

## IMMATERIAL LABOR AND THE INFORMATION ECONOMY: REPLY

I am not sure whether Kaan Kangal (2016) is trying to praise me or bury me. He sees, correctly, that I am criticizing recent writers who are trying to dismiss Marx's concept of labor as outdated and he praises me for this and maintains that my arguments can be applied to more recent work in this area (130); and yet he argues that there are three problems with my account (124).

First, he says that my position on immaterial labor is "ambiguous" and that I "oscillate between refuting and appropriating the term" (130). I do not think this is true. I criticize Hardt and Negri and other recent writers who have argued that much labor in "postindustrial" society has an "immaterial" character and that Marx's concept of labor does not apply to it. It is a mistake, I argue, to think that Marx's idea of labor applies only to industrial or handicraft work. As I show, it applies also to what Hardt and Negri call "affective" (service, caring work) and "symbolic" labor (informational, cultural production, etc). Although these forms of work involve an immaterial aspect, both in their processes and results, this does not justify Kangal's criticism that I "readopt the notion of immaterial labor" (127), at least not in the sense in which writers like Hardt and Negri want to use it to criticize and reject Marx's concept of labor.

Kangal's second criticism is that I "ignore passages in Marx's economic works" that are "decisive" against my views on immaterial labor (*ibid.*). The first part of this criticism is correct: I did overlook important passages where Marx discusses immaterial labor. However, these are in the context of Marx's discussion of the concept of productive labor in classical economics and are not relevant to my criticisms of contemporary uses of the notion of immaterial labor.

Kangal usefully draws attention to the fact that Marx was perfectly well aware of the many forms of what Hardt and Negri call "immaterial labor" that existed in his time. He discusses these under the headings of "non-material" or "spiritual labor" (Marx, 1963, 410–411). In *Theories of Surplus Value* there is extensive discussion of the two main kinds of immaterial labor distinguished by Hardt and Negri: affective labor, such as that of teachers, physicians, priests; and symbolic work, such as that of writers, artists, orators, and actors (*ibid.*, 399–411).

The context of Marx's discussion is the distinction between productive and unproductive labor in the specific and peculiar sense given to these terms in classical political economy. This relates only to the economic character of the product, and the economic relations within which the work takes place. It is unrelated to the actual — material or immaterial — product created.

According to Marx, the productivity of labor is conceived in classical economics “*from the standpoint of the capitalist*, not from that of the *workman*” (Marx, 1963, 158). Thus, as Kangal says, labor is described as “productive” only when “it is hired by capital directly in order to produce surplus value” (129); it is “unproductive” when it is exchanged “directly with revenue” (Marx, 1963, 157). This means that Marx's concerns here have nothing to do with whether the process or the product of labor is material or immaterial: exactly the same physical activity can be productive in one situation and not in another.

The designation of labour as *productive labour* has absolutely nothing to do with the *determinate content* of the labour. . . . *The same* kind of labour may be *productive* or *unproductive*. . . . Milton produced *Paradise Lost* for the same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of his nature. Later he sold the product for £5. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig, who fabricates books . . . under the direction of his publisher, is a *productive labourer*; for his product is from the outset subsumed under capital, and comes into being only for the purpose of increasing that capital. (Marx, 1963, 401.)

Marx also distinguishes immaterial labor that results in a material product, such as a book or a painting, from forms of it that do not, such as the work of singers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc., and service work in general (Marx, 1963, 410–411, 405). Again the context is a discussion of the concepts of productive and unproductive labor in classical economics.<sup>1</sup>

What this shows quite clearly is that Marx was well aware of such “immaterial” forms of labor; that he does not regard them as presenting a problem for his concept of labor; and that his discussion of them in *Theories of Surplus Value* is not relevant to my arguments with writers like Hardt and Negri.

Kangal's third point is that my account of immaterial labor “does not fully apply to recent debates on immaterial labor in the information economy” (124). Here he is not so much criticizing my position as arguing that it can be extended to cover new forms of postindustrial labor and recent work

1 As Kangal goes on to say, value is another “immaterial” product of labor. He criticizes me for failing “to acknowledge the distinction between production as a creation of a product and production as value production” (130). Again, this is irrelevant to the concept of immaterial labor as Hardt and Negri are using it, so I will not discuss it here.

about them by writers such as Terranova and Fuchs (130). This is a useful addition to my argument and I welcome it.

The main purpose of my article was to explain Marx's concept of labor and show that it is not refuted by the advent of postindustrial forms of work. However, I do not wish to dismiss the issues raised by the contemporary discussion of them. Lazzarato, Hardt and Negri, and the more recent writers that Kangal cites (Terranova, Fuchs), are all responding to real social and economic changes in the character of work. Although some particular forms of it are clearly new (work involving computers, for example), immaterial labor is not a novel phenomenon. As the passages mentioned by Kangal show, it existed in Marx's time and long before. What is new is the extent of such work in the modern world. Service work, office work, and work in the information sector have been increasing rapidly, whereas work in manufacturing and agriculture is in steady decline. These are real changes, even if they do not justify the "postindustrial" label.

Moreover, much work that was done in the past on an informal basis is now increasingly being done by paid "professionals": service work, caring, domestic cleaning, cooking meals, etc. Similar developments are occurring with what Kangal, following Terranova, calls "digital labor" in the informational economy. "While internet users enjoy their time . . . surfing on the internet, they indirectly work for free" for internet companies. "Web users contribute to the creation of users' data that is processed and sold to advertising companies. . . . digital data generation is some sort of unpaid and infinitely exploited work" (129).

In this way web users are creating value. In economic terms their labor is "unproductive," though it is used and exploited for profit. If they were doing this work for a company as wage labor, that labor would be "productive." However, it is increasingly being brought into the net of wage labor and subjected to what Gorz (1989) calls "economic rationality."

These are some of the real changes that these writers are describing. They respond to them in different ways. Many, like Gorz, deplore them and want to preserve a sphere of non-wage labor (Sayers, 1998). However, the concepts of "material" and "immaterial" labor are not satisfactory, either for understanding these developments or for thinking about how to respond to them. Marx's theories are still valid and more useful for these purposes.

SEAN SAYERS

*66 Havelock Street  
Canterbury, Kent CT1 1NP  
United Kingdom  
s.p.sayers@kent.ac.uk*

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### IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A NON-ALIENATED "CREATOSPHERE"?<sup>1</sup>

In their article "The Anatomy of Twenty-First Century Exploitation: From Traditional Extraction of Surplus Value to Exploitation of Creative Activity" (*Science & Society*, October 2013), Aleksandr Buzgalin and Andrey Kolganov call attention to an increasingly important area of exploitation in modern capitalism. They define this as the "creatosphere," wherein creative activities, such as "education and training, health care, technical and scientific creativity, the recreation of nature and society, the productive elements of managerial work, art . . ." (494–5) play a major role in terms of profit generation and capital accumulation. Unlike other writers who mostly debate whether or not intellectual labor creates value (Moulier-Boutang, 2012; Fine, *et al.*, 2010; Starosta, 2012; Foley, 2013), Buzgalin and Kolganov specifically focus on exploitation and alienation in cognitive industries. According to them, the prevalence of creative activities in the modern capitalist system, especially in developed countries, has given rise to new relations of exploitation and a new class of workers that they call the "creative class." They consider this to be a new historical–logical "layer" of exploitation, and argue that, with all the human cultural phenomena as resources, the creative labor process represents "universal" activity and includes unalienated cooperation among the creative workers (496–7).

The authors further assert a contradiction between the inalienable nature of creative labor and the existence of an exploitative relationship pertaining to the "creatosphere." On the one hand, the result of creative

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