

A Genealogy of Labour: Tracing a Keyword of Early Modernity¹

Taihei Hanada

I

Readers of early modern texts are confronted with unique difficulties when using keywords of modernity such as 'labour', 'liberty', 'right' and so forth. The question is often asked how we can discuss 'liberty' before liberalism or 'labour' before modern economics, ideally without corrupting the original meaning.² If modernity is a jealous and totalising god, never letting us go outside the concepts within which our mind operates, what we deal with and encounter in our historiography is only 'the patterns of our own mind', however elaborated it may be (Arendt, *HC* 286-87). Furthermore, these keywords of modernity are the very product of early modernity; this means that our reading of early modern texts *should* be experienced as constantly encountering difficulties and even resistance in understanding the keywords whose modern (and therefore 'true') meaning still remains antenatal. This *sense of labouring* when we read early modern texts is not so much a matter of ethics, but of scholarly method that hopes to recover the otherness of early modernity.

Indeed the concept of 'labour' is deeply embedded in history. It arose with the rise of political thought itself, going back to the birth of the Greek *polis*. This correlation between labour and the city-state motivated Hannah Arendt to write *The Human Condition [HC]* (1958) as a prolegomenon to her political theory. Her book is divided into lengthy discussions on labour, work and action, whereby she criticizes the modern (more precisely 'Marxist') glorification of labour as the perilous admission of the private into the public realm. This brief etymological note aims to free us (as much as possible) from the burden of the modern entanglement with Karl Marx.

II

Prior to Marx's systematization of it as the living machine of historical process, labour signified the radically strange reality of human life on earth. Saint Paul, for example, in Romans 8.22-23, presents the enigmatic image of a labouring Creation:

For we know that the whole creation groaneth [συστενάζει] and travaileth in pain together [συνωδίνει] until now. And not only *they*, but ourselves also, which have the first-fruits of the Spirit [πνεύματος], even we ourselves groan [στενάζομεν] within ourselves, waiting for adoption, *to wit*, the redemption [ἀπολύτρωσιν] of our body [σώματος]. (The Authorized Version [AV])

The New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] has recently translated συνωδίνει (*sunōdinei*) as 'labour pain': 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now'. The Greek word συνωδίνω (*sunōdino*) signifies not the concrete fact of manual work, but the sense of suffering the pains of childbirth, as a 1602 Geneva gloss on the verse explains: 'By this word [*sunōdinei*] is meant not only exceeding sorrow, but also the fruit that follows from it'. Together with the preceding term συστενάζει (groaning), the Pauline concept of creativity, merging groaning pain into labour, was, according to John Rogers, employed by the mid-seventeenth-century revolutionaries to authorize their radical theologies (*Matter of Revolution* 71).³

Paul's conception of the labouring human condition has a special affinity with the ancient notion of *saeculum*, as

¹ This paper is based on a part of the first chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation, *The City and the Problem of Labour in Milton's Samson Agonistes* (University of Exeter, 2011): 24-33.

² This phrase is taken from Quentin Skinner's book *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2012).

developed by Saint Augustine. ‘The *saeculum*, in the medieval era,’ according to John Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory*, ‘was not a space, a domain, but a time – the interval between fall and *eschaton* where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must make shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity’ (9). As far as Saint Paul is concerned, for the Christian spirit (πνεῦμα [*pneuma*]), the corrupted body (σῶμα [*sōma*]) is only inhabitable when seen to be in need of redemption or deliverance (ἀπολύτρωσις [*apolutrōsis*]). Therefore, the operation of (incarnated) secular institutions such as private property is limited (and defined) by the Second Coming of Christ. Secularization, in this light, is only the temporal suspension of religion to deliver its ultimate goal. As the category of labour is charged with the connotations of the Fall and the eschatological promise of its final abolition (‘Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours’ [Rev. 14.13]), it is not difficult to detect the Judaeo-Christian roots in the Marxian association of labour with the linear concept of time. Recast in the constitutive ambiguities of *saeculum* (as it imagines life to be the time that is ending), the labour process of history is the modern *civitas Dei* (cf. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment* 552).

The NRSV’s rendition captures well labour’s often neglected sense as childbirth (*OED* n., 6a, v., 16). Nonetheless, under the influence of the materialist concept of labour, we do not take seriously labour’s signification of natality and its pain, considering it to be merely metaphorical. Conceptually, the category of labour operates as ‘the middle term’ to explain the substantial change of raw nature into the worked product. Yet ‘labour’ as childbirth obscures the clear distinctions among, for example, the Aristotelian four causes, especially the distinction between material and efficient causes (*Metaphysics* 1013a24-1013b2). In the generation of a child, a mother, strictly speaking, is not *homo faber* (maker) who works upon a separate object; her causal body is both material and agency (of the baby she delivers). Here I wish to propose that an etymology of the word ‘labour’ with a special focus on

its sense as ‘childbirth’ reveals a complex history of linguistic politics, especially with respect to the contrasting word ‘work’. We do not use the phrase ‘the woman *labours* her baby’ but ‘the woman is *in labour*’; the first usage designates active production (or would do so, if the usage were possible), while the latter signifies an objective state or condition into which the woman falls.⁴ Hence, in the 1613 production of *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare, collaborating with John Fletcher, writes: ‘The Queen’s in labour – / as they in great extremity – and feared / She’ll with the labour end’ (IV.ii.17-18). In *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* (1650), John Milton employs ‘labour’ as childbirth to ridicule his opponent’s impossible claim:

“Now,” you say, “a new and loftier range of arguments rises before me.” A range of arguments greater than those springing from the law of nature and of God? To the rescue, goddess Midwife, Mount Salmasius is in labor! There was reason in his being his wife’s wife; watch out, ye mortals, for some monstrous birth! ... The mountain has really labored to bring forth this ridiculous mouse! Come all grammarians to help this grammarian in labor: all is over—not with the law of God or nature, but with the phrase-book! (*CPW* 4: 454)⁵

Milton is here drawing on the monstrosity of the male grammarian *in labour*, ‘giving birth’ to his trivial argument; Milton’s rhetoric works both to feminize Salmasius and ridicule the vanity of his trying to assume the Creator’s place. It is worth noting that labour in Milton pertains to the realm of nature that both grounds and transcends *ius gentium* (the law of nations).

III

Hence it is no accident that the English language does not recognize female reproduction as a *productive* activity, for the title of ‘producer’ would register the authority of

³ The recent rise of literature on Saint Paul’s epistle to the Romans is indeed remarkable: Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, 2004); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, 1994); Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Chicago, 1981); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, 2005); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, 2003). Julia Reinhard Lupton’s work focuses on Saint Paul’s significance to early modern texts: see her *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago, 2014). For a more general historical background, see J. S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible* (Oxford, 1970).

⁴ These implications become clearer when we consider the phrase ‘the woman is at *work*’, which simply means that she has a job, even though in other circumstances, we use ‘work’ and ‘labour’ as if they were interchangeable. We say ‘productive labour’ but not ‘productive work’ precisely because ‘work’ already denotes the product it delivers, whilst ‘labour’ does not.

⁵ Salmasius’s argument is as follows: ‘If one who is, and is called, king could be summoned before some other power, that power should be in all respects greater than royal; but the power which is established as greater must actually be, and be called, royal. For royal power is to be thus defined as that which is highest and unique in the state, over which no other is recognized’ (*CPW* 4: 454).

maternal bloodlines. The succeeding etymology shows that the seemingly subtle and arbitrary difference of orientation between 'labour' and 'work' reflects the politics of male production over female reproduction. From one angle, one could even argue that the intellectual history of modern economics is a history of its success and failure in *containing* the rich ambiguity of the word 'labour'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] registers a line from *Cursor Mundi*, an anonymous Middle-English religious poem from around 1300: '{Th}an sal it [{th}e erth] blisced be and quit o labur, and o soru, and sit' ('labour' n., 1a). Juxtaposing 'labour' with 'sorrow' in the manner of Psalms 90.10 ('yet *is* their strength labour and sorrow'), this earliest example shows that the senses of work and pain were already present in 'labour'. Yet, 'work', labour's competing synonym, also refers to pain and toil from the beginning. Raymond Williams notes that the root word of 'labour' is 'uncertain but may be related to slipping or staggering under a burden' (*Keywords* 176). It is through this close association with both mental and bodily exertions that 'labour' gained a sense of work, not vice versa, whereas it is possible that 'work' had a sense of pain only through the arduous character of work in the Middle Ages. This indicates that when and where work becomes less painful, 'work' may cease to signify pain. Williams notes that the deep-seated association of labour with pain and toil eventually prevailed over work's association with pain: 'manual workers were generalized as *labourers* from C13, and the supply of such work was generalized as *labour* from C17' (*Keywords* 335). At the most basic etymological level, 'labour' is Latinate, whereas 'work' derives from an Anglo-Saxon root. 'Work' does not have an adjective form equivalent to, for example, *laborious*, denoting the strenuous aspects of one's activity.⁶ I suggest here that despite evolving into similar usages, 'labour' and 'work' concern fundamentally different conditions of human life.

Hannah Arendt also contends that the conceptual difference between 'labour' and 'work' can be traced back to the

sense of pain and toil built in at the former's origin. Moreover, the two terms' differing relationship with the 'finished product' they deliver sets them apart decisively:

the word "labor," understood as a noun, never designates the finished product, the result of laboring, but remains a verbal noun to be classed with the gerund, whereas the product itself is invariably derived from the word for work, even when current usage has followed the actual modern development so closely that the verb form of the word "work" has become rather obsolete. (*HC* 80-81)

'In other words,' Arendt concludes, 'the distinction between productive and unproductive labor contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinction between work and labor' (*HC* 87).⁷

We find evidence for Arendt's theory as well as proof of its social permeation, rather unexpectedly, in the portrait of Adam Smith (1723-1790) on the back of the new 'Series F' twenty-pound note issued by the Bank of England from March 2007. There we read: 'The division of labour in pin manufacturing: (and the great increase in the quantity of work that results)'.

The line indeed encapsulates core ideas of Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*



Illustration 1. The back of the new 'Series F' twenty-pound note issued by the Bank of England from March 2007.

⁶ Adjectival forms of 'work' often signify the objective fact of employment (*working*, *workaholic*) or mechanical functioning (*workable*, *workalike*, *worked*, *working*) but not the sense of labouring.

⁷ Before Arendt, Friedrich Engels (1820-95) in his note for the fourth German edition of Marx's *Das Kapital* (1890) points out that '[t]he English language has the advantage of possessing two separate words for these two different aspects of labour. Labour which creates use-value and is qualitatively determined is called "work" as opposed to "labour"; labour which creates value and is only measured quantitatively is called "labour", as opposed to "work"' (Marx, *Capital* 138). The translator Ben Fowkes, however, notes that '[u]nfortunately, English usage does not always correspond to Engels' distinction' (*ibid.*). Indeed, the findings of this note run counter to Engels' association of 'work' with quality and 'labour' with quantity. More importantly for our discussion, however, it is still worth noting the fact that Engels detected a difference in the natures of 'labour' and 'work'. To consolidate the fact, Arendt shows that this distinction can be found, not only in English, but also in other European languages. Arendt notes, following Lucien Febre in 'Travail; evolution d'un mot et d'une idée' (1948): 'the Greek language distinguishes between *ponain* and *ergazesthai*, the Latin between *laborare* and *facere* or *fabricari*, which have the same etymological root, the French between *travailler* and *ouvrier*, the German between *arbeiten* and *werken*. In all these cases, only the equivalents for "labor" have an unequivocal connotation of pain and trouble. The German *Arbeit* applied originally only to farm labor executed by serfs and not to the work of the craftsman, which was called *Werk*' (*HC* 80).

(1776), in which Smith understands 'work' in quantitative terms and 'labour' as a collective activity that can be reorganised to maximize productivity. In his Adam Smith Lecture (October 2006), Mervyn King, then Governor of the Bank of England (2003-13), announced that the choice of Smith for the banknote may provide an 'opportunity to recognize Adam Smith's contribution to the understanding of society and its development. Smith's insights into human nature, the organization of society, the division of labour and the advantages of specialization remain at the heart of economics'.⁸ This can be seen as recognition that the modern 'organological' concept of work carries within itself the *division* of labour, symbolized in the famous example of a sublime 'pin factory' in which Smith's economist aesthetics observed no sweat but the pure expression of productivity.

IV

As a transitive verb, 'labour' first had a general sense of tilling and cultivating the ground; subsequently 'it was extended to other kinds of manual work and to any kind of difficult effort' (Williams, *Keywords* 176). As an intransitive verb, the word was applied to the most painful of all labour, that is, childbirth, from the mid-fifteenth century. The *OED* cites this usage in the *Paston Letters* (1454): 'Aftir she was aretid she laboured of hir child, that she is with all'. 'Labour' as a verb meaning to give birth to a child was soon supplanted by a noun form ('Rachel traueiled, and she had hard labour' [Gen. 35.16]) or used figuratively ('But my Muse labours, and thus she is deliuer'd' [*Othello* II.i.128]). As the word 'labour' developed its association with pain and difficulty, by the early seventeenth century it began to acquire a novel sense of theological darkness alienated from light and good. Therefore in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* Milton's Satan 'with difficulty and labour hard / Moved on, with difficulty and labour he', showing that the punitive difficulty of Satan's labour signifies his estrangement from the Creator (1021-22).

This can be explained by the rapid dissemination of the

vernacular Bible in print, as these complex associations of labour with pain, difficulty and childbirth are found in Genesis 3, in God's judgements on the disobedient Adam and Eve. To Adam, God says:

cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; ... in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread (Gen. 3.17-19)

And to Eve:

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Gen. 3.16)⁹

Where their punishments differ is interesting. Whilst Eve suffers a direct deterioration of her reproductive faculty, that is, *her* labour, Adam's difficulty arises, not from himself, but from the fallen ground, the *object* of his labour. Eve's pain emanates from her flesh, whereas Adam's stems from the exertion of his mind and body due to the difficulty of cultivating fallen ground.

The distinctions above may seem pedantic but their consequences are dire. The rhetoric of Genesis 3 'successfully' facilitates a hierarchical relationship between the first man and woman by juxtaposing fallen Eve with the fallen ground, both of which are now the *objects* of Adam: 'he shall rule *over* thee'. In other words, 'nature' in Eve becomes an engraved mark of subjection, formalized as the sexual division of labour.¹⁰ For Terry Eagleton, this amounts to a feminist critique of capitalism in that the historical subordination of women and of labouring people may have the same origin.¹¹

In the ancient world the word 'proletariat' (*proletarius* in Latin) referred to those who served the state by producing children (who manufactured labour power) because they were too poor to serve it by property. The proletariat,

⁸ 'Bank of England, News Release, 30 October 2006' <<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/news/2006/october/adam-smith-to-feature-on-new-series-20-banknote>> (date accessed 10/April/2018).

⁹ The AV's translation of Genesis 3.16-19 corresponds to that of the Geneva Bible (1602), which Milton tended to use.

¹⁰ It is not difficult to observe the intrusion of history into these biblical texts. In the ancient Jewish society of the Old Testament, as Bryan S. Turner notes, '[t]he husband was the master (*ba'al*) of the wife in the same way that he was *ba'al* over the fields. It is clear, therefore, that women as 'productive' bodies were possessions of the head of the household alongside other possessions: servants, ox, ass and dwelling place' (130). The perpetuated sexual division of labour amounts, in Marion Grau's words, to this: '[a]scetic living for women today may include ... the renunciation of procreation, the managing of their own bodily economy', rather than recovering the dignity of reproductive labour itself (192). For further discussions of the historical roots of the subjugation of woman, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford, 1986).

¹¹ Arendt also notes: 'Hidden away were the laborers who "with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life," and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else's property but because their life was "laborious," devoted to bodily functions' (*HC* 73).

in other words, is as much about sexual as material production; and since the burden of sexual reproduction falls more upon women than men, it's no hyperbole to say that in the world of antiquity, the working class was a woman. ('A Shelter in the Tempest of History')¹²

The feminine dimensions of 'labour' may derive from labour's root association with the sense of pain. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt points out that:

[a]ll the European words for "labor," the Latin and English *labor*, the Greek *ponos*, the French *travail*, the German *Arbeit*, signify pain and effort and are also used for the pangs of birth. *Labor* has the same etymological root as *labare* ("to stumble under a burden"); *ponos* and *Arbeit* have the same etymological roots as "poverty" (*penia* in Greek and *Armut* in German). Even Hesiod, currently counted among the few defenders of labor in antiquity, put *ponon alginoenta* ("painful labor") as first of the evils plaguing man. (48)

This association of physical pain with the reproduction of life itself is for Arendt 'the oldest and most persistent insights into the nature of labor, which, according to the Hebrew as well as the classical tradition, was as intimately bound up with life as giving birth' (*HC* 106).

V

To summarize, 'work' is distinguished from 'labour' by its orientation towards the product; and 'labour' from 'work' by its integral association with pain and toil. Thus one can even say, 'This is the *work* of my labour', without sounding too clumsy, though of course 'the *fruit* of my labour' is more usual. From a gender perspective, it is clear that by conceiving of labour in terms of class, Marxian historical materialism is unconcerned with the labour of women at home: 'an active woman, running a house and bringing up children, is distinguished from a woman who works: that is to say, takes paid employment' (Williams, *Keywords* 335). One would still labour whilst s/he is out of work. Indeed the word 'labour' seems to express a different relationship between human effort and the resulting object it delivers – different from a productive process of work. The sense of 'labour' as childbirth may draw on the nuanced relationship inherent in the term; as the phrase 'the *fruit* of my labour' implies, labour, though in groaning pain, has the power to reproduce a living organism, whereas work only can

produce lifeless objects that need to be activated by human use. After early modernity, the term 'labour', as increasingly losing its (pro)creative opacity, made the transition from childbirth to colonial cultivation, and from a verbal form to nominalization in the market place.¹³

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¹² Terry Eagleton, 'A shelter in the tempest of history' <<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/A-shelter-in-the-tempest-of-Web>> (date accessed 10/April/2018).

¹³ Williams notes: 'It is interesting to watch the effects of these modern developments on the old general sense of labour. The special use in childbirth has continued, but otherwise the word is not often used outside its specific modern contexts' (*Keywords* 179).

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