

# Managing Freely Acting People: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action and Modern Management and Organisation Theory

Han van Diest and Ben Dankbaar

*This article offers an interpretation of theories of management and organisation from the perspective of Hannah Arendt's theory of free action. This endeavour will contribute to criticism and eventually improvement of the conceptual framework of management and organisation theory. We discuss conceptual tensions in this field, for instance with respect to the relationship between human action and the constraints of an organisation. To the extent that management and organisation theory are practice-oriented, such an analysis can help to understand tensions and ambiguities in practice. Some of the optimism and high hopes found in the literature may have to be tempered as a consequence of a more adequate analysis of free action. The analysis therefore provides a critical point of view on the problems of managing freely acting people.*

Hannah Arendt is best known as a critical political philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Totalitarianism, Nazism and Stalinism were her main topics but from a wider perspective, her thought refers to all western political theory and in part, to political praxis.<sup>1</sup> Her critical stance rests on her conception of 'man' i.e. man's capacity to 'act' and a philosophical anthropology thus functions as her point of reference.<sup>2</sup> In this article we want to explore the implications of this theory of action for modern conceptions of work in the theory of management and organisation, just as Arendt did for Western political theory.

At first sight, this exploration appears to be ruled out, because Arendt's concept of action seems to exclude any reference to categories like labour, work and efficiency. We will show, however, that Arendt's theory of action is relevant to modern conceptions of management and organisation by articulating these concepts, which are more or less hidden in her writings because she did not connect work and labour to the sphere of action.

Our argument will be presented in four sections. The first section provides a sketch of major trends in the theories of management and organisation. In the second section, we present Arendt's theory of action. In the third section we present our interpretation of Arendt's theory and show how it can be related to theories of management and organisation. Finally, in section four, we investigate the implications of Arendt's theory for modern theories of management and organisation.

## 1 Some Trends in Modern Management and Organisation Theories: A Sketch<sup>3</sup>

Most of us spend an important part of our lives in organisations and like our work. Why? To suggest it is to provide for necessities of life seems insufficient to explain job satisfaction. Work has, or ought to have, an intrinsic value. This statement, however, also raises questions. Surely the employment relationship is one of submission and control? Throughout the history of western economies, the success of organisations has been seen as a product of coercion.<sup>4</sup> A worker had to accept the work that was offered to him or her, and to obey the orders of the employer, because otherwise employment would be terminated. Disobedience meant risking the very conditions for survival.

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* San Diego, Harcourt, Brace & Company 1951; Hannah Arendt *Macht und Gewalt*, München, Piper 1970

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1958; Hannah Arendt. *The Life of Mind*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1978

<sup>3</sup> This section is based mainly on chapters 2 and 3 of J van Diest *Zinnig Ondernemen. Het reflexieve handelen als grondslag voor de continuïteit van ondernemingen* Assen, Van Gorcum 1997, where extensive references can be found.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Beaud *De Geschiedenis van het kapitalisme* Utrecht, Het Spectrum 1994

Over the past two centuries, the conditions of work and labour have improved dramatically, but some tension remains. People still work in organisations to earn the income needed to survive (in terms of the high standards we have developed regarding survival) and as such, work has instrumental meaning. But we also want to be 'ourselves' in our work; our work is an important part of the way we live our lives.

How can this intrinsic value of work be articulated? Modern theories of management and organisation take it for granted that work must be 'challenging'. In the theories this challenge has two dimensions, which are interrelated. One dimension is the freedom for initiatives. Routinised, completely programmed work is considered inhuman and employees, for instance, may be challenged to take initiatives to find a unique solution in an unexpected or special situation. Doing something new in such a situation can give a feeling of intrinsic value to work. The other dimension concerns communication with others, our 'peers'. Work without communication is considered unsatisfying. Communication can relate to our initiatives, our feelings about the relevance of work, the risks, our dependence on others and our support of them. From the perspective of the theories it does not matter if we communicate with our superior, with our colleagues or with clients; we treat them as our equals.

It is reasonable to ask if work really can offer such challenges in all cases. It may be possible in organisations which are called 'knowledge-intensive', for instance engineering companies or business consultancy, but not obviously so in manufacturing organisations in which many routinised processes occur such as the production of candy bars or screws. And what of service firms that perform a large number of routine activities, like banks and insurance companies?

Here, the point is often made, processes may be routinised, but work is not or not necessarily so. Thanks to the constant search for more efficiency and reduced production costs, on the one hand, and increasing pay on the other, many tasks - especially when they are routinised - are automated. This applies also to administrative tasks. People are employed almost exclusively at those points where *human* interventions are necessary; they carry out tasks which cannot (yet) be (fully) automated because they require human insight, initiative and communication. Therefore, even in mass manufacturing and routinised services, we can see the same development as in knowledge intensive organisations: the freedom and the ability to take initiatives and to communicate become dominant characteristics of work.

Apart from this development there is something else going on. Most organisations, especially businesses, have to 'distinguish' themselves from other organisations. They have to compete. In this respect price and quality of products or services are important but nowadays, a low price and good quality are not enough. Price and the quality (reliability etc.) are important when buying a new car. But in these respects car companies increasingly resemble each other, thanks to the general availability of high quality and efficient production technology. Customers know that no bad cars are produced anymore, and regard the relatively small differences in the prices of comparable cars of different brands almost irrelevant. Customers choose one car of a certain brand over another brand mainly by reference to factors like image, design and innovative technology. Most of these factors are 'soft' while others, such as innovative technology, require soft factors in the manufacturers, such as ability to innovate, knowledge and creativity. In short: special *human* capacities are necessary for the survival of those companies.

Generally speaking we can say that employees are no longer needed for their physical strength or ability to move something physically. They are needed for the following abilities: to take initiative; to 'judge', i.e. to do the appropriate thing in unpredictable situations; to be creative; to 'know' how to communicate (with peers, clients and so forth).<sup>5</sup>

In the following we will speak of the capacity for 'free action' when referring to these abilities; people are needed in organisations for their ability to act 'freely'.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Feenberg 'Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power and Democracy' *Inquiry*, 35: 3/4 (1992)

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many writers about management and organisation pointed to this phenomenon. They used different labels, depending on their approach, including autonomy, empowerment, responsibility, flexibility, the importance of commitment, freedom to take initiatives, the importance of making mistakes, or the relevance of learning in organisations.

Usually these topics were combined with a criticism of the traditional bureaucratic organisation and its division of labour. It was argued that bureaucracy (i.e. hierarchy, a high division of labour, separation of planning and execution, detailed job descriptions) made it impossible for employees to do their tasks in an appropriate (creative, autonomous, innovative) way. Hierarchy must therefore be eliminated and the organisation restructured along the 'horizontal' dimension, the boss become a coach, and workers become 'entrepreneurs' (or intrapreneurs) or 'advisers' in their enterprise. The organisation needs to give them opportunities to act freely and use their abilities, and so become committed to the organisation and give the best of themselves.

But there remain ambiguities in these new concepts of work and organisation, specifically with regard to the concept of freedom. The concept of freedom does not take into account why people should be free in organisations. It is not for ethical or humanitarian reasons that these writers proclaim the 'freedom' of employees, the outcomes of this freedom have to contribute to the profitability of organisations. The reason these writers are so 'humanistic' is an economic one.

Thus modern writers about management and organisation devote considerable attention to discussing how to influence the free action of employees – which raises the question of the sense in which management-influenced or controlled action can be free. Behind influence and control lurks the problem of negation of that freedom. This problem is reflected in a phrase often read or heard in this context: 'you have to give workers *the feeling of freedom, responsibility*'. In other words: they don't need to *be* really free.

Modern writers about management and organisation realise that often there can be no direct control of actions of employees while the need to influence those actions remains. As they reflect on the conditions for this influencing, organisational culture has become an important issue in management theory. It is hoped that changing the organisational culture will change the behaviour of employees in ways which are profitable for the organisation.<sup>6</sup> Eccles hopes to achieve the same by influencing the 'identity' of employees through rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

It is quite understandable that the perspective on free action is that of the profitability (or more generally survival) of the organisation. Only those aspects of action which are relevant for the success of the organisation are taken into account. What is lacking is an analysis of the concept of free action as such. We think that some elements of Hannah Arendt's theory of action can be used to create a fruitful framework for such an analysis.

## 2 Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action

Some writers interpret Arendt's philosophy as 'post' modern, for instance Benhabib, Villa, and Grossmann<sup>8</sup> and insofar as modernity implies the idea of man's ability to control nature, himself and society, Arendt can indeed be considered 'post-modern'. Her theory of action contains elements pointing especially in the direction of 'post-modernity', with its emphasis that human action goes beyond making or producing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar H Schein *Organizational Culture and Leadership* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass 1992

<sup>7</sup> Robert G Eccles, Nitin Nohria and James D Berkley *Beyond The Hype* Boston, Harvard Business School Press 1992

<sup>8</sup> Seyla Benhabib *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications 1996; A Grossmann. 'Renaissance einer streitbaren Denkerin' *Philosophische Rundschau* 44 no 3 (1997); D R Villa *Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political* Princeton, Princeton University Press 1996; Larry May and Jerome Kohn *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later* Cambridge, Mill Press 1996

<sup>9</sup> Jacques de Visscher, Marc van den Bossche and Maurice Weyembergh *Hannah Arendt en de moderniteit. Monografieën* Kampen, Kok Agora 1992

Firstly, free action for Arendt means a permanent articulation of 'who' one is.<sup>10</sup> In whatever we do, our 'who' manifests itself even when we are totally absorbed in an activity. This 'who' is indefinable; it eludes all conceptual description. When we try to define it we can at best describe only some aspects of the 'what' of a person, for instance his/her character. But the real 'who' disappears, as it were, in the moment we try to describe it.

Secondly, action means taking initiatives, starting something new. A human being is not (only) a mechanism of blind processes or an organism that instinctively looks for means of survival. S/he can take initiatives which are not to be predictable from man viewed as an organism. What you can expect from humans is the un-expectable.<sup>11</sup>

Action is not monological; a human is an element of a web of human relations and *plurality* is a basic condition of men. The articulation of one's 'who' is always in confrontation with others. For Arendt this implies that one's 'who' may be better 'known' by another than by oneself. The other basic condition of human beings is their *natality*. Being born means: being a new beginning. This condition reveals itself in human action: in action you cannot but start a new initiative. And because of the condition of plurality, this initiative is always in interaction with others, for instance as a response to the initiatives of others.<sup>12</sup>

Taken together, these basic conditions of human life imply both the manifestation of one's 'who' and the continuous starting of a new beginning in a web of relationships.

Arendt's concept of action is thus not a kind of *making* or *producing*. The condition of every making is the *who*; the starting of something new is above all an articulation of *meaning*. Without this 'who' and an articulated meaning no making or producing is possible. How can this be understood?

Every making is in the context of means and ends but the end of something is not the same as its meaning. For humans, the end of a producing activity is always formulated or interpreted in terms of its possible meaning and for Arendt, meaning refers to that what is intrinsically valuable. Interaction with your peers (as meaning, as an intrinsic value) may require a table, chairs or a communication programme as means. These means to the end of interaction are themselves the realised *ends of a prior process of making* and the meaning of this prior making refers to the social-cultural interpretation of its results. A communication programme is an end for a programmer and its meaning shows itself in the communication or interaction by 'end users', which is conditioned by the programme. Of course, communication can be seen as means for other ends such as bargaining to effect a business transaction. But we communicate for its own sake too, for instance when we enjoy the process of interaction, engage in play, go to a concert, or tell stories to others. In fact, even 'functional' activities like the process of selling can be experienced as intrinsically valuable.

In work we use specific means to produce or realise preconceived ends. The end, say a house or a computer program, must have a certain kind of stability if it is to be an end. For Arendt, the realised ends, taken together, constitute the *world*. Being the condition of our *action* is the meaning of this world. The fluidity of actions requires the stability of a world, just as communication requires say, a room, table and chairs in order to take place.

For Arendt, work as such cannot be meaningful in itself. What are the implications of this?

According to Dietz<sup>13</sup> Arendt connects the following elements with *work*:

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1958 pp 175 ff

<sup>11</sup> Compare James T Knauer 'Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action' *The American Political Science Review* vol. 77 (1980); William J Denayer *Handelen en denken bij Hannah Arendt. Ontologie van het actieve* Leiden 1993

<sup>12</sup> Willem B Prins *Op de bres voor vrijheid en pluraliteit* Amsterdam VU Uitgeverij 1990

<sup>13</sup> Mary G Dietz 'Arendt and the Holocaust' in: Dana Villa (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000 p 97

The work of our hands, the man-made world, fabrication, (human) artifice, (human) creativity, production, usage, durability, objectivity, building, constructing, manufacturing, making, violation, maleness, linearity, reification, multiplication, tools and instruments, rules and measurements, ends and means, predictability, the exchange market, commercialism, capitalism, instrumental processes, utilitarian processes, objectifying processes, artificial processes, vulgar expediency, violence, deprivation of intrinsic worth, degradation, disposability, destruction (of nature, world), and lifelessness.

Dietz comments that these features can be viewed as points along a single continuum that shade from the human condition 'under which life on earth has been given to man' into a condition *in extremis* under which life on earth is taken away'. In other words: insofar as work is not established as a meaning (in itself), it is a 'condition under which life on earth has been given to man'. Not having intrinsic value (a possibility which Arendt denies), work leads to lifelessness, destruction of life.

We therefore need to be 'redeemed' and this can happen only in a context where meaning is at stake. For Arendt, this is the context of action. For her, the *homo faber* is the prototype of the 'working man'. She writes: '...homo faber could be redeemed from this predicament of meaninglessness...only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects'.<sup>14</sup> Only action is meaningful, as opposed to work. The stories produced are results or expressions of articulated meanings in action. The dynamics of work come to an end when its results function as worldly conditions of action.

For Arendt work and action cannot be the only human activities. Action requires (the result of) work; but both action and work require *life*. The conditions of life form a human condition too. In this context Arendt speaks about 'labour', the prototypical activity of the *animal laborans*. This labour (as opposed to work) consists mainly in routinised practices for life to survive and in a broader sense 'labour' encompasses all necessary activities to maintain the 'life' or existence of something, say a house, property, organisation, or nation.

Dietz connects the following elements with Arendt's concept of labour:

The blessing of life as a whole, nature, animality, life processes, (human) biology, (human) body, (human) metabolism, fertility, birth, reproduction, childbirth, femaleness, cyclicity, circularity, seasons, necessity, basic life-needs (food, clothing, shelter), certain kind of toils, repetition, everyday functions, (eating, cleaning, mending, washing, cooking, resting), housework, the domestic sphere, abundance, consumerism, privatization, purposeless regularity, the society of jobholders, automation, technological determinism, routinization, relentless repetition, automatism, regularization, non-utilitarian processes, dehumanizing processes, devouring processes, painful, exhaustion, waste, recyclability, destruction (of nature, body, fertility), and deathlessness.

We can see these elements too along a continuum: from the human condition 'under which life on earth has been given to man' to a condition under which life on earth is taken away. Labour as meaning or value in itself results in dehumanising automatic processes, compulsive repetitions, consumerism and the eternal return of processes that undercut stability. So labour (like work) has to be redeemed by stopping these effects. This happens through work, which, by producing tools and useful artefacts 'not only eases the pain and trouble of labouring but also erects a world of durability'.<sup>15</sup>

So labour is redeemed by work, and work by action. But what of action itself? Is it 'sustainable' in itself, or is it to be redeemed too?

Although action is meaningful, it is not sustainable from within; it is frail. The results of action threaten action itself. In Arendt's analysis, the threat stems from the unpredictability and possible irreversibility of action.

Action can be 'irreversible' in that a manifestation of one's will or an initiative in a web of relationships cannot be undone by one's own proclamation or rule. You can become 'stuck' with a

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1958 p 236

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p 236

reputation and new initiatives can be made almost impossible or be ignored by others...The image of one's 'who' can be fixed so that one's 'real who' becomes invisible too. The saying: 'Once a thief, always a thief' expresses this irreversibility.

It is only through a faculty of action itself, that this irreversibility can be overcome. A kind of redemption of action by action itself is achieved by *forgiving*. 'The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing - is the faculty of forgiving.'<sup>16</sup> Besides being irreversible, action is unpredictable. 'The unpredictability (...) is of a twofold nature: it arises simultaneously out of the 'darkness of the human heart', that is the basic unreliability of humans who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act.'<sup>17</sup> Man cannot rely upon himself and remain master of what he does; it is the price human beings pay for freedom. This unpredictability can result in a chaos of voices and initiatives in which nothing can endure or last.

The function of *promising* redeems this price of freedom, of possible chaos. 'The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises.'<sup>18</sup> By the faculty of promising man is able to commit himself to a project, a plan, a task and so forth. Promising is the basis of a contract. 'Islands' of predictabilities arise in the domain of action.<sup>19</sup>

Action as such is uncontrollable and unpredictable. For Arendt, this 'human condition' is the background to efforts in political philosophy to 'undo' the faculty of action.<sup>20</sup> In her view, Plato stressed the importance of laws because of their function to structure or to make predictable, the actions of the inhabitants of a state (for instance the citizens of the Greek *polis*). A statesman has to retain mastery of the initiatives he starts. He therefore has to separate his initiatives or orders from their realisation by subordinates and thus separate 'thinking' (planning, ordering etc) and 'doing'; a separation which is inherent in *homo faber's* activity of making. Arendt's point is that following Plato this separation has become a basic principle of political philosophy. She interprets the political tradition (in theory and in practice) as a continuing effort to reduce the faculty of action to making i.e. to designing, ordering or commanding on the one hand and realising, doing or obeying on the other.

But for Arendt these efforts are bound to fail. As long as there are people, they will act. The faculty of action cannot be reduced to making. No matter how 'totalitarian' a government may be, resistance or subversion by the subordinates will always be possible and will always occur. For Arendt, the irreducible capacity to act is the unalienable source of a primary uncontrollability and unpredictability in human communities. But more than that, given the human condition of plurality and natality, this capacity of acting is the source of experiences of intrinsic values, happiness, meaning and freedom.

### 3 Interpreting Arendt's Theory of Action: Two Points of View

We now analyse the implications of Arendt's theory of action for management and organisation theory. A serious problem presents itself from the outset because it can be argued that the theory has no relevance at all to the field. There are two reasons for thinking this.

Firstly, when Arendt writes about 'The Human Condition' she refers to the Greek *polis*. In the public sphere of the *polis* only the 'free men' are able to act. She stressed the importance of great, exceptional 'deeds', which are to be remembered. In an atmosphere of competition these deeds were (re)presented, repeated in drama and discussed. In this way, a kind of eternal remembrance of great

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 p 237

<sup>17</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 p 244

<sup>18</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 p 237

<sup>19</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 pp 236 ff, 243 ff

<sup>20</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 pp 192, 220, 294

deeds was realised. Applied to the sphere of management and organisation, this view seems to imply that if there is any meaning at all, it must be located in the ('top') management of organisations. It is there that great leaders perform 'unforgettable' deeds: new successful strategies, takeovers, for instance. There is much of literature about 'great' men in organisations. Seen thus, however, Arendt's theory of action would be of, at best, limited importance.

The second reason refers to a conceptual question. Arendt defines the concept of action in such a way that it excludes work and labour which comprise the activities in organisations. One might conclude that the concept of action has no application at all in organisations. We will discuss these two reasons below and explain why we think differently.

### *Equality and Elitism in Arendt's Theory of Action*

Two major sources inspired Arendt's theory of action. The first is the Greek *polis*, which leads to an elitist concept of action. The free citizens in the *polis* are liberated from labour, which is 'delegated' to slaves, craftsmen, women and traders. They care for the necessities of life of the free men. In Arendt's opinion, if you live in the 'realm of necessity' you are excluded from the 'realm of freedom'. Only when liberated from the realm of necessity, the realm of freedom is open for you. Arendt projects this distinction back onto the ancient distinction between the *polis* and the '*oikos*'.<sup>21</sup> Liberated from the realm of necessity, citizens could meet each other on the '*agora*', a space of appearance for freely acting men. They could discuss everything, tell stories, and take initiatives, manifesting 'who' they were in their great activities such as poetry, music, tragedy, philosophy and political discourse. In an atmosphere of competition they sought to impress each other, looking in this way for immortality. In the interpretation of action based on this source, action is only possible for the few.

Arendt's second source of inspiration is Augustine. Writing about action, Arendt argues: 'Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiatives, are prompted to action'. Referring to Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, Arendt notes: 'With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created, but not before'.<sup>22</sup> A man, as born, as a beginning, cannot help but act but begin. This view leads to an *egalitarian* concept of action. No one can avoid acting. Slaves, women, craftsmen, traders, as people, act because they are human.

There thus seems to be a tension in Arendt's theory of action and it can be argued that she never overcame it between its elitist and the egalitarian dimensions.<sup>23</sup> Below, we adopt the egalitarian interpretation and defend it by discussing a problem to which it gives rise. It implies that, everywhere and under all conditions, every man will act. One can question whether this is a realistic position and find more plausible the elitist account, that action is possible only under special social and economic conditions. Is it not true that the faculty to act can be repressed say when working hard merely to survive? The answer will depend on the relations between the concepts of acting, working and labouring, which we consider below.

### *The Concept of Action Related to those of Work and Labour*

For Arendt, labour is a brutal routinised process based on biological necessity. Work is the process of modelling material, given a preconceived model to realise a 'lasting' (part of the) 'world'. Both are 'alienated', corrupt in themselves, although they can be redeemed as discussed. Labour or work cannot be a process of liberation, as is the case in Hegel's master/slave relation. By definition they are 'closed' in themselves; you can be liberated only *from* them. This means being liberated from the necessity to produce: (i) the conditions of reproducing biological life, and/or (ii) the things that make up the world.<sup>24</sup> From this line of thought the elitist model arises.

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<sup>21</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 pp 28-35

<sup>22</sup> Arendt *op cit* 1958 p 177

<sup>23</sup> For this, see Hauke Brunkhorst 'Equality and elitism in Arendt' in: Dana R Villa (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000 p 178

<sup>24</sup> Cf Brunkhorst *op cit* Arendt on Revolution' in: Dana R Villa (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000 p 232

We agree with Wellmer that Arendt has a tendency to reify the concept of action. That is to say, she represents the sphere of action as an autonomous or separate sphere with - as it were - a content of its own.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, when she speaks about action it is about issues which are outside the sphere and interests of labour or work, such as poetry, tragedy and telling life stories. However, for Arendt, as we have seen, the ultimate anthropological reason to talk of action is rooted in the two forms in which humans manifest their humanity: men's manifestations of their 'who', and their beginning of something 'new' in interaction with each other. From this perspective, there is no need to restrict the sphere of action to politics and poetry and it is impossible to restrict access to this sphere to a small elite.

The reason why Arendt excludes aspects of work and labour from the sphere of action is that the interests behind them (those of biological necessity, economic interest, constructing a world, violence and so on) threaten to corrupt the sphere of action by dominating and indeed eliminating deliberative, free action.<sup>26</sup> So, in Arendt's opinion, to act implies to be liberated from these interests.

But can a person act only if he or she is *completely* liberated from these interests? It would mean that only a very limited number of people - a true elite - would be able to engage in the essence of human behaviour. And in fact even the free citizens of Greece certainly had to engage in some labour (eating and cleaning themselves to ensure their personal wellbeing and biological survival). We would argue therefore that for *every* person a sphere of action is to be found in at least those hours of the day when he or she is not engaged in labour or work (in fact, people will frequently be thinking about action while being engaged in a simple routine at work). This leads to a further point. Not only is it difficult to imagine human life without at least some room for free action (and even the slaves in ancient Greece had a life of their own), but it is most likely that the interests behind labour and work will become subjects of action. There are two related arguments for this position.

Firstly, Kateb<sup>27</sup> has demonstrated that for Arendt action is also concerned with the conditions of action. As far as we can see, it is only in Arendt's political analyses that this conclusion can be drawn directly from her writings as, for instance, when she writes: 'Action, insofar as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history'.<sup>28</sup> But why should we restrict ourselves to the sphere of politics? As bodily incorporated, humans have to care for the conditions of life, i.e. of action. From this we can conclude that in the sphere of action, as far as it is concerned with the conditions of acting in general, issues of work and labour ought to be subject of action too. Otherwise, this sphere would still (so to speak) be floating in the air.

Secondly, it can be argued that it is indeed characteristic of the sphere of action to make issues of labour and work subjects of action. Work and labour, as forms of human activity, can be 'liberated' from the one-sided subordination to 'blind' biological necessity, economic interests or violence. They can become subjects of deliberation, of free speech. This can be interpreted as the redemption of labour and work by action which is achieved by discussing and interpreting the meaning of work and labour, for instance as a kind of a personal fulfilment, or negatively, as inhuman. This redemption has obvious political elements, as is clear by reference to the well-known distinction between 'national income' and 'national well-being'. Labour and work contribute to the national income, but growth in national income is not necessarily associated with growth in national well-being. The transformation of national income into national well-being can be interpreted as the redemption of work and labour as *means* and the translation into their possible *meaning*. In this sense, labour and work become political matters by making them issues of *common* public concern.<sup>29</sup> In this way, labour and work become topics within the sphere of action as its 'content'.

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<sup>25</sup> Albrecht Wellmer 'Arendt on Revolution' in: Dana R Villa (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000 p 232

<sup>26</sup> Brunkhorst *op cit* pp 184-186

<sup>27</sup> George Kateb 'Political action: its nature and advantages' in: D R Villa (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000, p 134; see also Wellmer *op cit* p 230

<sup>28</sup> Arendt *op cit* p 8

<sup>29</sup> Richard J Bernstein 'Rethinking the Social and the Political' *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in Pragmatic Mode* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania 1986 pp 238-259

What does this mean in a more concrete sense? Work and labour have to be done but as human forms of activities; they cannot be conceived as only routinised or automated forms of activities. They are not 'blindly' given; they are mediated by a social-cultural and technological context in which deliberation takes place and choices are made about the content of these activities and the way they have to be done. The sphere of action is the sphere in which these deliberations and decisions take place. It is the sphere in which we can discuss the interests of labour and work, where we can ask questions about the possible dominance of particular economic interests in the organisation of work or in decisions about what we make or about our consumption patterns and so on. If there is a possibility for 'redeeming' issues like pollution, exploitation and consumerism, then the origin of it will also be situated in the sphere of action.

In the next section we will discuss some implications of our understanding of Arendt's theory of action for the (theory of) management and organisation.

#### **4 Applying Arendt's Theory of Action to Modern Theories of Management and Organisation**

We discuss the implications of Arendt's theory of action for the theory of management and organisation theory in three sections. First we will show that it helps explain the reasons for some well-known limitations of mainstream theories of organisation and management. Secondly, we discuss the efforts in modern management theory to introduce free action into the organisation. Finally, we discuss what, in Arendt's approach, could be called the 'politics' of work organisation, i.e. the possibility of issues of work and organisation becoming subject of free action.

##### ***The Limitations of Mainstream Theories of Organisation***

Arendt interprets political theory from Plato onward as a continuing effort to reduce action to making or to being made. The reason for this is the perennial fear of chaos or absence of structure when the activities of people are not regulated by laws. A state thus has to be created to control the subjects. Besides Plato, Hobbes' *Leviathan* is a good example of this line of thought: people have to abdicate their 'freedom', and have to obey absolutely the laws produced by the Leviathan for the sake of their survival.<sup>30</sup> Arendt's claims that even political theories of representative democracy fall within her account: it is irrelevant under what conditions laws are constructed in respect of the point she wants to make. Those laws are meant to be followed and in that sense the potential of people to freely act 'politically' is negated.

A similar point can be made with regard to virtually all classical theories of management and organisation. All activities in an organisation are expected to contribute to the making of things (including services) and all independent action by organisation members is considered dysfunctional, and consequently disregarded and if possible eliminated. The main task of (top) management is to produce rules and prescriptions which are to be followed by the employees.

In a state, it is the task of the police and sometimes the army to ensure the compliance of the subjects. In organisations (lower) management has to watch over employee activities. In the state the ultimate sanctions refer to the conditions of life or survival of the subjects themselves (imprisonment or even the death penalty). For employees, disobeying the prescriptions and rules of management can result in their being fired. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this in fact also implied a threat to the conditions of life and even of survival.<sup>31</sup>

The classical image of an organisation is that of a machine with workers as the cogs and wheels that have to function according to the design drawn up by management. In the systems tradition, an organisation is seen as an organism in which the employees participate in the processes transforming

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<sup>30</sup> Cf Arendt *op cit* p 300; also Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* London, Routledge 1994; Michael G Gottsegen *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* Albany, State University of New York Press 1994

<sup>31</sup> Beaud *op cit*

inputs into outputs, thereby ensuring the survival of the organism. Notably, most of these processes (like breathing and digestion of food) take place unconsciously in the body and employees are similarly held to act, as it were unconsciously, according to the precepts of management.

For Arendt, the perfect realisation of a state is not possible. As long as people live, they will act and, as a consequence, they will be unpredictable. This means that the artefact 'state' will not (fully) function as artefact, as a predictable machine. Arendt makes this clear in statements like this:

To act in the form of making, to reason in the form of 'reckoning with consequences,' means to leave out the unexpected, the event itself, since it would be unreasonable or irrational to expect what is no more than an 'indefinite improbability'. Since, however, the event constitutes the very texture of reality within the realm of human affairs [the sphere of acting], where the 'wholly improbable happens regularly', it is highly unrealistic not to reckon with it, that is, not with something with which nobody can safely reckon.<sup>32</sup>

In mainstream organisation and management theory similar insights can be found. Most textbooks distinguish between the formal and the informal organisation. The *formal organisation* is the division of tasks into an official framework established by the management, complemented with job and task descriptions, guidelines and procedures.<sup>33</sup> The formal organisation maintains itself by means of the power created by authority relations, structure, agreements, procedures, and so forth.

However, there is a large and important area of activity in which the power of the formal organization cannot be exploited. Informal organization arises spontaneously and is always based on personal relations and mutual interdependencies.<sup>34</sup>

In times of crisis, situations often occur in which informal aspects of an organization can fulfil a more important role than the formal organization. An informal leader steps forward and takes control.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, in spite of the fact that Keuning recognises the importance of the informal organisation for the organisation's functioning, there is very little discussion of the topic in this textbook and virtually all others. We think this is so because the theory reduces the activities of management and employees to rational 'making' (and labouring). The theoretical presupposition about the rationality of conduct as the basis of designing and functioning of organisations makes it impossible to have an open (theoretical) eye for the fullness of human activity and indeed for the actual functioning of an organisation.<sup>36</sup> Seen from the perspective of Arendt's action theory, this neglect is the consequence in management theory of that basic shortcoming she found in Western political theory: the reduction of action to making. In classical organisation theory, human activities are treated as rational, controllable and programmable. The *formal* organisation is based on this programmable character of work as the source of productivity. As far as work is programmable it is the formal organisation which determines its productivity. In this perspective, the *informal* organisation, although it may be important for the functioning of the organisation, is not productive as such. That is why this aspect can be neglected, theoretically as well as practically. Most famously, Frederick W. Taylor's work on Scientific Management is based on the assumption that work can be programmable, based on time and motion studies and planned by a special engineering department. Taylor's system became an important part of the paradigm of mass production that conquered the world after the Second World War. In spite of its 'dehumanising' effects on workers, it was accepted as part of what has been called the Great Compromise in post-war Western countries. Workers agreed to subject themselves to the Taylorist regime in exchange for higher wages, more job security, longer vacations, and shorter working hours. In effect, employees were left to express their humanity outside the organisation. As a consequence, employees came to look for their identity in activities and recreation outside work.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Arendt *op cit* p 300

<sup>33</sup> Doede Keuning *Management, A Contemporary Approach* London etc, Pitman Publishing 1998: p 265

<sup>34</sup> *loc cit*

<sup>35</sup> *ibidem* p 266

<sup>36</sup> Mary-Jo Hatch *Organization Theory, Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives* Oxford, Oxford University Press 1997

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, it turns out that what is often called the 'private' sphere is the space in which people can go 'public' in Arendt's sense of the word, show themselves as (they think) they really are.

Neglecting the informal organisation may have negative effects for the organisation. It is useful to distinguish here between two types of informal behaviour in organisations. On the one hand, there is behaviour which could be considered as 'action' in Arendt's sense of the word. People use the fact that they are not completely absorbed by their work (say because they can perform a task automatically) to tell each other stories and to get to know each other. On various occasions, managements tried to prevent such activities as they were considered detrimental to productivity. Sometimes, it was even explicitly forbidden to talk to colleagues on the assembly line. Nowadays, management is usually more tolerant of such informal behaviour, because it is seen to contribute to morale, but in both theory and practice there remains a tension with the formal organisation, which surfaces time and again (e.g. when e-mail is used for purposes unrelated to the business). On the other hand, there is informal behaviour that may be seen as a corrective to the formal organisation. The formal organisation is frequently unable to foresee all possible disturbances and employees develop all kinds of informal and 'illegal' routines in order to keep things running. Such informal solutions are obviously positive for the organisation, but they also frequently have negative side-effects, for instance when employees start to accumulate a secret stash of spare parts in order to be able to continue work when parts are delayed. As a result, the production process runs smoothly, but the problem of late parts delivery goes unnoticed and more capital than expected is tied up in parts. Managements have often reacted to such informal behaviour by introducing more rules and regulations. To the extent that such rules were unable to anticipate all disturbances, 'a vicious circle of bureaucracy' arose in such organisations, increasing costs and lowering productivity.

The problem of the vicious circle of bureaucracy has, of course, been recognised in the literature.<sup>38</sup> When product variety increased, mass production organisations grew in complexity and it became virtually impossible to describe all tasks in sufficient detail, let alone to prescribe adequate actions for every possible disturbance. Consequently, various concepts for 'flexible' organisations were developed, which to some extent incorporate informal behaviour of the corrective type discussed above. Employees receive broad job descriptions and are invited to devise creative solutions to any problem they encounter on the job. Furthermore, they are encouraged to engage in 'horizontal' communication with fellow employees in order to solve problems in the flow of production without having to go through higher echelons. Descriptions of this type of organisation emphasise the need for 'autonomy' and initiative on the part of employees and one may ask if this leads to work as 'action' in Arendt's sense of the word. There are no doubt moments where work in this context provides possibilities for employees to express themselves, show 'who they are' and initiate 'new beginnings' (innovations). However, it should be noted that this 'self-regulated' work is heavily circumscribed and instrumentalised for the purposes of the organisation. The tension between self-regulation and the desire for rationality and predictability becomes visible when creative solutions developed by individual self-regulating employees become imposed as standard operating procedures on all other employees. It remains the purpose of the flexible organisation to function as machine-like as possible and therefore to ban free action and indeed humanity from the workplace. The fact that this is never entirely possible does create some space for self-regulation and 'free' action.

### ***The Theory of Action and Modern Concepts of Creativity in Organisations***

Beyond the sphere of high variety mass production and, *a fortiori*, in services where direct communication with customers is essential and tasks can be much less precisely described, the concept of 'flexible' organisations quickly reaches its limits. As a result more 'radical' concepts have been launched over the past decade emphasising the need to 'empower' employees and grant them the freedom to bring their creativity and full personality to bear on their jobs. Highly programmable work has increasingly been automated and/or exported to less developed countries. Besides that, as noted above, flexibility, efficiency and quality are necessary, but no longer sufficient to compete successfully. Companies now need to be innovative – preferably on a continuous basis. For companies to compete successfully employees have to take initiatives and make independent 'judgements'; they have to act decisively in unpredictable situations; and they have to communicate. All that comes very close to saying that it is necessary for employees in modern organisations to

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<sup>38</sup> L Ulbo de Sitter *Synergetisch produceren* Assen, Van Gorcum 1994

really *act*. Let us explore these notions of 'action' inside organisations a little more. First, we discuss the theme of 'being yourself' and 'showing who you are' in organisations, and then we focus on the articulation of meaning and taking initiatives.

### *Manifestation of the 'Who'*

The importance of manifesting one's who for the theory of management and organisation is stressed by Eccles *et al*, who also refer to Arendt.<sup>39</sup> They write: 'All a manager needs to know - and this is a lot - is *who* a person wants to be and *how* this person aims to achieve it.'<sup>40</sup> 'Recognising who a person wants to be, and realising the implications of this for what she wants to do, is the key to creating a context in which the right kinds of action occur.'<sup>41</sup> The main task of management is thus not designing and controlling an organisation, but to find matches between each employee's aims or motives and the interests of the organisation. 'The basic task of management... is to mobilize action by using language creatively to appeal to the identities of people.'<sup>42</sup> This usage of language is what Eccles calls 'rhetoric'. It is clear that different aspects of action manifest themselves: the manifestation of the 'who', communication and the articulation of meaning. And after this mobilisation has taken place, a mutual promise, agreement or even contract can or will result: the promise of the manager to facilitate the person, and the promise of the employee to commit himself to achieve the result of the mobilised action.

### *Articulation of Meaning and Taking Initiatives*

Different writers introduce articulation of meaning (or 'sensemaking') as an important issue in organisational processes. As Feldman notes: sensemaking is an interpretative process that is necessary 'for organisational members to understand and to share understandings about such features as what it is about, what it does well and poorly, what the problems it faces are, and how it should resolve them.'<sup>43</sup> Referring to the task of a leader, Thayer notes: 'A leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the *meaning* of that which they do by recreating it in a different form, a different 'face' in the same way that a pivotal painter or sculptor or poet gives those who follow him (or her) a different way of 'seeing' - and therefore saying and doing and knowing in the world.'<sup>44</sup> This articulation of meaning can easily be connected with 'using the language creatively to appeal to the identities of people' as Eccles wrote.

In his *Sensemaking in Organizations* Karl Weick provides a compact account of his concept of sensemaking in the answer of a little girl who had the making of a poet in her. When she was asked if she was sure of the meaning before she spoke, she replied: 'How can I know what I think till I see what I say?'<sup>45</sup> Weick writes: '...the words I say affect the thoughts I form when I see what I've said.'<sup>46</sup> Generally speaking we can say: my actions affect my manifestation of my 'who', my initiatives, my articulation of meaning and communication, when I see what I did. So principally, action is an ongoing process with no end and no stable result can be guaranteed.

In the context of organisations, this finding raises important questions. It seems to imply that organisations have to accept any initiative (free action), because only after the completion of an action is it possible to judge if that action has been right. Mistakes are inevitable and in a sense necessary, and in any case not to be foreseen. But how can we speak about mistakes in this context? We would need a norm or reference point to judge these actions.

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<sup>39</sup> Eccles et al *op cit* p 64

<sup>40</sup> *Loc cit*

<sup>41</sup> Eccles et al *op cit* p 63

<sup>42</sup> Eccles et al *op cit* p 37

<sup>43</sup> Martha S Feldman *Order without design* Stanford, Stanford University Press 1989 p 19

<sup>44</sup> L Thayer 'Leadership/communication: A critical review and a modest proposal' in: G M Goldhaber & G A Barnett (ed) *Handbook of organizational communication* Norwood, Ablex 1988 p 250

<sup>45</sup> Karl E Weick *Sensemaking in Organizations* London, Sage Publications 1995 p 12

<sup>46</sup> Weick *op cit* p 90

For this, let us take a closer look at the structure of action as a process. For Weick, 'self fulfilling prophecies are the prototype for human sensemaking'.<sup>47</sup> He writes:

...self-fulfilling prophecies are a fundamental act of sensemaking. Prophecies, hypotheses, anticipations - whatever one chooses to call them - are starting points. They are minimal structures around which input can form as the result of some kind of active prodding. People do not have much to start with when their goal is to 'get to know' some other person, or setting or job. This means that their expectations cannot help but be the force that shapes the world they try to size up.<sup>48</sup>

When perceivers act on their expectations, they may enact what they predict will be there. And when they see what they have enacted, using their predictions as a lens, they often confirm their predictions.<sup>49</sup>

Prophecies, hypotheses, and anticipation appear here as *articulated* meanings within action. They function as stabilising factors in the process of acting, for instance as point of reference or norm for evaluating this process. This process of 'enactment' is presented as a space, in which failures are structurally possible.

Thus, from the perspective of Arendt's theory of action, we can argue that both the notion of articulated meanings and the idea of tolerance of failure are present in the modern theories of management and organisation. The notion of articulated meanings becomes visible particularly in the theme of 'vision' stressed as important by many in the management and organisation literature: Collins and Porras Senge, Vail, De Geus, Eccles et al, Hamel & Prahalad, and Peters.<sup>50</sup> For Eccles,<sup>51</sup> a successful vision consists of three elements: an imaginative vision of the future, a realistic portrayal of the present, and a selective depiction of the past which can serve as a contrast to the future. In the words of Peter Senge<sup>52</sup> there must be a 'creative tension' between reality and vision that inspires people personally to take up this challenge of transformation. Then people will 'enact' this vision as anticipation or prophecy. The same elements recur in Peters' definition of vision.<sup>53</sup> This vision will be the basis for the process of interacting and promising between a manager and his/her people. The kernel of promising will refer to the type of enactments they will both initiate to realise the vision. As vision, as an articulation of meaning, it constitutes a relative stable component in the sphere of action. As Peters puts it: 'Effective visions (...) stand the test of time in a turbulent world.'<sup>54</sup>

The notion of tolerance of failure is also widely accepted in the literature. All the authors just mentioned support this notion. Peters is very clear; he even advocates making failures, and considers it a virtue to become a 'Failure Fanatic'. He states: 'Introducing the new, which by definition goes beyond the routine and accepted, will be accompanied by failure .... For these failures are necessary, when we 'experiment with new ways of doing things.'<sup>55</sup> Although a vision may be clear, the ways we enact - taking initiatives, articulating specific meanings in specific situations to help realise this vision - are not determined by this vision. Only after our action or enactment is realised, can we hope to judge (and be judged) correctly about it. Our actions can appear to be wrong. Although being criticised for such wrong actions could seem natural, it is not. To be released from consequences is necessary in order to to continue with new initiatives. As Arendt writes, as an

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<sup>47</sup> Weick *op cit* p 35

<sup>48</sup> Weick *op cit* p 148

<sup>49</sup> Weick *op cit* p 152

<sup>50</sup> James C Collins and Jerry I Porras *Built to Last, Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, New York, HarperBusiness 1994; Peter M Senge *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* Doubleday 1990; Peter B Vail *Managing as a performing Art* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers 1998; Arie de Geus *The Living Company* Boston, Harvard Business School Press 1997; Eccles et al *op cit*; Tom J Peters *Thriving on Chaos Handbook for a Management Revolution* London, Macmillian 1988

<sup>51</sup> Eccles *op cit* p 32

<sup>52</sup> Peter Senge 'The leader's new work: Building Learning Organizations' *Sloan Management Review* 32 Fall 1990 pp 9-10

<sup>53</sup> Peters *op cit* pp 401-404

<sup>54</sup> Peters *op cit* p 402

<sup>55</sup> Peters *op cit* p 262

ultimate consequence, 'without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever...'<sup>56</sup>

Does all this mean that 'free action' is indeed not only possible but also necessary inside (at least some) organisations? Although the conceptual discussion seems to point that way, Arendt's contribution makes it possible to point to some important *caveats*. The concepts of the modern organisation and the concomitant management practices have gone far in introducing 'free action' in organisations. They have gone much further than earlier concepts of flexibility in giving broad freedom of action and decision making to employees. The prototypical example of such efforts can be found in business consultancy, where individual consultants bring all their creativity to bear on the problems of customers whom they have often acquired themselves. The leadership of such consultancy groups can find out what the company is doing only by talking to their consultants, certainly a far cry from the old view of leadership in terms of designing and programming. It would be difficult to deny that (some) individual employees in such companies (and more generally in many 'knowledge-intensive' companies) frequently experience their work as a space in which they can express themselves (at least to some extent) and show the world who they are. Nevertheless, all of their sensemaking and initiatives are in the end subjected to the test of how well they contribute to the continuity of the company. True, one can make a few mistakes, but there comes a point where mistakes can no longer be explained away as failed experiments. In spite of all the freedom and the feeling of exhilaration that accompanies efforts to make good use of that freedom, employees at times also feel considerable pressures to perform. The challenge of doing something new easily becomes a constant pressure to think of something new. In this type of organisation people complain work is never finished.

In the old organisations employees were not expected to 'take their work home' with them. After hours, they really were 'free' to engage in 'action', unrestricted by any vision or expectation of the company. That was part of the Great Compromise achieved. In modern organisations, the quality of work is considered much better; the employee is free to take decisions, to communicate, and to be a personality, but as a result the clear dividing line between work and free time tends to disappear. From the perspective of Arendt's theory of action, this by itself is not problematic. Indeed, any enlargement of the sphere of action can be applauded. It becomes problematic whenever the logic of 'making' re-imposes itself and no clear rules seem to apply regarding its boundaries. In their enthusiasm about the discovery of the space for free action inside work organisations, modern management theorists have neglected its inherent limitations. By doing so, they have left people ill-prepared for dealing with these limitations, which we would argue are at least partially negotiable. If it is true that modern organisations depend for their survival on the creativity and the capacity for free action of their employees, then the conditions of that freedom become subject to negotiation, bargaining and political action, just like other conditions of employment. Efforts to enlarge and protect the sphere of action, as argued above, must be part of action itself. That is the subject of our final comments.

### *The 'Politics' of Work Organisation*

Action can be concerned with the conditions for action in two ways: first, by imposing limits on the sphere of work; secondly, by supporting the expansion of action into the sphere of work. These two ways may be called the politics *of* production and politics *in* production, concepts we borrow from Burawoy.<sup>57</sup> Politics *of* production refers to all regulation of work relations by outside parties, mainly the state and collective bargaining partners. Politics *in* production refers to explicit and implicit negotiations and power struggles between employer and employees in the workplace itself. Politics of production is concerned with relatively traditional actions like limiting the length of the working day and imposing standards for working conditions - all aimed at limiting the level of physical and mental exhaustion. Traditional politics of production was frequently shaped by politicians and unionists acting on behalf of employees, supported by experts in ergonomics and other experts in work organisation. The development of legislation and regulation regarding working conditions has

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<sup>56</sup> Arendt *op cit* p 237

<sup>57</sup> Michael Burawoy *Politics of production: factory regimes under capitalism and socialism* London, Verso 1985

by and large reflected power relations in society between employers and organised employees. One can argue that the traditional politics of production has become less important in view of the improvement in working conditions due to technological change (automation) and the growth of services and knowledge-intensive activities. Although it is easy to underestimate the continuing relevance of most legislation on working hours and working conditions, it must be conceded that much of this legislation is difficult to apply in situations where employees exploit themselves, as it were, because they have been given considerable autonomy. Modern problems like stress and burn-out among professionals and so-called knowledge workers are difficult to deal with by general regulation. It is precisely here that action affecting the conditions of action (in work) becomes relevant. The realm of politics in production, i.e. direct bargaining in the workplace between (individual) employees and their employer, is becoming increasingly important. Such bargaining is not restricted to traditional conditions of work (eg pay, working hours) but concerns also the content and intensity of work. In some consulting companies consultants can negotiate their individual work targets, the related workload, the methods they employ, and, of course, the related pay. Whether they will be satisfied with the results of such negotiations - and the extent to which they experience work as 'free action' - depends on various circumstances, which we cannot discuss here. Our point is that the characteristics of knowledge-intensive work tend to enlarge the scope for politics in production. We would stress that 'free action' does not necessarily come to an end as soon as some form of pressure to increase productivity becomes felt. Indeed, many professionals will probably argue that they need the pressure, the deadlines, and the limitations in time and other resources. It is not easy to say where 'free action' stops and 'work' (making) begins.

## 5 Conclusion

In the modern knowledge-intensive organisation, much work is based on the individual's knowledge and creativity. It cannot be planned by management, but has to be planned by the employee himself. The organisation often invests in the further education and development of employees and the planning of such development programmes is frequently and by necessity based on the needs noted by the individual employee, because he or she is the only one who can identify them accurately. Here again, the borderline between the needs of the employee and the needs of the enterprise are difficult to draw. Writers such as Peters, Eccles, and Senge implicitly or explicitly turn around the means-end relationship of people and organisation. People are not there for the sake of the organisation, but the organisation is there for the sake of the people working in it. This raises the question of the meaning of work. When the activities of people are interpreted in terms of work or labour (in Arendt's sense of the words), these activities are 'redeemed' by the organisation. Their meaning is to contribute to profit or to the organisation's continuity. But when people *act* in organisations, the 'redemption' must come from action itself. As a consequence, the meaning of organisation must be located in action itself: an organisation is the result of action and ought to make action possible.

Senge<sup>58</sup> argues that an organisation is not an instrument for making profit, but the location in which human action can flourish. He thinks that the 'artificial' separation between work and family has to disappear and be replaced by a natural relationship between man's life in an organisation and all other aspects of life. For Eccles the 'ongoing actions [of working people] are the very building blocks of structure [of an organisation] and also the reason that structure is constantly changing to varying degrees.'<sup>59</sup> But, 'just as structural decisions must be adapted to identities, they also have a hand in building these identities', for instance by giving a certain status or title. For Eccles one's place in an organisational system is an important part of personal identity.

As indicated above, we think that these authors are one-sided in their focus on the possibility of free action in modern organisations, which in their writings seems to be almost natural and inevitable. Applying Arendt's theory of action makes clear that action will always be needed to shape, defend and enlarge the space for action within the realm of work. It belongs to the sphere of action (the politics in production) to bring issues of labour and work into the sphere of meaning.

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Senge *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* Doubleday 1990 ch 10, 16

<sup>59</sup> Eccles et al *op cit* p 135

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#### Han van Diest

Han van Diest is Associate Professor of Philosophy of Management and Organisation at the Faculty of Philosophy, Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands. He studied mathematics at the University of Utrecht and philosophy at the Radboud University Nijmegen and has a PhD (1997) in philosophy from the latter university. His PhD thesis concerned the relation between human action and the conditions of continuity of enterprises. Prior to coming to Amsterdam he was a director of a consultancy firm for small and medium-sized enterprises. He was responsible for projects in the field of quality and personnel management and information technology. He was a member of the Inter-departmental Group of Science and Society at the Radboud University Nijmegen. In this context he published on the philosophical presuppositions of the Dutch version of the Socio-Technical Systems approach as a theory of organisations and of the implementation of structural alternatives in organisations. He has served on the editorial Board of the Dutch Journal *Filosofie in Bedrijf*. His most recent publication is 'Possibilities of Democratisation in Organisations' published in *Social Epistemology* 2008 Vol 22 no 1.

diest@online.de

#### Ben Dankbaar

Ben Dankbaar is Professor of Innovation Management and Organisation Design at the Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He also holds a chair in Management and Technology at the Faculty of Science of the same university. He studied social sciences and economics at the University of Amsterdam and has a PhD in economics from the University of Maastricht. Prior to coming to Nijmegen, he was employed at, among others, the University of Amsterdam, the Science Center Berlin (WZB), and the Maastricht Economic Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (MERIT). He is director of the Center for Innovation Studies and member of the Board of the Institute for Science Innovation and Society, both of the Radboud University. His current research concerns various aspects of innovation management and innovation policy. He is especially interested in the manufacturing industry with a focus on the automobile industry. His articles have been published by international journals, most recently *European Planning Studies* and *Leviathan* (German). He most recent book is an edited volume *Innovation Management in the Knowledge Economy* published by Imperial College Press in 2003.

B.Dankbaar@fm.ru.nl