Reconceptualising Solidarity in the Social Factory: Cultural Work between Economic Needs and Political Desires

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Abstract
This article reconceptualises work-based solidarity as political action that is distinct from, yet interlinked with, a socio-economic mode of activity. To extend existing relational approaches to work, this article reads a case study of a cultural initiative through Hannah Arendt’s notions of labour, work and (political) action. With the latter being a form of engagement marked by plurality – the co-presence of equality and difference – the analysis shows how work-based solidarity as political activity is a temporary and precarious phenomenon. It necessitates constant engagement of various material and discursive elements to create its conditions. This article also shows how work-based solidarity is enabled through particular arrangements of activities stretching over both the socio-economic and the political sphere in a way that maintains the political mode of work distinct from socio-economic reasoning without ignoring its economic necessities.

Keywords
aesthetics, cultural work, equality, Hannah Arendt, plurality, politics, solidarity, TSOL, work

Introduction
Traditionally associated with organised labour (Hyman, 1999, 2015), discussions on solidarity often revolve around revitalising unions, for instance through strategies of organising (Connolly et al., 2017; Engeman, 2015), reflecting notions of solidarity based on ideas of community, membership or even homogeneity (Bayertz, 1999). Without
diminishing the need for collective action, this article argues that such an understanding tends to fall short of grasping possibilities for solidarity in light of precarious labour conditions that lead to increased mobility, flexibility and individualisation (see, for example, Virno, 2004). Growing discussions about various types of work that differ from standard employment, such as informal employment (Visser, 2017), contingent (Bolton and Laaser, 2013) or unpaid work (Siebert and Wilson, 2013), show an awareness for contemporary forms of value-extraction, such as financialisation (Cushen and Thompson, 2016), and bring employment-focused definitions of work under considerable pressure. Tronti’s notion of the ‘social factory’ (Tronti, 1966; van Dyk, 2018; Weeks, 2011) highlights that capitalist value-extraction geared towards finding ever-new sites of operation has long left the confines of the factory. This allows focus on the various ways in which activities that have not been considered work start displaying the same form of productivity (Terranova, 2000; Virno, 2004) and suggests reconceptualising work in a way that is much broader than formal employment (Pettinger et al., 2005). Notions of work that include myriad productive activities and emphasise their relational qualities reflect this development. Approaches like the Total Social Organisation of Labour (TSOL) (Glucksmann, 1995, 2005) do not categorically distinguish between work and non-work but assume that both are entangled, embedded and differentiated with regard to various socio-economic relations and spaces in which an activity takes place. Such conceptualisations, this article argues, tend to fall short of grasping the political mode of human activities. Hence, Hannah Arendt’s (1998[1958]) notions of labour, work and action are introduced not only to expand the understanding of work, but also to explore possibilities for solidarity ‘within work itself’. In order to do so, cultural work is taken as a starting point because its transient, precarious and individualistic character symbolises ‘more than any other [. . .] transformations of work’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 2). Moreover, its specific relation to politics (Shukaitis, 2016) makes cultural work ideal for reconsidering and extending the discussion on work-related solidarity. Exploring cultural work’s potential for solidarity under contemporary socio-economic conditions, this article contributes to the nascent discussions on how changing notions of work call for changing concepts of solidarity beyond the confines of the waged workplace.

This article first discusses current relational conceptualisations of work in light of contemporary changes as to what constitutes work. Arendt’s distinction between labour, work and action is introduced as the analytical framework to reconceptualise work with regard to its political potential. In order to grasp the possibilities for reconceptualising work-related solidarity, different aspects of current notions of solidarity are discussed along the specificities of cultural work. Arendt’s framework is then used to analyse a case study of an artist setting up a project that addresses the issue of social housing. It shows how, in contrast to institutionalised forms of organised labour, solidarity in the social factory is not linked to notions of stable community or homogeneity but is a temporary phenomenon between ever-changing actors who need to actively create the conditions for it. This article shows that work-based solidarity does not necessarily reconcile political and economic demands for all actors involved. Instead, it is a relational phenomenon constituted by complex arrangements of various activities that separate yet interlink the political and economic sphere.
Different qualities of activity: Arendt’s notion of work in relation to labour and action

Although ‘the waged workplace’ (Thompson and Smith, 2009: 917) still plays an important role in discussions on work, non-essentialist approaches, like TSOL, call ‘for an inclusive concept that acknowledges as work many forms of labour’ (Glucksmann, 2005: 21). Arguing that work takes ‘place in different spheres, embedded in and defined by particular social relations’ (Taylor, 2004: 38), TSOL approaches question a definition of work solely as employment. They argue that historically this emerged with a re-alignment of public and private spheres, defining the first ‘as the site of economically productive industrial labour [. . .], whilst the private domestic sphere came to be seen as non-economic’ (Taylor, 2004: 38) forms of labour. Criticising that this ‘rendered impossible analysis of the interconnections and interdependencies between the different spheres in which work was actually performed’ (Glucksmann, 1995: 66), TSOL’s approaches aim at extending the notion of work as relational socio-economic activities taking place in both public and private spheres. This allows the same activity as work to be traced across different domains, showing how it takes on various socio-economic modes (paid/non-paid; formal/informal). Accordingly, Glucksmann (2005: 32) points to the ‘interpenetration, boundaries and articulations between work and non-work processes’ that are worth exploring to further this new sociology of work. While TSOL approaches aim at extending what counts as work, Tronti’s (1966) notion of the ‘social factory’ highlights that capitalist forms of value-extraction operate as interlocking systems of exploitation that draw together apparently unconnected phenomena, of which labour is only one part. Discourses around the ‘creative class’, for instance, reconceptualise creative labour as a form of personal fulfilment (McRobbie, 2016), which leads to a labour force that works longer, harder and for less pay. In addition, the notion of the ‘creative class’ conceptualises cultural labour as an essential part of neighbourhood renewal, whose value created through cultural initiatives, however, is often siphoned off by others, such as the real estate industry. This not only fundamentally questions the notion of labour as the sole source of economic value-production, it also demands conceptualising work-related solidarity beyond merely thinking about redistributing resources, as current discussions on the role and functions of unions suggest (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017; Engeman, 2015). To be able to conceptualise solidarity under the conditions of extended value-extraction in the social factory, this article draws on an Arendtian framework (1998[1958]) that extends the productive modes of labour and work with action as a distinct political mode of activity. Arendt, too, employs a relational notion of these activities that take place in differing but interconnected spheres. In contrast to most discussions within the sociology of work that draw on a distinction of public and private that emerged in the course of industrialisation, and that attribute economic activities solely to the public sphere of formal employment, while reproductive labour is devalued as non-economic and taking place in the private sphere of the household (Glucksmann, 1995), Arendt’s distinction between public and private is rooted in the way ancient Greek democratic society was organised. She thus considers the private sphere as the sphere of any social-economic activity – both productive and reproductive – and contrasts it with the public sphere as the realm of political action. Accordingly, her distinction between work and labour is unique:
Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological processes of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced [. . .] by labor. [. . .] Work is the activity which [. . .] provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different to all natural surroundings. (Arendt, 1998[1958]: 7)

Here, labour and work differ in the temporality of their outcomes. Labour is about preparing goods for (immediate) consumption, such as food, and work is directed towards producing objects that are meant to last and give humans a dwelling on earth, for example buildings. The public sphere, instead, constitutes and is constituted by the political mode of action, expressed in speeches and deeds with which humans reveal themselves to each other in political engagement. Action shares the temporality with labour, yet, its fragile webs spun by speech and deeds differ considerably in their function. While labour serves to satisfy the needs of individual bodies, action constitutes the socio-political body. Work shares its visibility with action, albeit solely in its materiality and not in its intention.

This rather counterintuitive distinction between labour and work in the private and political action in the public sphere has been criticised as de-politicising and devaluing labour (Weeks, 2011) or perpetuating a patriarchal hierarchy between labour and politics (Ingala, 2017). However, one reason for Arendt’s decision to separate the political from the private sphere of serving individual needs is her concern with the politically disempowering effects of a globalised economy,

as a constellation of developments – including the growth of large-scale markets and the commodification of labor; the corresponding preoccupations of nation-states with economic imperatives; and the growth of conformism that helps reduce human activity to scientifically and administratively tractable ‘behavior’. (Markell, 2011: 21)

For Arendt, thinking relations in (merely) economic terms fosters the expansion of the private sphere with its ‘assumed one interest of society as a whole in economics’ (Arendt, 1998[1958]: 40). An exclusive focus on Arendt’s separation between the public-political and the private sphere, however, misses Arendt’s aim to show the relational (Markell, 2011) character of the three notions.

A dynamic reading of Arendt’s analytical distinction explores the intersecting zones between the activities and makes visible the different modes that work can take on. It allows us to see that the results of work, although they are meant to last, can also become consumer goods, as with buildings that become commodities in a real estate market. At the same time, as shown in the following, work can also be pushed towards facilitating political engagement. Making use of this analytical potential, Yeoman (2014), for instance, combines this Arendtian framework with a notion of work that, similar to TSOL approaches, takes place in multiple time-spaces whose boundaries are open, fluid and contestable, involves the exercise of different modes of being and is constituted by inter-subjective relations. She thereby extends work with regard to an ‘existential dimension of political being [. . . that] enables us to ask what the relevant social needs are which must be met by a system of social cooperation’ (Yeoman, 2014: 54). However, while Yeoman aims at conceptualising an ethical dimension of work regarding cooperation at
the workplace, in light of work having transgressed the boundaries of the factory, in that all sorts of relations become productive in the social factory, this article seeks to explore work’s potential for solidary action beyond the confines of the workplace. The following section thus provides a closer engagement with the concept of solidarity and Arendt’s specific take on it.

**Solidarity and changing forms of work: The case of cultural labour**

Despite increasing interest, several commentators have noticed a ‘curious absence of solidarity as a subject of research in sociology’ (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017: 5). The notion of solidarity has a variety of meanings and uses that Scholz (2008) tries to systematise, arguing that, amongst others, one characteristic of solidarity is that it mediates between the individual and the community. While she introduces the welfare state as a form of civic solidarity that relates citizens and state by ensuring that citizens’ basic needs are met, work-related discussions often use the notion of social solidarity. Claiming solidarity between workers ‘because they are workers’ (Simms, 2012: 113; emphasis in original) conceptualises solidarity based on the sense of belonging to a particular community. Under current conditions of value-extraction that increasingly make work and non-work display a similar form of productivity, thus precarising all forms of work, traditional notions of (e.g. worker) communities increasingly come under pressure. In the case of cultural work, various ideological and structural constraints seem to undermine social solidarity, even if cultural workers are represented by a union, such as for instance actors (Dean, 2012). Against Coulson (2012), who highlights the communitarian, non-utilitarian activities of creative workers, Umney and Kretsos (2014) point to the often flawed and cliquish character of entrepreneurial networking that cultural labourers pursue. At the same time, instead of searching for work-related solidarity within the professional confines of the cultural sphere, an awareness of working ‘in’ the social factory can bring cultural workers in proximity to other groups that are marginalised in capitalist value-extraction – unemployed, old, young, unpaid house-workers, etc. This demands work-related solidary action beyond their professional community (Ross, 2008).

Political solidarity differs from the notion of social solidarity as it goes beyond pre-existing communities in that it constitutes ‘a moral relation formed when individuals or groups unite around some mutually recognized political need or goal’ (Scholz, 2015: 732). While it does not necessarily exclude other forms of solidarity – for instance when union work merges with activist movements (Engeman, 2015) – it is not rooted in the homogeneity of a community. Instead, political solidarity is ‘an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences’ (Mohanty, 2003: 7). This resonates with Arendt’s (1998[1958]) proposition that solidarity can only be enacted in the public sphere characterised by plurality that:

> has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men [sic] were not equal, they could neither understand each other [. . .]. If men were not distinct [. . .] they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sound to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough. (Arendt, 1998[1958]: 175–176)
Claiming that if we all want, need, hope and dream the same it would destroy the basis for political action because it makes debates superfluous, Arendt maintains that solidarity is ‘achieved through a shared commitment, a promise, to act in concert, not an exclusionary unity that is presumed in advance’ (Allen, 1999: 113). Avant-garde artistic production has always been highly entangled with politics, visible in debates around framing political art as activism or considering politics as being constitutive of art production (Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2011). However, despite work’s political potential, it is also involved with economic demands. This is specifically mirrored in cultural work, such as art production, that is often disputed when seen in light of commodification and marketisation processes that serve artists to make a living. The need of cultural workers to negotiate such conflicting demands (e.g. Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007) thus makes their work prone for exploring possibilities for and limits to solidarity ‘within work itself’. In order to do so, this article introduces a case study of cultural work that was set up with a particular political intent.

Methodology and case

This article focuses on a case taken out of a larger research project on alternative ways of organising work that comprises six cases of artist-run organisations. While the other projects focus exclusively on the conditions of cultural work, the chosen case does not aim at fostering solidarity among members of one occupation (artists), but rather across highly disparate groups of actors. Designed to engage with issues of social housing, the project has a clear political intent in addressing the mechanisms of value-production and expropriation to which cultural work is instrumental but reaches beyond the field of cultural production. The case not only shows the typical characteristics of cultural work, such as project-based arrangements, close links to international networks and a precarious financial situation, but also an explicit intent to act in solidarity with a broad array of individuals through cultural activities.

Data consist of 23 semi-structured interviews that were held by the first author between December 2015 and August 2017 with Samuel, the founder (12 interviews), the project-coordinator and a former intern who worked for them on a freelance basis (4), summer school mentors (4), students (2) and a house owner (1); 22 of the interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed. These data were augmented by informal talks with students and interns documented in memos by several recordings of team meetings and workshops, field notes and visual recordings, as well as video recordings of the first summer school. Additional material consists of regular screenshots of the project’s web- and Facebook-site and secondary sources, such as newspaper articles, blogs or TV programmes.

The material was first coded by both authors individually and then discussed and further structured with regard to the focus on work and solidarity. In the subsequent analysis, Arendt’s distinction between labour, work and action was brought in dialogue with these topics to initiate an iterative process of interpreting and reassessing the findings against the data. Before presenting the findings, an introduction of the case provides background information on how the project emerged and operated.
Critical Concrete (CC)

Critical Concrete (CC) was born out of Samuel’s personal experiences of living and working in Berlin for an artist-run organisation that claimed to foster socially engaged art. After several years living in a sublet flat and increasing difficulties to sustain a living while also considering the art projects failing to become socially relevant, he decided to start his own project. Moving to Porto, a secondary city in a country whose economic situation would give him space for experimentation, Samuel came across the issue of social housing:

There is this characteristic housing configuration in Porto, which [...] are very small habitation units, like from 15 to 20 m² each [...] normally the kitchen is in the small house unit, but common bathroom and common garden. I saw this place and I thought it is really cheap [...] if I had bought this place, I would have become suddenly a landowner, trying to get his rent. I really did not want to do that. It is not like an occupation I found really fun. I discarded the idea, but then [started] thinking about it as a project in a sense because [...] people were living in conditions that are unbearable – all the mould into the house, really terrible.

These conditions, as Branco and Alves (2015) show, were the result of national and local policies in Portugal that since the 1960s have contributed significantly to the deprivation of urban environments and a displacement of vulnerable communities out of the city centre. The authors demonstrate that in recent years there has been a shift in urban regeneration programmes towards ‘generating market dynamics and incentives for owners’ (Branco and Alves, 2015: 10), leading to a situation in which house owners who lack the financial means required to refurbish their houses cannot apply for public financial support but – in the worst case – can be expropriated or forced to sell. Against this backdrop, Samuel set up a three-week summer school during which international students, mainly from architecture, design, engineering and related subjects, refurbished one social housing configuration to gain practical knowledge on materials, tools and to find solutions for real demands. With no formal links to any academic institution, he advertised his first summer school by sending personal emails to individual members of architectural schools and related faculties all over the world. Although he was unable to offer a degree or certificate, his concept attracted 40 students from 16 countries, who were searching for alternatives to the current realities of urban development schemes or the university education they had experienced so far.4 Bringing together issues of social housing and education, he thought he had also found an intelligent way to finance it, calling CC a:

method to refurbish places with social interest but without the funds, the idea is to create this machine that collects money from abroad [...] by creating an interesting programme and making it flow and developing the social housing.

In this case, the term social housing does not designate a public housing programme but rather buildings that are privately owned by families who do not have the economic resources to sustain them. Samuel’s definition of social interest relates to the social mix
that still characterises Porto with economically vulnerable families living among more potent inhabitants in small housing configurations in the city centre. The house for the first summer school was chosen with the help of the municipality that suggested a little house owned by a man who was supervised by social workers for several years and lived off a tiny benefit scheme. Being aware of the mechanisms of the property market that also affected local communities, CC formalised a contract with the owner to ensure that he would not immediately sell his property after the students had refurbished it for free.

**Analysis**

CC’s project was set out to respond to both political and economic demands, making CC’s work oscillate between labour and action. The analysis, thus, takes the Janus-headed position of work as a starting point to reconceptualise solidarity under these conditions.

**Becoming we**

CC aimed at spinning a web of solidarity across a heterogeneous group of actors that Samuel described as ‘a mobile, undefined “we”’, which not only included the CC team and summer school students but also the house owner. Such an ‘in-process understanding of the “we”’ (Mohanty, 2003: 7) points beyond the narrow confines of distinct professions or classes as commonness could not rely on a presumed community. Instead, it had to be actively constructed as a voluntary interdependence based on the co-presence of difference and equality – a concept that Arendt (1998[1958]) calls plurality.

Critical for fostering plurality within the project was the relation between the relatively privileged students and the house owner who a CC team member described as being ‘in a very vulnerable situation’. To counter this unequal relationship, CC decided to interconnect material and discursive elements of the summer school case in a particular way. When introducing the house they planned to refurbish, CC refrained from telling the house owner’s personal life story. With its run-down conditions already telling the story of severe poverty, CC presented the house on its website as a professional architectural challenge:

> [The house], currently occupied, includes a total of approximately 70 m², divided on two floors. A spacious backyard, covering 33 m², plus a 13 m² terrace, are part of the property. The place needs complete renovation and lacks of the most basic housing conditions, such as access to running water or sanitary facilities.

Before the start of the summer school, the house became part of a blog and was framed by other posts on various aspects of sustainable, alternative and socially engaged architectural experiments and materials. Presenting the house as a site of work and unique learning opportunity made clear that neither the students nor the house owner nor CC would have been there without the other. It did not deny the underlying inequalities but rather named them as conditions to start from, to engage and work with, and to learn to find ways that tackle issues that these inequalities bring about.
Yet, while this framing interconnected students and the house owner in a way that was not fuelled by pity, the process of refurbishing the house for the owner also reflected how challenging it was to foster plurality in a socio-economic context that segregates on so many levels. Telling the students at the beginning that they ‘can do whatever [they] want with his house’, the owner did not actively engage in its re-design. Hence, the students had lively discussions on ‘what is best for him’ with regard to functions of the refurbished house, such as heating through solar panels or a traditional boiler. Aesthetic decisions, instead, remained unquestioned and so the refurbished house reflected a particular kind of aesthetics the students were familiar with, including colour schemes, raw, brick-lined or wooden walls. This was not unproblematic, as it reflected the typical commodification processes that make use of aestheticisation (Ley, 2003) in what is often called aesthetic capitalism. This aesthetic that has become dominant in processes of value-extraction, however, considerably differed from the house owner’s aesthetic sense, who expected wallpaper and plastered walls. Commenting on the result of his newly refurbished house, the owner later stated in an interview: ‘When I first came here, I told them that I did not like it at all. I am pretty conservative.’ He thereby made the marginalisation of his aesthetic sense appear within the frame of commodified aesthetics that dominated the result of the students’ work and reopened the question of aesthetics for debate. Although at first the house owner’s statement was a shock for the CC team members, in consecutive summer schools CC put specific effort into involving the house owners in every step of the (re-)design process of their homes. They therefore demonstrated solidarity with positions that were not only socially and economically, but also aesthetically, de-valued and marginalised in dominant mechanisms of value-extraction. The way CC’s activities manoeuvred the co-presence of equality and difference thus demonstrates how establishing plurality (Arendt, 1998[1958]) not only requires on-going negotiations of the practices that aim at fostering it, but also highlights the precarious state of a commonness that is not held together by institutionalised forms of community.

**Becoming public**

For Arendt’s (1998[1958]) political notion of solidarity, action takes place in a public realm, a sphere that comes into being when humans appear in front of others. She considers political engagement as a process that is highly involved with discourse, expressed in deeds and speech. Both need reification, as otherwise they ‘would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been’ (Arendt, 1998[1958]: 95). Yet, not every material object is necessarily a materialisation of political action in the public sphere. Materiality has to be linked to a public debate in order to become political. CC’s work reflected this as it was not geared towards becoming a cheap provider for social housing. Samuel was rather clear that the summer school:

is not a sustainable model to refurbish houses. We are not going to make 500 social housings with that. [...] It really is a hub of ideas, of interesting people who come, travel and go, experiment with some of the ideas and produce some of these things here and there. That’s really all what it is about. Of course it offers an alternative way of doing things [but] if you only see [this] one angle of it, it’s very weak with regard to sustainability.
CC summer school’s result instead became a material reference against which the ‘plurality of perspectives that constitute the political can emerge’ (Benhabib, 1996: 55) because they linked their work to a broader discourse and made it visible through media work. CC’s work thus produced a material reference that stabilised a counter-narrative to those promoted by policy-makers and investors that aggravate and exploit the situation of the poor for further land value-extraction. It made visible that a refurbishment of these houses can actually be done and thus questioned the efficacy of programmes that have replaced welfare state policies with market-centred incentive schemes (Branco and Alves, 2015).

The refurbished house became part of national news on television and in newspapers and was presented at various conferences that included members of different NGOs and local as well as national members of the administration responsible for housing and local development. Often discussed in the closed circuits of experts, such as academics, consultants, politicians, public administrators, or investors, whose arguments materialise in studies, statistics and guidelines, the refurbished house, in contrast, generated a public arena where different voices, views and ideas – including the ones of the house owner, Samuel and the students – could open up and reshape the closed discourse of experts. Hence, the house as the material result of the students’ work provided a starting point for intervening in a public discourse on urban regeneration that addressed urban development in its social consequences instead of discussing it in mere economic terms.

Contrary to the refurbishing process, the CC team was also careful to present the project together with the house owner to allow different voices to emerge. In the press and media work that followed, CC gave the house owner the stage to speak for himself in public instead of speaking for him.

After seeing the house owner in several interviews for newspapers and television, it became apparent that the house owner himself had transformed. Not only did he look much healthier, he also displayed a routinised engagement with people he did not know. When one of the authors mentioned this to Samuel during a field trip, he replied, ‘Yes, many people have already said so’. The house owner’s body thus told the story that the official claims of retaining the illegal status of those houses for health and safety reasons, and subsequently displacing their inhabitants in social housing complexes outside the city, can be challenged. While Arendt (1998[1958]) points to work’s materiality as the place where the political can reify, this section shows that it only takes place in practices of actively interlinking material, aesthetic and discursive dimensions in a particular way that allows a marginalised subject to appear as a viable speaker in front of others. The distinct character that Arendt (1998[1958]) assigns to political action is mirrored in Samuel’s awareness of the project’s economically unsustainable character that prevents it from becoming a cheap replacement for social housing programmes. The simultaneous presence of political and economic considerations – also present in Samuel’s above-mentioned statement on CC not being a large provider for cheap social housing – points to work’s Janus-headed character that the Arendtian framework suggests. Work as (solidary) action is thus similarly fragile as a plural commonness. It easily slips back into an economic logic if it is not actively produced and maintained – as shown in the next section.
Labour as the basis and limit of solidary work

Arendt (1998[1958]) situates work between the political and the economical, with the latter being associated not only with necessity and reproduction but also with commodification and consumerism. While solidary action takes place in ‘the public realm [and] stem[s] from freedom as opposed to necessity’ (Ingala, 2017: 38), political action cannot be conceptualised independently from consumerism or reproductive necessity. Using an Arendtian framework, allows us to see how CC’s work was structured by the co-presence of political desires and economic necessity, a challenge that became apparent at various points. With the summer school relying on student fees to finance the project, CC capitalised on the commodification of education that normalises fees for participation. This brought the students’ work into proximity of acts of consumption and necessitated delicate balancing acts between acknowledging and downplaying their position as paying customers. For instance, the way CC offered its service formally acknowledged students as consumers. In addition to summer school t-shirts, students also received a programme and information-package with ‘things to do in Porto’. For some team members, the latter resembled a tourist guidebook, which Samuel replied: ‘But in a way [the students] are tourists’. As such, rather than ignoring the ambiguity of students paying for the summer school, the aim was to give it a particular twist. The t-shirts, for instance, were second-hand ones with the CC logo printed on top. This made visible a shift towards broader questions concerning (over-)production and -consumption. Such practices not only emphasised CC’s political agenda but also pointed towards a notion of learning beyond the boundaries of commodified education. It framed the students as enablers of an alternative education rather than consumers. At the same time, Samuel questioned the exclusion of those who happened to lack the financial resources to participate in such alternative but paid education. He stated that ‘we need to elaborate strategies on how to also get [students without financial resources] to this project’. For the first summer school, CC managed to attract funding from a cultural foundation to allow two students to participate without pay.

The necessity to negotiate political desires and economic necessities also became apparent when Samuel downplayed or even ignored his reproductive needs, which led to a severe crisis of the project as a whole. While established forms of generating income in the cultural sphere often rely on producing exclusivity by individualising authorship, Samuel criticised such approaches. He was particularly critical of projects that claim to be political but in the end still centre on the artist as sole author of social interaction and thereby relegate every participation to alibi-interaction. In Samuel’s view, such projects capitalise on participatory formats and would be most satisfied if they had ‘one or two locals on board, so that they can have pictures with them that they can show on conferences and talk about participation’.

Rejecting to monetise on pictures taken with people one claims to be in solidarity with, echoes Arendt’s (1998[1958]) argument that political action stems from freedom as opposed to necessity. Aiming at leaving the political potential of the solidary relationships between students, house owners and himself intact, Samuel refused to translate the collective value-production during the summer school into individual cultural capital. Relying on students’ fees for participating in the summer school instead, Samuel thought
he had generated an alternative economic base. Yet, it turned out that this base was rather weak as funding only flowed during summer, while CC’s team worked throughout the year. Three consecutive unsuccessful EU grant applications led to the whole project being at risk. In early 2017, this mirrored in Samuel’s mental and physical health, when he shared: ‘My life is so punky, everyone else goes back home and when I lie in my bed it rains through the roof on me. I have nothing to sustain myself, let alone a family.’

It was only after this severe crisis that he realised ‘I am the one who I am ignoring’ and that his current work for CC did not allow him to generate adequate means of subsistence. Trying to keep political activity apart from generating means for sustaining oneself, thus, does not inherently imply that one of them is irrelevant. According to Arendt (1998[1958]), only once bodily needs are met can one act freely. As the income coming from participating students was used for material to rebuild the house and pay tutors of the summer school, Samuel realised that he himself had no sustainable economic base to make a living. Eventually, he took on additional freelance work and thereby extended his work arrangement with regard to income-generating labour to support and enable the work-based solidary action he carried out with CC. Hence, both in the way CC addressed the students’ role of consumers and the way Samuel realised his own existential needs, economic relations take on a peculiar position: although economic necessities are the basis and limit of solidary action, they do not constitute it. Thus, in order to maintain the potential for solidary action, strategies of re-framing (the student-consumers as enablers) or re-placing (the need to earn a living) are geared towards freeing CC’s work from pure economic reasoning without negating it.

Discussion and conclusion

With employment-based definitions of work eroding and capitalist modes of value-extraction expanding beyond labour, this article adds to furthering an understanding of work-based solidarity by exploring how – under these conditions – solidarity can be enacted ‘within work itself’. While current debates on work-related solidarity mainly address it in terms of organised labour to redistribute resources, this article starts with questioning how to conceptualise work ‘in’ the social factory and what consequences to draw from it to reframe solidarity. New developments in the sociology of work, such as TSOL approaches, point to the contested character of what counts as work and claim that ‘economics hijacked the notion of work by defining it as wage labour and thus [. . .] work became an economic question’ (Taylor, 2004: 31). To further the understanding of contemporary work, TSOL as a relational framework highlights that work constitutes and is constituted by myriad activities carried out in different yet interconnected socio-economic modes. Despite widening the scope of what counts as work, a view on solidarity in predominantly socio-economic terms only allows it to be seen with regard to its capacity to redistribute resources. In current debates on traditional work-related forms of solidarity, such as organised labour, this is often said to fall short: ‘to connect organizing with a broader political approach’ (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2009, in Hodder and Edwards, 2015: 851). Emphasising the unfinished character of her TSOL framework, Glucksman (2005) points to the potential of exploring the boundaries, articulations and interpenetrations of work and non-work activities for further development. This article analyses a case of cultural
work geared towards generating solidarity by means of Arendt’s (1998[1958]) relational framework, which distinguishes labour, work and action as interconnected modes that can be mapped onto two distinct modes of activity – a socio-economic and a political one. Conceptualising work as interlaced with labour on the one hand and potentially prone to political action on the other, this article demonstrates by means of a case study how work-related solidarity is a temporary outcome of an active struggle that also takes place beyond well-known forms of resistance, such as strikes or demonstrations. To make work itself become solidary, Arendt (1998[1958]) suggests that it has to be carried out in a political mode of action that is constitutively interlinked with the public sphere marked by plurality – the co-presence of equality and difference. The analysis shows how CC politicised work by using complex strategies of (re-)assembling material, discursive and aesthetic elements to respond to the unequal relationships that capitalism thrives upon. For instance, the disturbing material reality of the house owner’s living conditions was re-framed to enable the house owner and the students to become equal partners in the summer school. The material result of the students’ work, in contrast, allowed the emergence of a public debate on social housing that included in the discourse other positions than the dominant ones. Here, the material realities that work produces do not constitute a neutral objectivity. Instead, its aesthetic is a statement on how the world should look – a central question in Arendt’s (1998[1958]) conception of political action. While this can be used to make a marginalised position visible, it can also serve to reinforce dominant positions. This becomes apparent in the aesthetics of the students’ work as it follows an aesthetic that is part of contemporary value-extraction processes that marginalise other positions, such as that of the house owner. Although Arendt conceptualises political action as rather transient in character, constituted by speech and deeds, the analysis of CC’s work brings into focus the crucial role of the aesthetic-material dimension of work for solidary action and its complex interlinks with discursive processes and practices. To further the understanding of such material-discursive assemblages geared to nurture work’s solidary potential, research on different materialities, for instance the materiality of service work, appears promising.

An understanding of solidarity as situated in the public sphere, whose plural character constitutes a precarious site permanently threatened by capitalist realities, highlights the need to constantly carve out and maintain the conditions for it. This does not only pertain to the above-mentioned material-discursive assemblages and their ability to foster plurality, but also includes the form of sociality that the case study engages in. In contrast to most work-related notions of solidarity that presume some sort of community (Simms, 2012), the complex arrangement of activities carried out by and between disparate groups – students, house owners, CC team members – points to much more transient forms of sociality within which work-based solidarity can take place. In times when people suffer from ever further withdrawal of the welfare state while lacking a particular community of work to which they belong, the scope of such community-based concepts of solidarity can be questioned (Ross, 2008). The case analysis instead suggests how the bringing together of heterogeneous actors interested in responding to a situation of injustice can lead to reconceptualising solidarity. As such, solidarity is not only a relational phenomenon, but also a temporary phenomenon around changing notions of we across a plurality of actors beyond an assumed community.
Although, so far, work-based solidarity has been mainly articulated as taking place in a political mode that is clearly distinct, it cannot be fully separated from a socio-economic mode of activity. Indeed, the analysis of CC’s work shows that not all economic and political demands can be reconciled easily. This relates to debates that cultural workers have to negotiate conflicting artistic and economic demands (e.g. Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Instead of aiming at reconciling economic demands and political desires within CC’s work – whose feasibility is suggested by narratives of social entrepreneurship – the framework this article develops allows us to see how CC’s work constitutes and is constituted by a particular solidarity arrangement. It includes both political and economic considerations. Similar to TSOL conceptualisations of work (Glucksmann, 2005; Taylor, 2004), work-based solidarity consists of an arrangement of various activities taking place in different, yet interconnected spheres that serve different functions.

Read as such, Samuel taking on additional freelance work is not necessarily a flaw of the project. The Arendtian framework put forward in this article suggests that actively keeping the political mode distinct from the economic sphere is central for maintaining a solidarity arrangement. If CC fully economised on its activities, for example as a social enterprise, it would not only subsume the project under an economic logic rather than a political one, but also make it prone for a critique of capitalising on inequalities. Relocating the need to earn a living in additional freelance work, frees the work of CC from this necessity and allows it to not subsume the political under economic reasoning. This way, relying on additional freelance work can, indeed, be read as actively working towards establishing the conditions for solidary action instead of wishing ‘ideal conditions for developing solidarity’ to appear (Jehle and Buckermann, 2017: 12). Arendt’s (1998[1958]) notions of labour, work and action, hence allow seeing that establishing these conditions means separating political from socio-economic reasoning without neglecting their interconnection but engaging in the way they are interlinked. Contrary to Arendt’s critics (Dietz, 1995), who see an act of de-politicising and devaluing (re)productive activities in her separation of these different modes of activity, it actually contributes to re-politicising work. For Arendt (1998[1958]), politicising means protecting the political from technocratic or purely economic reasoning, which implies that the political is not seen as a ‘luxury’ that can be tackled once basic needs are satisfied (in labour). On the contrary, the very configuration of labour, work and action itself constitutes a political question in that it determines how our world is formed in and through these activities (Jaeggi, 2016).

To conclude, this article argues that as value-extraction increasingly leaves the boundaries of the factory, and communities of workers are dissolving, re-conceptualising work-based solidarity should follow this route. This article develops a first outline to reconceptualise work-based solidarity as a precarious and temporary phenomenon, constituted by different material and discursive elements that aim at fostering a plurality of different people involved. Solidarity is enabled by particular arrangements of activities that politicise the boundaries that separate, yet interconnect, the socio-economic and the socio-political sphere. Such an extended understanding of work-based solidarity promises to be fruitful for further explorations regarding contemporary forms of work and related issues.
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Notes

1. TSOL approaches are rooted in a feminist agenda of making domestic labour visible as work but with advancing forms of exploitation that increasingly draw on social relations and activities beyond formal employment, TSOL approaches go beyond its initial intention and include many more forms of productive activities that are not formal employment. Although gender still matters in the analysis of contemporary forms of work, this article does not explicitly engage with it but assumes that the breaking down of the traditional economic division between productive and reproductive labour is a development of contemporary work that has implications for all members of society.

2. Owing to the fact that a rich documentation of the project can be found online, the use of a pseudonym would not protect the founder’s identity, because this would also require a pseudonym for the project and the geographic context. As this would considerably compromise the understanding of the case, the authors opted for requesting consent from the founder to use his real name to address the potential conflict between writing about highly individualistic work-settings and an invasion of the founder’s privacy (Bryman, 2016). The project founder has given full consent after having read the latest version of this article.

3. The comparatively high number of interviews with the founder is due to the first author keeping in touch with the project for over two years; he was the only person involved during the whole period.

4. For further information regarding the students’ countries of origin, finances, additional funding bodies, etc., see: https://criticalconcrete.com/category/summer-school-2016/

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