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## Follow the money? Value theory and social inquiry<sup>\*</sup>

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### abstract

The paper seeks to conceptualise Marxian value theory as a problem for social research to investigate. It is argued that so conceptualised, value can only be encountered by the study of the 'totality of social relations' in capitalist society, inside the workplace and outside in the wider sphere of everyday life. It first gives a brief overview of the author's interpretation of the theory of value. It then suggests a way of conceptualising the theory of value as an object of research. It is contended that such research requires the study of the different 'modes of existence' that value takes over the course of the production of commodities and their circulation in society. Possible research approaches are discussed. First, the Italian worker's inquiry tradition is analysed as a means by which production in capitalist economies can be investigated in its micro-level, everyday aspect. This is deemed inadequate for its simple engagement with the workplace and those employed within it. An alternative approach is put forward inspired by feminist research into the 'life trajectory of the commodity', which incorporates the full totality of capitalist social relations into a broad and wide-ranging study of the different modes of existence taken by value both inside and outside the workplace, in production and circulation. Alongside this primarily theoretical project, some concrete recommendations are made for how this might pan out in practice.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I address the lack of intercourse between social research and the conceptual framework provided by Marx's theory of value. This is attributed to the difficulty of dealing in the ephemeral, abstract existence possessed by the production and circulation of value. It is wagered that many attempts at Marxian social research are hamstrung by the limitation only to research that presents itself immediately to the observer – monolithic amounts of 'surplus labour' extracted from the worker, rates of exploitation, instances of class struggle, etc. It is suggested that one can better understand the specific role that labour takes in capitalist society not by means of a study of work, workers or the workplace, but by means of an approach which studies these things in their location with the circuit of capital as a whole.

It may be said that the research of value can tell us more about labour than the study of labour itself, in some ways. Value is determined on a continuum, a procession of modes of existence of which labour and production are merely one. At different times, it appears as commodities, at others, money, in production, consumption and circulation. Labour has an integral role in the production of value, but only on the basis of the way in which its concrete existence is abstracted from in and through the exchange relation. This relegates the study of concrete labour and the conditions that surround it to a fairly peripheral and incidental status vis-à-vis the study of value.

Hence, just as the study of value can tell us more about labour, the study of labour is necessary to that of value. Obviously, this is conditional upon the judgement that it is important to study value in the first place. Where the question of 'why study of value at all' arises, it might be answered that value is what lies behind and is expressed in its phenomenal forms of wealth and power, and the concentrations of these that govern social relations of class domination, for instance. It is the validation of labour as value-producing through the exchange abstraction that marks it out as productive, specifically *capitalist* labour, and brings into existence with it class subjectivities tied to this labour. Yet value is a social form, and its study transcends work, workers and the workplace in order that it may reflect a renewed understanding of their properly social role, abstracted from in exchange, back upon these categories.

## The conceptualisation of the problem

Treated as a means of *researching* work and workers and their position under capitalism rather than a principally *political intervention* in these matters, the tradition of workers inquiry exhibits both failings and pointers in the direction of such a study.

In a 1981 paper on value theory and social research, Erik Olin Wright identifies the relative isolation of Marxian value theory from the ‘concrete investigation [...] of social life’. The two meet only implicitly in the wide body of Marxist-influenced workplace studies. The issue of how the two might be reconciled is the central problematic of this article. Wright contends that

Debates on the labour theory of value are usually waged at the most abstract levels of theoretical discourse. Frequently these debates are preoccupied with questions of the appropriate methodological stance toward social analysis, epistemological disputes about what it means to ‘explain’ a social process, and mathematical arguments about the merits of competing ways of formally deriving certain categories from others. Rarely are the issues posed in terms of their implications for the concrete investigations of social life in which social scientists would engage. (1981a: 36)

According to Wright, the Marxist analysis of labour and value provokes researchers to look closely at the labour process, due to the central role played by the ‘socio-technical conditions of production’ in determining the value conferred upon the commodity. In this way, a simple picture of the inputs and outputs of production is inadequate; rather, what happens in between becomes central (Wright, 1981a: 63). The labour theory of value ‘systematically direct[s] research towards questions of the labour process and its relationship to classes’ by situating the ‘conceptualisation of classes in terms of exploitation based in the relations of production’ (Wright, 1981b: 130-1). This could be used as an explanatory factor for both class-struggle and labour-process streams of empirical research. In the seminal workplace ethnographies published in the UK over the 1970s and 1980s, examples such as Ruth Cavendish’s *Women on the line* (1982) and Huw Benyon’s *Working for Ford* (1984) focused on the everyday conditions of work and the struggles between workers and management. The former possessed the virtue of linking what happens in the workplace to wider set of social positions and practices constituted on the basis of gender. In the USA, labour process researchers, such as Michael Burawoy in his study *Manufacturing consent* (1982), assessed the particular practices of control, discipline and domination exerted by management upon their workers.

The most notable among attempts at fully-fledged social research within the Marxist tradition are those carried out in Italy over the course of the sixties and

seventies under the banner of the 'inquiry'. It will be argued here that such approaches are deficient where the study of the theory of value is concerned. Whilst providing valuable insights into the quotidian conditions of work in contemporary capitalism, and compelling evidence as to the veracity of the Marxist concept of exploitation, such examples as those presented by the Worker's Inquiry tradition bear only the slightest proximity to the conceptual framework of the theory of value, with its explanation of how individual labours are rendered social by the system of commodity exchange. These examples suggest that instances of class conflict and domination provide a far more observable set of phenomena for research than do the categories of Marx's theory of value. The theory of value and its attendant categories (such as abstract labour) are only ever at best *implicit* in such research, but 'rarely is it explicitly incorporated into the *conceptualisation of the problem*' (Wright 1981a: 65, emphasis added). In light of this, this paper is an attempt to explore how the theory of value can be *conceptualised as a problem* for social research to investigate. This is principally a question of what might be the appropriate *object of research* for an empirical study of value, one which demands what might be called a 'social' inquiry rather than a 'worker's' one *per se*. We will first outline in brief the conception of value theory henceforth utilised.

## Outline of a theory of value

In conceptualising value theory as a problem to investigate it is first necessary to outline an interpretation of the theory of value with which to proceed. This interpretation has its roots in the mature economic works of Marx, but differs in important ways from orthodox, traditionalist approaches to his output, redressing the disproportionate emphasis placed upon the value-producing properties of labour in favour of a perspective which foregrounds the abstract process of *social validation* which renders labour productive of value.

In this paper the theory of value will be characterised as an attempt to explain how commodities are commensurable in a society organised around commodity exchange. The key device through which commensurability is explained is considered to be the social validation of individually expended concrete labour-time as social *abstract* labour-time, which is both presupposed by and expressed in the money form. In the wake of selected value-form critiques of traditional Marxism, we set out an alternative position that emphasises both production *and* circulation as parts of a totalising process of value determination.

Michael Heinrich (2012: 53-55) suggests that rather than a property produced at some point in the production process with which the commodity is endowed,

value is instead something ‘bestowed *mutually* in the act of exchange’. Marx himself points towards this mutual constitution of value when he suggests that outside their exchange with one another, the coat and linen have no ‘value-objectivity’. It is only the relation between the two, in which the labours that produced them are equalized and abstracted from, that can endow them with any such objective value. A product of labour on its own, then, is neither value-bearing nor a commodity. The product of labour is only such when it enters into exchange. However, whilst value is not determined prior to exchange, it can also not be said to originate ‘coincidentally’ solely through the exchange act itself. Rather, Heinrich reconciles productionist and circulationist approaches to value by moving the emphasis away from a preoccupation with the ‘*individual* labor of the producer and the product’ towards a relationship of validation whereby individually expended labours are brought into relation with (and reduced to a fragment of) the ‘*total labor of society*’. Neither exchange nor labour is therefore seen as producing value, but rather exchange is seen as mediating the relationship between individual and social labour, bestowing value upon abstract social labour-time through a process of social validation. Thus, Heinrich renders nonsensical the dispute over whether production or circulation ultimately determines the creation of value. As he asserts, ‘[v]alue isn’t just “there” after being “produced” someplace’, but is a ‘social relationship [...] constituted in production *and* circulation, so that the “either/or” question is senseless’ (*ibid.*: 52-54, emphasis in original).

The idea of value as being the product of a social validation of labour enacted through exchange will be harnessed in the foregoing synthesis in order to articulate a distinct position which orients itself towards an explanation situated in both production *and* circulation as opposed to one or the other. The idea of abstract labour as a category actualized through the ‘social validation’ of the commodity moment will play a central part. The conceptual apparatus through which this is to be understood will be outlined before proceeding. This apparatus revolves around an interpretation of value as an abstraction, which is essentially *emergent*, reliant upon a dialectic of potentiality and actuality.

Riccardo Bellofiore follows Lucio Colletti (1973; 1989) and Claudio Napoleoni (1975) in suggesting that the abstraction of labour is a mystical, metaphysical, mental abstraction that takes the form of a *real hypostatization* taking place *in reality*. The abstraction that takes place in exchange is merely ‘the end-point of a *process* of real hypostatization’ that involves the whole capitalist cycle, including production (Bellofiore 2009: 180, emphasis added). At its most basic and earliest level, this can be exhibited in the fact that ‘*on the labour market*, the *worker* has to be seen as an *appendix of the commodity he[*she*] sells*, labour power’. This leads Bellofiore to posit that ‘abstract labour is not a mental generalization but a *real*

*abstraction*. It goes on daily in the ‘final’ *commodity market*, but also on the *labour market* and *immediate production*’ (*ibid.*: 183).

Such a perspective holds abstraction to be a process rather than an instance. As the *Endnotes* collective writes, value is a process which takes different forms at different times – money, labour-power, commodities, and then money again (Endnotes, 2010). This process-oriented conception of value provides a useful counterguard against theorisations which present the production of value in a static, reductive way. Bellofiore and Roberto Finelli associate the theoretical foundations of Marx’s conceptualisation of value in the nexus of possibility, potentiality and actuality presented in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1998, Book *Theta*: 251-283). In Aristotle’s schema, *possibility* is only the conceivable ‘capacity to be’, *potentiality* achieves ‘being’ in the sense that it is ‘the unfolding of a form already implicit’, and *actuality* is the result of potentiality’s full unfolding. According to Bellofiore and Finelli, labour and value can be read along these lines, with labour power as ‘the potentiality for labour’, of which living labour is the actuality. At the same time, this actuality of labour is *potential* value, of which money is the actuality. Money then stands as ‘potential capital’, which can attain actuality through the valorisation of the labour process by means of exchange (Bellofiore and Finelli, 1998: 55-56).

Rather than the simultaneous ‘performance’ of concrete and abstract labour, it is perhaps better to see the latter as merely *latent* in the former, a mere possibility or potentiality awaiting actualization. As Marx writes, ‘[s]ocial labour-time exists in [...] commodities in a latent state, [...] and becomes evident only in the course of their exchange’. Therefore, writes Marx, ‘[u]niversal social labour is consequently not a ready-made prerequisite but an emerging result’ (1859). It is this latency that constitutes the conceptual thread which situates value at a point of articulation *between* both production and circulation. Rubin saw Marx as situating the exchange abstraction not merely post-production, but as a process which has its traces at every stage of the capitalist circuit (Bellofiore, 2009: 183-4). Following Rubin, Bellofiore discusses money and abstract labour as ‘*diachronic* concepts “in motion”, perpetually *in becoming*’ (*ibid.*: 188). Rubin’s belief in the latency of abstract labour is best summed up where he writes that abstract labour is ‘not something to which form adheres from the outside. Rather, through its development, the content itself gives birth to the form which was already latent in the content’ (Rubin, 1972: 117). Bellofiore sees labour as inhabiting two characteristics in the very same activity. It is both concrete in that it possesses specific properties and ‘*latently abstract*’ in that it possesses the ‘tentative’ promise of producing money (Bellofiore, 2009: 189).

In contrast to productionist and circulationist variants of value theory, this perhaps is a more moderate way of placing abstract labour at the point of exchange – to say that it is only *latent* in production, a dual character of labour that is only half ‘there’ at any one time. In the same way that labour-power is not labour but the potential to be so, so too is abstract labour *not* labour but its residual aggregation. The first ‘non-labour’ is introduced before the labour process, the second arises afterwards. The belief in abstract labour as a ‘type’ of labour incites the expectation that this labour should be responsible for producing something, a misguided expectation that Marx does nothing to discourage with his representation of abstract labour as that element which gives rise to value and acts as its ‘substance’ (Elson, 1979: 148) Marx himself does confuse matters somewhat when he writes of abstract labour that it is at once ‘quantities of homogeneous human labour’ (1976: 128) and ‘human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human labour in general’ (*ibid.*: 135). The two accounts are marked by differing temporal perspectives, the first conveying abstraction as a retrospective summation of the labour that has taken place, the second suggesting that this abstraction functions through the expenditure of general human labour on the job. The first places an emphasis upon abstract labour as the aggregation of abstract labour-time *ex post*, whereas the second places an emphasis upon abstract labour as something with a concrete, active existence. It is the former, *ex post* appreciation – henceforth referred to as one of ‘social validation’ – which proves adequate to a conception of abstract labour as latent.

This latency is evinced in the means by which abstract labour is measured, as an average established after production has taken place. Abstract labour cannot be counted on the clock, like the hours expended in acts of concrete labour. Rather, abstract labour is not expended at all. Instead, as Heinrich asserts, abstract labour is a ‘*relation of social validation that is constituted in exchange*’. In this process, ‘privately expended concrete labor’ is validated as ‘a particular quantum of value-constituting abstract labor’ (Heinrich, 2012: 50-51). Therefore, the determination of value is considered to be subject to a process located within the entire circuit of production and circulation. Such a ‘circuitist’ position holds that value is determined not solely in production, but through the social validation of expended labour, which takes place in circulation. There the one cannot be said to possess any determination without the other, with production and circulation consisting as ‘moments of a whole’ (Clarke, 1980: 9). This whole is the capitalist circuit.



## Researching value

To summarise the above account, in foregrounding the process of social validation by which labour is rendered productive of value, the theory of value given here has placed an emphasis upon abstract labour rather than concrete as the key guise in which labour assumes importance in the capitalist mode of production. In this conceptualisation, once a product of labour is confirmed as a commodity possessed of value and exchangeability, the *concrete* specificity of individual labours is *abstracted from* in order to smooth out the former's differences and constitute pure, undifferentiated homogeneous labour expressed in exchangeable commodities. By means of this process, the labour which went into a commodity's production is *validated* as a portion of the total abstract labour of society, as *productive* labour which has helped bestow value upon a good or service so that it can stand as a commodity in a relationship of equivalence and commensurability with the other commodities of the market by means of money.

Hence, abstract labour does not take place at all, but is an invention of the process of abstraction that stems from the concrete, private nature of the labour that takes place in capitalist society – it becomes social and abstract only after it has occurred. The only labour that takes place is concrete, and, by extension, the study of concrete labour in and of itself offers little in the way of understanding of the true function of labour in the production of value, and inhibits an ability to interpret what is specific and notable about the existence of capitalist labour itself. Rather than constituting a set of observable and researchable practices that allow us to get to the bottom of value-producing labour, concrete labour comes to take a role in the production of value only by means of its mediation through the immaterial process whereby value is assigned to a quantity of abstract labour.

Thus, research geared solely towards concrete labour, its conditions and the experience of it can touch upon only part of the reality of labour under capital. Research must instead be geared towards the social totality in which abstract labour is brought into existence. The 'commodity moment' marks only the resolution of a process of abstraction that begins with the inception of the production process. The expectation of monetary return which guides business activity already gives a tentative, latent form to abstract labour, and lays the foundation for its social validation over the whole course of the circuit of value creation. It is the crystallisation of abstract social labour-time in the form of money that marks the endpoint in what is in effect a *process* of social validation that begins in an ideal form as soon as bank finance sets the ball rolling. Whilst one can accept that the material paraphernalia of working life – wages, timesheets, performance indicators, targets, commission and, perhaps most of all, the clock – can all be seen as agents of this process of abstraction that are

actively lived and experienced by workers (and it is towards these dimensions that my own research is directed), there remains a sphere of determination which exceeds these easily experienced and observed manifestations of social validation, taking on both empirical and non-empirical reality in the social totality at large, in money, commodities, circulation and consumption- namely, in the circuit of capital as a whole.

### Modes of existence

We will begin our attempt to sketch a conception of an adequate object of research by establishing some theoretical foundations. Richard Gunn differentiates two modes of theorising, *determinate* and *empiricist* abstraction (1992: 23). The simplest way to sum up what Gunn means when he poses empiricist abstraction against determinate abstraction is that the former refers to a mental category, such as ‘production’, which abstracts from and irons out the differences between all the different modes of production to create one which functions as a synonym for all, whereas the latter refers to an abstraction that has a real existence, such as the abstraction ‘labour’, which may well function as an empiricist abstraction, taking all the different kinds of work and abstracting from them for ease of presentation, but also has a social form that arrives with the development of the exchange relation, in which different and multifarious labours are abstracted from in the shape of value (see Gunn, 1989: 19-21). Whereas empiricist abstraction relies upon a set of *external* relations, determinate abstraction describes a situation of *internal* relatedness strung together by the totalizing modes of existence of social phenomena. In this internal relatedness, A might be B’s mode of existence (or ‘form’), with B also as A’s mode of existence. Furthermore, C might be B’s mode of existence, and D the mode of existence of C whilst also having a separate mode of existence as A. This ‘criss-crossing field of mediations’ constitutes a totality, no part of which persists on its own (Gunn, 1992: 24).

The internal relatedness described by Gunn is not defined by mere *relations* between things, nor *equivalences*. Rather, what faces us are actual *samenesses* complete *identicalities*, in which things stand as modes of existence of one another (*ibid.*: 24). This has implications for social research. One that may be inferred from this explanation of determinate abstraction is that research objects are essentially *elusive*, present only in the totality of relations, appearances and modes of existence itself. The mode of existence, for Gunn, conforms precisely to that Aristotelian notion of process which we earlier attributed to the production of value. For Gunn, ‘actuality and activity are the same thing’, and to *be* is to *do* (*ibid.*, n. 14: 38). The mode of existence, then, must not be seen as a passive or

static 'being', but an active 'doing', in which 'existence' is read as existence or ek-stasis or ecstasy, i.e., in an active way, in which 'nothing static [...] inheres' (*ibid.*: 21).

For Gunn, such 'existence-in-practice' is the hallmark of determinate abstraction, and 'mode of existence' the true object of the study of 'form' (*ibid.*: 23). As such, a clear link can be drawn between the study of value as a social form and the idea of value as a process of possibility, potentiality and actuality- a mode of active *existence*. Furthermore, such a form is not only marked by its active existence as a process, but through its constitution as 'an internally related 'field'', in which 'anything can be the mode of existence of anything else' (*ibid.*: 23). In these two aspects – what Gunn calls 'unfixity of form' (*ibid.*: 32) and internal relatedness – is presented the real problem which faces researchers who venture into the study of value theory and its categories: the mode of existence.

Thus, in the course of its becoming, value can be seen as subject to a constant procession of such 'modes of existence', of which internal relatedness and unfixity of form are the chief features. In the first, *internal relatedness*, all things appear as everything else. In the second, *unfixity of form*, each manifestation of form is fleeting, fugitive and elusive. These issues present obvious problems for social research geared to the investigation of the value form. The conceptualisation offered by Gunn would seem to suggest that what is needed is a social research which rather than avoiding or attempting to reduce the internal relatedness and unfixity of the phenomena which it studies, is geared towards the investigation of modes of existence as an object of research.

We might phrase the sequence of these modes of existence in the following way. Labour is significant in capitalism by virtue of its abstraction and validation as value-producing. Hence, to investigate labour under capital, one must look to value. Value and its categories are elusive, and its investigation always points towards another place. For instance, value theory might direct the research towards the other commodity in which the value of a given commodity is represented. Furthermore, the social labour-time necessary for a commodity's reproduction of course pertains to that amount of labour time necessary to expend in order to be able to create the means by which the commodity may be purchased or exchanged for. This implies that in order to judge socially necessary labour time, one must look at another commodity, and for that, another, and so on and on endlessly. The commodity only possesses value insofar as it is drawn into a relation of equivalence with other commodities- or indeed the universal equivalent of money. In order to research labour-time, for instance, we must first look not at the commodity produced in that labour-time, but another commodity, or, indeed, money itself. This demands a holistic approach to research which

encapsulates both production and circulation. This means that it cannot follow previous Marxist social research in limiting itself to the workplace, instead situating itself in the whole totality of capitalist social relations.

As the description of the different stages that value takes in the process of production and circulation which forms its central movement displays, value is an elusive category to research, constantly withdrawing from quick and easy observation. A social, all-encompassing investigation of the totality of relations is needed in order to capture some impression of the 'modes of existence' that value assumes in society. The law of value cannot be researched without consideration of exchange, abstraction and circulation. What is needed is a research approach which does not limit itself to the labour-process or the realm of production, but can appreciate the capitalist circuit in the round.

Therefore, many examples of Marxian research into work and the labour-process are deficient for the purposes of an enquiry into value and its categories. Often this is attributable to the simple fact that their object is typically class struggle and its transparent, observable instances. Turning our attention towards worker's inquiry we find many such problems. However, whilst providing a useful case study for delineating some of the problems faced by a social research approach to value theory, the history of 'workers' inquiry' in Italy also points us towards a potential way out.

### **The workers' inquiry: 'sociological-objectivist' and 'political-interventionist' currents**

The 'workers' inquiry' is perhaps the most notable strand of Marxian social research, specifically for the fact that it originates with Marx himself. However, it was the Italian autonomists who provided the necessary update to the inquiry template, and, in the process, its popularisation. Scholars and activists grouped around the journal *Quaderni Rossi* eschewed the remote engagement of the questionnaire in order to insert themselves within industrial workplaces (often as workers) and perform research from *within* and in conjunction with the object of their research, the workers themselves (Brown and Quan-Hase, 2012: 489).

These attempts to infiltrate the factories and their workers had historical foundations in Mao's clarion call 'No investigation, no right to speak!', which inspired Maoists in the West to send 'moles' into factories in their home countries. At the same time, they rubbed shoulders with militant Leninists who had entered workplaces in order to whip up revolt under their exclusive leadership (Aufheben, 2004). Within these two earlier instances, Maoist and

Leninist, can be traced the basis for a split between two tendencies in the *Quaderni Rossi* group.

On the one hand, the *Quaderni Rossi* grouping arose from young elements of the Italian socialist and communist parties who, Wright tells us, sought to ‘apply Marx’s critique of political economy [...] to unravel the fundamental power relationships of modern class society [...]. In the process, they sought to confront *Capital* with “the *real* study of a *real* factory”, in pursuit of a clearer understanding of the new instances of independent working-class action’ (Wright, 2002: 3). This gave rise to what is referred to as a ‘sociological-objectivist’ current who wished to simply understand and analyse working conditions employing interview techniques inspired by industrial sociology (Aufheben, 2004). This understanding and analysis could then be turned towards the effective political activity of the organisations pitched in on the side of the workers (Thorpe, 2011). Panzieri (1965), a key representative of the current, suggests that such research provides an empirical bulwark against over-optimistic portraits of class power at any one time. In this way, it mirrors the Maoist invocation of investigation before action.

Whereas the sociological-objectivist current characterised the workers only as an *object* of research, the second ‘political-interventionist’ current saw the worker as constituting a joint subject-object who effectively participates in the performance of the research. The political-interventionist tendency also displayed scepticism about the sociological-objectivist current’s use of industrial sociology, which was seen as a bourgeois tool of the capitalist academy and of utility only in so far as it provided a first step in researching the field before the jointly-constituted co-research of worker and researcher could begin (Aufheben, 2004). Rather than merely understanding or analysing the situation, research in the political-interventionist vein was conducted from a strategic and tactical standpoint of encouraging workers to come to (correct) consciousness and participate in the class struggle through their own self-activity and self-understanding as co-researchers (Thorpe, 2011; de Molina, 2004). As such, it compares to the earlier militant interventions carried out by Leninists who inserted themselves artificially in potential sites of workplace revolt.

### **From workers’ inquiry to social inquiry**

As Brown and Quan-Hase suggest, the one similarity that persisted between Marx’s inquiry and that of the autonomists was the strict location of such studies within the ‘factory as the central site of study’, not only sociologically but physically. Whilst principally a matter of convenience in that factories

concentrated workers ‘in geographically specific locations [...] working en masse at regular and predictable hours, and on jobs that could be observed or described first hand’ (not to mentioned compared), it could be claimed that the narrow focus upon such workplaces is also attributable in part to the ‘workerist’ ideology popular on the Italian left at the time, and exhibits many of the pratfalls of Marxian research I have highlighted in the preceding discussion of the role played by labour in the production of value.

However, an alternative trend to that of the workerist tendency in the inquiry tradition provides valuable pointers for potential ways forward. By the end of the sixties, many of the representatives of this workerist tendency ended up in the organisation *Potere Operaio*, which took the political-interventionist current to its logical conclusion by dispensing with inquiry entirely in favour of struggle and intervention in the factories through rank-and-file committees. However, inquiry was rejuvenated at the end of the seventies with publications such as *Primo Maggio*. The new spirit of inquiry developed partly in reaction to workerism. Negri had posited the new *operaio sociale*, ‘a new proletariat disseminated through society’ through capitalist restructuring and the ‘massification of abstract labour’. The study of this new class subjectivity, defined by its activity in the social fabric at large rather than the traditional workplace, necessitated an inquiry ‘obliged to follow the workers outside the factory’ (Aufheben 2004) in their roles as agents of consumption and circulation as well as of production. The necessity to turn outside the workplace into society is one that still confronts Marxian research today.

In the investigation of the *operaio sociale*, co-research came to play a central role. This co-research is described by Negri as ‘involving building a description of the productive cycle and identifying each worker’s function within that cycle; but at the same time it also involves assessing the levels of exploitation which each of them undergoes’ (Negri, 2008: 162-3). As such, co-research retains a focus on exploitation within the realm of production whilst seeking to situate this experience in the overall processes of capitalist valorisation. It resembles what today is known as participatory action research, expanding ‘the scope of research locales’ into other areas of society such as the school and the community.

As Brown and Quan-Hase suggest, this expansion, like earlier developments in inquiry method from Marx to the *Quaderni Rossi*, demonstrates the way in which ‘it is the problems presented by the contemporary labouring context that force us to once again change our strategies’ (2012: 490-1). Furthermore, new understandings of value, forged through the immanent critique of work on the topic in the Marxist tradition, should also provoke us to consider new strategies for research. Not least among the novelties of any new strategy must be an

approach that does not reduce all Marxian research to a study of the workers who bear the brunt of capitalist production as has the workers' inquiry tradition, but rather seeks to open a window upon the system of commodity exchange to which capitalist production stands in service. This latter aim requires a radically new conception of the object of such research, the broader social context of which is only hinted at by the developments in autonomist inquiry achieved by *Primo Maggio* and their investigation of the *operaio sociale*.

Within this more outward-facing conception of the inquiry is contained an attempt to embed work and those who perform it within the wider totality of production, circulation, consumption and the circuit of capital. Hence, one can see within the inquiry tradition a potentially convergent path from that of a study simply of the conditions and subjectivities of production, which, rather than limiting itself to the workplace, extends its reach into a more *social* path of investigation – a *social* inquiry.

Whilst there is a clear chronological development that leads from the workers' to the social inquiry, there is no simple fixed point at which the 'factory went social' and the inquiry adequate to it became social in turn. Even in the new kinds of work to which the moniker 'immaterial' has attached itself, fairly traditional techniques of inquiry remain. A notable example is that of Kolinko's call centre inquiry (2002). Despite the stated recognition that '[w]e cannot only focus on call centres because these - like any sector - can only be understood by looking at capitalist cooperation', in *Hotlines*, the isolated workplace is the singular focus of the inquiry. Rather than the inquiry building into a wider conceptualisation of the position of call centres in the circuit of capital, the external context in which call centre work is situated is largely considered only as preliminary preparation for the real business of the research itself. In spite of paying lip-service to a theorisation of the broken boundaries between the formal realm of production and the valorising forces found in society outside the workplace (*ibid.*, n.4: 193), Kolinko's inquiry stays squarely within a traditionally workerist paradigm.

Elsewhere, contemporary inquiry has become endowed with a more 'social' quality in response to the perceived development of 'cognitive capitalism' and the hegemonic position assumed by immaterial labour in capitalist society<sup>1</sup>. De

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1 The importance of ideas around cognitive capitalism and immaterial labour to the development of the inquiry tradition was helpfully pointed out by the second anonymous reviewer, along with the challenging suggestion that the theory of value given in the paper conforms to an outdated model of factory production. However, rather than ignoring the important ways in which work has changed, I would argue that what the paper does is to implicitly restate the continuing relevancy of a theory of value to models of production subsequent to what we think of as the formal 'factory'

Molina (2004) suggests that the eminence of knowledge and the exploitation of the common in new immaterial forms of production require a mode of inquiry geared towards the mapping of ‘cartographies’ of the manifestations of valorisation in society. This largely corresponds to the argument made here, albeit for the weight of the emphasis placed upon the novelty of the present condition. The theorisation of the law of value given above privileges an explanation oriented around the social validation of abstract labour rather than the expenditure of concrete labour. Put simply, any and all labour may be reconciled with the former, whatever the distinct guise or form taken by the latter. Therefore, against accounts such as that of Hardt and Negri (2001: 292), which would suggest that any proper theory of value is compromised by the immateriality and immeasurability of the new forms of production, the alleged advent of immaterial labour does not compromise or render dated the theory of value given above. What this suggests is that the insistence of de Molina and others upon the imperativeness of social inquiry in the context of specifically contemporary conditions of capitalist production is misleading. No ‘new facts’ are needed to guide us from the traditional workers’ inquiry to that of the social. A fully ‘social’ inquiry has always been necessary, because capitalism is and has always been subject to a process of immaterial social abstraction, of which cognitive capitalism is as much a piece as any other previous appearance of the same system, and which can only be fully appreciated by means of a perspective that treats all society as a factory in which valorisation is achieved.

The implication of all this is that, against the more workerist approaches found within the inquiry tradition, the position of work and workers in capitalist society – and by extension its link with value, that key principal towards which all critique of capitalism must direct itself – cannot be researched solely on the basis of work, workers and workplaces, without consideration of the process of exchange, abstraction and circulation which truly renders work and those who perform it an important and significant phenomenon, by means of the role played in the determination of value and, thus, the form of appearance value assumes by way of wealth and power in capitalist societies. An inquiry directed towards anything else more limited than this gives an incomplete picture of the position of the worker under capital.

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model, in spite of claims to the contrary based upon the supposedly revolutionary newness of immaterial labour. In what follows, space demands that only a very brief summary is given of a more extensive and nuanced argument concerning the resources via which a theory of value oriented around the social validation of abstract labour both accommodates and neutralises critiques informed by the attribution of a kind of disruptive novelty to the immaterial. I hope to flesh this out further in a forthcoming paper.



What is needed is a research approach which does not limit itself to the labour-process or the realm of production, but can appreciate the capitalist circuit in the round. This entails a research which has as its object the totality of capitalist social relations. In the concluding part of the paper, I will sketch out an example of the research practice that this necessitates, reflecting upon some of the ways in which the initial threads of such an approach are promised in existing research programmes derived from feminist approaches which follow the 'life trajectory of the commodity' through society, as a medium through which the social relations that constitute the value-form – production, circulation, consumption – can be captured as an object of social research which gives over to its essential unfixedness and endless interrelationality rather than coming up against these qualities as obstacles.

### **The life trajectory of the commodity: An example of a properly social inquiry?**

By way of illustration, there is one body of literature in social research which seems to be able to grasp production as a process unlimited to the workplace and to appreciate the internal relatedness of the totality of social relations, to the extent that working tasks cannot be considered in and of themselves without reference to the commodities they create and the way in which they fit into to the total labour of society. This body of literature is associated with a feminist understanding of social phenomena as criss-crossed with relations of gender. The gender-oriented approaches detailed here illustrate a broad, all-encompassing and essentially *processual* understanding which incorporates commodities, labour and economic relations as parts of a totality. Whilst this tendency, exemplified here by the theoretical contributions of Miriam Glucksmann on the 'total social organisation of labour' and the empirical research of Cynthia Cockburn and Susan Ormrod, does not possess or provide all the answers we are seeking, it can be seen to point us in a number of worthwhile directions.

In her understanding of the organization of production, Glucksmann is interested in the way in which interconnections exist within different types of work activity, and between work and non-work activities outside the formal confines of the workplace. In an attempt to provide the necessary 'equipment' for a 'new sociology of work' adequate to contemporary capitalism, her 'total social organisation of labour' schema defines four dimensions. The first is 'across the processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption'. The second is 'across the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, market and non-market, formal and informal sectors'. The third is 'the articulation of work activities and

relations with non-work activities and relations'. The fourth is 'differing temporalities of work and the significance of temporality across the other three interconnections' (2005: 19). Glucksmann suggests that temporality is the 'golden thread' that connects the first three dimensions, 'denot[ing] the organisation of time in durations, cycles, synchronies, sequences and rhythms, and their articulation' (*ibid.*: 33).

Glucksmann emphasises the 'overlapping and inseparable' quality of these linkages (*ibid.*: 19). Rejecting the notion of a 'circuit' of production and consumption for its implied linearity, Glucksmann suggests instead that we adopt a conception of *overall process* as the means by which the interlocking mechanisms are expressed (*ibid.*: 25). As examples of the way in which the internal relatedness of economic processes can be appreciated with an overall approach, Glucksmann writes of the complex ways in which the 'provision' of ready-made food is intricately linked to the productive role of women in society and the way in which commodities such as washing machines were turned from industrial use in laundrettes to instruments of female reproductive labour in the home. She suggests that 'ever-extendable' examples such as these demonstrate the way that they cohere only through a process consisting of 'a particular configuration of production, distribution, exchange and consumption', from which no element 'can be properly appreciated on its own' (*ibid.*: 28).

Glucksmann's earlier study *Women assemble* (1990) attempted to put these principles into action. With a focus upon the role of technology as a factor in a social process encompassing production, circulation and consumption, the study focused upon assembly-line production and the way in which it not only positioned women as the users of technology as part of the production process but also the purchasers and users of the commodities produced when they reached the realm of circulation. It is such a perspective, with its object as commodity production and consumption considered *in the round*, as a totalising social process, which might be most adequate for research into the theory of value.

Cockburn and Ormrod cite Glucksmann's earlier work as an influence upon their own inquiry into the social interaction between, and dual constitution of, gender and technology (1993). In this piece of research, Cockburn and Ormrod studied the path a specific commodity takes through society, in this case the microwave oven. From design, through production, distribution, marketing, selling, consumption, use and obsolescence, Cockburn and Ormrod analyse the different dimensions of the way gender is inscribed within and constituted in conjunction with the commodity. Although, as the authors acknowledge, this treatment might seem to unduly reify the commodity itself, the analysis of this

commodity as the product of a complex system of social relations insures against such a pratfall. Further, unlike other studies that reify not so much the commodity itself but a specific, isolated *aspect* of the commodity's production—such as research which confines itself solely to the labour-process in a formal workplace with no consideration of the wider economic apparatus in which such a labour-process is situated – Cockburn and Ormrod's study of the microwave oven, through the conduit of the conceptualisation of a commodity as subject to a process which encapsulates multiple different social modes and activities, is distinguished by its emphasis 'not on any one moment in the life of a technology (design, diffusion etc.) but rather to trace the whole life trajectory of an artefact' (1993: 3). The motivation for this overall view of production and circulation consisted in the fact that extant approaches to the social study of technology had emphasised only the initiation of technology in production, where the engineers and scientists participating were overwhelmingly male. By extending 'the scope of the technology world' beyond 'the initiatory moment' and into consumption and use', the study could account for women's engagement with technology in a more explicit way (*ibid.*: 9-10).

Cockburn and Ormrod criticise approaches focused only on one or the other aspect of the 'innovation' and 'impact' of technology. Where a focus on 'innovation' ignores the way in which the social role of technology is partly constituted after its production, one occupied only with 'impact' reifies the particular technology in question as something that appears entirely unproblematically as somehow 'given' in society (*ibid.*: 11). Research into value is faced with a similar conundrum. A focus purely on the labour that takes place in the production of a commodity misses the important way in which this labour is only rendered a productive component of the total labour of society by means of an abstraction located in exchange and merely latent during production. Meanwhile, a focus only on the 'commodity-moment' in which the instantaneous validation of concrete labour as abstract takes place misses the parts of the process which necessitate and presuppose this occurrence. Cockburn and Ormrod's emphasis upon the 'life trajectory' of the microwave oven provides a possible template for a circuitist, processual research approach aimed holistically at both production and circulation which might circumvent these dilemmas.

Cockburn and Ormrod perform this analysis of the 'life trajectory' of the microwave oven by exploiting the commodity's ability to 'provide [...] a rationale for, and [give] coherence to, a sequence of contacts and case studies'. These 'linked case studies' thus give a picture of a series of interlaced 'phases in the life trajectory of the artefact, involving an overview of a wide network of actors and agencies' (*ibid.*: 3-4). This meets the two criteria implied by the preceding critique

of value and the possibilities of social research. On the one hand, the processual nature of the research is susceptible to an understanding of *unfixity*, the movement of possibility, potentiality and actuality which defines commodity production and exchange, and an appreciation of the fleeting and fugitive nature of economic categories within the constant transition and overhaul which marks this process. On the other, the incorporation through the medium of the commodity of a wide network of social relations represented in a range of case studies encourages recognition of the radical *internal relatedness* of the capitalist totality.

Any such programme of research which uses the commodity as its basis poses a number of serious difficulties. The study of the commodity can be problematic—not least for the fact that a commodity is only a commodity in relation to the wider world of commodities, and only has value in so far as this value is expressed in an equivalent commodity, inviting an endless inquisition into a seemingly infinite procession of ‘modes of existence’. It is by virtue of its lack of an explicit commodity-analysis that Cockburn and Ormrod’s study of the microwave oven leaves only *pointers* towards possible directions rather than a template. Whilst a research approach geared towards unfixity and internal relatedness can *open up upon* modes of existence as an object of research, these modes of existence are nowhere more profound, mysterious and *real* as with the world of the commodity and the production of value of which it is the agent.

One of the chief problems of the more myopic treatment of the commodity circuit that may follow from a life-trajectory approach is that it may unduly reify the commodity and its social position. In the same way that a myopically labourist study of valorisation would simply reflect the fetishisation of labour in capitalist society, an approach inspired by the life-trajectory method might perform the same mirroring of capitalist social relations<sup>2</sup>. Cleaver (2000: 76-77) asserts how the strands of post-operaist thought and workers’ inquiry inspired by conceptualisations of the social factory sought to undermine such fetishisations by compromising the clean separation of productive work from non-productive leisure, of commodities from the underlying class struggle from which they are forged. The ‘social’ inquiry provides a basis for both the recognition of the importance of the whole circuit of capital in the process of valorisation- and the way that this can be traced through the travel of the commodity through society- whilst endowing any study of this movement with an understanding of class and social reproduction and the struggles that pertain to them.

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2 My thanks to the first anonymous reviewer for usefully reminding me of this.

Looking for evidence of this mode of research and analysis in the inquiry tradition, perhaps the closest recent parallel we might identify with reference to this radicalised 'life trajectory of the commodity' approach is that exhibited in the Uninomade Collective's inquiry into the logistics sector (2013). The study of logistics is the study not only of an isolated sector, but also the study of commodities and their valorisation in a much wider sense. An inquiry into logistics invites scrutiny of the movement of commodities in society, and the unfolding of their valorisation at the different stages of this movement. The case of logistics provides an exemplary focus for such a study, bringing into perspective one of the chief means by which the valorisation of commodities is made possible, namely via the lubrication of the structures which bring goods to people and people to goods.

## Conclusion

The central issue with which we set out to engage was how the theory of value could be conceptualised as a problem for social research to investigate. This conceptualisation theorises the determination of the value-form as subject to an 'internal relatedness' whereby the various different parts and components appear as the 'modes of existence' of one another, and by an 'unfixity' whereby these modes of existence persist on a perpetual continuum of becoming. As such, the value-form is defined as a fugitive, fleeting and elusive object of research which withdraws from easy analysis. This conceptualisation of the value-form constitutes the theoretical foundation of our reflections upon how social research into value theory might function in practice. We would suggest that it is these 'modes of existence' which are ultimately revealed to be the correct object of research for investigations into the theory of value.

It is recommended that the difficulties presented by the fugitive, fleeting and elusive nature of the mode of existence can be overcome by a programme of research inspired by feminist approaches, which rather than focusing on either production or circulation as the locus of capitalist economic processes, seek instead to appreciate the entire circuit as an *overall process* from which no one part can be isolated. This provides a tentative template for enquiry geared towards a positive understanding of the internal relatedness and unfixity that characterise the modes of existence through which the value-form appears in society. It is in such a way that the theory of value can be conceptualised as a problem for social research to investigate.

The workers' inquiry tradition has tended to fall short of this model of social research, subject to a narrow preoccupation with the workplace. However, some

later strands inspired by the theorisation of the ‘social factory’ can be seen as providing the initial germ of a basis for future research into value, calling into dispute the reification of the formal workplace in favour of an outward-facing position that encompasses the process of valorisation in the domestic, cultural and educational realms. Alongside such contributions, inquiries into certain key areas of capitalist activity, such as that by the Uninomade Collective into the logistics sector, also provide the basis for a deeper and more extensive exploration of the interrelational and unfixed procedures of valorisation. The later trends in the Italian inquiry tradition point towards the kind of social, all-encompassing research of the totality of capitalist social relations that is needed in order to capture some impression of the ‘modes of existence’ that value assumes in society.

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