Labour in Modern Industrial Society

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In recent years the character of work in advanced industrial society has been changing rapidly. Production is being automated and computerized. The factory operated by massed workers is being superseded. Industrial labour is ceasing to be the dominant form of work. Work in offices that used to require intellectual skills is now done by computers. With the enormous growth of jobs in the service sector and the increasing use of information technology, new kinds of work are being created.

These changes are often summed up by saying that these societies are moving from the industrial to the post-industrial stage. In some important respects this notion is questionable. Arguably, the economy is still industrial, but it now operates on a global scale. If industry is ceasing to be the predominant form of work in Western Europe and North America, it is mainly because of its relocation to other parts of the world in a new global division of labour.

Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that work is changing. With the widespread use of computers and information technology, new kinds of work have developed. Hardt and Negri's (2000; 2005) attempt to theorize these changes has been particularly influential. The older industrial forms of labour which produced material goods, they argue, are no longer dominant. They are being superseded by new ‘immaterial’ forms of work. Hardt and Negri situated their thought within the Marxist tradition. However, they maintain, Marx's ideas need to be rethought in the light of the new conditions of post-industrial society (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 140). Marx takes material production as the paradigm of work, his concept of labour is based on an industrial model. In order to describe the new post-industrial forms of work, Marx's account must be supplemented with the concepts of ‘immaterial’ labour and ‘biopolitical’ production.

My aim in this chapter is to criticize these ideas. First I will explain Marx's account of labour and show that Hardt and Negri's criticisms are based on a fundamental misreading of his thought. Then I will argue that Hardt and Negri's own account is confused and unhelpful. Properly understood and
suitably developed Marx's concept of labour continues to provide a more satisfactory basis for understanding the nature of work in the modern world.

**Marx's concept of labour**

According to Marx, labour is an intentional activity designed to produce a change in the material world. In his early writings, he conceives of work as a process of 'objectification' through which labour is 'embodied and made material in an object' (Marx, 1975, p. 324). Later he describes labour as activity through which human beings give form to materials and thus realize themselves in the world.

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, p. 180)

This account is often taken to assume a 'productivist' model that regards work which creates a material product as the paradigm for all work. It is much criticized on this basis. Hardt and Negri along with many others point out that many kinds of work do not seem to fit this picture, some with which Marx was familiar, others that have newly developed.

There are two versions of the view that Marx has a 'productivist' model of the labour process. Some, like Hardt and Negri (2000, pp. 255–6, 92; 2005, pp. 140–2), accuse him of presupposing an industrial idea of labour. Others, by contrast, maintain that Marx's ideas are based on the paradigm of craft or even artistic work. In either case, the productivist account is treated either as self-evident (Adams, 1991) or as a 'plausible' reading of Marx's language and imagery (Habermas, 1987, pp. 65–6; Benton, 1989, p. 66). These interpretations are superficial and unsatisfactory. Marx's theory of labour is not self-evident, nor is it based upon mere metaphors or images. It is a central element of a systematic philosophical theory of the relation of human beings to nature in which the concept of labour plays a fundamental role.

This theory is never stated explicitly by Marx. Although he discusses the general character of labour 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 labour, not only in his early writings where they are clearly evident, but throughout his work. For a valid understanding of Marx's concept of labour, as I shall demonstrate, it is essential to see it in this
Hegelian context. However, the critics I am discussing do not take this background into account. 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 labour in these terms and project them onto Marx.

In particular, the theory that labour is a process of 'objectification' and a form-giving activity has a Hegelian origin and plays a central role in his philosophy. According to Hegel labour is a distinctively human ('spiritual') activity. Through it human beings satisfy their needs in a way that is fundamentally different to that of other animals. Non-human animals are purely natural creatures. They are driven by their immediate appetites. 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 labour 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 labour 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 which is mediated through work. We objectify ourselves in our product, and come to recognize our powers, embodied in the world. We develop as reflective, self-conscious beings. Moreover, Hegel maintains, relations with others are a necessary condition for these developments (Hegel, 1977, p. 118). Labour 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.

These ideas are taken over and developed by Marx (Sayers, 2003; 2007a). They apply not only to industrial or craft work, but to work in all its forms, as Hegel makes clear in the following passage.

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, p. 86, §56A)
Hegel here treats all these different kinds of work as form-giving activities in the sense that they are all ways of imparting form to matter. ‘Productivist’ types of work which create a material product, such as craft and manufacture, figure as particular kinds of labour, but it is quite clear that Hegel is not trying to assimilate all 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 labour; 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, the object to which the subject relates develops and changes too.

This is the organizing principle of Hegel’s account of labour.² He conceives of different kinds of labour as different forms of relation of subject to object (nature). In characteristic fashion, moreover, the different forms of labour are arranged on an ascending scale according to the degree of mediation that they establish between subject and object. Marx draws extensively on these ideas. They provide an indispensable key to understanding Marx’s account of labour, as I will now argue.

**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. 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.³

Benton argues that such labour cannot be fitted into Marx’s account (Marx, 1961, p. 180, quoted earlier).

The conversion of the ‘subject [i.e. 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, p. 69)⁴
This is not correct. Such labour does transform 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 transforms the object in that it separates it from nature (Marx, 1961, p. 178). The object is thus made useable: it is caught and killed, plucked, extracted, moved, etc. Labour 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 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 have been caught makes a great deal of difference: 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'.

**Agriculture**

As productive activity develops our relation to nature alters and subject and object are changed. This is a crucial theme in Hegel that is taken over and developed by Marx. It is overlooked by Benton, Habermas, Hardt and Negri and many other writers. With the development of agriculture we no longer relate to nature as a mere given, we cease to be entirely dependent on the contingencies of what is immediately present. We actively arrange the natural environment to meet our needs. Thus we begin the process of freeing ourselves from passive dependence on natural contingency.5

Furthermore, in agriculture, our relation to nature is mediated through previous work. Agriculture employs raw materials that are themselves the results of previous labour (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 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.

Benton argues that agriculture is another case that does not fit the productivist model that he attributes to Marx. The products of farming are not created by forming the object but grow on their own.

Human labour 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, p. 60)

Agriculture, he maintains, is primarily ‘a labour of sustaining, regulating and reproducing, rather than transforming’ (Benton, 1989, pp. 67–8).
Both Hegel and Marx are of course aware that farming depends on natural processes, but they do not regard this as conflicting with the view that agricultural work is a formative activity. In thinking that it must do, again Benton is taking the notion of form-giving activity to refer specifically to work which creates a material product. 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 natural conditions and processes for human ends.

Craft and industry

Craft work involves a further development of our relation to the object of labour and to nature. 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 is that the worker uses his or her own skills to make the object from raw materials that are themselves the products of previous labour.

Craft work is the basis upon which industry develops. Under the impact of capitalism, first the division of labour and then the character of the labour process itself is transformed. There are two distinct phases to this process. The first involves what Marx (1976, pp. 25–34, 1019–23) terms the ‘formal subsumption’ of labour under capital. The traditional methods of work are not altered, but the social organization of work, the division of labour, is transformed.

With the introduction of machinery, the labour process itself is altered. This is what Marx (1976, pp. 34–8, 1023–5) calls the ‘real subsumption’ of labour under capital. In craft production, the worker controls the tool. In industrial production, the tool is operated by the machine. The craft element is progressively eliminated from the labour process (Marx, 1973, p. 705), the industrial factory is created. Subject and object are again changed.

Moreover, with the transition from handicraft to manufacture and industry, labour 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, p. 709). The scale of production also increases enormously. Production is no longer designed to meet particular and local needs, it becomes what Hegel (1991, p. 236, §204) calls a ‘universal’ process aimed at satisfying ‘universal’ needs by means of market exchange using the ‘universal’ medium of money. 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 also a central theme in Marx’s account. Craft labour is rooted in particularity. It involves 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 labour in the automatic workshop is that labour has there completely lost its specialized character [...] The automatic workshop wipes out specialists and craft-idiocy.

(Marx, 1978, p. 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. However, the industrialization and mechanization of work prepares the way for still fuller forms of automation. The more mechanical work becomes, the more it can be taken over by machines altogether. In the end, the human being can ‘step aside’ (Marx 1973, pp. 704–5, echoing Hegel, 1991, p. 233, §198).

In this way, through the development of industry, the relation of worker to product becomes increasingly mediated and distanced. The labour process ceases to involve the direct transformation of the object by 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 labour as a form-giving activity is rendered inapplicable. On the contrary, industrial production is still formative in that it is intentional activity that gives form to materials and creates use values which embody human labour.

**Universal work**

Industry creates a highly mediated relation of the worker to nature and to the social world. Work become increasingly distant 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 the 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 kinds 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. Such work has become increasingly significant in modern society.

Hegel and Marx witnessed the beginning of these developments. Hegel treats commerce as a type of work essentially connected with and subordinate to manufacturing industry. However, he regards public administration and education as distinct spheres which involve the universal work of a separate class of 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.

Commerce, administration and service work do not have direct material products, yet both Hegel and Marx include these sorts of work under the same heading of formative activities as other kinds of work. As economic activity grows from a local to an industrial scale, 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.

Post-industrial work

How do these ideas stand up today with the great changes in work since Hegel and Marx’s time? As we have seen, Hardt and Negri argue that Marx’s concept of labour is a product of the industrial society that was emerging at the time. It must now be rethought.

What sort of rethinking is needed? 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 post-industrial 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. Post-industrial forms of work using computers merely continue and extend this process (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 292). More commonly, however, they suggest that post-industrial forms of work are completely novel and necessitate a radically new theoretical approach. Marx’s account of labour, they imply, presupposes an industrial and productivist model which is ceasing to apply. Industry is being superseded by the ‘immaterial’ production of the information economy (Hardt and Negri, 2005, pp. 107–15). New ‘immaterial’ forms of labour are becoming predominant.

Hardt and Negri (2000, pp. 281–5; 2005, pp. 107–9, pp. 40–3) have taken the concept of ‘immaterial labour’ from Lazzarato (1996) and extended it to become central to their account of post-industrial society. Immaterial labour, like all labour, they acknowledge, involves material activity: what makes it ‘immaterial’ is its product. Lazzarato (1996, p. 133) defines it as ‘the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’. According to Hardt and Negri (2005, p. 108), it creates ‘immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response’. It makes not just objects but ‘subjectivities’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 32). It is ‘biopolitical production, the production of social life itself’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. xiii).
These ideas have considerable initial appeal and plausibility. However, they will not bear detailed examination. Precisely what kinds of work are these concepts referring to? Hardt and Negri’s account is hazy and shifting. In *Empire*, they distinguish three types of immaterial labour.

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, p. 293)

More recently, the first of kind of work on this list has been dropped (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 108). Quite rightly so. Although industry uses computer control, this does not make it an ‘immaterial’ process. The fact that many aspects of car production, for example, are now 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 labour**

Hardt and Negri no longer include computerized industrial work under the heading of immaterial labour. That leaves two ‘principle forms’ of such work: ‘symbolic’ or intellectual labour and ‘affective’ labour, dealing with feelings or attitudes. Both are types of immaterial labour, 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 artistic. It ‘produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 108). It includes computer programming, graphic design, various sorts of media work, work in advertising and public relations, etc. Work of this kind, it is true, does not directly create a material product. In this respect it resembles commercial, administrative and other kinds of service work. However, it is wrong to think that a new category of immaterial labour is needed to comprehend it. The error here is to imagine that ‘symbolic’ work of this sort has no material result and that only work which directly creates a tangible product, like industry or craft, is material activity. It is not the case that symbolic work creates only symbols or ideas; products that are purely subjective and intangible. All labour operates by intentionally transforming matter in some way, as Marx maintains.
Symbolic labour is no exception: it involves making marks on paper, making sounds, creating electronic impulses in a computer system, or whatever. Only in this way is such activity objectified and realized as labour. In this way, all labour is material.

Economically speaking, symbolic work is not primarily concerned with creating a material product 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 processes of material production in an industrial economy. They are needed in order to establish, maintain and facilitate the economic and social relations required for production. A modern economy cannot function without managers, accountants, computer programmers, designers, etc. Their work does not directly create a material product, nevertheless it has material effects which produce and reproduce social and economic relations and alter consciousness.

In this way, there is also an immaterial aspect to such labour, as Hardt and Negri maintain. However, the same is true for other kinds of work as well. All labour has an immaterial as well as a material aspect. For all labour takes place in a context of social relations. In altering the material world, labour at the same time sustains and alters these social relations. In the process, it affects – creates, alters – subjectivities. All labour, it must be stressed, does this. It is not peculiar to a special sort of ‘immaterial’ labour or ‘biopolitical’ activity alone.

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.

(Marx, 1978, p. 103)

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 he 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 (2000, pp. 404–5) criticize Habermas for thus ‘compartmentalizing’ work and communicative action into separate spheres. In the post-industrial period with the development of immaterial labour, 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 valid as far as it goes but it should be taken further, for it applies to his account of labour and social relations quite generally. By restricting their argument to ‘immaterial’ labour only, Hardt and
Negri end up reproducing a dualism between material and immaterial activity of the sort that they criticize in Habermas. All human labour is social and necessarily involves a communicative element; and at the same time all human social relations are rooted in material labour. This is Marx’s theory, and neither Hardt and Negri nor Habermas presents a valid critique of it.⁷

**Affective labour**

There are similar problems with the account that Hardt and Negri give of their second form of immaterial labour, ‘affective’ labour. This is

> labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. 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, p. 108)

Such affective labour also includes caring and helping work. According to Hardt and Negri this is a further form of ‘immaterial’ labour 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 maintains that there is a fundamental distinction between what she calls ‘labour’ and ‘work’ which Marx fails to make. What she terms ‘labour’ is activity to satisfy immediate consumption needs. It is concerned primarily with the maintenance of natural life, it creates no lasting products. Arendt’s main examples of such labour 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’ labour is ‘labour’ 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 (1958, chs 3–4) 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 ‘labour’ which has no enduring product.

Again we must avoid thinking that only work which results in a material product counts as work or form-giving activity for Marx. This is at the basis of both Arendt’s and Hardt and Negri’s criticisms of him. It is wrong to imagine that Arendt’s ‘labour’, or Hardt and Negri’s ‘affective’ labour have no products. Such work operates, as does all labour, by intentionally forming matter and altering the material environment in some way, including through speech and other forms of communicative action. It does not simply disappear, it is objectified in the world, it creates use values.

Affective labour is necessary in order 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 directly creates a material product, yet they are formative activities and modes of objectification nonetheless. As with the other kinds of so-called ‘immaterial’ production discussed earlier, they have material results which serve to produce and reproduce social relations and subjectivity.

Hardt and Negri are aware of some of the problems with the concept of immaterial labour to which I have been pointing. The ‘labor involved in all immaterial production’, they admit,

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, p. 109)

The concept of ‘biopolitical’ labour does not resolves these problems, they go deeper than Hardt and Negri appreciate. As I have argued, just as all immaterial labour necessarily involves material activity, so all material labour has an immaterial aspect in that it alters not only the material immediately worked upon but also social relations and subjectivity. There is no clear distinction between material and immaterial labour in this respect. Resort to the concept of ‘biopolitical’ activity is no help. The same point applies. All productive activity is ‘biopolitical’ to some degree in that all labour transforms relationships and social life. In this way all labour is ultimately a form of self-creation (Marx, 1973, p. 712). In short the notion of ‘biopolitical’ activity is no more satisfactory than that of ‘immaterial’ labour as a way to distinguish post-industrial forms of work.

Political implications

Hardt and Negri are right to argue that work has changed radically since the industrial revolution. Despite the initial plausibility of their account, however, their categories of immaterial labour and biopolitical activity are little help in understanding these changes. Properly understood and suitably developed, Marx’s theory of work as objectification and form-giving activity provides a more satisfactory and illuminating conceptual framework for understanding the nature of work, including its new post-industrial forms.

According to this theory, different kinds of labour involve different degrees of mediation in our relation to nature ranging from the most immediate 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 labour comes the emergence of self-consciousness from immediate natural conditions towards a developed, reflective and mediated state and with that a growth of freedom.

It is not immediately clear whether Marx adopts a similar perspective. His theory of labour is developed in an economic context. In purely economic terms, Marx does not differentiate between different kinds of labour, still less make a hierarchy of them. Like other classical economists, in the labour theory of value he equates different forms of labour together as ‘abstract’ labour. This may appear to suggest that he does not rank different kinds of work morally or politically. But that is not the case: there is clearly an evaluative dimension to Marx’s theory. The writers I have been discussing all criticize it in this respect, and they are not wrong in doing so. However, they fail to take account of the Hegelian dimension to Marx’s thought and so misunderstand its implications.

The view that Marx’s account relies on a ‘romantically transfigured prototype of handicraft activity’ (Habermas, 1987, pp. 65–6, cf. Benton discussed earlier) is a complete misconception. Marx could not be clearer in his rejection of the craft ideal. He is scornful of the ‘idiocy’ and small-mindedness engendered by handicraft work (Marx, 1978, p. 138). His critical attitude is grounded on the account of the labour process that I have been describing which sees craft work as a limited and purely 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 of capitalism in which the pressure towards universality inherent in industry comes into conflict with the system 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, p. 487). In the longer term, however, the coming of industry means the elimination of brute physical effort and the reduction of repetitious and mechanical toil. Work becomes more productive, rational, and universal, hence ‘more worthy of […] human nature’ (Marx, 1971, p. 820). 8

These points about Marx are widely understood. Marxism is thus often seen as a philosophy rooted in industrial conditions that idealizes industrial labour and the industrial working class. This is Hardt and Negri’s position. However, the reading that I have been proposing suggests a different view. Marx is a 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 things have moved on. Hardt and Negri are right to insist that Marx’s ideas must be rethought and developed to take account of this.
Marxism 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 higher forms of labour, beyond industry, in more universal kinds of 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, p. 488)

It is easy to dismiss this as a utopian dream but that would be a mistake. Aspects of it are already coming true, though within the contradictory conditions of capitalism. In contemporary 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.

(Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 285)

As I have argued, Marx’s concept of labour, properly understood, continues to provide a more helpful basis than the concepts of immaterial labour and biopolitical production for understanding these developments. In more favourable conditions, such universal work might extend our rational and creative powers. It could become something we do not only because we are forced by economic necessity but as a free activity. This is Marx’s ideal (Marx, 1971, p. 820).

Notes

1. This is an edited and revised version of Sayers, 2007b. An earlier draft was first read at a Marx and Philosophy Society Seminar on 28 May 2005. I am grateful to David McNally for his comments.
2. This is also the organizing theme in Hegel’s accounts of the development of ‘spirit’ (Hegel, 1977; 1975; 1988). The first seeds of this theory of labour appear very early in Hegel’s work (Hegel, 1979). It is well worked out by time of the Jena lectures (Hegel, 1983). It is presented again in Hegel, 1991, pp. 231–39, §§196–207. This work was well known to Marx. The earlier accounts were not published in Marx’s time and would not have been available to him.
3. ‘All those things which labour merely separates from immediate connexion with their environment, are subjects [i.e. objects] of labour 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, p. 178). Such work is mentioned briefly by Hegel (1997, pp. 179–80, §103).


5. Of course, agriculture remains dependent on the natural contingencies of the seasons, climate, weather, etc. until we begin to free ourselves from these factors too.

6. The distinction between these forms is not clear cut, as Hardt and Negri (2005, p. 108) acknowledge, ‘most actual jobs involving immaterial labor combine these two forms’.

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

8. 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 (Sayers, 2003).

Bibliography


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