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(I'm)Material Labor in the Digital Age

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No doubt, capital seeks to make sense of the world in terms of itself, but the consequence has more to do with patterns of operation than certainty of outcome. The current imperialism is indebted to all the others, but can be specified in terms of how finance organizes (and disorganizes) a way of life.

Randy Martin, "Where did the Future Go?"

Introduction

Just a URL away from us is *Red Critique*, a powerful journal from the classical Marxist position. I want to begin this special section on mental labor there, specifically with Teresa L. Ebert and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's "Daily Lessons on Class," since any serious consideration of qualitative change in the relations of production risks bourgeois radicalism and the status quo. Their "Wednesday" is compelling: "The middle class is an ideological illusion used to obscure class binaries and conceal the fact that under capitalism society is breaking up more rigidly into two classes whose opposition cannot be dissolved in the hybrid of a playful in-between-ness." With that lesson one is reminded of Lenin's assertion that "all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, and certainly distinctions of trade and profession, must be obliterated" (137). Walter Benjamin illuminated the binary's ideological significance when he pointed readers to Marx's origin of false consciousness:

Division of labor becomes truly such only from the moment when a division of material and mental labor appears. [. . .] From this moment onward, consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practices, that it really represents something without representing something real. (Arcades 651-52)

Benjamin's quoting Marx underscores how false consciousness comes with the division of mental and physical and how that division serves capital. Class consciousness and social change depend on workers recognizing that labor is labor. As George Caffentzis explains, "class struggle is basic to the capitalist mode of production in the region of 'mental' labor just as it is to be found in the realm of physical production. It is basic not because it is a sign of the special quality of mental labor but because it is simply labor"

(“Why Machines” 55). Perhaps the division endures because mental labor is near impossible to quantify as abstract labor, the socially necessary labor time that represents the average labor time embodied in a commodity. It is this average that makes commodities and labor commensurable through exchange (Harvey 14-15). Or maybe the mental-physical divide persists because factory exploitation is more obvious than, say, university. One can hear the skeptic ask the instructor, Where is “Jackson’s arm” in teaching? Where is the blood and sweat, the loss of life and limb as Jack London described factory conditions in *The Iron Heel*? The answer is that the comparison is capitalist.

I don’t think it’s too much to suggest that today’s debate between orthodox and revisionist Marxism (where the fundamental disagreement centers on how value is created) reads like the Bolshevik-Menshevik split of 1903. We may recall how Lenin took the Mensheviks to task: “‘Economic struggle against the government’ is precisely trade union politics, which is very, very far from being Social-Democratic politics” (101). Yet if Lenin’s position on Menshevik economism is the orthodox position it is not because Lenin’s position is in toto closer to Marx’s. Lenin’s position is orthodox because it recognizes that economism, reformism, and any alternative to dissolving worker-owner relations through working class revolution remains within capitalism.¹ Lenin’s attack also included a more general critique of spontaneity that brings us closer to the topic at hand.² Lenin imagined a worker-peasant revolution led by a cadre of professional revolutionaries (the counterpart perhaps to today’s benevolent and bureaucratic public intellectual) that would circumvent the impetuous, fragmented, and uninformed uprisings emerging across his Russia. For Lenin, workers and peasants did not have the knowledge or language to recognize the nature of their situation and therefore could not respond to their situation effectively. But these individuals were bound together as the only ones capable of bringing classlessness. The professional revolutionary would facilitate worker-peasant consciousness and organized resistance.³

I begin with *Red Critique* and Lenin because today’s classical Marxist denunciation of poststructuralist, autonomist, and cyber-Marxism, not to mention grassroots rationalism and post-work flâneurism, is itself a marginalized radical project, certainly within and without the academy but also among the Left. Classical Marxism’s marginalization occurs in our profession because revisionism’s incrementalism, identity politics, and affective turn share ideological space with higher education’s longstanding liberalism, the culture and economics of today’s academic capitalism. More obvious is that revolution is no longer a dirty word—it is dismissed entirely in populist circles as a viable strategy for social change.

From this marginalization, one must be bold enough to ask if mental labor means the millions upon millions of workers who still occupy factory positions or are currently migrating to these positions. Does the much-theorized techno-communicative “countermobilization” strategy for global resistance also include the world’s homeless or half-billion illiterates?⁴ Classical Marxism informs these important questions. Yet as devastating the implications one must at the same time recognize the gravity and reality of transformation, including one recent estimation that “[f]inancial markets trade more in

a month than the entire annual global gross domestic product” (Martin). To be sure, late capitalism’s “regime of investment” does not include portfolios from the majority of the world’s working class poor, but it does account for the increasing concentration of the world’s wealth.

Knowledge Economy Rhetorics

As I argued at 2007’s MLA, to suggest that rhetoric masks class relations and surplus value is not the same thing as saying rhetoric is the cause. I am interested in the way that knowledge economy rhetorics (e.g., “information society”) shift our attention from class to nationalism, racism, genderism, and more recently posthumanism. Stephen Tumino has stated convincingly that to explain social inequality in these identarian terms is to “legitimate capitalism” since capitalism is cleansed of its superstructural contradictions while the primary contradiction between owners and workers endures. We then “accept economic inequality as an integral part of human societies.” Tumino is responding to new Marxisms that augment class to a matrix of floating, discursive power struggles. These Marxisms speak of hybridity, information, difference, and multitude but rarely the labor theory of value, even though such relations are aspects and outcomes of exploitable labor. Consider, for example, the weight given to “open articulation” in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s postmodern radicalism, a radicalism that turns its back on Marxist teleology and base/superstructure naturalism: “If the worker is no longer a proletarian but also a citizen, consumer, and participant in a plurality of positions within the country’s cultural and institutional apparatus [. . .] then the relations between them become an open articulation which offers no a priori guarantee that it will adopt a given form” (36). This ontology stands in stark contrast to Marx’s: “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life” (*Contribution* 20). And no one to my mind levels the former’s privilege and paradox like David Harvey. I would like to quote him at length:

The rhetoric of postmodernism is dangerous for it avoids confronting realities of political economy and the circumstances of global power. The silliness of Lyotard’s “radical proposal” that opening up data banks to everyone as a prologue to radical reform (as if we would all have equal power to use that opportunity) is instructive, because it indicates how even the most resolute of postmodernists is faced in the end with either making some universalizing gesture (like Lyotard’s appeal to some pristine concept of justice) or lapsing, like Derrida, into total political silence. (117) 5

So while there is work beyond wage labor—and nationality, race, and gender could be kinds of work—there are only owners and workers, and this contradiction remains the principal source of value.

Before we can begin to understand how this emotional theorizing earns its platform, we should consider another lesson from Ebert and Zavarzadeh. With “Friday” the two remind us, “Friends of capital resignify class as inequality. Inequality is not class. Inequality is a statistical index describing differences without conflicts. Class is a

structural relation marking the antagonisms of labor and capital.” Isn’t this displacement the very strategy of dystopian fiction? If there is class antagonism in dystopic visions of the future, the antagonism is obfuscated by technological determinism and liberal finger-wagging, from *Fahrenheit 451*’s Wall-TV, an interactive screen technology that taps the homeowner into one-dimensional subjectivity, to *Sleeper*’s Orgasmatron, a cylinder-of-sensations that takes the intimacy and work out of sex. *Metropolis* has none of these gross machinic opiates, yet the film presents the most dangerous dystopic vision of all. *Metropolis*’ spectacle of labor and technology is shocking and true. When, for instance, a foreman shouts, “The machine—someone must stay with the machine!” we immediately recognize the horror and limitation of technology-hope. But I say that *Metropolis* is the most dangerous because the viewer is already so drawn in by these very real critiques of capitalism that when he arrives at the film’s final message, that workers and owners should learn to get along, he believes that too. This is how liberalism works. Liberalism shifts our attention from what needs to be done to the after-effects.

Dystopian liberalism mirrors more recent digital liberalism, including present conceptions of technology, information, and value. Knowledge economy rhetorics (digital, informational) foster this liberalism in three ways: first, by splitting labor into “mental” and “physical”; second, through cyber radicalism (where the Web’s antifoundationalism, immediacy, and user-generated content promote a false sense of agency, collectivity, and freedom); and third, by circulating the most pervasive anxiety of all, the total replacement of humans by machines.

The mental-physical divide has been noted above, so I will focus briefly now on the latter two. Since user-generated content (UGC) contributes to the internet commodity, it is tempting to put that kind of mental work through the labor theory of value, especially since many internet sites would not exist without their user-generated content (see for example “*Time*’s [2006] Person of the Year: You” and N’Gai Croal’s *Newsweek* short “The Internet is the New Sweatshop”). Yet it is precisely because this work is voluntary and wage-free that it does not create value; these web participants are “unproductive” in the Marxian sense. While there is indeed heterogeneity of process as well as product, user-generated content does not create “surplus-value directly, i.e. the only productive labour is that which is directly consumed in the course of production for the valorization of capital” (Marx *Capital* 1038). Marx’s example of Milton helps:

Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, a writer who turns out work for his publisher in factory style is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of his own nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who produces books, such as compendia on political economy, at the behest of a publisher is pretty nearly a productive worker since his production is taken over by capital and only occurs in order to increase it. (1044)

Marx here draws a fine line to be sure. Yet one must consider all forms of work if one is to take Marx’s notion of totality and socially necessary labor time seriously—work

driven by necessity, politics, and pleasure. (And with the latter we resist Adam Smith's position that labor cannot be pleasant in itself.) While only productive labor yields value, productive labor also involves ties to the unproductive type. This unproductive work contributes indirectly to a commodity's value without itself being a source of surplus value/labor. As Marx suggests, "certain kinds of unproductive work may be incidentally connected to the process of production" (1042).

In his essay "The Information Commodity" Dan Schiller suggests that "new conditions" and "pressures exerted by [capitalism]" have demanded "production processes" and "cheaper sources of appropriately skilled and deskilled labor connected with the capitalization of [. . .] information production" (110) As Schiller imagines it there are now four fields of information production: "Wage/Market, e.g., TV Camera Operator; Wage/Non-Market, e.g., Federal Census Statistician; Non-Wage/Market, e.g., Bestseller Writer; and Non-Wage/Non-Market, e.g., bedtime storyteller" (110). How might one classify YouTube work—the use-generated content that includes video clip posting, a response to a video clip, or the response to a response? It is tempting to place that kind of voluntary labor in Schiller's last category, "Non-Wage/Non-Market," but I would argue that YouTube work, like blogs and chat-room activity, contributes to the internet commodity in a more direct way than, say, a bedtime storyteller. There could be a category for this kind of work between non-wage/market (bestseller writer) and non-wage/non-market (storyteller), since a YouTube respondent is not only working as a storyteller but also co-creating the Web-product itself. But most important for the present discussion is that the mental labor in wage-free cyber-work is an appropriated liberalism: "free" citizens exercise their "right" to express, contest, and acknowledge universality and difference, a posturing that typically ignores class relations in favor of personal achievement and the promotion of identity. Chat rooms, YouTube, and iPods draw us in with this sense of agency, and this radicalism serves fast capital and beyond.

Knowledge economy rhetorics tell us that the "information society" represents qualitative changes in the relations of production that have the capacity to free workers from work. Some have gone as far as to suggest that technology will replace the very need to work. If this is the case, then the replacement can only occur in a post-capitalist society; the logic of capitalism forbids this "freeing." It is one thing to redefine "work" to include the informational and another to wish it away entirely. Capitalism requires that workers' wages be returned to owners via consumption. According to Harvey, "labor can create no value unless it creates social use values—the values for others" (*Limits* 16). Profit or surplus value is realized in the difference between the value the worker has added to the product through the workday and the predetermined price paid out in wages to the worker, or, more simply, when workers work beyond what is necessary to cover the costs of their wages.

As a brief aside, this version of surplus value/labor is markedly different from others of late, such as Kojin Karatani's brilliant but problematic Kantian Marxism that locates surplus value in the antinomy of difference between value systems in the commodity circuit rather than at the site of exploitation itself: labor.⁶ Slavoj Žižek has recently courted these poststructuralist economics and argued that we are not free because we

purchase “nothing,” are driven by the signifiers “fat-free,” “sugar-free,” and so on (Zizek). Such Derridean revisionism emphasizes consumption rather than production, echoing falsely, I believe, “Revolution through boycott!” rather than worker collectivity, an Amazon.com politics of privilege.

But to return to our main point, even a gradual increase in machine labor, let alone the absolute replacement of humans, results in overproduction, inflation, and decreased surplus value, “counter-tendencies” and all.⁷ As the revisionist Eduard Bernstein summarized, with the improvement of machinery one finds “a gradually accomplished decrease in the rate of profit which, though temporarily impeded by counteracting circumstances, will always reassert itself” (56). This logic is precisely why Marx concluded in *Capital* that “whatever the proportion between the constant and the variable part of a given capital [. . .] the law [of surplus-value] is not affected” (420-21 emphasis mine). Jim Davis and Tom Hirschl have made the case succinctly: “A robot can build a car. But a robot cannot buy a car” (*Cutting Edge*).

This fear of human replacement by machines has been mythologized closer to home, at the corporate university in regards to distance learning. As Marc Bousquet argues in his new book, *How the University Works*, the fear of future informationalization suggested by distance education technology, as just one example, is a rhetoric that masks the fact that informationalization is already here and the university is still very much an embodied institution. According to Bousquet,

While the dystopic image of distance education captures the central strategy of the information university (substituting information delivery for education), that dystopia erroneously maps the strategy onto the future, as if informationalization were something “about to happen” that could be headed off at the pass, if we just cut all our fiber-optic cables. (56)

The university’s futurism is in reality a version of a larger presentism—an ideology of bringing future into present by making individuals rather than institutions (and, ultimately, class relations) accountable for pre-empting potential disaster and maximizing potential profits, the very strategy of risk management that Martin says enables late capitalism to make privileged households (that is, those that can invest) micro-centers of finance and responsibility (student loans, mortgages, and pensions, to name a few) (Martin). Risk management is also partially responsible for liberal university policy-making that would ostensibly bring high-tech transformation into what David Noble calls “digital diploma mills” (Bousquet 56). As Andrew Ross observes, “When education is viewed as a product to be delivered without risk, then the most compelling corporate vision is that of the wired, tenureless university” (25). But the futurism and fear of university techno-disembodiment conceals our present and real embodied informationalization. The university already has a cost-effective flexible labor base of adjuncts, lecturers, and graduate teaching assistants; educators at all levels have felt the pressure of a streamlined no-child left behind (read as left behind global competition) testing and skills ethos: “we have met the Info. U.,” says Bousquet, “and it’s us—not some future disembodiment but a fully lived present reality” (56).

Regardless of the workplace, only human labor yields value. So I would agree with *Red Critique*'s Rob Wilkie when he writes, "To posit technological development as in itself transforming the relations of production [. . .] is to invert the relationship between technology and labor in order to provide an ideological alibi for exploitation" ("Class"). I would also add that where one finds spheres of production with little variable (human) capital yielding value, there are in reality other spheres connected in the production process with much variable capital. These spheres generate surplus value. Manuel Castells, for example, posits a "network society" that demands an endless body of unskilled and semi-skilled workers even as automation "increasingly enable[s] companies to eliminate the lower tier of workers" (418). Castells suggests that today's high tech companies require four kinds of workplace locations: R&D, innovation, and prototype fabrication plants; skilled fabrication branch plants; offshore semi-skilled, large-scale assembly plants; and global aftersales maintenance and technical support centers (418). Yet, as impressive as this cartography is, if we have witnessed flexible accumulation, expansion of transnational corporations, and new dependency on information flows we still have not seen "a system break of a kind comparable with, say, slavery's supersession by feudalism" (Webster 161). The knowledge economy, therefore, does not represent a mystical way to extract value without human labor as much as it does new kinds of work. And the real agents of social change are not immaterial voices in the space of flows. They are workers.

"Mental Labor"

It has been a tremendous honor and privilege working with this section's contributors. When I solicited contributions for this section, I suggested to each participant that they approach "mental labor" in their own way. The result is an inspired, expansive, and at times shocking historical, political, and institutional account of late capitalism's changes and the effects of those changes on human relations. David B. Downing's essay, "Autonomy vs. Insecurity: The (Mis)Fortunes of Mental Labor in a Global Network," opens our section with an historical and epistemological account of the West's engagement with late capitalism. Downing's foundation is necessary to understand the relationship between the essays that follow. His covers a wide terrain, from the recent CAFTA and rise of transnational corporations to the birth of autonomist collectives and information work. *Workplace* Founding Editor Marc Bousquet's "Extreme Work-Study or The Real 'Kid Nation'" is a devastating look at student labor in the corporate university. Bousquet reveals the economic and emotional hardships caused by the UPS "Earn and Learn" program in Louisville, KY, proving that flexible accumulation is sanctioned and abetted by university ties to corporations. George Caffentzis's "From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* and Beyond: Then and Now" notes an important parallel between Marx's transformation from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* and the conceptual development of anti-capitalist thought since the 1960s. The parallel reveals that the introduction of science and technology into production in the second half of the 20th century is not leading to "the end of work" but rather is increasing the scope of exploitation and extending capitalism's historical trajectory. In "Ideology and the Crisis of Capitalism" Thomas A. Hirschl, Daniel B. Ahlquist, and Leland L. Glenna demonstrate that

contradictions in the material realm of society are creating the context for profound ideological and political changes. They show the extent of these changes through an empirical analysis of U.S. Presidential elections during the post-Reagan period and conclude that educational institutions are implicated in the ideology of voting choices. Desi Bradley provides a compelling, candid reflection of her experiences as a student-mother up against gender and labor biases within and without the corporate university. Her essay, “Gender, Contingent Labor, and Our Virtual Bodies,” suggests that technology may offer student-mothers an opportunity to transcend these intellectual and ideological constraints. *Workplace* is thrilled to have these writers participate.

Notes

1 My intention here is to revisit the mental labor debate by acknowledging the importance of orthodox Marxism. I think our ultimate question is an extension of Lenin’s: “What is to be done now?”

2 Some may be surprised to hear Michael Hardt’s recent call for “love” as the medium to spontaneity and centralism. According to Hardt, love could be “a field of training for constructing a democratic society” (“About Love”).

3 It is worth noting a parallel between Lenin’s professional revolutionary and Gramsci’s organic intellectual. Whereas Lenin’s professional revolutionary is the self-made educated intellectual, overtly conscious of his political mission, Gramsci’s organic intellectual is the more general, inclusive historical being, “already in existence”—a “‘philosopher,’ an artist, a man of taste,” who “participates in a particular conception of the world” (Gramsci 7, 9).

4 While literacy comes with its own elitist politics (for one thing, there is more to “literacy” than reading and writing), W. O. Lee points to research in post-Mao China, where one estimate finds 220-million illiterate adults, documenting a “direct correlation between education and concern for democracy” and that “people with higher educational levels were much more likely to have an opinion on the nature of the political situation and were much more likely to be dissatisfied with the situation” (66 emphasis mine).

5 But before we turn these Foucauldians completely on their head, we might note that one early source of power/knowledge, discipline/discourse, could be Marx himself:

Political economy [. . .] does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the workman, in so far as he happens to be outside this labor-relationship. The cheat-thief, swindler, beggar, and unemployed man; the starving, wretched and criminal working-man—these figures who do not exist for political economy but only for other eyes, those of the doctor, the judge, the grave-digger and bum-bailiff, etc.; such figures are specters outside the domain of political economy. (Economic 86)

Doesn't this observation prefigure Foucault's Ship of Fools? Those who cannot participate in capitalism are collected, housed, and given disciplinary roles: the patient, the criminal, and so on.

6 Laclau and Mouffe contend that Kantian Marxism's addition of a "discursive element into the constitution of social objectivity" has enabled "Marxists to conceive the infrastructure as a terrain whose conformation depended upon forms of consciousness, and not upon the naturalistic movement of the forces of production" (28).

7 These countertendencies, e.g., price fluctuations, are only temporary adjustments to slumps in economic cycles. As Thomas Sowell reminds us, Marx "repeatedly referred to the transitory nature of individual crises" and argued that only revolution rather than "permanent economic 'breakdown'" would defeat capitalism (169).

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