

Labor/Value/Information

Is this work? Does this work? For you? With the financialization of everyday life comes the emergence of the global network as a necessary condition for the production and reproduction of global society. Or is it the other way around? Perhaps the emergence of the global network as a financial exploit curated by the invisible hand (first with just a few digits but now with its digits everywhere) masquerading as communications infrastructure (and/or the imagination) has itself waged the epic battle for the financialization of everyday life. For the benefit of its shareholders, of course.

Or, let's tell it differently. Struggles against colonization, slavery, indentured servitude, racism, sexism, nationalist domination, imperialism, all the oppressions, have driven people to communicate, to labor to know one another and strive for solidarity that ranges far beyond their local locales—out of the kitchen, out of the caretaker's hut, the shop floor, the cottage industry's enclosure—and to extend their social relations farther than the market might imagine. An outflanking, if you will. In those aspirations to liberation, labor has—now historically—posed as the many challenges to capital. It is a life-making insurrectionary labor that capital and its owners and beneficiaries have rushed to capture, to contain and put to work in order to accumulate its product: the dead labor as property that after all is not just theft but also death. The drive to liberation outpaces capital innovation—or almost. Otherwise, all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.

Labor and the globalized network suggest the market as a model for culture, as expropriator of culture—culture that is not just an incidental or extraeconomic situation but now, clearly, part of the means of production. Content to influence culture informally at first (except when lawyers, pedagogues, and militaries are called in to suppress class-based and colonial uprisings), the market had to be formally organized for exploitation as its decolonizing and liberatory aspirations gained traction. Labor, for

Marx, is the truly creative force, and we have been at work both in and out of the factories. Labor's subjection—and the laborer's subjugation—to the wage (a first imposition of digitization in the creation of the commodity for the market, a use value over an exchange value that would soon put all use values under the regime of exchange value by denominating them in the terms of exchange) introduced an encroachment on the other that no doubt continued, formalized, and intensified certain prior encroachments. Racial capitalism was built on civilizational racism; Cedric Robinson has taught us that.¹ But here the mathematicization and informationalization of these relations produced few modes of account save those of domination. The subsumption of labor became the subsumption of lifetimes, as Neferti Tadiar deduces, including the subsumption of lifetimes, as slavery, the carceral system, and forms of radical disposition administered by the banks and their interstate system so bloodily testify.² Yes, there is collusion. And yes, there is fascism. The popular appeal of revanchist programs to punish those who are already victims fills psychopathological needs bound up with imperial, sovereign masculinities and in struggle against what is feared as feminization—or at least what feminization means in heteropatriarchy. Revanchist accounting is the libidinal template for an aspiring whiteness that would disavow its dependence on slavery and coloniality.

“The organization of the audience through organized material,” said Sergei Eisenstein of montage, but who is doing the organizing—who is doing the work of organizing the fragments?³ Yes there is the director, the editor, the shop managers, but so too were the spectators organizing as they processed the feed. The industrialization of the visual, which can be sketched and therefore grasped by recognizing that the cinema translated the assembly line to the eye, provided a new model for production, for work. Formerly unremunerated, but now, here you are reading this, if not on your screen, then after having it and yourself passed through so many screens, so many microadjustments in the network of exchanges that brings it to you and you to it, such that it and you are, if not exactly indistinguishable just now, then cut from the same digital cloth. The same obscure passages through techne that has been built on the backs of all who are disappeared, disavowed, dispossessed, forgotten, archived, annihilated. They are also part of you and of this, as you are part of them. Already some of what you are has fallen away, into the black hole, into the crypt, into the immemorial.

Eenie, meenie, miney, moe. Who knew that all along this was about capture and flight? We learned quickly, very quickly, that it was about the past, even the present, the imminent fall of the stochastic gavel of the kid-mob, but did anyone want to think that it was not just a residue of the past but an intimation of the future? That fugitivity was perhaps our only path

to survival, our best bet. We are not one here, not all the same—not by a long shot, and who wants that, anyway? But we live on the same planet, the great globe itself. We partake of the transubstantiation of labor, the labor of others and more than likely the transubstantiation of your own. We are incorporated; we deeply participate in the technic/psychic platforms—or is it platform?—of this thing, this thinking called media. The drone, it tolls for thee.

Ambient media, sur-, sous-, and omniveillance, social-media (now inexorably written with a hyphen whether or not that “reality” is known to all “users”). Where we used to sweat in factories, were violated in ships, plantations, and camps—many of us (and I use this term perhaps too loosely) still do and are. They and along with those cast in white collars also do the unremunerated work of interface, of tending their screens—someone’s screen. As Instagram contributor or data point on a sovereign census, they drive the world computer picosecond by picosecond into new states. And in truth this formerly unremunerated labor is increasingly creating currency. Many currencies, not quite general forms of social wealth for as long as these currencies remain in their platformed silos, but becoming general.

We are talking about the collective labor of cultural practice and the development of an infrastructure that can uptake, abstract, and extract from that. Leveraged exchange. Dissymmetrical exchange. Mental labor as one future of work—a future Charles Babbage and Lady Lovelace already wanted to automate with their analytic engine and their difference engine. But these processes of calculation that today underpin all communication (including me talking to you, you thinking about this voice of a “me” that’s not me) are not just automated; they automate the automators. We are the conscious organs and, sadly perhaps, also the unconscious organs—metabolic vehicles inhabited by capital logic, processing those forces and generating the data, the metadata, that are at once produce and raw material for the next cycle of the endless accumulation of numbers. Numbers, we should say, that in all their indifference are not a matter of indifference. Numbers that own, numbers that can save, and numbers that kill.

Amazon knows what it’s doing—like Google, that is, Alphabet, colonizing not just the terrain but the terrain of words. Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, the microlabor apparatus branded as “artificial” artificial intelligence, allows would-be employers a shot at what was at one point touted as billions of hours of wasted time in the third world, and to employ people for screen-based piecework—translating words, scavenging images, identifying stuff, and the like. The gig economy writ small. Writ granular. But artificial artificial intelligence is the truth of artificial intelligence. Better perhaps to say that all intelligible intelligence, artificial or otherwise, runs on submerged

labor. It's hard to footnote, but there it is. I think what I think because of language + culture + history + technology + semiotics of embodiment, and you can add whatever unique, actual, yet random histories that traverse the nodal point of this utterance. But there is no escape; we are bound in and bound to the unrequited violence of historical memory and also all that which is immemorial, unphotographed and unphotographable. The capture of the future feels not just imminent but complete.

The capture of the future. Capital's wet dream, its ur-calculus. Planet-wide, even cosmic. The labor process has not only altered itself, and the whole (mise-en-/Anthropo)scene, it has altered the temporal landscape of the planet. More than once. The vast automaton of machine-mediated racial capital takes over the linear history afforded by linguistic command, parallel processing millions of bureaucratic operations (programs) in a coordinated manner that is actually existing AI. Key here is the value not only of labor and all of its new forms of generating information but also of disposability. The ability to dispose of life as AI or IT sees fit. Death, but let's call it what it is and say murder, is work too, not least of all for those who perish, though it keeps armies, politicians, and news networks gainfully employed. Really, it's their bread and butter. In the necropolitics of capitalist command—a key modality of “interface” that functions precisely through defacement (of the living, of those who would no doubt prefer to survive)—murder is part of the language of power/capital, meaning precisely that it is at once worth something to someone and, like other forms of coerced extraction, practiced with near impunity, for now. Covering murder also means hiding it, and the whole communications infrastructure has a dog in that financial race.

Cashing In on the Social

To profit and cash in on this race requires the replacement of bodies with their parts and logics. The data created from these parts have become fuel for the shifting economy. It has become increasingly clear that “data is the new oil.” This expression, now common parlance in business and technology circles, was first used by mathematician Clive Humby in 2006: “Data is the new oil. It's valuable, but if unrefined it cannot really be used. It has to be changed into gas, plastic, chemicals, etc to create a valuable entity that drives profitable activity; so must data be broken down, analyzed for it to have value.”⁴ While Google and Facebook first provided massive demonstrations of the value of data by using it to generate advertising revenue, corporate interests are now eagerly collecting and selling data to maximize efficiency, customize product and service offerings, inform research and development, or lower insurance premiums. The business cases for harnessing big data continue to expand.

While exchange conditions social relations under systems of capitalism, the digitization of social relations promises to deepen this entanglement. The “social” currencies of views, likes, shares, pokes, adds, follows, and comments bring an ever greater richness and fidelity of sociality under the control of corporate (or state) interests. We are witnessing—more than witnessing—the total objectification of the social through “lifestyle” applications like Instagram, where nonprofessional and professional users alike compete to promote products, brands, trends, cities, events, and so on.

Truth be told, “Digital Culture” is really “Digital Culture 2.0.” Commodification was the first digital culture with universalizing aspirations (DC1), and computation is the intensification of that process (DC2).⁵ Capitalism, as Nick Dyer-Witheford indelibly remarked, “was always a computer.”⁶ The rise of the discrete state machine was a way to streamline the management of market abstraction. Blanket digitization was a means to financialization, the financialization of everything. There’s way more, including the resolution and granularity of commodification and value extraction, the networking of the commodity (as opposed to its “objectification” as “object”), the transformation of value-productive labor, computational colonization, and the possible decolonization of the money form. But not everything can be downloaded at once.

What might make a positive impact? Immunity from finance? Or perhaps it’s the decolonization of finance. This would mean not only overcoming complicity with coloniality as speakers, writers, practitioners, workers, thinkers, beings but also remaking finance, claiming “the economic” as a cooperative, communal, trans-ontic endeavor, this time consciously designed with collective, planetary liberation in mind.

There are proposals, and not just on the horizon. Blockchain technologies innovated by Bitcoin and Ethereum have not yet produced post-capitalism’s “killer app,” but that may be in the works. Basic minimum wage gives way to basic equity as all participants in any platform whatever (such as this journal issue, perhaps as this journal, but multiplied now by the millions of endeavors people undertake with qualities that are not fully subsumed by the value form) become stakeholders. Labor that is not alienated at a communal level creates enclaves that may hollow out capital. Alternative communities will be (self-)empowered to create convivial economic spaces that produce an exodus.

This hypothesis on liberation and autonomy is at once a historical projection and a reconceptualization of value and information. It suggests that value metrics can be scripted at the communal level, financialized for the benefit and sustainability of the community, and made interoperable with other communities. At the very least, the radical Left must soon rethink the questions of financialization not in order to dismiss them but

to take them over. This was, finally, one part of communism that we want to hold onto—seizure of the mode of production and its radical transformation. We don't need historical communism's gender politics, its stultified bureaucracies, the racial politics of much of the "working class" in the United States and Europe, its heteronormativity. But we do need control of the means of production and not so much a radical redistribution of the social product for our liberation, but a radical reformulation of the computational logics of production of the social product, which would now have collective equity built into it. A left finance seems like a necessary component to this historical struggle, a path towards reparations and a communism we could live with. A recognition of the convergence of computation, valuation, and information is the starting point of home economics for the digital age.

If information is itself a machine of capture, a form of transmission that seamlessly transforms our vitality into communication—and, as we many now grasp, into *value*—we must figure out how to take back this livelihood into communal and cooperative, rather than corporate, life. How do we withdraw this livelihood from its role as labor for domination and make it part of a communist ecology? We need to grow and cultivate and create and serve our own sustenance—for our bodies, our thoughts, our play, for the taste buds and erotic organs we have yet to grow, for new life. We need to learn how to plant and code, to tend to the surround—the living we do and make with others (and not just those "humans")—as well as to justly transmit and receive the goods we might share across the built divides. Yes, we can feed ourselves and the planet with the robust activity of our interfaces.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See "How This Text Was Written" (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Robinson and Kelley, *Black Marxism*.
2. Tadiar, "Life-times in Fate Playing"; Tadiar, "City Everywhere."
3. Eisenstein, *Writings*, 63.
4. Clive Humby, quoted in Michael Haupt, "Data Is the New Oil."
5. Beller, *Message Is Murder*.
6. Dyer-Witheford, "Red Plenty Platforms."

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