



# The irrationality of labour in Stanisław Brzozowski's philosophy of "labour"

Krzysztof Kasprzak<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 17 August 2020  
© The Author(s) 2020

## Abstract

This article explores the concept of labour through a diremptive reading of Polish philosopher Stanisław Brzozowski's essay "Prolegomena filozofii 'pracy'" ("Prolegomena to a Philosophy of 'Labour'") written in 1909. This essay appears as a chapter in his main work *Idee: wstęp do filozofii dojrzałości dziejowej* (*Ideas. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Historical Maturity*), first published in 1910. In "Prolegomena," Brzozowski defines labour as an inner gesture that delineates the duration of life. In the interpretation of this definition the influence of Henri Bergson on Brzozowski's thought is stressed. Inspired by Bergson, Brzozowski understands labour as the only ground-creating—and therefore *metaphysical*—activity of humanity, when faced with the absence of transcendent grounds for existence in modernity. Emphasis is placed on Brzozowski's insistence in "Prolegomena" that labour is *irrational* in its delineation of the absolutely new. He describes it as the  $\alpha$  of the inner gesture of labour that cannot be known until it is performed. This unknown  $\alpha$  is interpreted as his way of describing the *groundlessness* of the ground-creating activity of labour, and that this groundlessness means that labour eludes the control of the subject.

**Keywords** Stanisław Brzozowski · Henri Bergson · Philosophy of labour · Irrationalism · Duration · Polish socialist thought

## Introduction

An important aspect of Stanisław Brzozowski's late philosophy of labour, especially as it is expressed in "Prolegomena filozofii 'pracy'" ("Prolegomena to a Philosophy of 'Labour'") from 1909,<sup>1</sup> is his insistence on the *irrationality* of labour. This particular dimension in his thinking about labour, whose proximity to the philosophy of

<sup>1</sup> According to Brzozowski, this was his most important philosophical work (Brzozowski 1912, XII).

✉ Krzysztof Kasprzak  
krzysztof.kasprzak@sh.se

<sup>1</sup> The Centre for Studies in Practical Knowledge, School of Culture and Education, Södertörn University, Alfred Nobels allé 7, PD 216, Huddinge, 141 89 Stockholm, Sweden

Henri Bergson I will emphasize in the following text, has not been studied closely in secondary literature.

The general scheme of interpretation is that Brzozowski's efforts to develop a philosophy of labour are concentrated to the years 1906–1907, and that this period in his thinking is preceded by a philosophy of absolute individualism, followed by a turn towards irrationalism, a stronger nationalist emphasis and an interest in modernist Catholicism. In his preface to Brzozowski's main philosophical work, *Idee: wstęp do filozofii dojrzałości dziejowej* (1910) (*Ideas. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Historical Maturity*), Andrzej Waliczki describes this general movement in his thinking as a "subjectivation and irrationalisation of the 'philosophy of life'," through which the meaning of labour is widened to the extent that it encompasses "every effort that increases the power of man" (Walicki in Brzozowski 1990, 40).<sup>2</sup> In this way Brzozowski's later concept of labour was "broadened, subjectivized, and irrationalized" (Walicki 1989, 160). This broadening entails that labour in Brzozowski's late thinking eventually incorporates "the totality of human praxis" (Walicki 1989, 141). What this identification between the irrationality of labour and human praxis actually means is not further elaborated by Walicki.

More recently Tomasz Sobieraj interprets the turn to "irrationalism" in Brzozowski's thinking along similar lines as Walicki, when he writes that late Brzozowski understands "irrational life as an incessant process, additionally encased by the philosophy of labour" (Sobieraj 2016, 125). It is telling that the only article fully dedicated to interpreting specifically "Prolegomena" completely omits the theme of irrationality in this text, although it is decisive for Brzozowski himself (Popek 2014). Also Holger Politt shies away from this in *Stanisław Brzozowski: Hoffnung wider die Dunkle Zeit* (Politt 1996, 119–121). The same goes for Stanisław Borzym, who emphasizes that Brzozowski's thinking struggles against the naturalism and positivism that was dominant during his time in search for the "creative Yes" of human existence. But, similarly to the authors mentioned above, he does not address the meaning of irrationality as such, except when he says that irrationality transcends any form of *ratio* and that it cannot be a means for formulating a doctrine. The only reference to Bergson is that Brzozowski anticipates his distinction between an open and a closed society, when he (in his youth) describes the ideal society as a community in the plurality of creativity (Borzym 1993, 147, 156, 160).

Still others tone down the role of irrationalism in Brzozowski's late thinking when they interpret it as merely the expression of the anti-intellectualism that was trendy during his time (Bielik-Robson 2011, 169; Politt 1996, 134). Maria Woźniak more or less dismisses the topic of irrationality, when she discharges the influence of Bergson on Brzozowski writing that the philosophy of the latter has another aim; it is not anti-intellectualist in a typical sense, but seeks to return reason and intelligence to their proper place, which means to ground them in the irrationality of life. Woźniak argues that this differs from Bergson, for whom there is no possibility for reason to reach "the secret of life" (Woźniak 1990, 84 f.).

<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

Unlike the described efforts to side-step the theme of irrationality in Brzozowski, the following is an attempt to highlight this very theme by focusing on the possible meaning of the irrationality of labour as it is discussed by Brzozowski in “Prolegomena.” I undertake this endeavour with a conscious disregard for the hermeneutic sensibility that a more historically oriented study would have to respect. In contrast, this approach of highlighting can best be described as a form of *diremption* in Georg Sorel’s sense, although he uses this concept for the investigation of social phenomena and not the interpretation of philosophical texts.<sup>3</sup> With his words, the method of *diremption* means “to examine certain parts without taking into account all of the ties which connect them to the whole, to determine in some manner the character of their activity by pushing them towards independence” (Sorel 2004). In this spirit, the meaning of the irrationality of labour in “Prolegomena” is pushed towards independence in order to show how Brzozowski sees, acknowledges, and affirms the *uncontrollable* dimension of the *groundlessness* of human autcreation.

It must be mentioned that I am indebted to Ewa Sowa’s *Pojęcie pracy w filozofii Stanisława Brzozowskiego (The Concept of Labour in the Philosophy of Stanisław Brzozowski)* (1976). It is to date the most profound *philosophical* study of the concept of labour in Brzozowski, largely overlooked in the literature. However, also Sowa stops short of an interpretation of what Brzozowski actually means by the irrationality of labour. Still, she points out the open character of “Prolegomena”: it is a draft that encourages one to think of labour beyond Brzozowski himself, but in the direction that he indicates (Sowa 1976, 152).

## The silence of the world and the longing of existence

Labour is for Brzozowski a *metaphysical* concept, in the sense that he understands it as the *only* activity through which humanity is able to create grounds for its existence: any form of human exertion, although it might not be creative in itself, is *grounded* in previous acts of creative labour (Sowa 1976, 151). This metaphysical dimension of labour has to be interpreted from the perspective of Brzozowski’s experience of the world of modernity—the world appears *as* an absence of grounds and reasons for existence. In other words, his philosophy of labour is an effort to *actively* address the problem of nihilism. In *Stanisław Brzozowski. Postawa krytyczna. Wiek XX* Andrzej Mencwel stresses the influence of Blaise Pascal’s cosmology on Brzozowski’s thinking, indicating the importance of the absence of grounds and reasons for the development of his thoughts on labour (Mencwel 2014, 242). Pascal famously writes:

When I consider the short span of my life absorbed into the preceding and subsequent eternity, *memoria hospitis unius diei praetereuntis* [like the memory of a one-day guest (Wisd. 5: 15)], the small space which I fill and even can see, swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and

<sup>3</sup> Sorel’s influence on Brzozowski is of great importance, but will be omitted in this text.

which knows nothing of me, I am terrified, and surprised to find myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why it should be here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who put me here? On whose orders and on whose decision have this place and this time been allotted to me? (Pascal 1995, 26)

Mencwel argues that, unlike many Polish traditionalists, such as Henryk Sienkiewicz, Brzozowski did not possess a “pre-intellectual sense of security in the world.” Instead, even before reading Pascal, he understands the creation of a world that is habitable for humans as a purely human endeavour (Mencwel 2014, 242). But, as hinted by Brzozowski in a lecture from 1906 entitled “The Worldview of Labour and Freedom” (“Światopogląd pracy i swobody”), the meaning of “human” is ambiguous: the frightening absence that Pascal describes also reveals a boiling and seething within the realms of the I that is frightened, that does not coincide with this I (Brzozowski 1973, 423). What is revealed can best be described in romantic-philosophical terms; as man’s will to being, which is not yet being, but the seething will of life to realize itself in a *form*. It is the experience of an exposure of existence to a cosmological silence that discloses the seething of human life as a forming force on its own—and left to its own. The metaphor of seething obviously describes a movement of a liquid that spontaneously overflows whatever boundaries may contain it, while dependent on these very boundaries for its excess. Brzozowski recognises this movement in Walter Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* as that of a groundless *longing*, when he writes that this book

*teaches to accept longing as the only true form of reality; our straining and feverishly burning essence, this is reality, our modern reality, that does not need any justification outside of itself.* (Brzozowski 1990, 404)

For Brzozowski this mirrors the tragic experience in Sophocles, as a call to learn to live with the “unfinished and active reality as our constant condition” (ibid., 404). Greek tragedy teaches that beyond humanity there is only the abyss (ibid., 234). However, for Brzozowski this “beyond” is the longing in the human that does not coincide with its I, an ecstatic movement that reaches out into the abyss—which is not nothing (in the sense of *ouk on*), but the magnitude of a world that receives this excess in man, *when it is realized through labour*:

*For us the most general property of the world is that it is commensurate [jest on współwymierny] with labour: it receives labour in itself, bequeaths it in itself and protects its result.* (Ibid., 224)

This underlines the cosmological dimension in Brzozowski’s understanding of labour. For him, labour has first and foremost the metaphysical meaning of creating grounds for human existence. However, this ground-forming can only be thought in relation to the world as the magnitude of a terrifying abyss, that still receives and bequeaths the grounds created through labour. This is a metaphysical-cosmological relation because the world is not reduced to a thing by Brzozowski. He writes that it is never merely given. In a strict sense it cannot be said to exist, and what appears in it cannot be foreseen; the relation between humanity and world is characterized by the absolute *creativity* of labour—in the sense of its ability to *begin* something

*new*—and not by cognition (ibid., 230). In contrast to any reifying understanding of the world that defines it in terms of e.g., univocity, causality, or the preservation of energy, Brzozowski describes the main characteristic of its “commensurability” as a *sensitivity* towards the creativity of labour (ibid., 224), and he writes that the mutual

“commensurability” between world and labour is in fact the ultimate fundament, and beyond it there is actually no ground for us. (Ibid., 227)

This means that the ground for labour’s creation of grounds, is the non-ground of the *relation* between existence and the world; and Brzozowski’s name for this relation is longing. It is akin to the relation between a sculpture—“*the form of art that hates sentimentalism*”—and the surrounding space into which it extends, the frozen extension of the sculpture being the manifestation of a longing that has succeeded to create something that lasts, although precariously, through labour. In this sense “the living reality of longing” is the “plastic spirit of modernity,” and *modern* sculpture is an expression of this tragic freedom, that presents “our bodies” as “the concrete form of our tragedy” (ibid., 403). It is a form in which an enduring in the world is indicated, that points imagination towards the unforeseeable beginnings of duration.

## Labour as an inner gesture

Because Brzozowski prioritizes human creativity over human cognition he can be said to be in agreement with what Hannah Arendt describes as “the modern age’s conviction that man can know only what he makes, that his allegedly higher capacities depend upon making and that he therefore is primarily *homo faber* and not *animal rationale*” (Arendt 1998, 228). Indeed, this perspective is present already in early Brzozowski, and later he recognizes it in Bergson’s redefinition of humanity as *homo faber*, instead of *homo sapiens* (Brzozowski 1997, 96). However, the peculiar trait of the philosophy of labour that Brzozowski suggests in “Prolegomena,” is that although man can only know what he has himself created through labour, the creativity of labour itself escapes his cognition. This is indirectly expressed through a brief comment in *Pamiętnik* (1913) (*Diaries*) where he, alluding to William Blake, writes that *only what resists coherence and unity of perspective is important*. In other words; only that is important which transgresses factual life (Brzozowski 1985, 31). In “Prolegomena,” labour is thematized as the activity of this transgression. What follows is that for Brzozowski *labour is that most significant “thing” which resists coherence and unity of perspective*. This is indicated by the fact that he spells “labour” in the title of “Prolegomena” within quotation marks.

These quotation marks can be interpreted as Brzozowski’s way to emphasize a shift in his approach to labour, as a broadening of his previous treatment of labour as material production, and of material production as the “original form of activity” (Sowa 1976, 17, 97 f. n. 29). In his earlier works he discussed labour from two different perspectives: on the one hand from the standpoint of the subject in his philosophy of absolute individualism, and on the other hand from the standpoint of the object in his philosophy of labour. Both of these perspectives approach labour from the “outside,” which means from the view of the *finished form*. In “Prolegomena”

he makes an effort to think labour from “within” as the activity that creates both subject and object through movements that *imperceptibly* transgress their factually given forms (Woźniak 1990, 79).

In other words, the change that occurs in Brzozowski’s thinking about labour in “Prolegomena” denotes a shift towards an effort to think the *metaphysical*—ground-creating—dimension of labour as the *forming of the form of life*, which implies the forming of how subjectivity and objectivity appear. Sowa describes this later approach towards labour in Brzozowski as phenomenological, in the sense of an effort to descriptively grasp the *inventive* character of the acts of labour that create new forms of life (Sowa 1976, 150, 181, 187, 205).

Thus, in “Prolegomena,” “labour” is for Brzozowski a question about the possibility of a transition that is a transgression, described by Woźniak as an “enigmatic inner act that resists verbalization and reflection” (Woźniak 1990, 78). It is therefore important to emphasize that the quotation marks (that recur in the text) represent an effort to be true to labour as an activity that resists objectification. It can also be described as an attempt to combat the tendency to reify labour through interpretations that approach it from the perspective of its finished products.<sup>4</sup> Actually, this reification characterizes what Brzozowski describes as the pretended naivety of the “naïve perception” of labour, which he confronts in the first sentences of “Prolegomena”:

At a first glance the concept of labour does not present any difficulties, it appears it does not contain anything promising in regards to philosophy. However, this is a pretended naivety: precisely this concept confirms most emphatically the meaning of Goethe’s words about the “open secret.” We call labour the sort of effort that purposefully changes something in the external world. Seemingly, this is the most simple starting point we can find in our minds: there is a world of objects among which we live, that we observe and get to know, and through carefully chosen movements we cause changes in them at will. That is how it looks for the allegedly naïve perception. As a matter of fact—this ground caves in. (Brzozowski 1990, 213)

Sowa writes that there are methodological as well as substantive affinities between Brzozowski and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (Sowa 1976, 12). She qualifies this statement when she writes that Brzozowski can be said to have accentuated the “productive, and thus in a certain sense intentional character of consciousness.” She describes labour in Brzozowski as the constitution of “pure activity,” analogous to Husserl’s understanding of the constitutive activity of pure consciousness: Brzozowski discovers a life of subjectively constituting activity beneath the static world of fixed objectivity (*ibid.*, 194). In “Prolegomena” this constituting activity creates life forms through “*transgression of the limits of actuality*,” through movements

<sup>4</sup> In *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish beginnings of “Western Marxism”* (1989) Walicki extensively shows how the “Western Marxist” themes of alienation and reification are anticipated and independently developed by Brzozowski, although he does not use these terms himself.

(*ruchy*) that bring the subject outside of itself and the noematic object-world that belongs to its current lifeform (ibid., 182).

Although the phenomenological perspective suggested by Sowa<sup>5</sup> might be helpful in order to initially grasp the difficulty that Brzozowski encounters when he tries to think the metaphysical dimension of labour—as a *constituting* activity and not a *constituted* thing—the most important inspiration for his understanding of the *irrationality* of labour is Henri Bergson. In a letter from 1907 Brzozowski writes the following about his philosophy:

I think that he is the only living philosopher with a genuinely speculative capacity... His fundamental idea is the reality of time—not mathematical time, but our inner time. This means that creating oneself, inner self-creation, is truly real, while all solid forms—both material forms and mental constructs—are products of our mental organization. For me, this is the main point. We want to grasp in thought life itself, not its products, and each thing, each ready-made shape, is a product, not life itself. (Brzozowski quoted in Walicki 1989, 149)

This influence from Bergson is obvious in Brzozowski's definition of labour in "Prolegomena":

As an inner gesture labour is the duration of life delineated [*określony*] by us. We experience our fleeting life in a certain delineated way. Labour is our delineation of something irretrievable. Once delineated by us, the irretrievable remains like that for ever; we cannot undo it. However, this does not exhaust the meaning of labour. E.g., it differs from a "fantasy" in that, when we delineate a moment of our life in a certain way, we expect that the result of our delineation will be consolidated and that we will be able to count on it. Laboring we give up our time in order to, in return, find something that is not subjected to time, that is relieved from it. A certain moment in our life is experienced in such-and-such a way, but in exchange for that we find in every forthcoming moment *certain* acquisitions: in the future our life will be able to lean on something invariable, or relatively invariable. Labour is the exchange of a certain interval [*przeciąg*] of our life for lasting or relatively lasting, invariable or relatively invariable, conditions for our follow-

<sup>5</sup> It should be mentioned that Sowa's reading of Husserl is obviously influenced by her advisor Roman Ingarden's interpretation of the latter, which strongly emphasizes the productive nature of intentionality in the constitution of intentional objects (unlike Husserl, Ingarden reserves the notion "intentional object" for works of art) (Ingarden 1973). Arguably, it can be said that Ingarden understands Husserl along Fichtean lines, which gives Sowa's interpretation of Husserl—and consequently of Brzozowski—a Fichtean flavor. A treatment of Brzozowski's own encounters with Fichte's version of transcendental idealism has been left aside in this article. However, I would argue that a crucial transformation in Brzozowski's thought moving from Fichte to Bergson, is his understanding of the status of subjectivity: in "Prolegomena" the I is no longer the I that posits the non-I, since both the I and the non-I are now considered to be products of labour. On the surface, this seems to be a Hegelian standpoint, if it wasn't for the fundamentally non-teleological character of Brzozowski's philosophy (which will be discussed in relation to Bergson in what follows).



ing life. Using up our life in a delineated way, we indicate the conditions of our future life in accordance with our will. Delineating and using up ourselves in a certain way, we step outside of ourselves and create something on which we can count. (Brzozowski 1990, 223–224)

Labour is for Brzozowski a *delineation of duration*. By duration he has in mind Bergson's concept of the heterogeneous time of the deep self, which "means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new" (Bergson 1944, 14). In *Time and Free Will* Bergson writes:

What is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of duration are not external to one another. (Bergson 2001, 226)

Duration is an "inner life in which succession implies interpenetration" (Bergson 2001, 228). For Bergson this interpenetration in duration, which is a constant flow of deep-seated psychic states that "will never occur again," cannot be broken up except through the abstractions that happen on the surface of life where the flowing time of duration is juxtaposed for the rigid extensity of space, where things can appear side by side, clearly distinguished from each other (*ibid.*, 219). This homogeneity of space is for Bergson the place for the homogeneity of social life (*ibid.*, 236). It can be described as the place for the reification of the self, which means that Bergson understands the self to be divided. The clearly defined self that is projected in homogeneous space is a "social representation" of the deep self where the psychic states are "living things, constantly becoming, as states not amenable to measure, which permeate one another and of which the succession in duration has nothing in common with juxtaposition in homogeneous space." The self in homogeneous space is a "shadow" and a "ghost," and it can be said to constitute the everydayness of human life, in the sense that a connection with the deep self is rare. To return to it is "to get back into pure duration," and this "reduction" is a condition for freedom (*ibid.*, 231 f.).

For Brzozowski labour is such a "going back," a practical reduction that does not turn to the constitutive forces of life reflectively, but through action. Without further developing this theme, Walicki rightly points out that in "Prolegomena" "the initial impulse to work" is a "free and irrational decision" (Walicki 1989, 161–162). Indeed, what Brzozowski understands by labour is most similar to Bergson's description of a *decision* in the following passage, where he writes that we can

carry ourselves back in thought to those moments of our life when we made some serious decision, moments unique of their kind, which will never be repeated—any more than the past phases in the history of a nation will ever come back again. We should see that if these past states cannot be adequately expressed in words or artificially reconstructed by a juxtaposition of simpler states, it is because in their dynamic unity and wholly qualitative multiplicity they are phases of our real and concrete duration, a het-



erogeneous duration and a living one. We should see that, if our action was pronounced by us to be free, it is because the relation of this action to the state from which it issued could not be expressed by law, this psychic state being unique of its kind and unable to ever occur again. We should see, finally, that the very idea of necessary determination here loses every shred of meaning, that there cannot be any question either of foreseeing the act before it is performed or of reasoning about the possibility of the contrary action once the deed is done, for to have all the conditions given is, in concrete duration, to place oneself at the very moment of the act and not to foresee it. (Bergson 2001, 238 f.)

At a first glance it is difficult to discern how Brzozowski reconciles his understanding of labour as a delineation of duration with Bergson's concept of duration. Because, is it not so that for Bergson any form of delineation would belong to the homogeneous extensity of space, and therefore be a form of reification of duration? Walicki calls attention to this when he describes a crucial difference between Brzozowski and Bergson: for the latter all socialization is a form of reification, while for Brzozowski there is a difference between reified socialization and a "socialization in the non-reified sphere of inner life," which is a difference "between a living and a dead society" (Walicki 1989, 151). This means that Brzozowski understands the deep self to be rooted in social life. It is an irrational tie, with Walicki's word a "collective unconscious," that spans over generations and makes historical achievements possible:

A society which has ceased to exist as a half-instinctive, unreflecting, irrational state of souls cannot achieve anything. It is a society in a state of decline. (Brzozowski quoted in Walicki 1989, 152).

The collective dimension of the deep self is in Brzozowski expressed through the social myth which he, following Georges Sorel, understands as an image of thought that is able to entice creative action, in contrast to determined and mechanized forms of acting. The myth is "a future that creates itself" that introduces an active and heroic element to thought and orientates will (Brzozowski 1997, 113–115). For Brzozowski, the myth is how the deep self sets itself apart from itself through a future oriented image, that turns it into a task (Walicki 1989, 152).<sup>6</sup>

In the previous quote from "Prolegomena" Brzozowski also describes labour as an inner gesture. A closer discussion of this notion can help to further interpret the meaning of labour in this text. It is adequate as well in this context to turn to Bergson, more specifically to *Laughter* where the following definition of gesture is presented:

<sup>6</sup> The role of the myth in Brzozowski cannot be developed further here, since it would necessitate an extensive discussion about his interpretation of Georges Sorel and his understanding of the law.

By GESTURES we here mean the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching. (Bergson 1924, 44b)<sup>7</sup>

Bergson primarily has in mind the *laughable* gesture. It is a specific kind of gesture that can be contrasted to Brzozowski's understanding of labour as an *inner* gesture, in order to articulate what "inner" actually means for him. The laughable gesture is, like the comic in general for Bergson, connected to automatism: "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (ibid., 11b). We laugh when we observe in a speaker a gesture that repeatedly returns, especially when it does so in accordance with our expectation. This gives the speaker the appearance of an *imitation* of life, in contrast to the one whose gestures follow the rhythm of the "creative evolution" of the ideas that he conveys. The imitative characterizes the laughable gesture, revealed in the fact that we laugh when an individual imitates another individual's gestures in a repetitive manner. Conversely, we tend not to laugh at the gestures that follow the "inner movements" of a mental state, its changes and fluctuations, because these gestures are as alive as the mental state from which they emanate (ibid., 12a–12b).

It is possible to draw the conclusion, that when Brzozowski describes labour as an *inner* gesture, he has in mind the gesture as an expression of the life of a deep self, of a *singular* becoming in duration that is not an imitation. In other words: labour is an inner gesture that delineates the duration of life through a decision in favor of the enduring of a becoming, which entails that it wants it to be capable of transformation—to *endure*, is to *change* (Bergson 2001, 209). What Brzozowski means by *inner* can therefore also be called *deep*, since clearly it is an event in the deep self. As such a gesture *labour is a movement that prolongs a movement of becoming through delineation*, by tracing a movement of *forming* that happens within the heterogeneous flow of duration. Conversely, labour does not try to arrest a movement through *demarcation*, just like a gesture does not arrest the movements of thought in a speech but *articulates* their intentionality. If labour was merely demarcating it could only take place in the already constituted sphere of the social. It would rest on the sort of decision that belongs to politics—and not be an inner but a *laughable* gesture that mechanically repeats itself through the law.<sup>8</sup> The deep gesture of labour that Brzozowski has in mind is singular. It cannot be deduced nor repeated; while the laughable gesture is the imitable *per se*, deductible and repeatable, made possible by the reification of social life. With the words of Bergson:

We begin, then, to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter. (Bergson 1924, 12b)

<sup>7</sup> Bergson goes further and contrasts gestures from actions. I leave this discussion aside here.

<sup>8</sup> Brzozowski's own very different understanding of the law must be treated at another time.

While the body whose movements appear as laughable gestures is a “stupidly monotonous body” that radiates a “machine like obstinacy” (ibid., 17b), the labouring body that Brzozowski has in mind can be described as de-reifying; it manages to break out from mechanical imitation through a transformation of its posture (*postawa*) (Brzozowski 1990, 220). This can be likened to Bergson’s description of the transformation of an obscure desire into a deep passion, which gradually takes over the outlook on the world in such a way that in the moment of realization that an obscure desire has been transformed into a passion, there is also a realization that the world has changed: the “shade of a thousand perceptions” has been altered (Bergson 2001, 8–9). This world-transformative power of posture is the reason why Brzozowski describes concrete, everyday life as mankind’s absolute action: posture (*postawa*) is the metaphysical work (*dzieło*) of labour (Brzozowski 1990, 242 f.). And it is the metaphysical work of labour because it is the living ground (*podstawa*) of every human exertion. In “Anty-Engels” (1909) (“Anti-Engels”) Brzozowski describes this in terms of “bio-psychical creation”:

The incomprehension of *the essence of labour is the sickest point of modern thinking*. Labour is still observed from the outside, and not from the inside as a certain unceasing and autonomous bio-psyhic creation, fully delineated [*całkiem określona*] and always concrete. (Ibid., 332)

It has been loosely pointed out that Brzozowski’s understanding of labour anticipates the modern notion of biopolitics, in the sense that in his late thinking labour primarily concerns such phenomena as affects, language codes, gestures, habits, disciplines of the body etc. (Majmurek 2011a, b, 139). This means that labour, similarly to biopolitical production, can be said to have a *performative* character in Brzozowski. Majmurek suggests that his attention to this dimension of labour—which is more fundamental than the actual production of objects, since it creates the affective environment for this production—aims to show how the proletariat can become a “true creator of social reality” (ibid., 140). This creativity is not primarily a question about control for Brzozowski, not even about seizing control of the means of production. Instead, it is the “irrational state” of “a capacity to acquire new experiences” (Brzozowski 1997, 89). It necessitates an affirmation of the groundlessness of the original act of labour, which allows a beginning to have begun through an openness towards the new.

## The unknown $\alpha$ of labour

For Brzozowski, labour is a delineation of duration that has the character of a decision which transforms the posture of man through an inner gesture. The inner—or deep—character of this gesture describes *how* it delineates: not through a repeatable demarcation in homogeneous space, which would qualify it as a laughable gesture through the intensification of a becoming in the duration of the deep self. In this sense, *inner* means *transgressive*. In “Prolegomena” this transgressive element of labour is called  $\alpha$  (Brzozowski 1990, 214).

The question about the beginning of  $\alpha$  is the question about a beginning of a beginning. This first beginning lies in the longing *draft* of a goal. The ecstatic movement of this longing is like a *sketch* of a new will, a new directedness in the world, propelled by its terrifying immensity. This draft is not arbitrary. It is not a question of choosing among given alternatives, but about an “irrational spontaneity” that “transcends previous reality” and makes the “unforeseeable character of our I [appear]” “as if from the other side of memory.” This movement is initiated by the feeling that the whole of what is, is not enough—for Brzozowski labour *begins* through an uneasiness with the *whole* of the given (Sowa 1976, 185–190, f. n. 69). The longing draft of a goal is nevertheless merely one dimension of labour. The other is its realization. Before  $\alpha$  is found the drafted goal—the *beginning* of a beginning—is a mere fantasy (Brzozowski 1990, 220 f.). On its own, the draft is an impotent expression of the uneasiness with the whole—an inner itching without a gesture to relieve it. To become active the draft needs  $\alpha$  as its “irrational effort of realization,” which takes footing (*oparcie*) in the draft as a “subjective motive” of will for the creation of “the absolutely new” (Sowa 1976, 198–199).

Because the  $\alpha$  of the activity of labour is never given, the initial draft of labour is not possible to define as a plan. This cannot be emphasized enough, since at stake here is a fundamental indeterminism that Brzozowski sees as the nature of labour. Sowa argues that the reason for this indeterminism lies in the indeterminacy of the human that performs  $\alpha$  (ibid., 202). This statement has to be further qualified. Turning back to Bergson, it can be said that for Brzozowski indetermination is not a freedom of choice among possibilities. It is instead necessary to think the possibilities as themselves created through the indeterminacy of freedom. Only then is the new not reduced to a permutation, to “a mere rearrangement of former elements” (Bergson 1946, 122). Precisely because labour is not such a mere rearrangement, but a delineation “of the absolute new,” it is crucial that the  $\alpha$  needed for the transgression of a form of life is only discovered tentatively (*omackiem*)—as long as the adequate  $\alpha$  is not *performed* the form of life that we want to change remains. There can only be fantasies about a possible different life, but the specific delineation necessary for a transformation does not happen. Brzozowski’s point is the following: it is only possible to find out *performatively* what—or rather *how*—the sought after  $\alpha$  is (Sowa 1976, 214 f.). Consequently, it is not possible *intellectually* to discover what labour is necessary for a sought after form of life to come about, in order to then enact this knowledge. Awakened by the inner itching of an uneasy longing for a different life, the  $\alpha$  of labour is not the object of a plan but an activity of a *forming* that cannot be foreseen:

we cannot demarcate “labour” through the position it takes on in the finished world, because logically, this world does not exist for labour. (Brzozowski 1990, 217)

This means that the kind of labour—the kind of inner gesture—necessary for the transformation of life is not deducible. *What* is to be done can never be a given. Instead, it is the object  $\alpha$  of an *irrational* decision that has to be performed and whose effects have to be *experienced* and *evaluated*. It is an active turning of events within duration itself that *projects* life beyond itself in such a way that it entices

a “socialization in the non-reified sphere of inner life” (Sowa 1976, 184; Walicki 1989, 151). The  $\alpha$  of labour can therefore be described as the object of a leap of faith in Brzozowski. When Majmurek describes this element in Brzozowski’s thinking in Jacques Lacan’s terms he touches on an important dimension of what the irrational in Brzozowski means. He writes that the irrationality in Brzozowski is similar to how Lacan describes the irrationality of the belief that “God does not play dice with the universe,” or that there is no cartesian demon that deceives us about everything: both require an irrational decision whose irrationality lies in the fact that the decision *is not grounded in anything besides itself* (Majmurek 2011a, b, 196). Moreover, for Brzozowski this irrational act is not dependent on conscious will: we *want* to change our current life form, we *want* to become different, but we cannot concretely want the labour that is necessary for this change to come about. Instead, it is characterized by *chance*:

When it is in fact being performed for the first time *labour* has no fixed point towards which it strives; it emerges from creativity as its lucky form. (Ibid., 221)

In order to better understand the character of chance that labour has in Brzozowski, a short excursion to a phenomenological interpretation of Aristoteles’ concept of *techne* is helpful. In his reading of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Eugen Fink emphasizes that for Aristotle there is a certain affinity between *techne* and *chance*. *Techne* always concerns becoming. But it is not the kind of becoming that takes place in nature (*physis*), like the growing of plants or the birth of animals. *Techne* concerns the sort of becoming that does not happen through itself. It is a form of *poiesis*. This means that what comes about through *techne* does not have its reason (*aitia*) in itself. Instead, its reason lies in the one that produces it, which is why *techne* exclusively concerns such things that either can or cannot be. In other words, what is produced by *techne* has its beginning and ground (*arche*) in something else, namely, in the producer. This is why *techne* cannot create natural things, things that come about through the movement of nature (*physis*). As Fink puts it: “Nothing that *is* or *becomes* of necessity can be the work of *techne*.” And precisely here lies the affinity between *techne* and chance. Ontologically, *techne* concerns such things that could as well *not* be. Fink brings attention to the strangeness of this insight in Aristotle: that he compares the most deliberate activity of man to the random occurrences of chance. But again, the point is ontological in the sense that it concerns the character of the being of whatever appears as a result of chance or of *techne*: the main trait of both is that they appear as if they were *groundless*. The fact that the products of *techne* have come about almost seems like chance. (Fink 1976, 140)

The two sides of *techne* that Fink is attentive to in his reading of Aristotle—that it is groundless as well as the most deliberate activity—are also present in Brzozowski: his movement from an emphasis on the intentional and disciplined character of labour towards a thinking of the irrationality of labour in “Prolegomena” reveals its *groundlessness*. Labour is therefore only on the surface—from the perspective of homogeneous social life—the most deliberate of human activities. Its irrationality signifies, for Brzozowski, an absence of *ratio* in the product of labour, an absence of *arche* and *aitia* in the product, that instead lie in the

producing human. Man is the beginning of the products of labour, but the very beginnings of his beginnings have no further grounds. With Brzozowski's words, the  $\alpha$  of transformative labour is "absolutely negative." Its activity is non-given, which is why he also likens performed labour to a *spell* that reveals a change only after it is cast (Brzozowski 1990, 215, 221). It is a mistake to rationalize this event after the fact, after it has been performed, although such rationalization is a constant temptation for the intellect:

Here is a leap beyond the intellect. And the intellect that performs the leap and that assimilates the results of it wants to forget about it. (Ibid., 215)

The  $\alpha$  of labour is a leap beyond intellect because, as Bergson states, it is the function of intellect to pragmatically foresee (Bergson 1946, 34). Oblivious, the intellect seeks to formulate grounds for an activity that has no grounds beyond itself. Such grounds only appear after labour has ceased to be a delineating inner gesture, when it has become a mechanically repeatable activity in the space of homogeneous social life. For Brzozowski, what is perceived as conscious life is always an "answer to our gesture, to the invented, created  $\alpha$ ." (Brzozowski 1990, 216) However, it is an answer that is ignorant about the fact that it is itself *grounded* and not *grounding*, grounded through an act of labour that eludes intellect and merely indicates a "previous sum of gestures" (ibid., 218). It can be said that the kind of rationalization that seeks to provide grounds for the groundlessness of labour fetishizes what is essentially a *lack*. It seeks to support a lifeless form by providing grounds for its being. This happens from the perspective of an I—which Brzozowski sees as a sign of a lack, similar to how Bergson understands the body as the appearance of activities already passed (ibid., 220). In other words, the I only appears when the inner gestures that delineate life have become insufficient—in the absence of life's ability to renew itself through labour.

The discussion above reveals that Brzozowski regards the subject—any subject—to be a product of labour, and that labour first and foremost is the creation of subjectivity. This means that from the perspective of Brzozowski's late philosophy of labour the subject does not perform labour. Instead, labour *subjectivizes*. The subject is a *result* of the unknown  $\alpha$  of labour. What appears for itself as a determined subjectivity, is a form of life that is no longer capable of enduring. It no longer longs for the performance of an unknown  $\alpha$  because it is at ease with the world. But precisely this is the moment for the awakening of a renewed uneasiness; the drafting of ideas of different forms of life and tentative efforts to perform the transgressive  $\alpha$  that might realize them. Following Wiktor Marzec, who is inspired by Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) in his reading of Brzozowski, this can be described as the dimension of *the political* in Brzozowski:  $\alpha$  is the necessarily arbitrary moment in a political process through which a new political subject is formed (Marzec 2011, 105).

It is crucial for Brzozowski that the delineating act of labour excludes a duration that can never return. It entails the inner gesture of a *sacrifice* on the part of those who labour:

To be able to say I tomorrow one has to throw one's bloodstained today into the abyss, create a dam with today's bodies against the waves, that only know our tomorrow if they are held off. (Brzozowski 1990, 229)

What these bodies delineate is, first and foremost, their own duration through a necessary exclusion of irretrievable possibilities of life. Time is given up for the sake of something that is relatively liberated from time, which is the lasting delineation that strives to secure future life according to the longing of a will (ibid., 225). This lasting delineation can only be interpreted by those that inherit it as “something like a sign,” that has shaped their bodies and minds and impregnated their duration with a possibility to deliver a life willed by previous generations (ibid., 226). For Brzozowski, the question about the creation of grounds for future generations is inseparable from the status of the working class. The workers—“the hellish life of billions of workers”—are the ones that use up their lives, who's lives vanish in the creation of grounds through their labouring delineation of the duration of life. They can be said to sacrifice the possibilities of their duration for the sake of future duration. Brzozowski writes that everything about which we can say “it is”—which also entails “I am”—rests on this fundament, which means that it rests on suffering. The working class makes up the suffering magnitude of humanity. Its bodies are the only ones able to withstand the forces of the elemental in the silence of the infinite spaces and they make possible for future generations to pronounce “I,” conscious about the necessity of tragic transgression.

**Acknowledgements** Open access funding provided by Södertörn University.

**Funding** The submitted article is written as a part of the post-doctoral project “The Relation between Work and Political Emancipation from a Central and Eastern European Perspective: Autocreation, Work and Suffering in Stanisław Brzozowski,” funded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



## References

- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bergson, H. (1924). *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* (C. Brereton, & F. Rothwell, Trans.). Temple of Earth Publishing. Retrieved December 11, 2019, from <https://www.templeofearth.com/books/laughter.pdf>.
- Bergson, H. (1944). *Creative evolution* (Arthur Mitchell, Trans.). New York: Modern Library/Random House.
- Bergson, H. (1946). *The creative mind* (M. L. Andison, Trans.). New York: The Philosophical Library Inc.
- Bergson, H. (2001). *Time and free will: An essay on the immediate data of consciousness* (F. L. Pogson, Trans.). New York: Dover Publications.
- Bielik-Robson, A. (2011). Inne nawrócenie. O specyficznym katolicyzmie Stanisława Brzozowskiego. In A. Bielik-Robson (Ed.), *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Borzym, S. (1993). Pojęcie 'życia' u Stanisława Brzozowskiego. In S. Borzym (Ed.), *Panorama polskiej myśli filozoficznej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Brzozowski, S. (1912). *Głosy wśród nocy: studia nad przesileniem romantyzmem kultury europejskiej*. Warsaw: E. Wende i Sp.
- Brzozowski, S. (1973). *Kultura i życie*. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Brzozowski, S. (1985). *Pamiętnik*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie.
- Brzozowski, S. (1990). *Idee: wstęp do filozofii dojrzałości dziejowej*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie.
- Brzozowski, S. (1997). *Legenda młodej polski: studia o strukturze duszy kulturalnej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Fink, E. (1976). Phronesis und Theoria. In W. Biemel (Ed.), *Die Welt des Menschen—Die Welt der Philosophie: Festschrift für Jan Patočka*. Haag: M. Nijhoff.
- Ingarden, R. (1973). *The literary work of art: An investigation on the borderlines of ontology, logic, and theory of literature—With an appendix on the functions of language in the theater* (G. G. Grabowicz, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Majmurek, J. (2011a). Prawo do pracy. In A. Bielik-Robson (Ed.), *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Majmurek, J. (2011b). Nauka na drodze demokracji. Przeciw 'naukowościowemu zabobonowi'. In A. Bielik-Robson (Ed.), *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Marzec, W. (2011). Rewolucja 1905: Brzozowskiego myślenie polityczności. In A. Bielik-Robson (Ed.), *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Mencwel, A. (2014). *Stanisław Brzozowski: postawa krytyczna: wiek XX*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Pascal, B. (1995). *Pensées and other writings* (H. Levi, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Politt, H. (1996). *Stanisław Brzozowski: Hoffnung wider die Dunkle Zeit*. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz.
- Popek, K. (2014). 'Prolegomena filozofii pracy' Stanisława Brzozowskiego w kontekście naszych morderczych zmagani dla przyszłych pokoleń. *IDEA—Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych*, 26, 467–484.
- Sobieraj, T. (2016). *Stanisław Brzozowski. Przybliżenia*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Episteme.
- Sorel, G. (2004). *Reflections on violence* (J. Jennings, Ed., T. E. Hulme, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sowa, E. (1976). *Pojęcie pracy w filozofii Stanisława Brzozowskiego*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie.
- Walicki, A. (1989). *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish beginnings of 'Western Marxism'*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Woźniak, M. (1990). Teoria pracy u Brzozowskiego. *Archiwum historii filozofii i myśli społecznej*, 35, 71–92.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.