

Endless Accumulation, Endless (Unpaid) Work?

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Every civilisation must decide what is, and what is not, valuable. Marxists occasionally speak of a “law of value.” It is not a concept easily translated into everyday politics, or into our histories of capitalism. It sounds quaint, curiously out of step with our times. And yet the essential insight of the Marxist argument on value remains extraordinarily relevant: to how we connect capitalism’s manifold crises, and to how we respond to them.

Let us consider three radical critiques, their assertions of value, and their diagnoses of the present global conjuncture. For the Marxist, value is socially necessary labour-time: abstract social labour. We might think of abstract labour as the average labour-time embedded in the average commodity for the system as a whole. For the feminist, value is produced through the relations of social reproduction every bit as much as the relations of commodity production; neoliberal globalisation cannot, for instance, be understood solely through the “global factory”, it must also be understood through the “[global household](#)”. Thirdly, for the environmentalist, Nature is intrinsically valuable, and capitalism destroys it.

These are, of course, stylised. Each tradition, practically and theoretically, has been pursuing synthesis. Each borrows extensively across critiques: eco-feminism, feminist political economy, eco-Marxism, and so forth. But a synthesis of capital, power, and nature in modernity’s relations of production and reproduction has been elusive. My intention is to point towards one possible synthesis. This understands capitalism as a [world-ecology](#), joining the re/production of everyday life and the re/production of capital in dialectical unity.

Laws of value – understood as large-scale and long-run patterns that govern the life of a civilisation (e.g. Song China, feudal Europe, capitalism) – lead a double life. One operates in a domain that is usually called “economic,” but is in fact much more expansive. This is the domain of surplus production and distribution: who gets what and how do they get it? It’s not really *economic* for two good reasons. First, the question of surplus always implies power; and second, the production of surplus always pivots on the reproduction of life, from one day, and from one generation, to the next. Every “mode of production” is at the same time a “mode of reproduction.” But there’s another, equally significant, dimension of value. This is value as ethico-political norm. What do we *value*? A wetland or an industrial park? “Men’s work” or “women’s work”? In this second domain, the feminist and Green critique – not the Marxist – has led the view. But the differences have been viewed in terms that are much too fixed. The distinction between the first and second “life” of capitalism’s value system has often been confused. Each tradition’s angle of vision has identified – and announced – distinctive weaves of value as systemic logic and ethico-political alternative.

And yet, I think we have reached a conjuncture when clarity – at least *greater* clarity – is possible. The tremors of systemic crisis – financial, climate, food, employment – are translating into a *new ontological politics* that challenge capitalism at its very core: its law of value. Today’s movements for climate justice, food sovereignty, de-growth, the right to the city – and much beyond – underscore a new set of challenges: to capitalism’s value system, understood simultaneously in its ethico-political and political-economic dimensions. This new ontological politics has long

been implicit in radical politics. But it seems to have reached a new stage today. Entwining distributional demands – the right to food, housing, a safe environment – with calls for fundamental democratisation, justice, gender equity, and sustainable environment-making, these movements have brought capitalism’s “law of value” into question as never before.

How to bring clarity to this exciting – and complex – reality? Our first act of rethinking must be ontological. We must rethink the essence of modernity’s most sacred divide, Humanity/Nature. Civilisations had long distinguished between humans and the rest of nature. But during the rise of capitalism, something peculiar occurred. Humans were no longer “distinct”; they became, in modernity’s new cosmology, wholly separate. And so did Nature, now with a capital ‘N’. Nature became an object. The point was not only to interpret the world but to control it.

This had a decided advantage: Nature-as-object could be made cheap. And this Cheap Nature became the foundation for a new law of value. The unpaid work of natures became the pedestal of a new civilisational strategy: appropriate the whole of nature as a way to advance labour productivity within the commodity system. The result was an unprecedented revolution in human-initiated environmental change, as landscapes from Southeast Asia to the Baltic to Brazil were radically transformed, their peoples uprooted and dispossessed in the service of the endless accumulation of capital.

In practice, both Humanity and Nature were fluid categories, and enabled fluid strategies of accumulation. Humanity did not, in the first instance, include all humans. The rise of early modern materialism – the “scientific revolution” and all that – redefined some humans, *most* humans, as less-than-human. Women especially. The dualism of Humanity/Nature was the creation not of science alone, but of science, capital, and empire – entwined movements in a *world-ecological* system. When the Spaniards conquered Peru – a vast zone much larger than the country today – their name for indigenous peoples was *naturales*. The debate over indigenous slavery in the early 16th century – personified by the Dominican friar [Bartolomé de Las Casas](#) – turned on the meaning of “natural slaves.” From the very beginning, capitalism’s crucial point of fracture was not Humanity/Nature but between two zones with fluid boundaries: the zone of exploitation in commodity production, and the zone of appropriation, comprising the unpaid work of [Maria Mies](#)’ “women, nature, and colonies”.

My use of *appropriation* therefore differs from Marx, for whom appropriation was synonymous with the exploitation of wage-labour. Accumulation by appropriation names those extra-economic processes that identify, secure, and channel unpaid work outside the commodity system into the circuit of capital. Scientific, cartographic, and botanical revolutions, broadly conceived, are good examples. During the rise of capitalism, for example, a new way of seeing – and imagining – the world took shape. The world could be comprehended from *outside* rather than from within. It was of course a partial perspective, treating the specifically capitalist ordering of the world as “natural”.

It was also a violent perspective. States and empires could now reckon vast expanses of world-nature, like the Americas, as spaces of unpaid work/energy detached from local conditions. The furious pace of mapmaking and surveying in early capitalism sustained the furious pace of property-making in its broadest sense: drawing lines around particular spaces so as to create general markets in land. The extension of bourgeois property relations in northwestern Europe and the mapping of the Americas are much more intimately linked than often supposed. Both marked the rise of *world-praxis* in which nature is external, time linear, and space flat. This world-praxis was about far more than reshaping landscapes; it was about reorganising human (and other animal) populations in service to endless accumulation. Sheep “[ate men](#)” in New Spain (Mexico) no less than in England. Andean peasants were dispossessed and reorganised in this era just as they were in England. On both sides of the Atlantic, these transformations – en-

abling rapid bursts of accumulation by appropriation – were enabled by new ways of mapping space and nature.

In the centuries that followed, this praxis was amplified and reinvented. The British and American empires consolidated world power, in part, by mapping and reworking world-natures. The 19th century's Kew Gardens and the postwar era's International Agricultural Research Centres loom large in this history. Since the 1970s, the surveying of world-nature has reached new heights, as genomic mapping and the geospatial sciences (GIS, remote sensing, etc.) seek to reduce “the *Earth*,” as [Timothy Luke writes](#), “to little more than a vast standing reserve, serving as a ready resource supply centre and/or accessible waste reception site.”

The Earth? Yes, but also the unpaid work of human natures. For in capitalism, the crucial divide is between paid and unpaid work – not human and extra-human nature. Managing this divide is amongst capital's fundamental tasks. Why? Because rising labour productivity depends on a *disproportionately greater* increase in the appropriation of unpaid work/energy. The great energy revolutions – coal, then oil – offer ample testimony to this fact: spectacular advances in labour productivity have depended upon even more spectacular appropriations of cheap energy. But this disproportionality is not all about energy in the usual sense. It also encompasses the long history of dispossession. Industrial revolutions have always depended upon the appropriation of *accumulated* unpaid work in the form of labour migration: productive adults raised to maturity in peasant societies relatively independent of the law of value – and therefore “cheap” for capital. The appropriation of accumulated unpaid work in human form is surely one of capitalism's greatest achievements.

What are the implications of this line of thought, one that takes the law of value as a co-production of humans bundled with the rest of nature?

An approach to value that joins the appropriation of Cheap Natures and the exploitation of commodified labour-power allows us to unravel some of the mysteries of capitalism's dynamism. While Marxist ecology tends to ignore value, it does so by hiding from view Marx's formulation that use- and exchange-value represent “*on the surface*” the “internal opposition of use-value and value.” Marx's discussion in these opening pages of *Capital* are pitched at so high a level of abstraction that I think the implications of this “internal opposition” have been insufficiently grasped. These implications are explosive. For to say that value and use-value are *internally related* is to say that the value relation encompasses the relation value/use-value in a way that extends well beyond the immediate process of production. Here is a connection that allows us to join definite “modes of production” and definite “modes of life” in concrete historical unities.

This means that capitalism can be comprehended through the shifting configuration of the exploitation of labour-power and the appropriation of Cheap Natures. This is a dialectic of paid and unpaid work that demands a disproportionate expansion of the latter (appropriation) in relation to the former (exploitation). This reality is suggested – even if its implications for accumulation are only partially grasped – by those [widely-cited estimates](#) on the contribution of unpaid work performed by humans and the rest of nature (“[ecosystem services](#)”). The quantitative reckonings for unpaid human work – overwhelmingly delivered by women – vary between 70 and 80 percent of world GDP; for “ecosystem services,” between 70 and 250 percent of GDP. The relations between these two moments are rarely grasped; their role in long waves of accumulation rarely discussed.

The condition that some work is valued is that most work is not.

Not-valued forms of work *are* outside the value-form (the commodity) – they do not directly produce value (*contra* [Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James](#)). And yet – and it is a very big *and yet* – value as abstract labour cannot be produced except through unpaid work. This means that

the value *form* and the value *relation* are not coincident. The value relation cuts across the paid/unpaid work divide such that generalised commodification is sustained through a *double revolution*: of the forces of production and the relations of reproduction. This double revolution is of course cyclically punctuated; its condition is the availability of a sufficiently large mass of uncommodified nature. Thus the ongoing appropriation of the planet's last few frontiers – of unpaid human work, as in the highly gendered dispossessions across the Global South, and of unpaid extra-human work, as with world energy, both since the 1970s – signals a sea change in capitalism's crisis-fixing strategies.

In these double (but not dual) revolutions, the historical condition for socially necessary labour-time is socially necessary unpaid work. De-valued work becomes what Marx calls an “immanent...antithesis” within the generalisation of commodity production and exchange. The globalisation of commodity relations into new frontiers “works” for capital accumulation by opening new spaces of unpaid work/energy: new opportunities for cheap labour-power, food, energy, and raw materials. Frontiers are not merely empty spaces, but actively produced by capitalists and empires in successive eras: they are necessary because without new frontiers of Cheap Nature, the costs of production rise, and the rate of accumulation falls. Capitalism's long-run global expansion has been necessary because it has – until today – succeeded in getting human and extra-human natures to work for free, or as close to free as possible. Modernity's commodity frontiers have been epoch-making because they extended the zone of appropriation *faster* than the zone of commodification. This was the crucial dialectic that Marx put his finger on in addressing the contradictions of the working day: the tendency towards “industrial pathology” could be counteracted by incorporating “physically uncorrupted” human natures into the world proletariat. In sum, not only does capitalism *have* frontiers; *it's* a frontier civilisation.

It will consequently not suffice to identify the influence of abstract social labour as an “economic” phenomenon. This remains pivotal. But we can go further. Abstract social labour, in this reading, is the *economic expression* of the law of value, which is unworkable without strategies of appropriating Cheap Nature. To be clear, it is *capital* – not I – who reduces human unpaid work, especially in social reproduction, to the status of “nature.” The appropriation of Cheap Nature must outpace – if capitalism is to avoid crisis – the accumulation of capital. Absent a relatively greater appropriation of unpaid work, accumulated capital rapidly becomes *overaccumulated capital*. Hence, in the present conjuncture, the struggle to (re)valorise – or alter-valorise – care work and other forms of social reproduction directly squeeze the accumulation of capital. They are implicitly – potentially – revolutionary.

Why the centrality of unpaid work? Because, in short, the creation of socially necessary labour-time is constituted through a shifting balance of human and extra-human work that is unpaid; *the co-production of nature*, in other words, is constitutive of socially necessary labour-time. Socially necessary labour-time forms and re-forms in and through the web of life. Capitalism's landscape transformations, in their epoch-making totality, would have been unthinkable without new ways of mapping space, controlling time, and cataloguing external nature – and they are inexplicable solely in terms of world-market or class-structural change. The law of value, far from reducible to abstract social labour, finds its necessary conditions of self-expansion through the creation and subsequent appropriation of cheap human and extra-human natures. If capital is to forestall the rising costs of production, these movements of appropriation must be secured through extra-economic procedures and processes.

By this I mean something more than the recurrent waves of primitive accumulation that we have come to accept as a cyclical phenomenon of capitalism. These also remain pivotal. But between our now cherished dialectic of [“expanded reproduction”](#) and [“accumulation by dispossession”](#) are those knowledges and associated practices committed to the mapping, quantifying,

and rationalising of human and extra-human natures in service to capital accumulation. The term I have nominated for these practices is [abstract social nature](#).

Thus the trinity: abstract social labour, abstract social nature, primitive accumulation. This is the relational core of capitalist world-praxis. And the work of this unholy trinity? Produce cheap natures. Extend the zone of appropriation. In sum, to deliver labour, food, energy, and raw materials – the Four Cheaps – faster than accumulating the mass of surplus capital derived from the exploitation of labour-power. Why? Because the rate of exploitation of labour-power (within the commodity system) tends to exhaust the life-making capacities that enter into the immediate production of value. Capital is indifferent to the Cartesian divide. As Marx writes:

“Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, *in the same way* as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.” (my emphasis added)

We can now connect the dots. Value relations incorporate a double movement to exploitation and appropriation. Within the commodity system, the exploitation of labour-power reigns supreme. But this supremacy is only possible, given its tendency toward self-exhaustion, to the degree that the appropriation of unpaid work counteracts this tendency. It has been a difficult process to discern because value *relations* are more expansive than the immediate production of the value-*form* (the commodity). The generalisation of commodity production has historically proceeded through an expansionary web of value relations whose scope and scale is necessarily much broader than the immediate process of production. The problem of capitalist development is one of the uneven globalisation of wage-work *dialectically joined* to what [Philip McMichael](#) referred to as the “generalisation of its conditions of reproduction”. The difficulty in pursuing such an analysis has been rooted in the dualisms immanent to modern thought. To rethink capitalism – as a world-ecology of capital and nature, power and re/production – is to transcend the man/woman, nature/society boundaries upon which the whole edifice of modernist thought depends. For not only do we need to unify the distinct yet mutually formative dialectics of human work under capitalism through the nexus of paid/unpaid work – “productive” and “reproductive” work. We also need to recognise that the dynamism of capitalism has owed everything to appropriating and co-producing ever more creative configurations of human and extra-human work across the *longue durée*.

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