

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

10. The Vita Activa





Agenda

- History as pearl-diving
- Introducing *The Human Condition*
- Critique of the *Vita Contemplativa*
- Labour, work and action
- Activity



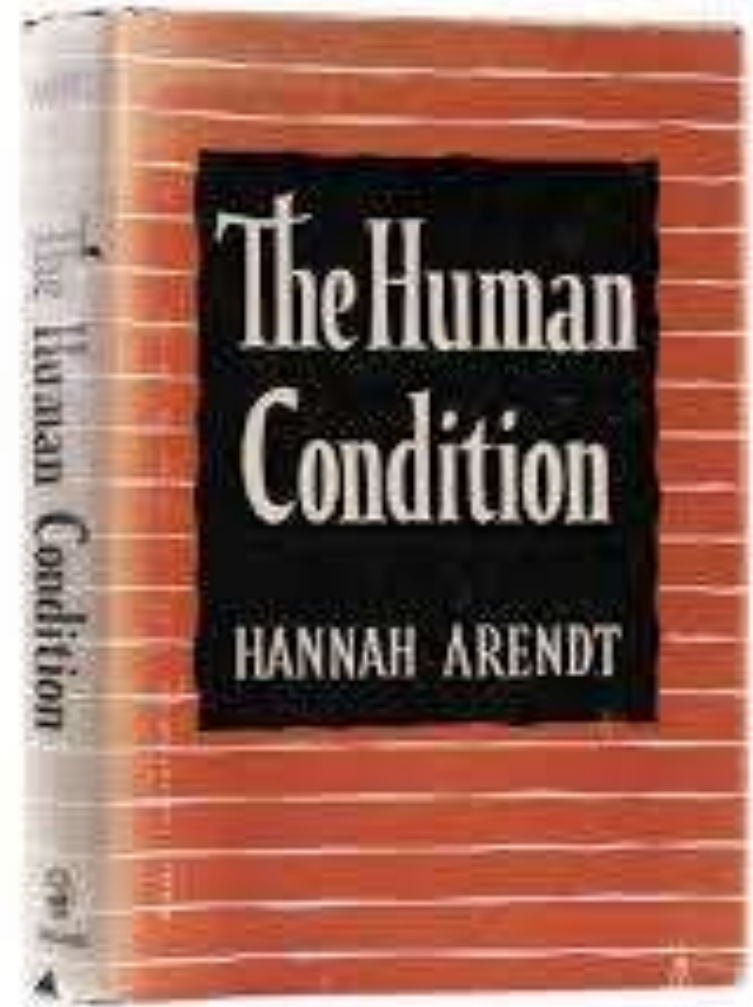


'Full fathom five thy father
lies,
Of his bones are coral
made,
Those are pearls that were
his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth
fade
But doth suffer a sea
change
Into something rich and
strange.'

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Walter Benjamin, pearl-diver

- Walter Benjamin was Arendt's cousin by marriage, and they met as exiles in Paris.
- Writing of his work later, Arendt describes him as like the pearl-diver in Shakespeare's *Tempest* ('full fathom five thy father lied...'), who recovers pearls and corals (historical quotes and material) from the ruins of the past that illuminate present and future.
- Benjamin's intellectual model was Charles Baudelaire's 'ragpicker', who rummages through the 'refuse' of the commodified past to find an object that would 'explode the continuum of history'...



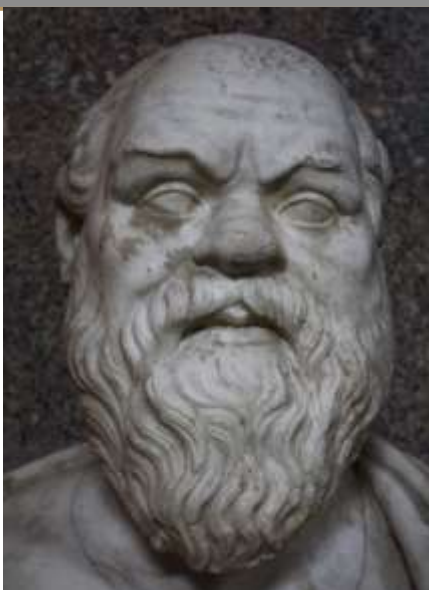
Introducing *The Human Condition*

- Published in 1958, following a 1956 lecture series at Chicago, where A was exploring totalitarian elements of Marxism
- *Amor mundi* an early title – love of the world
- Concerned with ‘conceptual analysis’ – the historical origin of concepts, like activity and action
- The *human condition* points to what is conditioned about human life – how our relationships and activities shape what we are
- *HC* is Arendt’s key philosophical outline of her concepts of action, plurality, freedom, natality – and yet is peculiarly anti-philosophical...



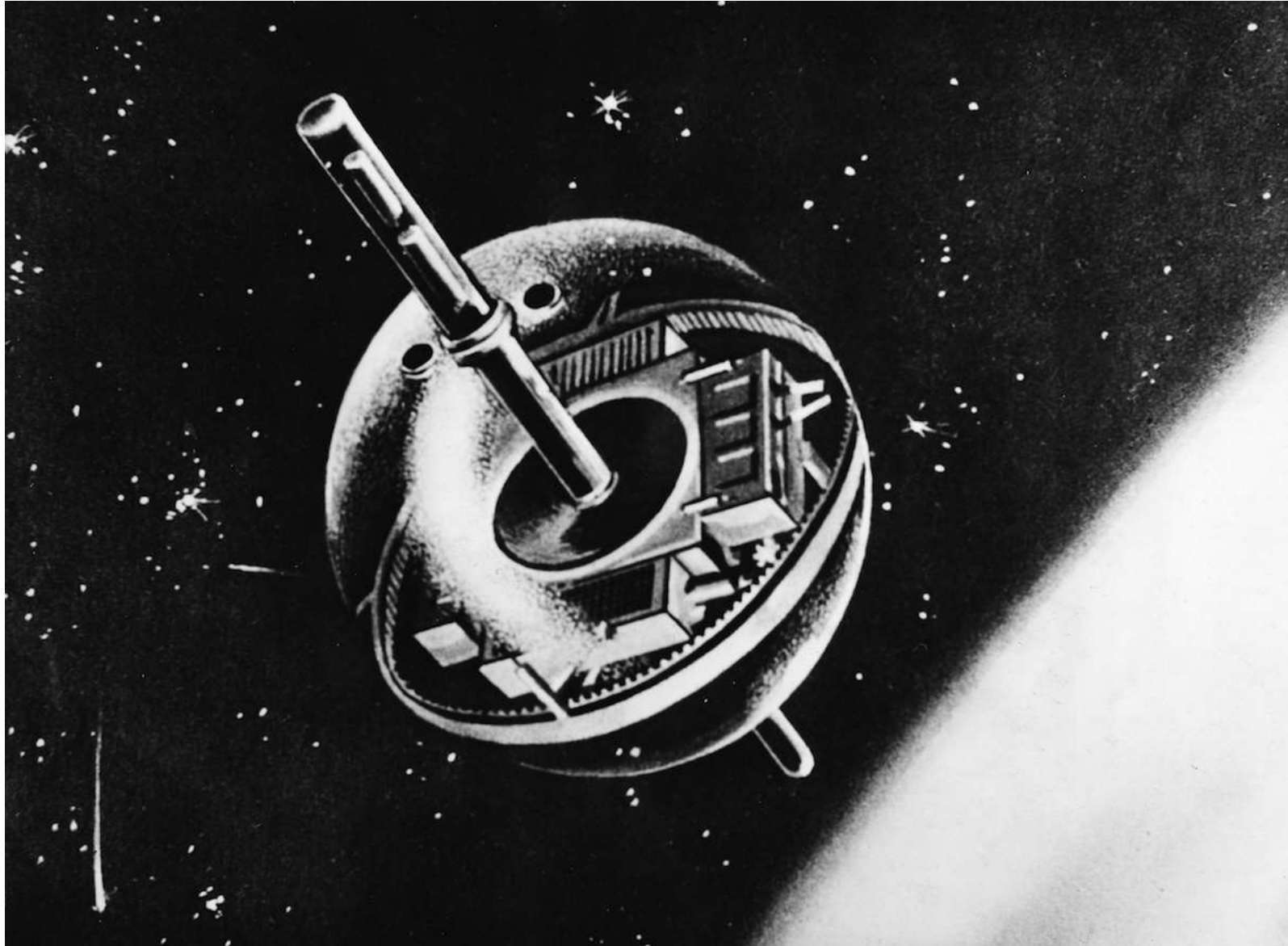
‘Thales was studying the stars and gazing into the sky, when he fell into a well, and a jolly and witty Thracian servant girl made fun of him, saying that he was crazy to know about what was up in the heavens while he could not see what was in front of him beneath his feet.’ – Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a





Against the Vita Contemplativa

- In “Truth and Politics”, Arendt contrasted the contingency of factual truths with the universalising certainty of rational (philosophical) ones
- As ever, the discussion grows out Socrates and Plato...
- Aghast at the complicity of German philosophers with Nazism, who failed to observe political questions before them
- Arendt points blame to a feature in philosophical thinking since Plato: striving for a universal, ideal theory that is then copied onto the world, which is inherently totalising and anti-democratic
- Instead, philosophy must respect plurality, difference and spontaneity
- The *vita activa* (active life), alongside the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life)



Over to you

Let's work in groups over one of the core questions of the Prologue:

1. We are confronted by a society of labourers without labour – why is Arendt alarmed at the prospects of a world without work? (5) And do you agree with her concerns?
2. Arendt sets out to explore 'to think what we are doing' (5). What makes her approach different from others? And why does modern-day thoughtlessness present such a danger?



- ‘which in a few decades probably will empty the factories and liberate mankind from its oldest and most natural burden, the burden of laboring and the bondage to necessity’.
- ‘Within this society, which is egalitarian because this is labor's way of making men live together, there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew.’
- ‘What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.’

- 'The trouble concerns the fact that the 'truths' of the modern scientific world view, though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved technologically, will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought. ... It could be that we will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do.' (3)



- ‘What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. ... What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.’
- ‘thoughtlessness – the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty – seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time.’
- ‘Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.’ (8)



Labour, work and action

- A central part of *HC* relies on the distinction of three human activities
 1. How does Arendt distinguish labour from work, and what characterises each? (7-9) How convinced are you by the distinction?
 2. What does Arendt mean by action? What are the political and philosophical consequences of prioritising it? (7-9)



Labour:

- Activities necessary to sustain human life, e.g. food, shelter. It is biological, necessary for survival, but also cyclical – its futility makes our freedom meaningful. ‘The human condition of labour is life itself’

Work:

- The artificial world of objects fabricated by humans on earth. They leave behind something permanent, worldly. Man is a *homo faber*, transforming nature to create a distinctly human, public world

Action:

- Our plurality as distinct beings. Speech, deeds and acts. Our freedom, acting without an instrumental purpose, as part of a political community. They require others to witness them.

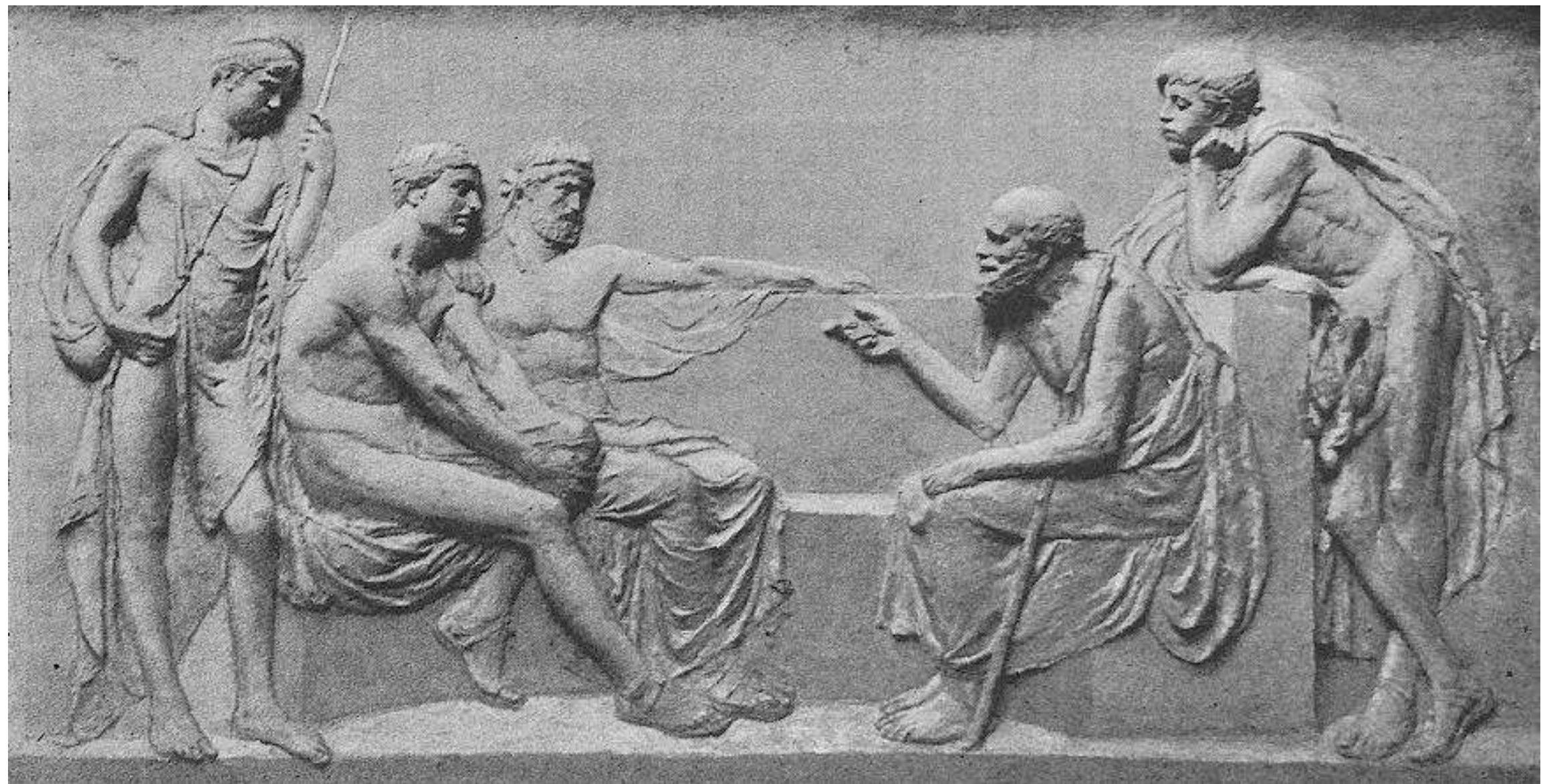
Labour vs work – some notes

- Labour is cyclical, natural, and is a precondition for the political. Slavery emerged out of the desire of the upper classes to be freed from labour.
- Work involves an act of violence, destroying an aspect of nature for material on a project. It involves a means-end rationale, unlike labour, and utilises technological thinking, fabricating something through the idea of the fabricator, *homo faber*. It has a beginning and an end; it inspires the making of tools, it builds a world and a home for humanity against the hardships of nature.
- Labour is of worldlessness, as human bodies concentrate just on remaining alive, and we remain imprisoned by nature, whereas work gives a sense of achievement and purpose.
- Work occurs in private and in solitude, but workers then meet in the public marketplace to sell their goods – and work is inherently more public in involving trade.
- The market isn't part of the political realm of action however, as it's governed by private interests.



Action and freedom

- 'This prerequisite of freedom ruled out all ways of life chiefly devoted to keeping one's self alive – not only labor, which was the way of life of the slave, who was coerced by the necessity to stay alive and by the rule of his master, but also the working life of the free craftsman and the acquisitive life of the merchant. In short, it excluded everybody who involuntarily or voluntarily, for his whole life or temporarily, had lost the free disposition of his movements and activities'
- ... they were concerned with the "beautiful," that is, with things neither necessary nor merely useful: the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed; the life devoted to the matters of the *polis*, in which excellence produces beautiful deeds; and the life of the philosopher devoted to inquiry into, and contemplation of, things eternal, whose everlasting beauty can neither be brought about through the producing interference of man nor be changed through his consumption of them.'



A living being capable of speech

- ‘Thought was secondary to speech, but speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind; and this originally meant not only that most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action. Only sheer violence is mute, and for this reason violence alone can never be great’ (25-26)
- ‘in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world’. (179)



The public, private and the social

- We'll remember from *On Revolution* that Arendt valued her concept of the public – spaces where we can politically act, speak, and witness
- In the modern world, the distinction between public and private (the household, *oikos*) has been lost, as society has become confused with the public, and the needs of private individuals have become predominant political concerns over the common good
- Today, state bureaucracies administer our private needs, while there are no public spaces in which to speak
- All this leads to a peculiar modern alienation and loneliness we'll explore next week...

Next week... more from *The Human Condition*

- We'll explore the last part of the book – why the modern age leaves us alienated, thoughtless and alone
- What do Columbus, the telescope, and Martin Luther have in common?
- Why is the rise of the social also the rise of the idiot? How has modern society and politics created a world of the private, labouring individual?
- More importantly, what is to be done?
- Please read Chapters 35, 43-45