‘Labour’, A Brief History of a Modern Concept\textsuperscript{1}

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As has often been observed, neither the thinkers of antiquity nor those of the Middle Ages exhibited a great theoretical interest in the social value or even the ethical significance of labour. Throughout this long period of history, the labour an individual had to carry out to make a living, and thus under compulsion, was understood more or less solely as a heavy burden. It signified daily toil and the state of personal dependency attaching to a lowly social rank. Consequently, there was no cause to subject it to any kind of moral consideration. Indeed, as Moses Finley reports (1999, p. 81) ‘[n]either in Greek nor Latin was there a word with which to express the general notion of ‘labour’ or the concept of labour as a general social function’ (see too Arendt, 2013 [1958], pp. 81 ff.). Famously, with the advent of modernity, the very opposite begins to become the case. In this period, in the wake of various intersecting processes of cultural revaluation and economic transformation, labour developed into a positive credential of free existence and a presupposition of social integrity: the Protestant ethic led to a gradual upgrading of the value of labour, because it was interpreted as a sign that one possessed a capacity for inner-worldly asceticism. In the course of the establishment of capitalist economic practices, the liberation of labour from personal dependency in legal terms gave rise to the idea that gainful work could henceforth be proof of a free decision, and it thus provided the precondition of individual independence.\textsuperscript{2} And over time, the more the intellectual union between these two revolutions was strengthened, the more it would go on to influence the cultural self-understanding of modern societies in the capitalist west: what was previously the sheer necessity of earning a daily crust was now understood as proof of social

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\textsuperscript{2} Besides Finlay (1999) and Arendt (2013 [1958]), see also the studies of Brown and Morgan (2008), who shows the extent to which the abolitionist movement also deployed the reference to ‘free labour’ as a propaganda tool for the promotion of capitalist values.
emancipation and freedom. Nobody provided a better conceptualisation of this transformed self-conception than Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who devoted an entire chapter of his ‘Philosophy of Right’ of 1821 to the emancipatory value of labour; here, he tells us that every (male) member of civil society ‘is somebody’ through ‘his competence’ and his ‘regular income and means of support’, i.e. possesses the social status of a full-fledged citizen, and will find ‘his honour’ in this recognised existence as a professional (Hegel 1991 [1821], § 253).³

Nevertheless, despite this new-found appreciation of the value of labour, from the very beginning it remained utterly unclear which of the countless activities pursued in gradually industrialising modern societies actually fell within this normatively distinguished category. The Protestant ethic, with its orientation to ‘inner-worldly asceticism’ and the virtue of industriousness, clearly operated with quite different normative standards to, for example, emerging economic theory. The latter initially sought to hold fast to the criterion of contractually agreed labour subject to no external pressures, and it thus excluded any form of coerced activity from its purview. Amongst these initial confusions and differences of opinion, however, a philosophical discourse soon began to take hold whereby loosely connected, leading representatives of the field across several countries sought to determine the precise characteristics of this new, status-conferring labour and wherein exactly its particular worth might consist. The result of this intellectual exchange, which began with John Locke and continued through to Karl Marx and Hanna Arendt, was a tacit – but for that reason all the more consequential – agreement upon a certain model of labour, central to which was the following condition: labour had to possess the property of remoulding a physical object with the aim of producing a saleable commodity or consumer good. One consequence of this conception, however, whether intended or not, was that activities and performances of countless other kinds, be they in the domains of service work, therapy (care?) or trade, could no longer count as ‘labour’ in the original sense and so quickly vanished into a conceptual no-man’s-land. Nevertheless, public opinion soon followed the conclusions of the philosophical discourse. It allowed itself to be guided by the notion that, at bottom, labour consisted solely in the physical transformation of an object with the goal of producing a consumable material good. Unfolding in the shadow of these reductionist beginnings, the history of

³ On the promise of ‘free’, social status-conferring labour, see Steinfeld (1991) and Gourevitch (2014).
modernity in the 20th century has also become a history of the struggle over the meaning of ‘labour’. Each of its periods and epochs have been stamped, albeit subliminally, by conflicts over whether other kinds of socially necessary activity deserve to be perceived and socially recognised as ‘labour’. The aim of the present contribution is to provide a brief account of the history of this debate surrounding the concept of ‘labour’ and its field of associations. It will stop at a few of the stations along the way of the hard-won extension of the concept, before asking whether and how it might still be meaningfully employed without falling victim to hopeless indeterminacy.

1.

The concept of ‘labour’ as it first entered modern social theory had an astonishingly narrow scope. John Locke (1689) already began to shape this extremely restricted notion when, in this Second Treatise on Government, he set about trying to ground the claim to property; this, said the English philosopher, results from labour which, through adding something to an object through a process of transformation, creates an addition(al) value; this, in turn, can then count as the source of the rightful possession of the manufactured product. Into this foundational theory of the value of labour, which would even serve as a model for Marx approximately two hundred years later, there flowed, almost imperceptibly, a notion of ‘labour’ that attends almost exclusively to the aspects of production and transformation. All performances that do not follow such a pattern and thus do not result in the manufacture of a product are left out of the definition, meaning that activities such as service work, the provision of care, delivery and supply cannot be regarded as ‘labour’ in the true sense. The inadequacy of Locke’s restriction immediately becomes clear when one considers the employment relations of his time: agriculture and manual craftsmanship – activities to which Locke’s definition clearly applies – did indeed remain the majority occupations of workers in 17th century England; yet countless men and women were at the same time engaged in service work, from cooking and cleaning for wealthy families to delivering messages and wet nursing, and thus not with the manufacture of products. If one also takes into account how even on the land, much of the work carried out by farmhands and maids did not consist in assisting in agricultural production per se, but in procuring and delivering goods, cooking, and tending cattle, the egregiousness of Locke’s concept of labour stares one in the face: as though it were the most
obvious thing in the world, he refuses to allow all these service-based performances to count as labour, even though they were just as indispensable for the maintenance of economic life as production. Making activities of transformation the presupposition of property meant linking labour exclusively with a relation to objects of production and thus surreptitiously excluding from its definition all those preparatory and auxiliary activities that enable process of production to occur in the first place. The shadow that thereby fell over domestic and service workers was so dark that the following two centuries would have difficulty casting light in such obscure corners as cooking, cleaning and transportation.

What John Locke began, Adam Smith – despite various grave concerns and internal contradictions – would continue. At first, he encountered difficulties with the question of how best to understand ‘labour’, because he began by operating with two quite different conceptions of the use of social labour: on the one hand, he sought to classify as labour any performance that contributes in any way whatsoever to the satisfaction of subjectively defined desires for a pleasant and agreeable life; on the other hand, he wanted to restrict his classification to those activities that made a ‘productive’ contribution to the overall increase in welfare. The first conception would have meant counting all the service work of the time as ‘labour’ in the full sense of the term, since they provided the population with a desired ‘utility’; the second, however, would have reserved the category for activities that add to the economic value of an object by subjecting it to a process of transformation. Sensing the tension between these two ideas, Smith ultimately comes down on the second chain of associations: ‘The labour of some of the most respectable orders in the society is, like that of menial servants, unproductive of any value, and does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject; or vendible commodity, which endures after that labour is past, and for which an equal quantity of labour could afterwards be procured.’ (Smith, 1776, p. 265). Here, Smith has entirely forgotten what he previously said about the ‘productivity’ of work, namely that it can be measured solely by its social ‘utility’, regardless of what kind. So, like Locke before him, he too succumbed to the tendency of viewing only that which creates a ‘vendible commodity’ as labour in the true sense. Nevertheless, in an important respect Smith was one step ahead of Locke: he registered quite how large a space was occupied by service work in both private households and public life in the overall fabric

4 On this contradiction in Smith, see the highly informative ‘introduction’ by Erich W. Streissler (2005, p. 6).
of employment relations. He could hardly overlook how the increasing wealth of the aristocratic and bourgeois classes of his day went along with a steady increase in the number of domestic workers required in kitchens, gardens, dressing rooms and stables – so much so, in fact, that such work would account for almost half of the employment in Europe by the beginning of the 19th century. Smith did not simply fail to recognise this great mass of the employed. But although he was certainly alive to their existence, he massively devalued their contribution. For Smith, because they were occupied with providing more or less useful services rather than with the manufacture of products, they were of only secondary significance for general social prosperity.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the enormous increase in service work in the 19th century – shortly after 1900, domestic labour alone constituted the most extensive category of employment in England – would force a widening of the dominant concept of labour, so that it might correspond to social reality. But one would be mistaken. After Smith, the treatment of the concept of labour was practically the opposite of what a theoretical consideration of the expanding quantity of service work would have demanded. This was especially true of the German social philosophy of Hegel and Marx. Both thinkers take over Locke’s terms of reference; only they gave them an anthropological turn and thereby once again deepened the connection between work and production. In Hegel (2018) [1807] the Lockean conception resurfaces as an essential element of his philosophy of spirit: labour, he maintains, has a formative function for self-consciousness, because labour is a means by which a subject objectifies himself in an external thing and thereby has his own powers and capacities reflected back to him.5 With this idea of Bildung through ‘objectification’, Hegel establishes such a fundamental connection between labour and the process of producing or manufacturing an object, that all other activities are bound to appear ultimately stale and mindless by contrast. Accordingly, when he gives his account of the ‘estates’ of modern societies in his ‘Philosophy of Right’, he brands the labour of the farmer as merely ‘receptive’ and unreflective and does not even think that domestic staff in private households merit a mention6 – even though he himself famously employed them. Actual

5 A typical formulation is Hegel (2018 [1807], p. 115): ‘by those means [‘formative doing’], the working consciousness comes to an intuition of self-sufficient being as its own self”

6 An exception is the ‘estate of commerce’, which certainly provides services and which Hegel assigns to the estate of productive trade and industry (Hegel, 1991 [1821], § 204).
labour, labour which therefore secures ‘honour’ and ‘independence’, is thus the formative activity of the craftsman or industrial producer.

Just a few years after Hegel’s death (and thus in Marx’s lifetime), the number of service occupations increased once more: the expansion of trade, commerce and banking required entirely new services, such as in accounting, sales and transportation. Nobody employed in these fields of activity engages in the manufacture of any kind of product, whereby one might recognise one’s own intellectual capacities in the emerging and finished article. And yet, in his ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts’, Marx followed Hegel by once again tailoring his concept of labour to the production of commodities. Concerning the activity by which the human species distinguishes itself from animals, we read that man ‘duplicates himself [in labour] not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created.’ (Marx, 1988 [1844], p. 77). Marx takes from Hegel the idea that all genuine labour is objectification, whilst naturally departing from his predecessor in his insistence that such a mirroring of one’s ‘essential powers’ in the manufactured product is impossible under capitalist conditions of production and that they therefore have to be understood as ‘alienated’. Yet the more Marx developed his own approach to political economy, the more he emphasised the ‘productive’, surplus value-generating character of such alienated industrial labour. In contrast to Smith before him, of course, Marx stressed how this surplus value was retained by private capital. Yet like Smith, his category of ‘productivity’ bracketed out all services as mere external factors, however much they might be indispensable preconditions manufacturing consumer goods – be it preparing food for the workforce, transportation of raw materials or calculating profit margins; in short, everything that would have to be counted amongst the necessary infrastructure of production.

The arguments we find in the tradition stretching from Locke to Marx thus characterise these kinds of activity as having a twofold deficiency: on the one hand, they cannot count as ‘labour’ in the original sense, since they lack any directly productive character; on the other hand, they do not seem to contribute anything to the general increase in welfare, because they are incapable of generating any saleable commodity. This conceptual marginalisation helped create a social imaginary with a downright paradoxical character: although industrial labour remained only a vanishingly small sphere of employment throughout the entire 19th century, it was made central to the cultural self-understanding of the societies of the day; even the general
population swiftly became willing subscribers to the myth of the dominance of industrial labour. People began to conceive of their societies as industrial societies, although they could have had but a dim presentiment of the true reality of such a thing; they believed in the driving, indeed revolutionary force of the proletariat, even though the workers’ movement was initially advanced primarily by class-conscious craftsman; and they simply forgot how the lower classes essentially owed the few comforts of their social lives to agricultural labour, whilst the luxury and leisure enjoyed by the upper classes was also dependent on domestic servants and a whole array of administrative activities. A side effect of this strange inversion was that no thinker of stature was prepared to acknowledge the particular quality and nature of service work. To be sure, almost every bourgeois realist novel featured dozens of cooks, domestic servants, governesses, coachmen and maids quietly working away in the background. Indeed, in his attempts to depict the world of work of late 19th century France, Émile Zola (1907 [1884]; 2012 [1873]) erected a literary memorial to the saleswoman, the retailer and the merchant. But there was nobody within either social philosophy or the emerging social sciences who evinced the slightest interest in the question of whether typical service occupations might have particular features meriting closer analysis. There were thus no attempts to distinguish between personal and administrative services, to stress how the former require empathetic interpersonal engagement and thus the acquisition of communicative skills, whilst the latter involve the mastery of symbols and methods of tabulation. Nor was any attention paid to the distinctive rhythm of such activities, which were not dictated by that of machines and thus allowed greater opportunities for occasional self-direction. All these peculiarities of service performances remained theoretically unexplored, victims of an exclusive concentration on industrial production which, contrary to all the evidence, was taken as the standard kind of employment amongst the labouring masses.

It took many years for service work to emerge from the long shadow cast by the dominant concept of labour and thus to enter public consciousness.

However, the initial impetus for this shift came not from the service workers themselves – a much too large and diverse group to have common concerns – but from sociology, even if it focused at

7 On the gradual construction of the industrial proletariat as a revolutionary class in the 19th century with partly literary means, see Eigen-Offe (2017), on the cult of the industrial worker, see especially 220ff.
first on only a small segment of the enormous mass of workers employed in the service sector. At the beginning of the 20th century, under the influence of Max Weber (2019 [1921]), there was a realisation that the previous decades had been not only a phase of increasing industrialisation, but at least as much one of increasing bureaucratisation. This was a turning point: now, for the first time, the wider public was able to see the vast quantity of work that needed to be performed in administrative centres, private enterprises, banks and insurance companies in order to maintain the social infrastructure and secure economic transactions. The administrative sector was not exactly cast in a benign light, however. Weber had already depicted administrators as uncreative, peculiarly soulless and rule-obsessed. Yet even such unflattering attention sufficed finally to correct the widespread misconception that social reproduction and prosperity was due solely to industrial-based labour. Captured under the umbrella term ‘bureaucracy’ or ‘bureaucratic administration’, administrative services were now placed firmly in the sphere of activities essential to social reproduction and understood as typical functions of ‘employees’ or civil servants. Even at the time, it was far from clear why the term ‘employee’ was chosen, despite the fact non-state employees formally had to count as ‘free’ wage labourers who therefore performed their work for a contractually agreed wage. To this day, the unofficial and barely plausible explanation for this designation is that it helped to emphasise its distinctness from the manual, blue-collar labour of the ‘true’ workforce.

However, this newfound if ambivalent appreciation for service work continued to exclude the personal services carried out in private households, in health and social services, and in education and hospitality. However great the number of people employed in these sectors – indeed, however much that number continued to grow at the turn of the century – there remained a failure to come to terms with the extent to which such activities, so indispensable for social reproduction, were so poorly compensated. Sociological diagnoses of the growing significance of bureaucracy and administration, for all their ambivalence, did bring certain service occupations out from the shadow under which they had remained throughout the 19th century. But the other domain of service work, that devoted to the care, support and education of others, continued to exist below the threshold of public perception. This could be the reason why labour continued to be conceptualised as an activity that plays out between a subject and an object, be it the product to be manufactured or a calculator or typewriter. What remained thoroughly unacknowledged was that labour can frequently assume the

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form of a communicative activity that, whilst certainly materially mediated, is directed primarily at other persons.

The ongoing marginalisation of personal services had a particular effect on those fields of activity that were occupied primarily by women. Not that the female workforce at the beginning of the 20th century was predominantly occupied in these sectors; due to persisting conditions of widespread deprivation, women were still active in all areas of economic life, but the majority were employed in the private households of the wealthy bourgeoisie, tasked with cooking, cleaning, educating children and making purchases for the home (Müller, 1985). Because the meagre wages not only of these domestics, but also of female secretaries and sales clerks employed in stores and offices, did not suffice to provide for a family, the national economy of the 19th century was already in the grip of an insidiously circular logic, of which Joan Scott (2006, p. 463) has provided an apt analysis: the underpayment of jobs performed by women was explained by the lower ‘productivity’ of these ‘ancillary’ activities, and this in turn was meant to serve as proof that they were in fact less arduous and beneficial than those carried out by men. The domain of female service jobs in private households, in merchandise, trade or hospitality therefore remained not only theoretically unexplored, but almost publically invisible terrain, which was regarded as having no economic significance. The daily experiences of denigration, authoritarian paternalism, unwanted sexual attention and personal harassment suffered by employed women may have found expression in penny dreadfuls, but not in the educational and cultural media of the time, let alone in the social sciences. The silent contempt for work concerned not with the manufacture of material assets, but with the procurement, maintenance, administration and transportation of already existing items had begun with Locke and Smith, was deepened by Hegel and Marx, and had an enduring influence on the thought of the first half of the 20th century: when, in her book *The Human Condition* (2013 [1958]), Hanna Arendt set about analysing the gradual rise to dominance of labour over communicative action in the public sphere, she distinguished only between ‘labour’, which resembles craftsmanship, and ‘work’ mediated by machines, without even so much as mentioning service work – a conceptual omission that bordered on the scandalous and which she later barely even registered (Arendt, 2013 [1958]).

The following decades witnessed an initial, if half-hearted attempt to rescue personal service work from its marginalisation. Yet this was due more to historical upheavals than any targeted, militant efforts on the part of the domestic labourers themselves. This class, comprised

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of young men and women, mostly descendants of destitute peasants and working in healthcare, private households and the hospitality industry, tended to be submissively resigned to their fate and thankful for any gainful employment; they were hardly in a position to attract the attention of the broader public and demand their recognition. It was the First World War and its socioeconomic consequences which ensured that at least a subset of such service work was brought to public attention and its social indispensability acknowledged. The care that thousands upon thousands of nurses provided to wounded soldiers made it clear to even the most stubborn members of the ruling classes that their self-sacrificing labour alone had prevented mass immiseration and death amongst the affected. Even if it had not previously been counted amongst the socially necessary occupations, the indispensability of nursing and care work had to be recognised, at least for the duration of the war. Yet this newfound interest proved short-lived and was revived only when the indispensable services of nurses and hospital aides once again became impossible to ignore. The failure to recognise their social significance was finally corrected only thanks to the overageing populations of western societies – without this being reflected in increased pay or public appreciation for these workers, most of whom today are drawn from poorer foreign countries.

Shortly after the First World War, domestic staff too became the object of considerably greater attention, albeit for an entirely different reason. The absurd extent to which the significance of such work had previously been neglected can be seen in the fact that even in the first decade of the new century, such work constituted, by some distance, the largest category of employment in the motherland of capitalism, England. Even today, it is hard not be incredulous when contemplating the sheer lack of curiosity about the everyday experiences and working conditions of this sector, despite its enormous size. However, it began to enjoy a somewhat greater degree of visibility when, due to the general decrease in prosperity suffered across different countries after the war, the number of people employed in well-to-do households fell rapidly; indeed, within a short period of time, the average number of domestic servants in such households shrunk to one. The resultant rise in unemployment suddenly provoked a retrospective recognition – as though it had previously been a secret – of quite how many tasks, from cooking, dressing and serving to cleaning and educating children, had been performed by these individuals within the four walls of aristocratic and bourgeois houses.

This swift decrease in the number of domestic staff in the 1920s would also trigger a process that increased the visibility of a type of
work that had previously been absent from the list of socially necessary activities. With the departure of domestic staff, women belonging to the affluent classes were suddenly forced to take on all those tasks for which some half dozen ‘subservient souls’ (Müller, 1985) had previously been responsible. The kinds of domestic labour that working class women in the 19th century had frequently performed alongside their gainful employment, often with the aid of family members and neighbours, now became the responsibility of female members of the bourgeoisie too. The initial willingness to take on these tasks stemmed, of course, from internalised notions of ‘typically’ feminine preferences and abilities, which had already taken hold in the cultural imagination of the 18th century: the prevailing ideology of the patriarchal age had it that man and woman complemented one another by sticking to their respective domains, with females naturally suited to the tasks of the household and males having their natural place in the public political and commercial spheres. Hegel (1991 [1821], §167) put things succinctly, stating that ‘the status of women’ is ‘the housewife’. With the exception of certain strands of socialism and the early women’s movement, social consciousness has taken it for granted ever since that women possess a natural aptitude, born of innate feelings of love and care, for taking to domestic chores with passion and enthusiasm. With the increasing incorporation of bourgeois women into the familial division of labour, this inherited ideology did not itself come under pressure, but its economic foundations and consequences were challenged. For already in the 1920s, the first representatives of the women’s movement began to demand that domestic labour be assigned a greater social and economic value. The argument for the latter demand was that the man’s wage should include a share for the domestic activities of the woman, since these furnish the preconditions of his extra-domestic labour (Greven-Aschoff, 1981). Even if such demands did not receive much of a hearing either in parliaments or corresponding commissions, the question of the economic remuneration of ‘private’ housework had nonetheless been placed on the agenda. It would be fifty years, however, before the topic would garner general attention in the public political domain and give a final impetus to a quite fundamental transformation of the concept of socially necessary labour.

The deep-seated inability to perceive the necessary but unremunerated domestic tasks performed by women as ‘labour’ was certainly due in part to its conceptual reduction to production and manufacturing. As we have seen, this restriction was indeed responsible for the considerable difficulties that a capitalism that saw itself as ‘industrial’
had in perceiving and valuing all kinds of service work. Yet the utter blindness to the sheer amount of work performed by housewives had a second, at least equally significant underlying cause, which was bound up with another scarcely questioned premise of the classical concept of labour: in defining the concept, that is, political economy evaluated only that labour for which there was a quantitatively measurable, recognised demand in the marketplace. This conceptual linkage between social need and market-based demand would later benefit the various services for which there was such economic demand in the 19th century, namely when the disregard for service, procurement, cleaning and care work decreased. However, the same cannot be said for the unpaid labour performed by the housewife within her own four walls, which included cooking, cleaning and child-rearing. This remained very much in the shadow of the traditional conception of labour, not only because household tasks seemed not to produce anything of economic value, but primarily because it was not the object of any evident demand. It was the feminist campaign for paid housework in the 1970s which brought this conceptual linkage into question; even if its demand at the time was not primarily directed at payment per se, but instead designed to make the gender-specific assignment of private domestic labour into a public scandal, it nevertheless worked to upset the previously unquestioned premises supporting the inherited picture of labour. For there was suddenly a new question on the agenda: is it really appropriate to measure the social necessity of work one-sidedly in terms of labour market demand? With the explicit thematization of this decisive question, the concept of labour that had undergirded the fantasy world of capitalism from the 18th century at the very latest saw its final foundation collapse.8

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As is typical in such subversive moments, the dismantling of the old structure at the same time brought all the spurious components of the established concept of labour back to the surface. From the beginning, it had been possible to ascribe the capacity for value creation exclusively to object-producing activity only because the service work that functioned as its necessary precondition was kept out of view, dismissed as merely so many external factors. Yet the clearer it

8 See the discussion and references to further literature in Komlosy (2018).
became both that this separation was purely artificial and how it had rendered invisible all those indispensable services surrounding the production process, from transportation, accountancy and news transmission to care-work, cooking and child-rearing, the more difficult it became to maintain a distinction between productive and non-productive labour. A similar fate met the premise that all real labour is realised between human being and object, as suggested by the narrow focus on the manufacture of material goods. The gradual adoption of care work into the category of socially necessary labour must already have made clear that the latter could also consist of performances directed at persons and the promotion of their individual ends. The goal of such labour thus has a quite different shape and determination than the classical concept of labour would like to acknowledge: its purpose is not invariably that of forming an object so as to produce a useful commodity or consumer product; rather, much of the purpose of care work can be revealed only by taking up the requisite communicative perspective; only then, for example, can one know which instrumental activity might be the most appropriate in a given instance of aiding another person. Neither the old distinction between manual and intellectual labour nor the more recent one between material and immaterial activity does justice to this special case of personal services: here, a communicative process, namely of achieving empathy with the person depending upon another’s support, is necessarily prior to any instrumental consideration, the search for appropriate means (see Gürtler, 2005). If one adds administrative services as a separate category, it is probably even sensible to distinguish between three different activity profiles that are required for the totality of social labour today: processing natural or man-made objects with the aim of producing useful commodities, interacting with other persons for the purpose of care-giving, consultancy and teaching, and operating with symbols with the aim of calculating, analysing and processing data beneficial to the administration of social and economic processes. This threefold division finally frees ‘labour’ from the traditional vice of the human-nature relation: socially necessary activity now has to include tasks that seem to be of overarching value for society, be they performed within a straightforwardly object-related, symbolic or communicative framework.

The feminist challenge to unpaid housework finally also brought down the third pillar of the previously dominant conception of labour: if it could be convincingly shown that countless necessary tasks were performed in private households without any

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9 I am here following a suggestion of Martin Baethge (2011, p. 45).
compensation in the form of wages, then the economic notion that the socially required volume of labour could only ever be measured in terms of market demand was false. As soon as this notion had been dispensed with, one could no longer ignore the countless jobs performed day in, day out by an unpaid workforce, all of which were indispensable for the reproduction of social life, be it cooking for one’s own family, grandparents rearing and educating grandchildren, or voluntary social care. Once all three corrections had been made – abandoning the distinction between productive and unproductive activities, severing the notion of genuine labour from the supposedly necessary relation to an object, and accepting other measures of the social necessity of labour beside the market – the following seemed to become clear: all the routine performances in a society that contribute to maintaining the universally favoured components of a given lifeform have to count as ‘labour’ in the sense of socially essential activities.

Nevertheless, this relaxing of the concept of labour so as to incorporate previously excluded activities brought with it a not inconsiderable problem. For, now that financially unremunerated performances were also assigned to the domain of social labour, it became extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish that domain from that of performances undertaken for purely private reasons. It is not so easy, that is, to decide in advance whether the wider community might assign a sufficiently high value to collecting vinyl records or playing music in the private company of friends, say, that it would willingly expend labour and effort to support them. Stretching the concept of labour too far invites the danger of encompassing anything undertaken out of purely personal interest or subjective inclination; yet any pre-emptive narrowing of the concept runs the opposite risk, namely of excluding activities that, on closer inspection, turn out to be indispensable for maintaining a given lifeform. In the second part of my reflections, I therefore want to attempt to strike a balance between these two tendencies.

The key to solving this problem perhaps already lies in the formulation I adopted just a moment ago in order to capture the scope of the broader conception of labour. I said that all performances essential to maintaining those components of social life that are currently taken to

10 On the difficulty of adequately defining the concept of ‘labour’ such that it is neither too wide nor too narrow, see too Budd (2011, p. 2): ‘A meaningful definition of work, therefore, needs to lie somewhere between the overly narrow focus on paid employment and the excessively broad inclusion of all human activity.’

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be valuable ought to be regarded as socially necessary. The concept of ‘taken to be valuable’ cannot, of course, be tailored to the perspective of a private individual; the question is not what any person selected at random might regard as valuable in social life, but rather of what a social community takes to be so valuable in their lifeform that they deem it necessary to expend labour and energy to preserve it. To be sure, in many respects taking up such a perspective means navigating uncertain terrain. For, neither is it clear what a social community is and where its boundaries lie, nor can one simply assume that its members do in fact share sufficiently many conceptions of value. For our purposes, we can say provisionally that we can speak of a social community wherever a large group of individuals, thanks to similar educational backgrounds, have reached a point at which they broadly agree in their normative judgments and orient themselves in terms of roughly the same values in their everyday lives (on these difficulties see Honneth, 2021). We can now say of such communities – irrespective of whether we are concerned with local, national or transnational groups – that they will also generally agree on which elements of their own lifeform are worth maintaining and protecting. And correspondingly, they may also possess extremely similar notions of which activities are required to preserve these valued components of their culture. From the perspective of such a social community, it is relatively easy to determine where the boundary lies between socially necessary and merely private activities performed from purely individual motives: activities are necessary and thus the responsibility of the community of a whole, when they are generally thought to maintain those components of the shared life-world the community deems to be of value; by contrast, performances that are generally judged to be products of personal preferences and thus to mirror merely individual value judgments, ought to be considered private matters. In his ‘Philosophy of Right’, Hegel (1991, §187) wanted to make the same division between social and private performances, between work for communal ends and activities serving merely individual purposes, in another, simpler form: somebody occupied with socially necessary labour must ‘determine their knowledge, volition, and action in a universal way’, whereas private activities are not subject to the constraint of having to adhere to universally valid standards.

In what follows, I mean to apply a combination of both criteria in speaking of socially necessary labour, or social labour for short. This term is intended to encompass all activities that, in the eyes of the community, serve its overall welfare and which are therefore subject to universally posited standards of the appropriate and
inappropriate. Thus, cooking or childcare in private households count as social labour just as much as paid employment in a factory or office. For, both kinds of work involve activities that pursue an end deemed valuable by the community. Furthermore, either informal or legally determined standards apply to all these performances: in the case of cooking, say, one has to consider commonly accepted nutritional requirements, childcare has to be conducted with the wellbeing of the child in mind, and contractually agreed employment has to abide by legally stipulated regulations. All these normative constraints fall away, however, as soon as some activity is performed purely out of personal inclination or private enjoyment: quite independently of whether it’s DIY, angling, or playing music in a small group, whilst participants of course have to abide by the general legal framework, they neither have to realise socially universalizable ends nor respect general standards of performance – in a sense, one can proceed as one sees fit. To this extent, a society’s responsibility to be attentive to whether some activity fulfils collectively agreed standards and to how it should best be organised lapses in such cases. Just as Hegel suggests, the distinguishing characteristic of social labour is that one ‘determine[s] their knowledge, volition, and action in a universal way’ by sticking to the conventionally or legally fixed standards of good and appropriate conduct.

Before confirming the concept of social labour I have just outlined as the true result of this brief reconstruction of a 200-year long process of social self-enlightenment, I first need to dispel a possible reservation. It might sound as though my account encourages an adherence to whichever matter-of-fact distinction between social and private activities are operative in a given society. The only labour it designates as ‘social’ is the labour that a given society, on the basis of its current value conceptions, recognises as contributions to the general welfare. And it is easy to see how fragile and short-lives such boundaries can be if we only consider that around a mere half century ago, cooking, cleaning and child-rearing in private households were still a long way from being understood as in the common social interest. Cultural distinctions between necessary labour and purely personal pursuits are in fact always fairly fluid, subject as they are to the vicissitudes of continual contests over the interpretation of the ‘socially valuable’. What is today regarded as a purely private diversion might tomorrow be esteemed as an activity of universal significance and utility, such that the community ought from now on to assume a responsibility for its organisation and support. Nevertheless, such shifts in the moral economy of a society take place within much narrower limits than it might seem
at first glance; only very few of the activities that today count as expressions of purely personal inclination pursue ends that, even with a great effort of the imagination, might ever really become those of society as a whole. Paradoxically, the reason for this is the modern fact of cultural pluralism; the more diverse, that is, the ethical beliefs and practices of a society become, the harder it becomes for merely private activities to be recognised by a majority as indispensable to collective wellbeing. The same cultural pluralism that seems to demand the continual proliferation of ever more private pursuits simultaneously prevents their overhasty transformation to activities of general interest. The more cultural lifestyles in a given society diverge from one another, the harder it becomes for initially private pursuits to be seen as socially indispensable contributions, almost as a matter of necessity. To this extent, modern societies leave only a relatively narrow space for radical revaluations of the social character of different activities. Before they could be valued as social labour, they would first have to be recognised as vital to social reproduction from a universalisable perspective.

The fear that my reformulation of the concept of labour fails to take of account of possible reinterpretations of the general welfare and thus tends to a certain conventionalism, is therefore unfounded. To be sure, it is important to keep cultural transformation of this kind in view. They should not be categorically excluded in advance. But there are very few factors that might initiate such changes: increasing pluralism means that the space for a social revaluation of candidate activities may be becoming ever smaller. Rather, we might expect to witness a future development in the opposite direction: performances whose social indispensability has thus far simply been taken for granted may once again lose their status and be demoted to the no-man’s-land of endlessly many private occupations. The fate of these professions would not so much be extinction at the hands of economic developments as devaluation as a result of society’s coming to adopt different ends.11 All things considered, there is no reason to accuse the concept of ‘social labour’ proposed here of being too closely linked to the dominant conventions of a given society. The theory does not seek to certify whatever the majority deems either necessary or expendable; it has its own tools for examining such distinctions and, as the case may be, for finding

11 An example of the first scenario are the workers in Kohlebergbau (Raphael, 2019, pp. 45 ff.); an example of the second variety might be reporters on the stock exchange or, in the event of a simplification of the tax code, accountant.
them appropriate. The only activities that ought to be valued as socially beneficial labour are those that, through the continual back and forth between social conventions and theoretical deliberations, prove to be vital to the survival of a cultural lifeform. If we look back over just the past two centuries, the scope of labour understood in just this sense has expanded considerably. Today, societies have a corresponding responsibility to develop new labour policies, which can secure decent, dignified and satisfying conditions for all those professions they judge indispensable to their own reproduction.12

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