

**ON THE UTOPIA OF THE END OF ALIENATION.
HANNAH ARENDT (MIS)READING SIMONE WEIL—AND KARL MARX**

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Abstract

The starting point of this paper is Hannah Arendt's positive comment on Simone Weil's La condition ouvrière, in The Human Condition. I first offer a brief reconstruction of Arendt's interpretation of Marx's analysis of labor which is the context in which the above-mentioned comment appears. This interpretation is based, I claim, on a (mis)reading which consists in a rather systematic blurring of the distinction between labor as a universal and irreducible human activity and labor in its historically determined capitalist form, which is the object of Marx's critique, i.e., alienated labor. Following that, I discuss Weil's construal of labor and I shed light on its affinities with the Marxian problematic. My aim is to show that Arendt's comment does not do justice to the problems that Weil addresses both with and beyond Marx.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Karl Marx, (alienated) labor, oppression

Introduction

In his beautiful book on Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil, Roberto Esposito proposes to consider the relationship between these two women philosophers who never ceased to reflect upon their present as a "missed encounter" (Esposito 2017, 1).¹ Indeed, the trajectory of the young German Jewish Doctor of Philosophy who

¹ Andrea Nye offers a very interesting feminist interpretation of Luxemburg, Weil, and Arendt as "women thinkers" who, despite their divergences, share "lines of inquiry different from those which have provided continuity in the mainstream philosophical tradition" (Nye 1994, xix). Dietz (1994), Cedronio (1996), Chenavier (1996) and Saint-Sernin (1996) also offer enlightening discussions of Weil and Arendt.

lived for several years in Paris during the 1930s, after having fled from Nazi Germany, never met that of the young French Jewish *agrégée de philosophie*.

Despite their missed encounter, Weil is nevertheless present in Arendt's work. In *The Human Condition*, there is a positive reference to the posthumously published *La condition ouvrière* (Weil 1951), which Arendt read very early on, as is evidenced by the notes in her *Denktagebuch*, taken in April and May 1952, during a trip to Europe (Arendt 2005, 223–24; 230–31).² Allow me to quote the whole passage: "It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that Simone Weil's *La condition ouvrière* (1951) is the only book in the huge literature on the labor question which deals with the problem without prejudice and sentimentality. She chose as the motto for her diary, relating from day to day her experiences in a factory, the line from Homer: *poll' aekadzomenē, kraterē d'epikeiset' anagkē* ('much against your own will, since necessity lies more mightily upon you'), and concludes that the hope for an eventual liberation from labor and necessity is the only utopian element of Marxism and at the same time the actual motor of all Marx-inspired revolutionary labor movements. It is the 'opium of the people' which Marx had believed religion to be" (Arendt 1958, 131). The brevity of this comment and the fact that it appears in a footnote should neither obscure nor minimize its importance, which does not only have to do with its praise but also with the context in which it appears. This context is Arendt's confrontation with Marx. As is well known, this confrontation, which was at the origin of *The Human Condition*, structures the whole chapter devoted to the activity of labor while also resurfacing in several other sections of the book. Consequently, in order to flesh out the implications of Arendt's comment on Weil, it is necessary to first turn to her reading of Marx.

In the ensuing paragraphs, I proceed as follows: I first discuss Arendt's reading of Marx on labor so as to show that this is, to a large extent, a misreading. The core of this misreading consists in a rather systematic blurring of the distinction between labor as a universal and irreducible human activity, and labor in its historically determined capitalist form, which is the object of Marx's critique, i.e., alienated labor. ³ In the

² In *The Human Condition* Arendt also comments on Weil's "very illuminating article [...] 'Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta'" from which she quotes a passage (Arendt 1958, 287–288). To my knowledge, there is no other reference to Weil in Arendt's published books, except for these two references in *The Human Condition*. In Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, apart from the notes on *La condition ouvrière*, there are also notes on Weil's *La source grecque* (Arendt 2005, 801).

³ Let me clarify from the start that I do not argue that Arendt misreads Marx on all the aspects of his thought that she discusses in *The Human Condition* and in other writings. For example, the critique according to which Marx reduces action to work or the account

second part of the paper, I turn to Weil, and focus on her complicated but nonetheless constant dialogue with Marx (Chenavier 2001, 203) that fuels her proper analysis of labor in modernity. My aim is to show that Arendt's positive comment on *La condition ouvrière* is rather hasty in so far as it does not do justice to this dialogue and, thus, to the problems that Weil addresses both with and beyond Marx.

1. Hannah Arendt: (Mis)reading Marx

Arendt's reading of Marx has often been characterized as ambivalent (Canovan 1994, 84; Pitkin 1998, 127; Weisman 2014, 1). Indeed, in the introductory paragraph of the chapter on labor in *The Human Condition*, Arendt announces that she will criticize Marx and immediately takes care to distinguish her criticism from that addressed to him by "professional anti-Marxists" (Arendt 1958, 79); she thus quotes a passage from Benjamin Constant on Rousseau which begins as follows: "Certainly, I shall avoid the company of detractors of a great man" (Arendt 1958, 79). Echoes of this characterization of Marx abound in Arendt's published and posthumous texts as well as in her correspondence: "Marx lived in a changing world and his greatness was the precision with which he grasped the center of this change" (Arendt 2002, 282); Marx's *oeuvre* was a "plea for justice for laborers" (Arendt 1958, 306); the "fundamental and flagrant contradictions" in his thought, far from indicating that he is a "second-rate" writer, place him among the "great authors" (Arendt 1958, 104–5). What is more, between the lines of Arendt's *magnum opus*, one can read several Marxian motifs or intuitions. For example, the idea that humans are conditioned beings who, through the activity of work, produce worldly objects that, in turn, become further conditions for them, converges with Marx. Nonetheless, neither the scattered, and sincere, positive remarks, nor the (unacknowledged) debts, counterbalance the criticism that Arendt levels against Marx. The objects of this criticism range from the issue of political action to the question of history, and from the issues of violence and revolution to the question of labor in modernity.

Arendt turns to Marx in order to understand how the tradition of political thought established by Plato is related to Soviet totalitarianism (Arendt *c.* 1951–2, 1). According to Arendt, Marx is situated at the end of the tradition. Being at

of Marx's view of history as determinist are, I believe, illuminating, and they have strong footing in Marx's *oeuvre*.

the end, he tries to reverse it but, simultaneously, remains captured within it, which means that he inherits its guiding schemes, because, as Arendt asserts in a Heideggerian vein, "it lies [...] in the very nature of the operation [of reversal] itself, that the conceptual framework is left more or less intact" (Arendt 1958, 17). In his rebellion against tradition, Marx rejects the position according to which the faculty of reason is the distinctive trait of human beings, and he elevates labor, traditionally considered as the basest of human practical activities, to the highest rank; in a nutshell, he substitutes the *animal laborans* for the *animal rationale*. Arendt considers Engels' statement that "Labor created man" both as encapsulating an aspect of Marx's rebellion, and as leading to the center of his thought as the philosopher of labor *par excellence* and, thus, of modernity.⁴ Among other things, this statement implies that, for Marx, "man, insofar as he is human, creates himself, [...] his humanity is the result of his own activity" (Arendt 1993, 22). Simultaneously, as an heir to tradition, Marx repeats, in his own manner, the philosophical gesture toward practical activities – labor, work and action – that obscures their differences.

Against the backdrop of these assumptions, Arendt sees "a fundamental contradiction" (Arendt 1958, 104) in Marx which consists in that while he raises labor, the cyclical and never-ending activity that reproduces the biological life of the species, to the status of the highest human capacity and, even more, to "the supreme world-building capacity" (Arendt 1958, 101), he simultaneously sets emancipation from labor as the goal of revolution and of the movement of history. In other words, revolution aims at depriving human beings of what, according to Marx's theory, makes them human. In the idea of emancipation from labor Arendt also detects a disavowal of the irreducible dimension of necessity that characterizes the human condition.

I would like to question both claims through which Arendt constructs Marx's contradiction, by showing that Marx is neither a theorist who, fascinated by modern productivity and imbued with the corresponding spirit of modern economic theory, glorifies labor as a pure metabolism between humans and nature,

⁴ The other two statements that, in Arendt's view, summarize Marx's rebellion are the following: "'Violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one' [...]. [... and] the famous last thesis on Feuerbach: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently; the point is, however, to change it'" (Arendt 1993, 21).

nor does he construe the abolition of labor, and thus of necessity, as the aim of revolution or of history.

To be sure, for Marx, labor is the activity that assures both the means of subsistence and the reproduction of the human species, but, in contradistinction to animal labor, it is primarily a purposive, objectifying activity, engaging both the physical and the intellectual capacities of human beings. Human labor differs from animal labor (pure metabolism with nature) because of the consciousness that humans have of their activity and of its purpose. In other words, while animals do not distinguish themselves from their vital activity, human beings render this activity the object of their will and of their consciousness. This is what constitutes labor as a free activity (Marx 1975c). This distinction between human and animal labor is also present in Marx's "mature" writings, where he insists on the difference between labor as expenditure of human vital force and as a vital necessity, and human labor proper. In *Capital*, Marx compares human labor with the activity of other species. This is the famous example of the spiders and the bees who, much like human weavers and architects, make their webs and cells but, in contradistinction to humans, do not do this in terms of freedom, in so far as they do not have, as humans do, a model which they have previously freely conceived in imagination and which they undertake to bring into being through the use of the appropriate means. Therefore, human beings do not simply change the form of natural matter, as animals do, but they also, and simultaneously, achieve an end, a purpose, to which they have previously submitted their will and their action (Marx 1996, 187–88). Arendt knows this Marxian analysis well; after quoting a segment of the relevant passage, she makes the following comment: "Obviously, Marx no longer speaks of labor, but of work – with which he is not concerned; and the best proof of this is that the apparently all-important element of 'imagination' plays no role whatsoever in his labor theory" (Arendt 1958, 99).

This comment illustrates one of Arendt's recurrent gestures toward Marx's texts: having postulated, instead of demonstrated, that Marx is a theoretician of labor who gives himself the "metabolism of man with nature" as an object of analysis and of praise, she refuses to follow the movement of Marx's thought and to survey the problems that he tries to tackle. Whenever she acknowledges that there is a thematization of work in Marx (that is, of the world-building activity whereby humans set a blueprint that they aim at bringing into being by employing

tools and by doing violence to nature), she immediately resorts to the above-mentioned postulate and implies that this thematization is, in a manner of speaking, a Marxian lapsus. In fact, while Arendt is aware that her proper conception of work corresponds to the Marxian construal of objectification, she is nonetheless unwilling to follow another path in translating Marx's analysis into her own terms, a path that would begin by recognizing that Marx's charge against capitalism is that it reduces objectification to alienation, which in Arendtian terms would mean that capitalism turns all work into labor.

Arendt develops diverse, and occasionally contradictory, lines of argument in order to support the claim that Marx is a thinker of labor.⁵ Allow me to briefly consider two of these lines: the first pertains to labor's productivity and to the related distinction between productive and unproductive labor; the second concerns the issue of world alienation as distinguished from human alienation. These two lines of argument overlap in that they both touch upon the question of objectification.

According to Arendt, Marx clearly saw that "labor and consumption are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life" (Arendt 1958, 99). Hence his interest in the cycle of production and consumption and in labor's productivity. For Marx, this productivity "is measured and gauged against the requirements of the life process for its own reproduction; it lies in the potential surplus inherent in human labor power, not in the quality or character of the things it produces" (Arendt 1958, 93). As for the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, according to Arendt, Marx, like Adam Smith, "despised unproductive labor as parasitical, actually a kind of perversion of labor, as though nothing were worthy of this name which did not enrich the world" (Arendt 1958, 86). Allow me to briefly comment on these issues. When Marx speaks of the cycle of production and consumption, he refers to the capitalist production process as a process through which surplus value is created and which aims at infinitely reproducing itself. Capital is accumulated human labor in the form of commodities; therefore, the reproduction of labor, i.e., the reproduction of the biological life of the laborer and of the species (to use the Arendtian terminology) is (the condition of the possibility of) the reproduction of capital. In other words, "the ever-recurring cycle" whose mode of functioning Marx seeks to capture, is the cycle of

⁵ For more detailed discussions of Arendt's (mis)reading of Marx see Parekh (1979), Pitkin (1998, 127–44), Amiel (2001, 117–213), Iakovou (2001, 282–333) and Weisman (2014).

capital itself. This underlies the specificity of Marx's understanding of the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, an issue on which Arendt again proves to be misreading Marx. It is from the point of view of capital and of political economy that productive labor is exclusively labor that produces surplus value. Arendt also obscures Marx's method of employing the standpoint of political economy in order to subvert its premises and its conclusions – a method which he already adopts in the *Paris Manuscripts* (Marx 1975c, 270).

As the second passage quoted in the previous paragraph suggests, Arendt also interprets Marx's insistence on the productivity inherent in labor as an indication of his absence of interest in the worldly character of the use objects that humans produce. This points to the other main line of Arendt's misreading of Marx that I want to discuss. According to this line of thought, Marx is solely interested in human alienation and not in world alienation. To be sure, when commenting on a series of Marxian articles, on the law on thefts of wood (Marx 1975a), she observes: "A law which regards men only as property-owners considers things only as properties and properties only as exchange objects, not as use things" (Arendt 1958, 254). Here Arendt acknowledges that there is in Marx a certain interest in the "thing-character of the world" (Arendt 1958, 93) and, consequently, an awareness of world alienation that capitalism brings about. But this observation remains without consequence in her overall reading. For Arendt, Marx's "original charge against capitalist society," in the *Paris Manuscripts*, "was not merely the transformation of all objects into commodities, but that 'the laborer behaves toward the product of his labor as to an alien object' [...] – in other words, that the things of the world, once they have been produced by men, are to an extent independent of, 'alien' to, human life" (Arendt 1958, 89). This charge persists throughout his *oeuvre*. In a nutshell, "the question of a separate existence of worldly things, whose durability will survive and withstand the devouring processes of life, does not occur to [Marx] at all" (Arendt 1958, 108). Arendt thus implies that Marx is caught in a subjectivist metaphysics, which denies the exteriority of the things of the world inasmuch as they are the products of human activity.⁶ This denial is the counterpart to Marx's hubristic conception of human

⁶ Although this subjectivist metaphysics is indeed present in the *Paris Manuscripts*, the Marxian problematic of alienation is irreducible to it as well as to the correlated idea of a fully transparent society; see indicatively Castoriadis (1987, 101–14; 2009, 153–91), Haber (2006; 2008), Jaeggi (2014) and Iakovou (2022).

beings as creators of themselves. In this reading, Arendt does not take into consideration the fact that "the objects of labor are *objectively* [...] removed from the laborer, a fact that has subjective ramifications in the experience of alienation" (Ring 1989, 439). She also obscures the fact that Marx teases out the particular structure of the labor process in capitalism, which, as a system of production of commodities, is based on abstraction: abstraction from the specific traits both of the laboring activity that aims at producing use objects and of the products of the activity (Marx 1996, 45–56).⁷ Marx's recourse to the term "'labor power' (*Arbeitskraft*)" (Arendt 1958, 88), to which Arendt gives particular emphasis when discussing the issue of labor's productivity, far from indicating that he is a thinker of labor who focuses on the "life process of mankind" (Arendt 1958, 89) and who is uninterested in "the productivity of work which adds new objects to the human artifice" (Arendt 1958, 88), also corresponds to this critical thematization of abstraction as a constitutive dimension of capitalism. Again, it is from the point of view of capital that the things of the world, the objects of use, become totally deprived of interest, except as bearers of (exchange) value; on the other hand, "the circulation of money as capital is [...] an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits" (Marx 1996, 163).

It is through the same grid of "subjectivism" that Arendt interprets the project of an end to alienation, i.e., the reappropriation by humans both of their objectifying capacity and of its products. When considering a passage from the "Comments on James Mill" where Marx paints the picture of future human production (in contradistinction to alienated production), she argues that in this case "world alienation is even more present than it was before; for then [human beings] will be able to objectify (*vergegenständlichen*) their individuality, their peculiarity, to confirm and actualize their true being" (Arendt 1958: 254).⁸

⁷ It is worth mentioning that in a letter to Karl Jaspers (4 March 1951) Arendt defends Marx with the argument that "the de-humanizing of man and the de-naturalizing of nature [...] are what Marx means when he talks about the abstraction of society" (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 167).

⁸ This passage, where Arendt seems to object to the very concept of objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*), contradicts another passage, where she seems to understand objectification as work: "And even Marx, who actually defined man as an *animal laborans*, had to admit that productivity of labor, properly speaking, begins only with reification (*Vergegenständlichung*), with 'the erection of an objective world of things' (*Erzeugung einer gegenständlichen Welt*)"; in the note she adds: "The term *vergegenständlichen* occurs not very

The contradiction that Arendt attributes to Marx is the result of her proper misreading of his work. To be sure, there are changes in the Marxian understanding of labor and of the emancipation of labor in the course of his work. To put it briefly, and at the risk of setting aside several interpretative questions that have been widely discussed in the literature: on the one hand there is the model proposed in the "Comments on James Mill" (Marx 1975b, 227–28) and implied in the *Paris Manuscripts* (Marx 1975c, 293–304). According to this model, emancipated labor would be an activity that humans would be capable of recognizing as their own; this activity, far from entailing an impoverishment of the senses, would permit them to flourish. The products of the activity would not be viewed as hostile beings but would be recognized as worldly things that crystallize essential human capacities and that mediate the relations between humans, thus permitting them to recognize each other in and through them, in so far as, to use a subsequent Marxian formulation, "social relations between men" would no longer be misapprehended as relations between things (Marx 1996, 83–4). On the other hand, there is the model that appears in the third volume of *Capital*, to which Arendt also refers, albeit in a manner that serves her argument. In this case, Marx proposes the "shortening of the working day" after having asserted that the realm of freedom "actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases" (Marx 1998, 807). In other words, this is a model where labor is not "abolished" and where the realm of freedom does not "supplant 'the realm of necessity'" (Arendt 1958, 104; emphasis added) but retains it as an "inextinguishable moment" (Schmidt 1994, 183).

There is no doubt that there are differences between these two Marxian visions of the emancipation of labor. But the problem to which both these visions respond is the same: alienated labor or labor that produces surplus value. Furthermore, in both cases, the outcome *vis-à-vis* Arendt's criticism is identical: neither of these two visions includes the project of an emancipation from labor as a constitutive human activity; neither of them implies what Arendt interprets as the fantasy of a complete abolition of necessity. Marx does not deny that "pain and effort, the outward manifestations of necessity" (Arendt 1958, 135), are intrinsically related to human life. What he claims, and what Weil also claims in his

frequently in Marx, but always in a crucial context" (Arendt 1958, 102). This contradictory assessment of the issue of objectification is, I believe, a strong indication of the rather hasty and unjust way in which Arendt reads Marx.

wake, is that it is possible to change the uneven, and thus unjust, social distribution of "pain and effort" as well as the multiple effects that this injustice has on the manner in which the subjects live, relate to themselves, to others, and to the (things of) the world. For Marx, emancipation *from* labor would indeed be (a kind of) "emancipation from necessity" (Arendt 1958, 131), as emancipation from exploitation. Far from dreaming of a "mass society of laborers [which] consists of worldless specimens of the species mankind" (Arendt 1958, 118), Marx, like other thinkers of emancipation, was in search of a condition in which human beings would not be degraded.

The fact that Arendt approaches Marx as a mediator between the tradition of political thought and Stalinist totalitarianism overdetermines the way in which she interprets him. Despite the claims that "Marxism [...] has done as much to hide and obliterate the actual teachings of Marx as it has to propagate them" (Arendt 2002, 275) and that "his thought was used and misused" by Stalinism (Arendt 2002, 281), Arendt does not manage to do justice to his thought.⁹ Although she praises Marx for having captured the fundamental transformations that occurred in his epoch, she obscures the fact that he thematizes labor in the historically determined, and thus surpassable, capitalist mode of production. In a nutshell, she proves unwilling to acknowledge the critical status of the Marxian analysis of capitalism.¹⁰ From this point of view, it is indicative that she deems the expression "System of Labor" (instead of *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*) as a more apposite title for his "great work" (Arendt 1958, 101).¹¹ In this sense, Arendt does not keep pace with the wish that she expresses by quoting Constant in the introductory paragraph of the chapter on labor in *The Human Condition*. Her

⁹ On the issue of labor, I find Leon Botstein's argument that Arendt's "concern was not Marx himself but the subsequent intellectual significance and understanding of Marx" unconvincing (Jay and Botstein 1978, 372). Arendt criticizes Marx *per se* for being *the* modern theorist of labor.

¹⁰ Mimi Howard (2020) pertinently teases out Arendt's critical dialogue with, and use of, political economy and Marxist thought. These are indeed quite evident both in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere; but they do not, I believe, invalidate, as Howard seems to argue, the claim that Arendt misreads the Marxian critique of capitalism.

¹¹ In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt briefly comments on the status of critique in Marx after having made the following remark: "There exists another book that uses the word critique in its title, and one I had forgotten to mention. Marx's *Capital* was originally called *The Critique of Political Economy* [...]" (Arendt 1982, 36). Richard J. Bernstein offers an instructive discussion of Marx's "conception of theory as critique" that "Arendt has failed to take seriously" (Bernstein 1977, 156).

approach to Marx brings to mind Merleau-Ponty's phrase according to which "to pin down the 'contradictions' is to treat the adversary as an object" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 160). By so doing, Arendt also risks undermining the significance of her proper contribution to the understanding of the changes in labor that have taken place during the 20th century.

We are now in a position to comprehend what Arendt may mean when she claims that Weil discusses labor "without prejudice and sentimentality." As we have seen, Arendt underlines that Weil opens her "Factory Journal" with a quote from the *Iliad*, pertaining to the issue of necessity. One may thus assume that, for Arendt, Weil does not share what Arendt considers as Marx's Prometheanism, the conception of humans as self-creating beings who would be capable of totally surmounting necessity. Also, one might assume that Arendt sees an indication of this absence of prejudice in the fact that Weil brings to the fore those aspects of labor that bear the indelible stamp of servitude to nature. Thus, in Arendt's understanding, Weil would be opposed to the Marxian, and modern, glorification of labor; and she would share at least some elements of Arendt's critique of the Marxian construal of emancipated labor.

As for the absence of sentimentality, I would say that Arendt refers to Weil's style. As Deborah Nelson has shown, Weil and Arendt are "women writers who [argue] passionately for the aesthetic, political, and moral obligation to face painful reality unsentimentally" (Nelson 2017, 1). Weil's account of the conditions of labor in the factory, far from expressing the emotions of a compassionate intellectual who seeks to partake in the worker's pain, is a kind of testimony (Taïbi 2006) that turns the readers' gaze toward the experience that she seeks to describe and to analyze. Arendt must have appreciated Weil's distance vis-à-vis her own suffering, the absence of self-pity from her texts. As Weil writes to Boris Souvarine, the fact that she is also the subject of suffering is for her an "almost indifferent detail" (Weil 1951, 41).¹² Above all, Arendt must have appreciated both Weil's "desire to know and to understand" (Weil 1951, 41) and her capacity to write in such a way as to keep pace with this desire.

Arendt is right to the degree in which she implies that Weil's is a political – in contradistinction to a sentimental – outlook on the worker's condition; it is an

¹² All translations of passages from Weil's writings that are not yet translated into English as well as those from other French sources are mine.

outlook inspired by solidarity.¹³ But simultaneously, Arendt is wrong, in so far as she places the horizon upon which this solidarity is inscribed into brackets: the end (or the alleviation) of oppression. This horizon is formed by Weil's dialogue with Marx, a dialogue whose depth and ramifications Arendt does not seem to recognize as the undertext of *La condition ouvrière*. This is what I will try to show in the following part of this paper.

2. Simone Weil: Thinking with and beyond Marx

Before I proceed, allow me to make a preliminary remark regarding Weil's texts to which I shall be referring. Given that Arendt's comment solely concerns *La condition ouvrière*, the question is raised of whether one is entitled to refer to other texts by Weil, notably those preceding her factory experience. I believe that the answer to this question is affirmative. Written at different moments in time, spanning from late 1934 to late 1941, the diverse writings that compose this unconventional posthumous volume – notes that Weil took during the months that she worked as an unskilled worker in the factories, letters to friends and to acquaintances, published articles, (drafts of) essays that remained unpublished during her lifetime – converge with other texts from the beginning of the 1930s. What is more, given Albertine Thévenon's concise "Foreword" to *La condition ouvrière* (Weil 1951, 7–17), Arendt must have had an insight into Weil's engagement in the syndicalist movement, her positions regarding the Stalin regime, and her relationship with Marx. In other words, Arendt must have had an insight into the fact that Weil's writings are intrinsically related to a project that is simultaneously philosophical and political, a project of understanding the world in order to change it.

In the early 1930s, Weil understands herself as a heretical Marxist engaged in social and political struggle for workers' self-emancipation (Weil 2004, 21; 24). As she puts it in her *Lectures*, "There is a duty to work for a change in the way society is organised: to increase the material welfare and technical and theoretical education of the masses" (Weil 1978, 160). Like other heterodox Marxists and leftist intellectuals¹⁴ – for example, Souvarine or his close friend Karl Korsch with whose work Weil was probably familiar through Souvarine and the journal *La*

¹³ I draw this distinction from Arendt (1990, 73–98).

¹⁴ For a sustained discussion of Weil's "heterodox Marxism," see Ritner (2020).

critique sociale where some articles of his were published – Weil is faced with a historical constellation different from the one that Marx faced: the Stalin regime coupled with the rise of Fascism and Nazism.

Weil is conscious, very early on, of the fact that, far from being a working-class state, the Stalin regime is oppressive – of crucial importance in this respect are, I believe, her collaboration and friendship with Souvarine, author of *Staline. Aperçu historique du bolchevisme* (1977),¹⁵ a book that she deems so important as to try to raise money for its publication (Weil 1999, 61; 64) and that Arendt uses approvingly, and extensively in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1973, 306; 307; 319; 349). Weil also challenges Trotsky's account of the regime with the argument that the worker's oppression, the existence of a bureaucracy that is unwilling to give up neither its power nor its status as a dominant class, as well as the disempowerment of the soviets, cannot be explained away as the temporary pathological aspects of a working class state that has already set the essential foundations of socialism and is heading toward its full development (Weil 2004, 4–6). Furthermore, the Stalin regime indicates that the change in the relations of production is not a sufficient condition for emancipation (Weil 1978, 148; Weil 2004, 10). As for Fascism and Nazism, they bring to the fore new elements pertaining to class division and to class struggle, to the political mobilization of the masses, and to the structural features of the economic system, elements for which neither Marx's theory nor official Marxism can account (Weil 1987a; Weil 1999, 221–38; Weil 2004, 6–7).

Far from entailing the abandonment of Marx, this constellation requires critically thinking both with and beyond him, so as to contribute to the understanding of the stakes of the present: "As for ourselves, Marx represents for us, at best, a doctrine; far more often just a name that one hurls at the head of an opponent to pulverize him; almost never a method. Marxism cannot, however, remain something living except as a method of analysis, of which each generation makes use to define the essential phenomena of its own period." (Weil 2004, 25).¹⁶

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider Weil's published and unpublished essays and drafts on Marx and Marxism in their entirety. There are

¹⁵ Souvarine's *Staline* was published in 1935; the English translation appeared in 1939.

¹⁶ As this and other passages (Weil 2004, 118) suggest, Weil at times explicitly distinguishes Marx from Marxism. Nonetheless, particularly as far as the contradictions that she pinpoints are concerned, she does not follow such a distinction.

significant changes between these writings due, in part, to Weil's effort to analyze the turbulent times in which she lives, as well as to her philosophical elaboration of her own experiences. I shall briefly present Weil's positive assessment of Marx as well as certain aspects of the critique that she addresses at his theory, without discussing their pertinence. I shall then focus on the analysis of labor in *La condition ouvrière* and try to shed light on its affinities with Marx's thought.

For Weil, there are in Marx's *oeuvre* elements that remain unsurpassable. First and foremost, Marx's materialist method which, in Weil's understanding, consists in starting from the premise that "in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations" (Weil 2004, 44). Against the Ancients, Weil sides with the Moderns and notably with Marx for having glorified "productive labour, considered as man's highest activity" (Weil 2004, 144), an activity that engages all human faculties, intellectual as well as practical. Consequently, Weil praises Marx as the exponent of a new conception of the distinctive trait of human beings: that by producing the conditions of their existence they simultaneously produce themselves (Weil 2004, 101). Given this understanding, Weil, in her 1933 sustained critique of Lenin's book *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, emphasizes the difference between Marx's materialism and the vulgarization of his thought and method in terms of a metaphysical position concerning the primacy of matter over spirit. The specificity of Marx lies in that he "never regards man as being a mere part of nature, but always as being at the same time, owing to the fact that he exercises a free activity, an antagonistic term *vis-à-vis* nature" (Weil 2004, 31). Furthermore, Weil argues that Marx correctly captured "that the essence of capitalism lies in the subordination of subject to object, of man to thing" (Weil 2004, 155). In the same vein, she maintains that Marx's discussion of the effects of the introduction of machines into the process of production contains precious insights. In her words, "Marx demonstrated forcibly, in the course of analyses of whose far-reaching scope he was himself unaware, that the present system of production, namely, big industry, reduces the worker to the position of a wheel in the factory and a mere instrument in the hands of his employers" (Weil 2004, 53). The gesture that this passage suggests is discernible in several parts of Weil's work: she finds in Marx apposite grids of analysis that she deems worthy of taking over in view of the circumstances of her proper epoch.

Despite this positive assessment, Weil does not shy away from criticizing Marx and Marxism. The "cult of production, the cult of big industry, [and] the blind belief in progress" (Weil 2004, 139) are the three major problems of Marxian and Marxist theory that she pinpoints. These problems interlock since they form the kernel of the belief according to which the course of history inevitably leads to the emancipation of the proletariat through the development of the forces of production. Revolution is viewed as the outcome of this development which, when arriving at a certain point, brings about the transformation of the relations of production. These blind spots are connected to the fact that priority is mistakenly given to productivity and output, instead of a focus on the activity of labor itself and on the way in which workers relate to their activity, to the means of production, and to other workers. They also indicate that, despite his pertinent insights concerning the dehumanizing effects of big industry, Marx did not sufficiently analyze the role that science and technology (can) play in the oppression of workers. Furthermore, these blind spots point to "the contradiction between the method of analysis elaborated by Marx and the revolutionary hopes that he announced," a contradiction that Weil considers as "still sharper" in her epoch "than in [Marx's] time" (Weil 2004, 143). Here, Weil formulates the germane problem of immanence, by raising the twofold question of how one can construe capitalism as a system that creates the conditions for its proper overturn and of how one can consider revolution and the emancipation of the working class as impending, given the relations of force that Marx had analyzed and that have become even more acute in the 20th century: "With the industrial convict prisons constituted by the big factories, one can only produce slaves and not free workers, still less workers who would form a dominant class" (Weil 2004, 112). This question is even more crucial in so far as historical experience reveals that revolution is the "crowning point" (Weil 2004, 131) of long-term transformations whereby power gradually passes into the hands of the ascending class.

This critique, in conjunction with Weil's afore mentioned doubts concerning the hypothesis that the abolition of private property would entail the abolition of oppression, lead her to give precedence to the issue of oppression *vis-a-vis* that of exploitation (Chenavier 2001, 211–33). This turn to the issue of oppression is combined with an emphasis on the division of labor and on the organization of labor in the factory. According to Weil, this organization brings about a new division, which tends to supersede the division between the owners of the means of

production and the workers: the division between "those who execute the work without, strictly speaking, taking any active part in it, and those who direct the work without executing anything" (Weil 2004, 10). Weil understands this division as the contemporary, and exacerbated, version of the "degrading division of labour into manual and intellectual labor" (Weil 2004, 20) that she views as yet another of Marx's great intuitions.¹⁷ The factory is thus the locus *par excellence* where a new form of oppression appears, after those based on armed force and on wealth as capital: the oppression "exercised in the name of management" (Weil 2004, 9) which tends to invade "almost every branch of human activity" (Weil 2004, 13).¹⁸

It is this form of oppression that Weil wants to examine closely, to experience and to understand when, in 1934, she applies for leave from her job as professor of philosophy in order to work in a factory. The texts included in *La condition ouvrière*, texts whose richness and multidimensionality render every effort to fully reconstruct them impossible, illustrate Weil's reiterated attempts to capture, to describe, and to communicate to others, both the constitutive dimensions, and the minute everyday aspects of this oppression.

For Weil, "the main fact" of factory work "isn't the suffering but the humiliation" (Weil 1987b, 225 / Weil 1951, 145),¹⁹ the feeling of being deprived of worth as a human being, both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others. Far from being the outcome of natural necessity, this blow at the core of human dignity is due to human-made constraints, since, as Weil puts it in "Reflections on the Causes of Freedom and Social Oppression," "if behind the infinite forces of nature there did not lie [...] divine or human wills, nature could break man, but

¹⁷ Weil does not cite Marx *verbatim*, but she is probably glossing on the claim in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* regarding the "higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished" (Marx 2010, 87). This is one of the reasons why I believe it is erroneous to assert that Weil refers to "a Marx [who] does not exist" and to whom she attributes a phrase that one cannot find in Marx's writings (Dommenge 2007, 215).

¹⁸ Weil's analysis presents striking convergences with the one that Cornelius Castoriadis (1988a; 1988b), Claude Lefort (1979) and other members of the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* develop after World War II.

¹⁹ Given that the English translations of the texts included in *La condition ouvrière* are published in different volumes, I also refer to the French edition after the English when I quote passages from these texts (Weil ENG / Weil FR).

she could not humiliate him" (Weil 2004, 91). It is the very structure and organization of labor in the factory that renders humiliation possible. The worker, particularly the unskilled one, loses every bit of mastery over his/her activity and over what s/he produces; "consequently, he experiences the sensation, not of having produced, but of having been drained dry. In the plant he expends – occasionally to the uttermost – what is best in him, his capacity to think, feel, be moved" (Weil 1946, 372 / Weil 1951, 340). The orders given by the foremen and the personnel managers, as well as the necessity of speed are the main features of the organization of labor in the factory that generate and radicalize this loss of control over one's activity and the consequent impoverishment of one's faculties. By constantly being under the foremen's orders (or under the anxious anticipation of such orders) and by perpetually striving to keep up with the machines, the worker becomes "a thing delivered to the will of another" (Weil 1951, 227–28). Pain and fatigue also enhance this oppression as they intensify the feeling of humiliation, not because pain by itself can be humiliating, but rather because it is not the worker "himself who disposes his own capacity for action" (Weil 2004, 81).

Weil does not employ the term "alienation" in *La condition ouvrière*. But, as several commentators have pointed out, her analysis of factory work resounds with the Marxian understanding of alienation (Vető 1962; Chenavier 2001; Sparling 2012; Ritner 2020). To this I would add that Weil combines the young Marx's problematic of alienation with aspects of *Capital*, notably with the analysis of modern industry and of the effects that the introduction of machines into the process of production has on labor.

From Weil's text, the experience of factory work emerges as alienating, i.e., as a process through which workers are dispossessed of basic human capacities, both intellectual and practical. This is a process which erodes the relation of the working subjects to their activity, to the product of their activity, to one another, and to the human species. What is more, the scheme of inversion (of the relationship between subject and object, and between means and ends) that Marx employs, both in the *Paris Manuscripts* and in *Capital*, runs like a common thread throughout *La condition ouvrière*.

Furthermore, Weil implicitly draws from Chapter XV of the first volume of *Capital*, where Marx sheds a crude light on the effects of the introduction of machines in production. Among other things, Marx shows that this introduction

gives rise to the intensification of labor: "machinery becomes in the hands of capital the objective means, systematically employed for squeezing out more labour in a given time" (Marx 1996, 415). He also compares tools and machines so as to demonstrate that while the former permit the workers to retain a degree of mastery over the work that they execute, the latter tend to transform the workers into mere appendages to the machines, to whose rhythm and mode of functioning they have to adapt their bodily movements.²⁰ This development means that "factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost [...] and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity. [...] the machine does not free the labourer from work, but deprives the work of all interest." (Marx 1996, 425–26). Marx also discusses how the system of machinery transforms the (technical) division of labor (Marx, 422–23).

Elements of this analysis, which Weil had previously praised in "Prospects. Are we Headed for the Proletarian Revolution?" (Weil 2004, 9) as well as in "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" (Weil 2004, 152),²¹ can be read between the lines of several passages of *La condition ouvrière*. But it is in her acute lecture on "Rationalization," given to workers in February 1937, that Weil takes up this analysis and develops it further, in view of the new givens of her time, particularly in view of the implementation of Taylorism, both in capitalist countries and in the Soviet Union. She forcefully demonstrates that the "scientific organization of labor" aims at depriving the workers of "the possibility to determine by themselves the procedures and the rhythm of their work and at putting into the hands of management the choice of the movements that have to be executed in the course of production" (Weil 1951, 301). Simultaneously, she underlines that the simplification that Taylorism introduces is a means to intensify labor (instead of prolongating the working day), to control the workers, and to destroy the very possibility of solidarity between them, through a system whereby each individual's work is isolated from the work of others (Weil

²⁰ This is one of the reasons why the introduction of machines in big industry is a crucial aspect of what Marx calls real—as distinguished to formal—subsumption of labor to capital.

²¹ In her *Lectures*, Weil notes that "in big industry, the opposition between a systematic and a blind way of working becomes quite clear: even the co-ordination is entrusted to a computer (machines). Method is taken away from men and transferred to matter. Once that has happened, men become cogs in a machine. The workers have in actual fact become things in their own work;" she then quotes passages from *Capital* and other sources (Weil 1978, 147).

1951, 304–10). In this system that tends to divest workers of their choice and control over the most minute details of their bodily movements, what is left to them "is the energy that permits them to make a movement, the equivalent of electric force; and this energy is used in exactly the same manner as electricity is used" (Weil 1951, 312).

Also, as Scott B. Ritner pertinently argues, "Weil's 'Factory Journal' may be read as an addendum to the chapter on 'The Working Day' in Marx's *Capital*. The day itself is what is at stake for Marx and Weil" (Ritner 2017, 198).

The following passage, one of the most poignant passages in *La condition ouvrière*, encapsulates in a sense all the above aspects of Weil's discussion of factory work while also showing that this discussion bears the mark of Marx's influence. Allow me to quote it at length: "Time drags for [the workingman] and he lives in a perpetual exile. He spends his day in a place where he cannot feel at home. The machines and the parts to be turned and machined are very much at home, and, to repeat, he is given admittance only that he may bring these machines, these parts together. They are the objects of solicitude, not he; though, perversely enough, there are occasions when too much attention is directed to him and not enough to them. [...] But whether the plant is protected or not against waste, the workingman is made to feel that he is an alien. [...] A workingman, with rare exceptions, cannot, by thought, appropriate anything in a factory. The machines do not belong to him in any sense. He serves one or the other of them according to the latest order received. He serves them, he does not make them serve him. They are not for him a means of turning a piece of metal to a specified form; he is for them a means whereby they will be fed the parts for an operation whose relationship to the ones preceding and the ones following remains an impenetrable mystery to him" (Weil 1946, 372 / Weil 1951, 340). The theme of exile and alienness, the idea that the organization of factory work is based upon an inversion of roles between the worker and the machine, the idea that the workers are deprived of the possibility to conceive of, and thus to make their own, what they do and how their activity contributes to the outcome of the production process; all these themes echo both the Marxian critique of alienation and (parts of) the analysis of *Capital*.

The above passage also points to a key aspect of Weil's analysis that I believe should not have passed unnoticed by Arendt. I mean the question of time.

Arendt discusses what she calls the "modern acceleration" brought about by machines which have "forced us into an infinitely quicker rhythm of repetition than the cycle of natural processes prescribed" (Arendt 1958: 125). Acceleration, understood as a constitutive feature of the organization of factory work, also runs as a common thread throughout *La condition ouvrière*. But while Arendt approaches acceleration from the point of view of productivity and consumption as well as with the question of how it causes the transformation of use objects into objects of consumption, Weil mainly focuses on the subjective experience of the workers: she brings to light the constant anxiety about whether one "will be able to keep up the pace" (Weil 1987b, 201 / Weil 1951, 109), the painful and humiliating struggle of the "weak bodies" to comply with the inhuman cadence of "the industrial *perpetuum mobile*" (Marx 1996, 406) and with the demands of the "pitiless" timeclock (Weil 1987b, 159 / Weil 1951, 50), and the suffering that this struggle along with the labor's monotony – "the tedium of monotonous drudgery" (Marx 1996, 481) – entail (Weil 1951, 310). "The speed is dizzying," Weil notes during her third week in the Alsthom factory (Weil 1987b, 160 / Weil 1951, 52); and a few months later she wonders: "if the workers develop other resources for themselves, and through work that is *free*, will they submit to these speeds for slaves? (If not, so much the better!)" (Weil 1987b, 206 / Weil 1951, 117). Labor, turned into a purposeless and thus meaningless speed race in the service of high productivity rates, becomes (or tends to become) pure repetition. Thus, the workers' experience of time is mutilated. Time loses its dimensions. It becomes a repetitive present (Vető 1962, 384). What is more, the workday, such as it emerges from Weil's texts, is not inscribed in the rather harmonious "cycle of painful exhaustion and pleasurable regeneration" (Arendt 1958, 108); rather, it appears as throwing even this cycle "out of balance" (Arendt 1958, 108). Therefore, Weil's analysis shows that labor in the factory tends to destroy "the time character of human life" (Arendt 1958, 98) at its core, to "eject" the workers "from the world" (Arendt 1958, 112), and even to undermine the conditions for "the elemental happiness that comes from being alive" (Arendt 1958, 108). This is why "time and rhythm constitute the most important factor of the whole problem of work" (Weil 1946, 374 / Weil 1951, 348).

When reading *The Human Condition* together with *La condition ouvrière*, one cannot but be impressed by the fact that Arendt, whilst following a phenomenological approach, scantily considers the first-person experience of the worker

in modern capitalism, an experience upon which Weil sheds a crude light. Equally impressive is the fact that Arendt comments positively on what she views as Weil's criticism of the Marxian idea of liberation from labor, without the slightest mention of the fact that this criticism appears in the final text of *La condition ouvrière*, where Weil explores the "Prerequisite to Dignity of Labour" ("Condition première d'un travail non-servile"). This text echoes what, several years earlier, in "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," Weil calls the "theoretical picture of a free society" (Weil 2004, 79). Allow me to briefly present certain elements of this picture's guiding "ideal" (Weil 2004, 79).

Weil rejects the conception of freedom as complete liberation from necessity. On this point, she sides with the Ancients, who thought of *anagkē* as an irreducible force and realm. The human, all too human freedom that Weil deems possible is "defined [...] by a relationship between thought and action" (Weil 2004, 81) whereby one is able to take into account and judge the circumstances in which one finds oneself, to posit an end, and to consciously chose the appropriate means to achieve it. Therefore, the guiding ideal of a free society would be to "widen bit by bit the sphere of conscious work" (Weil 2004, 90). Such a society would cultivate, as far as possible, the working subjects' access to the knowledge crystallized in the machines and it would reduce the division between managers and executants to a minimum; it would foster egalitarian relations of collaboration instead of authoritarian relations of command and obedience; it would be a society where human beings "would never be treated by each other as things" (Weil 2004, 94).

To be sure, there are significant changes in the way in which Weil treats the same issues in the "Prerequisite to Dignity of Labor." But it seems to me that the turn to God or the emphasis on contemplation, as well as other undoubtedly significant changes should not conceal the affinities between these texts. The problem for Weil remains the same: it consists in that the "workers' universe excludes purpose [finalité]. Purpose does not penetrate it except for very short periods always regarded as exceptional" (Weil 2005, 267 / Weil 1951, 359). Weil still takes as one of her guiding threads the way in which modern working conditions undermine workers' relation to their labor, and she is still in search of the terms that would restore this relation by restoring labor's purposiveness and meaningfulness. What is more, Weil repeats her approbation of Marx for having "rightly denounced as degrading the separation of manual and intellectual labour" (Weil 2005, 274).

Despite the changes that Weil's thought undergoes, she does not abandon Marx in her steady search for that social order which would agree "with Kant's formulation of the moral law: to treat human beings always as ends" (Weil 1978, 163). In tandem with Marx, Weil considers labor as a fundamental human activity, as a conscious and purposive activity which, taking place in the realm of the relationship with nature, is world-building (to use an Arendtian expression) and, simultaneously, relates human beings between them and with the world. Also, in a Marxian vein, Weil raises the question of what emancipation from human oppression and human-made constraints would mean; this is the reason why she repeatedly attempts to explore the conditions of possibility for non-servile, free labor. These attempts can be considered, I believe, as aspiring to the utopia of the end of alienation.

Concluding remarks

The above gives a supplementary meaning to the expression that, following Esposito, I used in the beginning of this paper – "missed encounter": Arendt read Weil and commented positively on her work, but she missed an encounter with a problematic that runs through Weil's thought, and, more precisely, *La condition ouvrière*. For Arendt, the "emancipation of the laboring classes from oppression and exploitation" seems to have already taken place (Arendt 1958: 129).²² This is not the case for Weil. Thus, Arendt fails to recognize that Weil's unprejudiced and unsentimental discussion of labor is nourished by what she sees as the unsurpassable and indestructible elements of Marx's thought. Arendt therefore also fails to acknowledge the deep affinities of Weil's quasi phenomenological description of labor in the factory with the Marxian description of alienated labor and with the analysis of the labor process in big industry in *Capital*. In her brief comment, Arendt seems to perform the same (mis)reading as with Marx: she puts into brackets the fact that Weil critically thematizes the working conditions in the modern factory, conditions that she deems human-made, historically determined, and thus subject to change. Paradoxically, Arendt seems to forget – or to pass over in silence – that, despite opening her "Factory Journal" with a quotation

²² For the at least four different meanings that the expression "emancipation of labor" (or "liberation of labor") has in *The Human Condition* see Iakovou (2002, 312–14).

from the *Iliade*, Weil deems non-servile labor possible, as the very title of the closing essay of *La condition ouvrière* suggests.

Weil and Arendt converge in that they both propose critical readings of Marx. Nonetheless, these readings do not arise out of the same assumptions, nor do they take the same questions as their guiding threads.²³ The horizon of Weil's critique of Marx and his contradictions is different from the one upon which Arendt's criticism is inscribed. While Weil inherits and re-elaborates the Marxian problematic of alienated labor, Arendt chooses a point of view from which the question of alienated labor seems to have been erased – and, more generally, a point of view that is exterior to Marx's theory, although significant aspects of her description of the modern condition converges with Marx's. As a consequence, while Arendt does not examine alienated labor as a decisive component of what she calls "dark times" (Arendt 1968), Weil construes the multiple aspects of labor in modernity – impoverishment to the point of destruction of human creative and intellectual capacities, relations of oppression in the organization of labor, loss of the self and of its relations to others and to the world etc. – as entailing a loss of individual and collective freedom; this is why she considers non-servile labor as a fundamental condition of freedom.

In a sense, Arendt's (mis)reading of Weil is discernible in her very act of citation. Let me explain. In *La condition ouvrière*, the passage from Homer is followed by another passage, obviously by Weil herself: "Not only should man know what he is making, but if possible he should see how it is used – see how nature is changed by him. Every man's work should be an *object of contemplation* for him" (Weil 1987b, 155 / Weil 1951, 44). This epigraph, whose Marxian overtones are quite evident, announces the ideal from the viewpoint of which Weil discusses labor in her "Factory Journal," although this ideal scarcely appears as such in the body of her notes. Also, this epigraph suggests that, apart from the irreducible realm of natural necessity, there is a considerable part of necessity which "stems from human arbitrariness" (Janiaud 2002, 53), and which can thus be alleviated through the transformation of the conditions and of the organization

²³ Let me also underline that the phrasing of Arendt's comment on *La condition ouvrière* implies that Weil's critique of the Marxian conception of revolution is the "conclusion" at which she arrives at the end of a well-constructed argument of an equally well-structured book. It is as if *La condition ouvrière* were not a posthumous collection of notes, texts etc.

of labor. Furthermore, and this might be more significant, there is a second instance in which Homer's passage appears in *La condition ouvrière*: almost in the middle of an article that was written on the occasion of a metal workers' strike in 1936 and was published in *La Révolution prolétarienne* under the pseudonym Simone Galois. Here, the passage takes an altogether different meaning from the one that Arendt attributes to it. Weil recalls her experience in the factory: the cold changing rooms, the humiliating pay days, the hunger, the daily anxious calculation of the money that she will be paid for her piecework, the fatigue – "overwhelming, bitter, at times painful to the point that one would wish for death" (Weil 1951, 225–26) – , the fear, "the perpetual necessity not to displease" (Weil 1951, 228), the domination of the chronometer. At the end of this sober enumeration (which is not really an end, but rather an abrupt halt), we read: "What else? This is enough. This is enough to show what a life like this is, and that if one submits oneself to it, one does so, as Homer says about slaves, 'much against [one's] will, under pressure of a harsh necessity'" (Weil 1951, 228). Despite the profound social and political transformations that have taken place since the period when Weil was thinking, writing, and acting, this human-made "harsh necessity" and the "undeserved suffering" (Weil 2005, 274 / Weil 1951, 369) that stems from it remain with us.²⁴

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²⁴ See Lecerf (2016), Noël-Lemaître and Di Ruzza (2016), and Devette (2019, 160–62).

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