

Introduction

After the Law of Value Is “Blown Apart”:
Labor as Value in the Contemporary

This forum of *the minnesota review* is situated in the contemporary dogma that “the future,” as Yann Moulier Boutang writes, “is already here for those who know how to read it” (2011, 8). This is the future in which “the so-called ‘law of value’ (according to which the value of a product is determined by the amount of labor time that went into it), which Marx considers the keystone of modern social relations, is, however, shattered and refuted by capitalist development itself” (Virno 2004, 100). To argue, then, for the centrality of the law of value in contemporary capitalism (or sometimes even to bring up the issue) has become a mark of an unacceptable orthodoxy within Left circles in the global North that have embraced the orthodoxies of the “communism of capital” (Beverungen, Murtola, and Schwartz 2013)—from its “common” to its “commonsense”—which declares, “There is no conflict here between reform and revolution” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 289).

The theory of the “communism of capital” takes as its starting point the presupposition that technological advances within the development of capital have shifted commodity production from material goods to immaterial products such as “knowledge, language, science, culture, art, information, forms of life, relations with oneself, others and the world” (Lazzarato 2004, 197) and, in turn, transformed the relations of capital from within, such that “the production of value depends increasingly on creative intellectual activity which, apart from placing itself beyond any valorization related to scarcity, also places itself beyond mass accumulation, factory accumulation and the like” (Negri 2008, 64). Immaterial labor is said to have become a problem for capital in that it cannot be contained within the boundaries of what Marx theorized as the “working day,” or the difference between surplus and necessary labor-time that is the basis of the law of value (Marx 1996, 239–43). Instead, the “communism of capital” is based upon the notion that “the traditional opposition between labour and non-labour loses any foundation” (Vercellone 2007, 30) and that, as a result, the law of value based upon the exploitation of labor has been “blown apart” (Hardt and Negri 1994, 11).

Instead of social transformation, what is presented as the “alternative” to capital’s “negative” power (ibid., 59) is liberating the “affirmative” energy that is the “*vis viva*” (living force) of life itself (ibid., 21). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write, “Living labor is the internal force that constantly poses not only the subversion of the capitalist process of production but also the construction of an alternative. In other words, living labor not only refuses its abstraction in the process of capitalist valorization and the production of surplus value, but also poses an alternative schema of valorization, the self-valorization of labor” (6). In this model of postlabor capitalism, labor is dematerialized and redefined as “a social analytic that *interprets* the production of value” (7), while capitalism becomes a cultural antagonism that the “creativity” of immaterial labor endlessly deconstructs.

The “communism of capital” represents a “left fantasy” (Ebert and Zavarzadeh 2014, 401) of a capitalism without labor, without contradictions such as class and exploitation, and, as a consequence, without the necessity of revolutionary transformation. This approach is reflected in the various “new communist” theories that have emerged, such as “accelerationism” and “communization,” in which the exploitation of labor is refigured as “the problem of work” which “cannot be reduced to the extraction of surplus value or the degradation of skill, but extends to the ways that work dominates our lives” (Weeks 2011, 13). As the Endnotes Collective argues, “If, after a revolution, the bourgeoisie is expropriated but workers remain workers, producing in separate enterprises, dependent on their relation to that workplace for their subsistence, and exchanging with other enterprises, then whether that exchange is self-organized by the workers or given central direction by a ‘workers’ state’ means very little: the capitalist content remains” (2010). “Work,” in this context, becomes the mechanism by which control over the creative force of living labor is perpetuated and maintained by capital. In the guise of “renewing” cultural theory through an attention to the conditions of work, the argument that “there is no longer an outside to the relations of production: they are the site of capture and exploitation, but also of resistance and liberation” (Roggero 2010, 361) is essentially little more than a philosophical form of trade unionism in which workers are taught there is no alternative to the existing and the struggle against capital is channeled into a struggle for better working conditions.

In a similarly vitalist discourse, the “posthumanist” turn proposed by writers such as Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter* [2010]) and

Graham Harman (*The Quadruple Object* [2011]) divorces the social consequences of capitalism entirely from any materiality in the exploitation of labor or even the problematics of work and locates the “crisis of value” instead as the consequence of human instrumentality in which “the source of each value is obtained through humanity’s collective or individual projection of its interests onto things of the flat world” (Garcia 2014, 332). It is said that the human-centeredness of instrumental reason fails to account for the singularity and fundamental difference between all objects—human and non-human alike—and that what is needed today is conceiving of objects not as “intrinsically inanimate matter” (Bennett 2010, ix) but “as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (5). This articulation of a world in which value is created through an autopoietic circulation of “intensities” is a variation of the postlabor immaterialism advanced by the new communists. Just as the new communists propose that value is produced by creative “life force” and cannot be contained by any measure, the proponents of the posthumanist turn posit that value is what exists in the intensity of the exchange between objects and that it, like the creative energies of immaterial labor, is only reduced by attempts to measure or contain it. Both models reflect a world in which technology is perceived to have supplanted labor to become the primary source of value, freeing humanity to concern itself with the problems of work or the (re)distribution of objects in the world.

Returning to the theory of the law of value from diverse perspectives, however, the writers included in this forum propose, from diverse perspectives, that contrary to the declaration that the law of value “is completely bankrupt” (Hardt and Negri 1994, 10), the central issue for cultural theory today is that labor (not just work) needs to be understood as the structure of contemporary culture. As Marx writes, “Labor seems to be a very simple category,” but “the most general abstractions arise on the whole only with the most profuse concrete development” (1986, 41). In other words, while debates over work or the distribution of objects focus on the more familiar manifestations of the economic logic of capital, labor concerns its latent economic logic. Thus the appearance that “labor has everywhere become *the* common substance” (Hardt and Negri 1994, 11) is not taken by the included writers as a sign that labor has become “cultural” (work) and therefore “the production of value [can] no longer be confined to the spaces and times of waged work” (Terranova 2013,

52). Rather, it becomes an opportunity to examine the ongoing validity of the labor theory of value for explaining capitalist society as a totality, in which the global expansion of the individual competition of wage labor “presupposes precisely production on the basis of exchange value, which, along with the universality of estrangement of individuals from themselves and others, now also produces the universality and generality of all their relations and abilities” (Marx 1986, 99).

My essay, “Gaming Labor: Class, Video Games, and the ‘General Intellect,’” addresses the fact that video games have become, not only a significant aspect of the technology industry but also, for many, the image of an emerging contradiction said to reside at the heart of digital capitalism. According to the dominant readings, capitalism is no longer based upon the exploitation of workers’ labor by owners but rather upon tenuous control over the commons and creativity of the multitude. Examining the concept of general intellect through a comparison of, on one hand, the readings of such writers as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Paulo Virno, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greg de Peuter with, on the other hand, Marx’s theorization of the connection between science, technology, and labor in the *Grundrisse*, I argue that the postlabor theories of the “ludo economy” of video games work to ideologically obscure a revolutionary critique of digital capitalism based upon the labor theory of value.

Benjamin Noys’s essay is titled “Bound to Labor: Life and Labor in (Early) Marx and (Early) Derrida.” He proposes that the work of Marx has often been treated as an ontology and metaphysics of labor, and this ontology has often been resisted in the name of life. In particular, in a series of recent theoretical works, the “savage ontology of life,” as Foucault names it, has been posed against the “limits” of political economy and Marx (Foucault 1970, 303). This claim to escape the bind of labor and of Marx is critiqued by a return to the early Marx and the early Derrida to explore a different reading of the binding of life to labor. Contrary to Derrida’s later reading in *Specters of Marx* (1994), which tends to confine Marx to the metaphysics of presence and of labor, Noys reads the early Marx alongside Derrida’s early reading of Antonin Artaud to disrupt this bind. The work of Marx is reread as a complex and fissured probing of the problem of detachment from the bind to labor that is never a pure escape. This, he argues, is not to reinforce our real binding to labor but a way to suggest new forms of mapping and thinking this binding as contradictory and as capable of being exploded from within.

Robert Faivre argues, in “Jameson’s Spiritual Reawakening: Labor Theory in the Time of Wal-Mart,” that Fredric Jameson’s reading of Wal-Mart as a figure of a postcapitalism-to-come is exemplary of the market logic that value is produced outside production, in distribution and consumption. Through his dialectics of ambivalence, Jameson produces an analysis that empties the social relations of their class content by making social transformation into an affective and spontaneous action. In this sense, Jameson’s celebrated reading of Wal-Mart is indicative of the general reading of global capitalism on the “radical” Left today, which spiritualizes Marx’s materialist dialectic by emphasizing form over content and turns theory into crisis management on behalf of the ruling class.

After a short historical and conceptual discussion of the labor theory of value (LTV), George Caffentzis writes in “The Oil Paradox and the Labor Theory of Value” that the oil industry presents an apparent paradox to the LTV. How is it that oil companies employ relatively few workers and invest in a relatively large amount of machinery and still are the largest and most profitable companies on the planet? It should be otherwise, if the LTV were true. He proposes that Marx modified the LTV to resolve such a paradox and to account for the peculiar role that the oil industry plays in contemporary capitalism.

In “New Materialism and the Labor Theory of Value,” Jennifer Cotter proposes that new materialism claims to offer a postanthropocentric advance over historical materialism by displacing human labor with the “vital agency” of all matter: from humans to objects and machines. By equating people with the objects they produce and positing the autopoiesis of things, new materialism inverts its own basis in commodity production and offers a new metaphysics of matter in which the ideology of exchange—which conceals the exploitation of labor in production—is writ large as the ontological basis of life as such. The main difference between vitalism and the labor theory of value is not (post)anthropocentrism but the classes they represent.

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