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The Concept of Labor: Marx and His Critics

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ABSTRACT: Marx conceives of labor as form-giving activity. This is criticized for presupposing a “productivist” model of labor which regards work that creates a material product — craft or industrial work — as the paradigm for all work (Habermas, Benton, Arendt). Many traditional kinds of work do not seem to fit this picture, and new “immaterial” forms of labor (computer work, service work, etc.) have developed in postindustrial society which, it is argued, necessitate a fundamental revision of Marx’s approach (Hardt and Negri). Marx’s theory, however, must be understood in the context of Hegel’s philosophy. In that light, the view that Marx has a “productivist” model of labor is mistaken. The concept of “immaterial” labor is unsound, and Marx’s ideas continue to provide an illuminating framework for understanding work in modern society.

In the labour-process . . . man’s activity, with the help of the instruments of labour, effects an alteration, designed from the commencement, in the material worked upon. The process disappears in the product, the latter is a use-value, Nature’s material adapted by a change of form to the wants of man. Labour has incorporated itself with its subject: the former is materialized, the latter transformed.

— Marx, 1961, 180

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MARX CONCEIVES OF LABOR AS “formative” activity, as activity through which human beings give form to materials and thus objectify themselves in the world. In his early work (1975, 324), he talks of labor as a process of “objectification.” This account is often taken to assume a “productivist” model of labor that regards work that creates a material product — industrial, craft or artistic work — as the paradigm for all work. It is much criticized on this basis. There are many kinds of work that do not seem to fit this picture, some with which Marx was familiar, others that have newly developed. In particular, with the use of computers and information technology and the growth of the service sector, it is argued, we are moving into a postindustrial stage. New “immaterial” forms of labor are coming to predominate (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 108–109). A new conception of labor is needed.

My aim in this paper is to respond to these arguments. The standard accounts of Marx’s ideas in this area are fundamentally flawed, I will argue. The view that Marx has a purely “productivist” model of labor — common as it is — is mistaken. The idea that his theories are inapplicable to modern forms of work is based on a serious misunderstanding of his thought. Properly interpreted, Marx’s ideas still provide an illuminating framework for understanding the nature of work in the modern world.

I. MARX’S CONCEPT OF LABOR

There are two versions of the view that Marx has a “productivist” model of the labor process. Sometimes Marx is said to presuppose an industrial idea of labor. According to Hardt and Negri (2000, 255–256, 292; 2005, 140–142), for example, Marx’s account is based on the image of the industrial factory. Others, by contrast, assume that Marx’s concept of labor is based on the paradigm of craft work. According to Habermas (1987, 65–66), for example, Marx’s account “derives its plausibility from a romantically transfigured prototype of handicraft activity” like that of John Ruskin and William Morris. Likewise, with reference to the passage quoted at the start, Benton writes, “it is . . . clear that the intentional structure of the labor-process is, for Marx, a transformative one. . . . It is plausible to suppose that Marx’s model is handicraft production of some sort.

Carpentry, for example, could be readily represented as having just such a . . . structure.”¹

The productivist interpretation of Marx’s concept of labor is often treated as self-evident. Alternatively, as with Habermas and Benton, it is presented as a “plausible” reading of Marx’s language and imagery. These ways of interpreting Marx’s ideas are superficial and unsatisfactory. Marx’s theory of labor as “formative” activity is not self-evident, nor is it based upon an isolated metaphor which can be understood in terms of the associations it may plausibly seem to suggest. It is a central element of a systematic philosophical theory of the relation of human beings to nature in which the concept of labor plays a fundamental role.

In some important respects this theory is never stated explicitly by Marx. Although he discusses the general character of labor and the labor-process in a number of places, he does not fully spell out his philosophical presuppositions (Marx, 1975; 1973; 1961; Marx and Engels, 1970). These are derived from Hegel. Hegelian assumptions underlie his thinking about labor, not only in his early writings where they are clearly evident, but throughout his work. For a valid understanding of Marx’s concept of labor, as I shall demonstrate, it is essential to see it in this Hegelian context.² However, the critics I am discussing do not take this background into account. Either they appear to be unaware of it, or, like Habermas, they discount it. When Marx’s thought is restored to its proper context and interpreted in this light it becomes evident that the charge that he is in the grip of a “productivist” paradigm is misconceived and unjustified. On the contrary, it is rather these critics who see all labor in these terms and project them onto Marx.

In particular, the theory that labor is a “formative activity” has a Hegelian origin. The concept of labor is central to Hegel’s philoso-

1 Benton (1989, 66) criticizes this as follows. “With some modifications, [this] representation might do for productive labor-processes in general. . . . However . . . Marx’s conceptualization is supposed to represent not just one broad type of human need-meeting interaction with nature, but, rather, a universal, ‘nature-imposed condition of human existence.’ Marx does, indeed, recognize such activities as felling timber, catching fish, extracting ore, and agriculture as labor-processes. But he constructs his general concept of the labor-process as if these diverse forms of human activity in relation to nature could be assimilated to it.”

2 The claim that Marx’s ideas, especially in his later work, have a Hegelian character remains controversial. I will not defend that claim directly here, except by showing that in the case of his concept of labor it is enormously illuminating to see his thought in its Hegelian context.

phy. According to Hegel, labor is a distinctively human (“spiritual”) activity. Through it human beings satisfy their needs in a way that is fundamentally different from that of other animals. Non-human animals are purely natural creatures. They are driven by their immediate natural appetites and instincts, and they satisfy their needs immediately, by devouring what is directly present in their environment. The object is simply negated and annihilated in the process. Appetites arise again, and the process repeats itself. Natural life is sustained, but no development occurs.

Human labor by contrast creates a mediated relation to our natural appetites and to surrounding nature. Work is not driven by immediate instinct. In doing it we do not simply devour and negate the object. On the contrary, gratification must be deferred while we labor to create a product for consumption only later. Through work, moreover, we fashion and shape the object, and give it a human form. We thus “duplicate” ourselves in the world.

Through this process we establish a relation to the natural world and to our own natural desires that is mediated through work. We objectify ourselves in our product, and come to recognize our powers and abilities, embodied in the world. We develop as reflective, self-conscious beings. Moreover, Hegel maintains, relations with others are a necessary condition for these developments (1977, 118). Labor is not a purely instrumental activity to meet only individual needs; it is always and necessarily a social activity. It involves and sustains relations with others (Sayers, 2003; 2007).

Different Kinds of Work

These ideas are central to Hegel’s philosophy. They are taken over and developed by Marx. The view that labor is a “formative” activity is presented by Marx as a general account of labor. It is not the description of a specific type of work; it applies universally, to all forms of work. This is clear in the passage quoted at the outset and elsewhere. Likewise Hegel emphasizes the general scope of his account. For example, he writes:

In empirical contexts, this giving of form may assume the most varied shapes. The field which I cultivate is thereby given form. As far as the inorganic realm is concerned, I do not always give it form directly. If, for example, I build a

windmill, I have not given form to the air, but I have constructed a form in order to utilize the air. . . . Even the fact that I conserve game may be regarded as a way of imparting form, for it is a mode of conduct calculated to preserve the object in question. The training of animals is, of course, a more direct way of giving them form, and I play a greater role in this process. (Hegel, 1991, §56A, 86.)

Hegel here treats all these different kinds of work as “formative” activities in the sense that they are all ways of imparting form to matter. “Productivist” forms of work which create a material product, such as craft and manufacture, figure as particular kinds of labor, but it is quite clear that Hegel is not trying to assimilate all kinds of work to this model. On the contrary, he is emphasizing the great variety of forms that it may take. Its result need not be the creation of a material product, it may also be intended to conserve an object, to change the character of animals or people, to transform social relations, etc.

The wider purpose of Hegel’s theory is to give a systematic account of the different forms of labor; and this is part of a still larger theme. One of Hegel’s most fruitful and suggestive ideas is that subject and object change and develop in relation to each other. He thus questions the enlightenment idea that a fixed and given subject faces a separate and distinct external world. As the activity of the subject develops, so the object to which the subject relates develops and changes too.

This is the organizing principle of Hegel’s account of labor.³ Hegel conceives of different kinds of labor as different forms of relation of subject to object (nature).⁴ In characteristic fashion, moreover, the different forms of labor are arranged on an ascending scale according to the degree of mediation that they establish between subject and object (nature). Marx draws extensively on these ideas. They provide an indispensable key to understanding Marx’s account of labor, as I will now argue.

3 This is also the organizing theme in Hegel’s accounts of the development of “spirit” (1977; 1975; 1988). The first seeds of this account of labor appear very early in Hegel’s work. The idea is already present in a fragmentary early piece (1979). It is well worked out by the time of the Jena lectures of 1805 (Hegel, 1983). It is presented again in the *Philosophy of Right* of 1821 (1991, §§196–207, 231–139). This gives an account of labor similar to that in the Jena lectures. The *Philosophy of Right* was well known to Marx. The earlier accounts were not published at the time and would not have been available to him.

4 In all but Hegel’s earliest account (1979), this theory serves also as the basis for his account of social classes.

Direct Appropriation

The simplest form of work, involving the most immediate relation to nature, is direct appropriation from nature, as in hunting, fishing, or the gathering of plants, etc. In work of this kind, nature is taken as it is immediately given. This is the limiting case, still close to unmediated, natural appropriation in that it does not involve transformation of the object in itself. However, such work is a distinctively human rather than a purely natural and unmediated form of activity in that, in its human form, it is intentional, socially organized and usually involves the use of tools or weapons.⁵

Marx is well aware of the existence of labor of this kind. “All those things which labor merely separates from immediate connection with their environment, are subjects [*i.e.*, objects] of labor spontaneously provided by nature. Such are fish which we catch and take from their element, water, timber which we fell in the virgin forest, and ores which we extract from their veins” (Marx, 1961, 178). Benton argues that this sort of labor does not fit into what he interprets to be Marx’s “productivist” picture:

The conversion of the “subject [object] of labour” into a use-value cannot be adequately described as “Nature’s material adapted by a *change of form* to the wants of man.” This conversion is rather a matter of selecting, extracting and relocating elements of the natural environment so as to put them at the disposal of other practices (of production or consumption). These primary labour-processes, then, *appropriate* but do not transform. (Benton, 1989, 69.)

Thus, according to Benton, Marx is led to “exaggerate their potentially transformative character, whilst under-theorizing or occluding the various respects in which they are subject to naturally given and/or relatively non-manipulable conditions and limits” (Benton, 1989, 73; see also Grundmann, 1991; Benton, 1992, 59ff).

⁵ Work of this kind is mentioned only briefly by Hegel (1997, §103, 179–180). According to both Hegel and Marx, this is the most unmediated form of relation of human beings to nature. Both writers associate it with a specific type of religious consciousness, “Nature Religion” (*Naturreligion*), in which this relation to nature and to natural contingency is expressed in the form of reverence for natural processes and awe of natural forces (Hegel, 1988, 225; Marx and Engels, 1970, 51). For further discussion, see Sayers. 2007.

It is simply not correct to suggest that Marx cannot accommodate “primary appropriation” in his account of the labor process. Contrary to Benton’s assertion, such labor does effect a transformation of the object. Appropriation is a kind of transformation; it is wrong to oppose these as though they were exclusive of each other. According to Marx, direct appropriation is “formative” activity in that it separates the object from nature. The object (or “subject” in Marx’s language) is thus changed and made useable: it is caught and killed, plucked, extracted, moved, etc. Labor is thereby embodied and objectified in it through a change of form.

It might be objected that a mere change of place affects only the object’s “external” relations and does not alter the thing itself. This objection assumes that an object’s external relations are not part of its being. This general view is questioned by Hegelian and Marxist philosophy, which is often described as a philosophy of “internal relations” for this reason (Sayers, 1990; Ollman, 1971). In the context of economic life the fact that game or fish has been caught makes a great deal of difference: “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” In short Benton’s objections to the view that appropriation is a kind of transformation must be rejected.

Agriculture

As productive activity develops, so our relation to nature changes and the relation of subject and object evolves. This is a crucially important theme in Hegel that is taken over and developed by Marx. It is overlooked by Benton, Habermas and many other writers. As our self-activity increases, so our reliance on external influences diminishes. We are less at the mercy of nature’s contingencies, more at home in the world, which becomes less alien and hostile to our purposes.

In the “direct appropriation” that I have just been considering, our relation to nature takes the most immediate and direct form. A profound change in this relation is brought about with the development of agriculture. We no longer take nature simply as it is given; we cease to be entirely dependent on the contingencies of what is immediately present in the environment. By keeping and breeding animals, by collecting and planting seeds, tilling the soil and gathering crops, we actively arrange the natural environment to meet our

needs. Thus we begin the process of freeing ourselves from passive dependence on natural contingency.⁶

Furthermore, in agriculture, our relation to nature is mediated through previous work. Agriculture employs raw materials that are themselves the results of previous labor (seeds, cultivated land, livestock, etc.), and which are then used to create useful products (crops, animals), as well as the materials for future production. In the process, it satisfies not only present and immediate needs; it necessitates planning for the future and determining future needs. In these ways, agriculture involves a more mediated and developed relation of subject and object than “direct appropriation.”

According to Benton, agricultural work does not fit into the craft model that he attributes to Marx. The products of farming are not created by “formative activity” but grow by their own natural processes. “Human labor does not *bring about* the transformation of seed to plant to crop, but secures optimal conditions for an organic transformation to occur by itself. Contrast this with the carpenter who works with tools to change the form of a piece of wood” (Benton, 1992, 60). Agriculture, he maintains, is primarily “a labor of sustaining, regulating and reproducing, rather than transforming” (Benton, 1989, 67–68).

Both Hegel and Marx are of course aware that farming depends on natural processes. In agriculture, as Hegel says, “the main part is played by nature, and human industry is subordinate to it.” He gives a perceptive account of the attitudes to nature associated with the agrarian way of life in which he acknowledges precisely the points that Benton stresses. In it, he says, “the human being reacts . . . with immediate feeling as he accepts what he receives; he thanks God for it and lives in faith and confidence that this goodness will continue” (Hegel, 1991, §203A, 236; see also Hegel, 1997, 179–180). For Hegel, however, this does not conflict with the view that agricultural work is a “formative” activity. In thinking that it must so conflict, Benton is again taking the notion of “formative” activity to refer specifically to craft-type work. This is a misreading of this concept, as I have stressed. For both Hegel and Marx agriculture is “formative” in that we realize our purposes in nature by means of it. It involves the control of

6 Of course, agriculture remains dependent on the natural contingencies of the seasons, climate, weather, etc. until it begins to free itself from these factors too through the application of science and technology.

natural conditions and processes for human ends. Although it uses natural processes in doing so, its results are not the products of such processes alone, as Benton at times appears to suggest; rather they are use values that embody human labor.

Craft and Industry

Craft work involves a further development of our relation to the object of labor and to nature.⁷ By comparison with agriculture, craft is less reliant on natural processes and less dependent on natural contingencies. It involves the creation of a material product by the direct activity of the worker. It is thus a directly formative activity. Nevertheless, as I have been arguing, it is not the only kind of formative activity. What differentiates it from other types of formative activity is that the worker uses his or her own skills to form the object from raw materials that are themselves the products of previous labor.

Craft work is the basis upon which industry develops. Under the impact of capitalism, first the division of labor and then the character of the labor process itself are transformed. There are two distinct phases to this process. The first involves what Marx terms the “formal subsumption” of labor under capital (1976, 1019–1023, 1025–1034). The traditional methods of work are not altered, but the social organization of work, the division of labor, is transformed. The manufacturing workshop is created. This is what Adam Smith (1970, I.i) is describing in his well-known account of a pin factory. The traditional craft of pin making is divided into its component tasks: drawing out and cutting the wire, making and attaching the head, sharpening the point, etc. Each separated operation is then assigned to different workers who work alongside each other in a workshop.

The traditional, individual handicraft worker does all these operations in turn and thus has knowledge and control of the whole process. The work requires a variety of skills. When this work is divided in the manufacturing workshop, it is simplified and made mechanical and routine. The craft worker is converted into a “detail worker,” restricted to a particular fragmentary activity. At the same time, these separated activities are brought together in the workshop.

⁷ This is not to imply that these forms of work constitute different stages of a historical development. Craft work coexists with both direct appropriation and agriculture.

The organizing of the whole process is taken over by a manager acting on behalf of capital.

The manufacturing workshop introduces a new division of labor, but it leaves the previous handicraft forms of work unchanged. With the introduction of machinery, the labor process itself is altered. The relation of subject and object is changed. This is what Marx calls the “real subsumption” of labor under capital (1976, 1023–1025, 1034–1028). In craft production, the worker controls the tool. In industrial production, the tool is taken out of the worker’s hands and operated by the machine. The craft element is progressively eliminated from the labor process (Marx, 1973, 705). The industrial factory and the production line are created.

Moreover, with the transition from handicraft production to manufacture and industry, labor becomes an intrinsically cooperative and social process. The product ceases to be something that the worker creates individually; it becomes the collective result of collective activity (Marx, 1973, 709). The scale of production also increases enormously. Production is no longer designed to meet particular and local needs; it becomes what Hegel calls a “universal” process aimed at satisfying “universal” needs by means of market exchange using the “universal” medium of money (1991, §204, 236). Thus both activity and product become more abstract and universal, and the relation of subject to object in work is further mediated and distanced.

The increasingly universal character of work is a central theme in both Hegel’s and Marx’s accounts. Craft labor is rooted in particularity. It involves specific and specialized processes and skills tied to particular materials and products. Its products are designed to satisfy individual and local needs. Industry does away with these limitations. “What characterizes the division of labor in the automatic workshop is that labor has there completely lost its specialized character. . . . The automatic workshop wipes out specialists and craft-idiocy” (Marx, 1978, 138).

With the introduction of machinery, work is reduced to routine and mechanical operations dictated by the machine, or to the feeding, minding and maintaining of machines (Braverman, 1974). However, the industrialization and mechanization of work prepares the way for fuller forms of automation that have been developed more recently and are still being introduced. The more mechanical work becomes, the more it can be taken over by machines altogether. In

the end, the human being can “step aside,” as Hegel puts it in words echoed by Marx (Hegel, 1991, §198, 233; Marx, 1973, 704, 705), and install machines in his place (Sayers, 1998, 84–86).

In this way, through the development of industry, the relation of worker to product becomes increasingly mediated and distanced. The labor process ceases to involve the direct transformation of the object on the part of the worker. The craft element is almost entirely removed from the work activity itself. In the production process, machines act on their own, nature acts upon itself. Human purposes are realized through the use of science and technology and the application of knowledge.

The craft model of production becomes less and less appropriate. However, that is not to say that the notion of labor as “formative” activity is rendered inapplicable. On the contrary, industrial production is still “formative” in the sense in which Hegel and Marx understand this notion, in that it is intentional activity which results in the giving of form to materials, and which creates use values that embody human labor.

“Universal” Work

Industry creates a highly mediated and abstract relation of the worker to nature and to the social world. Work is distanced from the direct production process as such, and the product is no longer related in a direct way to the satisfaction of particular needs. However, even automated industry is not the final stage of the process of development that I have been tracing. For modern industrial society has spawned entirely new forms of work that seem to have no relation at all to the creation of material products or the satisfaction of material needs. These include commercial, administrative and other kinds of service work. These kinds of work have become increasingly significant in modern society.

Hegel and Marx witnessed the beginnings of these developments. Hegel tends to treat commerce as a type of work essentially connected with and subordinated to manufacturing industry. However, he regards public administration and education as a distinct sphere. These forms of work, he maintains, involve the “universal” work of a separate “universal” class of civil and public servants. Such work is “universal” in that it is abstracted from the creation of particular objects

to meet particular material needs. Furthermore, it is the outcome of the exercise of universal, intellectual and rational powers. Marx also sees such work as employing intellectual abilities and creating a more universal and abstract relation between the worker and the object.⁸

Commerce, administration and service work do not have direct material products; still, both Hegel and Marx include these kinds of work under the heading of “formative” activities, and bring them within the same theoretical framework as other kinds of work. As economic activity grows from a local to an industrial scale, a separate administrative and commercial sphere becomes necessary to manage it. Mechanisms of administration, distribution and exchange are needed to organize production, and to maintain the connections between producers and consumers. Commercial, administrative and service work are formative activities in that they create and sustain these economic and social relations.

II. WORK IN POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Work has changed greatly since Hegel and Marx were writing. Industry is becoming automated. The industrial factory operated by massed workers, which was being introduced in Marx’s time, is now being superseded. Manufacturing processes, such as car production, increasingly use computer control and information technology; and types of work that previously required intellectual skill, such as commercial, administrative and other kinds of office work, have been computerized and automated. Completely new forms of work, not dreamed of by Hegel and Marx, are being created.

According to writers like Hardt and Negri, these changes are taking production from the “industrial” to the “postindustrial” stage. Marx’s concept of labor was worked out in the context of the industrial society that was newly emerging at the time. His ideas reflect this. They must now be rethought. This is implied by Marx’s method itself. “The key to Marx’s method is that social theory must be molded to the contours of contemporary social reality. . . . Once history moves on and the social reality changes, the old theories are no longer adequate. We need new theories for the new reality” (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 140).

⁸ This similarity exists despite the fact that Marx has a quite different account of social class, and entirely rejects the Hegelian idea of a “universal” class.

To what extent do Marx's theories need to be changed? Hardt and Negri are not clear about this. At times they suggest that their project is to develop and extend Marx's theory to comprehend work and politics in postindustrial society. They portray mechanization and automation as the paths along which industry has been developing since its inception, in the way that I have been arguing. The use of computers continues and extends this process, further distancing the worker from the object of work, and making work more abstract and less specialized.⁹

More commonly, however, they suggest that postindustrial forms of work are completely novel and necessitate a radically new theoretical approach. Marx's account of labor, they imply, presupposes a productivist model based on the industrial factory. This theory is ceasing to apply. The old industrial era is being superseded by what they conceive as the "immaterial production" of the information economy (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 107–115). New "immaterial" forms of labor are becoming increasingly predominant in the postindustrial world.

The term "immaterial labor" was introduced by Lazzarato (1996); it has been taken up and extended by Hardt and Negri, who make it central to their account of postindustrial society.¹⁰ Like all labor, such labor involves physical activity, they acknowledge; what makes it "immaterial" is its result. Lazzarato defines it as "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity" (1996, 133). According to Hardt and Negri (2005, 108), it creates "immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a

9 "With the computerization of production today . . . the heterogeneity of concrete labor has tended to be reduced, and the worker is increasingly further removed from the object of his or her labor. The labor of computerized tailoring and labor of computerized weaving may involve exactly the same concrete practices — that is, manipulation of symbols and information. Tools, of course, have always abstracted labor power from the object of labor to a certain degree. In previous periods, the tools generally were related in a relatively inflexible way to certain tasks or certain groups of tasks; different tools corresponded to different activities — the tailor's tools, the weaver's tools, or later a sewing machine and a power loom. The computer proposes itself, in contrast, as the universal tool. . . . Through the computerization of production . . . labor tends toward the position of abstract labor" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 292). This is in line with Marx's Hegelian account that I have been describing, which comprehends automation as part of the larger process through which the relation of subject and object are becoming more mediated and distanced. Indeed, Hardt and Negri implicitly refer to Marx's account of the genesis of abstract labor to make this point in this passage.

10 Hardt and Negri argue that such labor has become qualitatively (not quantitatively) predominant in postindustrial society (2000, 281–285; 2005, 107–109, 140–103).

relationship, or an emotional response.” Labor of this kind, these writers argue, is quite different from the material production on which Marx’s theories are supposedly based. It makes not just objects but “subjectivities” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 32). It is “biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, xiii).

Ideas about the specific kinds of work to be included under this concept are hazy and shifting. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri distinguish three types of immaterial labor.¹¹

The first is involved in an industrial production that has been informationalized and has incorporated communication technologies in a way that transforms the production process itself. . . . Second is the immaterial labour of analytical and symbolic tasks. . . . A third type . . . involves the production and manipulation of affect. (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 293.)

More recently, the first kind of work on this list has been dropped (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 108). Quite rightly so. Although the use of computer control in manufacturing industry involves information technology, it is misleading to describe this as “immaterial” labor. The fact that many aspects of car production, for example, are now automated and computerized, does not mean that car making has ceased to be a material process, or that car workers are no longer engaged in material production. Although machines now do the work and shop floor workers no longer “get their hands dirty,” nevertheless, by controlling these machines, they still have material effects and produce material goods. Their work is still material and formative in character.

Symbolic Labor

Hardt and Negri no longer include computerized industrial work under the heading of immaterial labor. That leaves two “principle

¹¹ Lazzarato (1996, 142–143) identifies two forms of such labor: labor that produces the “informational” and the “cultural” content of the commodity, respectively. Under the first heading he puts work involving “cybernetics and computer control,” and under the second “the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and . . . public opinion.” He mentions “audiovisual production, advertising, fashion, the creation of software, photography, cultural activities, etc.” Hardt and Negri’s first two categories of immaterial labor are similar.

forms” of such work: “symbolic” or intellectual labor and “affective” labor, dealing with feelings or attitudes.¹² Both are forms of “immaterial” labor, they maintain, in the sense they do not have material products nor are they designed to meet material needs. For this reason also such work seems to fall outside Marx’s model of work as formative activity.

“Symbolic” work is primarily intellectual or linguistic. It “produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products” (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 108). It includes computer programming, public relations, graphic design, and various sorts of media work. The primary purpose of work of this kind, it is true, is not to create a material product. In this respect it resembles commercial, administrative, and service work. However, it is quite wrong to think that the notion of “formative” activity does not apply to it, or that a new category of “immaterial” labor is needed. The error here is to imagine that “immaterial” symbolic work has no material result and that only work which directly creates a tangible material product, like industry or craft, is “formative” activity.

It is wrong to believe that “symbolic” work creates only symbols or ideas — effects that are purely subjective and intangible. All labor operates by intentionally forming matter in some way. Symbolic labor is no exception: it involves making marks on paper, agitating the air and making sounds, creating electronic impulses in a computer system, or whatever. Only in this way is it objectified and realized as labor. In the process, it affects — creates, alters — subjectivity. *All* labor, it should be noted, does this. This is not peculiar to some special sort of “immaterial” labor or “biopolitical” activity alone.

Symbolic work is not primarily concerned with production as such, but rather with the realization of value through distribution, exchange, marketing, etc. However, it is important to see that these activities are essential to the process of production in a developed industrial economy. Commercial and administrative work is necessary in order to establish, maintain and facilitate the economic and social relations needed for production. A modern economy cannot function without managers, accountants, computer programmers, designers, etc. Even though their work is not primarily aimed at creating a material product, it has material effects that produce and reproduce social and eco-

¹² The distinction between these forms is not clear cut, as Hardt and Negri acknowledge: “most actual jobs involving immaterial labor combine these two forms” (2005, 108).

conomic relations. In this respect it is “formative” activity in Marx’s sense and does not differ from other kinds of work. For all human labor occurs within a network of social relations which it creates and sustains.¹³

In a quite different way, Marx’s account is also criticized by Habermas (1972, ch. 2; 1996). He conceives of work as a purely instrumental activity to meet individual needs, and treats the sphere of communicative action and social interaction as a separate and autonomous realm. The result is a dualistic distinction between work on the one side, and the sphere of social relations (communicative action and social interaction), on the other.

Hardt and Negri reject this (2000, 404–405). They criticize Habermas for his “compartmentalization” of work and communicative action into separate spheres. In the postindustrial period, with the development of immaterial labor, they argue, work has become “biopolitical” and *essentially* communicative and social in character. By separating social relations from the sphere of work, Habermas detaches them from their real, material basis and idealizes them. This criticism of Habermas is fine as far as it goes, but it should be taken further, for it applies to his account of labor and social relations quite generally. By restricting their argument to “immaterial” labor only, Hardt and Negri tend to reproduce a dualism between material and immaterial activity of the sort that they criticize in Habermas. All human labor is social and necessarily involves a communicative element; and at the same time all human social relations are rooted in material labor. This is Marx’s theory, and neither Hardt and Negri nor Habermas presents a valid critique of it.¹⁴

Affective Labor

There are similar problems with the account that Hardt and Negri give of the second form of immaterial labor they distinguish, “affective labor.” This is “labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion.

13 “Social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. . . . In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. . . . The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations” (Marx, 1978, 103).

14 I am grateful to David McNally for suggesting this line of argument to me.

One can recognize affective labor, for example in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile)" (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 108). Such affective labor also includes caring and helping work. According to Hardt and Negri, this is a further form of "immaterial" labor that cannot be accounted for by Marx, since it has no material product.

To support their case they appeal to Hannah Arendt's philosophy. She insists that there is a fundamental distinction between what she calls "labor" and "work," which Marx fails to make. What she terms "labor" is activity to satisfy immediate consumption needs. It involves the direct satisfaction of needs which re-arise as soon as they are satisfied. Labor of this sort is concerned primarily with the maintenance of natural life; it creates no lasting products. Arendt's main examples of such labor are cleaning, cooking and other forms of housework, but her account applies to other kinds of service work as well. Hardt and Negri's "affective" labor is "labor" in this sense.

What Arendt calls "work," by contrast, makes an enduring object for "use" rather than for immediate consumption. It thereby creates a "world." Arendt criticizes Marx for treating all productive activity in terms applicable only to "work" in this specific sense, and hence for ignoring the fact that much productive activity is devoted to "labor" that has no enduring product.¹⁵

Again we must avoid thinking that only work that results in a material product, like industry or craft, counts as "work" or formative activity for Marx. This is at the basis of Arendt's criticisms. She is wrong to believe that service work has no product. It does not simply disappear; it is objectified in the world. It operates, as does all labor, by intentionally forming material and altering the material environment in some way, including through speech and other forms of communicative action, in order to create use values. Affective labor is necessary to establish and maintain economic and social relations. Housework is needed to create and maintain a home, education to produce socialized individuals. Receptionists, social workers, cleaners, shop workers, etc., are needed to maintain social and economic relations in a modern economy. None of these activities is primarily

15 Arendt's distinction is peculiarly her own, as she herself acknowledges (1958, 79–80). It has been the subject of much controversy. However, its details are not my concern here. I am using it to focus on the problems for Marx posed by the existence of work without a direct material product.

aimed at creating a material product, yet they are formative activities nonetheless. As with the other kinds of so-called “immaterial” production discussed earlier, they have material results that serve to produce and reproduce social relations. In this way, they are forms of self-creation, the final product of which is society. This is ultimately the case with all labor, Marx maintains:

When we consider bourgeois society in the long view and as a whole, then the final result of the process of social production always appears as the society itself, *i.e.*, the human being itself in its social relations. Everything that has a fixed form, such as the product etc., appears as merely a moment, a vanishing moment, in this movement. (Marx, 1973, 712.)

Hardt and Negri are aware of some of the problems with the concept of “immaterial” labor to which I have been pointing. The “labor involved in all immaterial production,” they emphasize,

remains material. . . . What is immaterial is *its product*. We recognize that *immaterial labor* is a very ambiguous term in this regard. It might be better to understand [it] . . . as “biopolitical labor,” that is, labor that creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself. (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 109.)

This does not resolve the problems, which go deeper than Hardt and Negri appreciate. Just as all “immaterial” labor necessarily involves material activity, so conversely all material labor is “immaterial” in the sense that it alters not only the material worked upon but also subjectivity and social relations. There is no clear distinction between material and immaterial in this respect.

Resort to the concept of “biopolitical” activity is no help either. The same point applies. All productive activity is “biopolitical” to a degree in that all labor affects relationships and social life. In short the notion of “biopolitical” activity is no more satisfactory than that of “immaterial” labor as a way to distinguish postindustrial conditions.

III. SOME POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Hardt and Negri are right to argue that work has changed radically since the industrial revolution. However, their central category of “immaterial” labor is not helpful for understanding these changes.

Properly understood and suitably developed, Marx's Hegelian theory of work as "formative" activity provides a more satisfactory and illuminating conceptual framework for understanding the new post-industrial kinds of work.

According to this theory, different types of labor involve different degrees of mediation in our relation to nature. In both Hegel and Marx, this is presented as a philosophical theory to categorize different forms of work in terms of the relation they establish between subject and object, ranging from the least mediated relationship of direct appropriation to the most abstract and universal kinds of work. This is primarily a logical sequence rather than a historical one, though historical changes are associated with it.

In Hegel's case, there is also an ethical and political dimension to his account. With the development of our relation to nature through labor comes the emergence of self-consciousness from immediate natural conditions towards a developed, reflective and mediated state and, consequently, the growth of freedom.

It is not immediately clear whether or not Marx adopts a similar perspective. His theory of labor is developed in an economic context. In purely economic terms, Marx does not differentiate between different kinds of labor, still less make a hierarchy of them. Like other classical economists, in his labor theory of value Marx equates different forms of labor together as "abstract" labor. This may appear to suggest that Marx, unlike Hegel, does not rank different kinds of work morally. But that is not the case. There is clearly an ethical dimension to Marx's theory of labor. This is an unmistakable aspect of Marx's account. The writers whom I have been discussing all criticize it in this respect, and they are not mistaken to do so. However, they all fail to take account of the Hegelian dimension to Marx's thought and so misunderstand its ethical implications.

The widespread view that Marx idealizes craft labor is a complete misconception for which there are no grounds in anything that Marx has actually written. There is almost nothing of the romantic in Marx; quite the reverse (Sayers, 1999). Habermas is entirely wrong to confuse Marx's views with those of social critics like Morris (1973) and Ruskin (1928).¹⁶ Marx completely rejects the craft ideal. He is scorn-

¹⁶ Adams is also open to this criticism when he writes: "the model of artistic craft is helpful in imagining the transition from capitalist to revolutionary forms of production. . . . Marx's

ful of what he regards as the “idiocy” and small-mindedness engendered by handicraft work (Marx, 1978, 138). His critical attitude towards such work is based in the Hegelian account of the labor process that I have been describing. According to this, as we have seen, the traditional form of craft work is confined to particular skills and activities; it is a limited, individual activity, aimed at the satisfaction of particular and local needs.

For Marx, the coming of industry means a liberation from these constraints. This is the positive aspect of its development. However, the change from craft to industrial production takes place under the contradictory conditions imposed by capitalism in which the pressure towards universality inherent in industry comes into conflict with the capitalist form of private ownership and the free market in which it develops. The result is the “devastation caused by a social anarchy which turns every economic progress into a social calamity” (Marx, 1961, 487). In the longer term, however, the coming of industry also means the elimination of brute physical effort and the reduction of repetitious and mechanical toil. Work becomes more universal and rational, and hugely more productive: “more worthy of . . . human nature” (Marx, 1971, 820).

This is the logic of Marx’s account. It should be Hegel’s outlook too, but Hegel does not fully accept the implications of his own theory. He is more doubtful than Marx about the progressive possibilities of industry. Contrary to the developmental implications of his own account, he remains sceptical that industrial production could ever lead to self-development and freedom. He tends to see industry as inescapably alienating and fragmenting, and to look back to simpler, pre-industrial conditions for his ideal (Sayers, 2003).

Marx does not do this. In this respect, he is a more consistent Hegelian than Hegel himself. To repeat, he is not in the least bit a romantic. He insists on the liberating potential of modern industry which has the power to lighten labor, eliminate craft narrowness, and make work more universal and rational in character. But this potential can begin to be realized only when the development of industry has been brought under collective and conscious control and directed

aesthetic sensibilities were formed around a traditional, highly individualized, and, in certain ways, romantic vision of art” (1991, 270).

towards the human good, rather than being used to exploit labor and maximize profits.

These points about Marx's thought are widely understood. In view of them, Marxism is often interpreted as a philosophy rooted in industrial conditions that idealizes industrial labor and the industrial working class. However, the reading that I have been proposing ultimately suggests a different view. Marx, like Hegel, is a dialectical and historical thinker. At the time he was writing, industry was becoming the predominant form of production, and the industrial proletariat was emerging as the most advanced political force. But social and human development have not stopped there. Writers like Hardt and Negri are right to insist that Marx's ideas must be rethought and developed to take account of subsequent changes.

Marx's philosophy should not be seen as eternally linked to an industrial perspective. Indeed, its underlying philosophy suggests that industry is not the highest development of our productive and creative powers. It points to a higher form of labor, beyond industry, in "universal" work. Hegel assigns this mainly to a "universal" class of civil servants. This is not Marx's idea. Marx envisages the eventual emergence of forms of work in which the universal tendencies of modern industry are realized, and in which

the detail-worker of to-day, crippled by one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to the mere fragment of a man, [will be replaced] by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours . . . to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers. (Marx, 1961, 488.)

This vision should not be dismissed as a pure utopian dream. Aspects of it are already coming true, though within the contradictory conditions of capitalism. In postindustrial society, as Hardt and Negri observe, "jobs for the most part are highly mobile and involve flexible skills. . . . They are characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, affect and communication" (2000, 285). In more favorable conditions, such work might extend our distinctively human, universal and rational, creative powers. It could become for us "free" labor, undertaken not because we are forced by economic necessity, but because it has become "life's prime want." Marx's ideal is free work of this kind:

[It] can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. (Marx, 1971, 820; cf. Marx, 1958, 24.)

Such work is a universal, rational (*i.e.*, “scientific” in a broad sense), self-conscious, collective kind of creative activity: conscious self-production and self creation.¹⁷ As I have argued, Marx’s concept of labor, properly understood, is more helpful than the concept of immaterial labor in understanding these developments.

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¹⁷ Further discussion is needed about whether this implies a theoretical ideal that involves the elimination of the element of practical, craft skill altogether. Arguably, Marx’s ideal is universal activity, all-round development. What he objects to is not craft activity as such, but the narrow and exclusive division of labor in which craft work is traditionally organized (Sayers, 1998, ch. 2).

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