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## Marxism, Culture and the Measurement of Value

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# WORKING PAPERS ON CAPITAL AS POWER

No. 2015/02

## **Marxism, Culture and the Measurement of Value**

James McMahon

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## **Marxism, Culture and the Measurement of Value**

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### **Abstract**

Various studies of mass culture use the Marxist labour theory of value to conceptualize how capital is being accumulated from cultural production and its broader social and immaterial dimensions. However, there is a significant methodological problem that lingers. The issue stems from the concept of economics and, more technically, the definition of capital. If economic value is conceptualized as a *magnitude of productivity*, theorists must follow through on a series of steps, both logical and empirical. Unfortunately, this basic assumption about the nature of capital creates an array of problems for the theorist that is interested to know, in more concrete detail, how the social relations of culture are theoretically relevant to capital accumulation. Essentially, there is no solid ground for Marxism, of various sorts, to claim that socially necessary abstract labour time is the essence behind the heterogeneous appearances of commodities, prices and profit. And as this paper demonstrates, this problem affects theories that are using Marxism to explain the economic value of artistry, creativity, advertising, consumer desire and other aspects of culture. Moreover, since the problem goes to the roots of the Marxist method, theoretical dilemmas about the labour theory of value precede any subsequent modification to the definitions of labour and productivity in cultural activity.

### **Introduction**

There does not appear to be a simple method to explain how the world of mass culture creates value for capitalist investment. Part of the complication has to do with the object of study. On the one hand, we have the material production of culture, which appears to be “obeying the same rules of production as any other producer of commodities” (Bernstein 2001, p.9). On the other hand, mass culture is also treated as a social nexus of production *and* consumption, of material objects *and* immaterial properties, such as meaning and desire. Are some or all of these aspects of culture relevant to a theory of capital accumulation?

Another complication has to do with how the study of culture is ripe for interdisciplinary approaches. An interdisciplinary approach, as such, is certainly not the problem. Rather, each theorist has the freedom, for better or worse, to create a constellation of concepts that broadly draw from the intellectual branches of culture, economics and politics. What constellation of ideas are we looking to develop? How will a combination of ideas explain capital accumulation from culture?

In light of these complications, a common anchor for many political economic theories of culture is Marxism's value theory. Indeed, Marx's labour theory of value is available for contemporary use, should the theorist feel that the business of mass culture is dependent, like so many other modern businesses, on the mode of production and the exploitation of labour. Alternatively, the intellectual development of Marxism has opened the door for a political economic theory of culture to reinterpret the aspects of culture that are productive inputs in valorization. Part of this reinterpretation has to do with Marx's limited attention to the productivity of artistic and cultural labour. It is also the case that the historical development of capitalism changes how one would adopt Marx's ideas to the business of culture. These ideas include: social reproduction, advertising and branding, immaterial labour, and consumer desire. While concepts like social reproduction or immaterial labour are sometimes used to modify the meaning of value creation, as was understood by Marx, these acts of alteration are not automatically perceived as taboo because Marx was already mixing the dimensions of politics, economics and culture with enthusiasm (Best & Paterson 2009).

However, there is a lingering methodological problem that will nag Marxist explanations of culture and capital accumulation. The problem is not with descriptions of ideology, broadly defined. Nor is it a problem that contemporary theories of culture are finding reasons to incorporate meaning, desire and other immaterial aspects of culture into an explanation of capital accumulation. Rather, the issue stems from the concept of economics and, more technically, the definition of capital. If economic value is conceptualized as a *magnitude of productivity*, theorists must follow through on a series of steps, both logical and empirical.

Unfortunately, this basic assumption about the nature of capital creates an array of problems for the theorist that is interested to know, in more concrete detail, how the social relations of culture are theoretically relevant to capital accumulation.

As a general method of analysis, a theory of value must determine (1) the nature of value, the source of equivalency between commodities; (2) what produces value, in distinction from what only uses or transfers already existing value; and (3) how much value each productive factor is contributing. In Marx's hands, these general tasks of value theory are translated into more specific tasks. Marx's labour theory of value must (1) reduce concrete labour to a universal unit of measure, socially necessary abstract labour; (2) determine what types of labour are productive; and (3) explain how prices reflect a chain of labour inputs.

Without any way to reasonably satisfy these three tasks, there is no solid ground for Marxism, of various sorts, to claim that socially necessary abstract labour time is the essence behind the heterogeneous appearances of commodities, prices and profit. As this paper demonstrates, this problem affects theories that are using Marxism to explain the economic value of culture. Moreover, since the above tasks are at the roots of the Marxist method, theoretical dilemmas about the labour theory of value precede any subsequent modification to the definitions of labour and productivity in cultural activity. Thus, methodological issues that surround the empirical measurement of exchange value are not solved when labour power is redefined to reflect the broader scope of cultural activity. For example, there is the issue of concrete, creative labour not fitting easily into what Marx imagined as simple labour. There is also the issue of *where* value is created in cultural processes. While some argue that value is created on the "factory floor" of cultural production, in the offices and studios that hire creative workers to use their imaginative powers for a wage, others will expand the definition of labour to include aspects of mass culture that are not commonly included. In this modified version of the labour theory of value, culture that is subsumed under capital is a "social factory" and ideology and the participation of consumers are said to be productive factors in the valorization process.

This paper is composed of three main parts. The first part establishes that Marxist political economy should be critiqued on the basis of whether we can objectively measure abstract labour time. In fact, if the real object of critique is capitalism, not Marx, an immanent critique of the labour theory of value is actually in the spirit of Marx's critical method. This critique also is fair game if Marxism does not simply explain the contradictions of capitalism from a moral or political standpoint—it makes claims about the logic of capital, the movements of social bodies and the structural tendencies of the capitalist mode of production (if *a*, then *b*).

The next two parts will address the tasks of value theory, as was just outlined above. With respect to the particular tasks of a Marxist labour theory of value, mass culture is an excellent stress test. Mass media is now big business and a theory of capital accumulation should be judged by how, among other things, it explains the labour behind mass produced art and entertainment. In addition, a theory of value that has traditionally emphasized material labour should be judged by how it keeps step with the immaterial and ideological aspects of mass culture, which are, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, ubiquitous aspects of everyday life.

### **Theoretical Assumptions About Capitalist Production**

The Marxist concept of exchange value is only meaningful if value is an objective substance. As a claim about the Marxist labour theory of value, this statement is anything but simple. Just as, for Marx, capital is not a “thing,” the objective nature of value is not defined as something outside or above the historical processes of capitalism, which are constantly in motion (Harvey 2006, p.38; Postone 1996, p.124). Yet, value must be objective because socially necessary labour time, one of Marx's most important concepts, cannot be subjective. Value is denominated in units of labour time (5 hours of labour, 2 days of labour...), and, for Marx, these units of labour time are expressions not of concrete labour, but of the average productivity of a competitive system. A “socially average unit of labour-power” is the emergent property of individual capitalists behaving as competitors:

The division of labour within society brings into contact independent producers of commodities, who acknowledge no authority other than that of competition, of the coercion exerted by the pressure of their reciprocal interests, just as in the animal kingdom the ‘war of all against all’ more or less preserves the conditions of existence for every species (Marx 1990, p.477).

Just as the mouse cannot appeal to the hawk to arrest the natural law of predation and the “circle of life,” individual capitalists, in the Marxist worldview, cannot buck social competition over material productivity. As Paul Baran clarified in a letter to Herbert Marcuse, socially necessary abstract labour time is nothing less than a system-wide average:

The fact that all profits are subject to *averaging* in the arithmetical sense is not the issue. *Ex post* for purposes of some calculations you can average out the profits of your corner grocer and of GM—this is of no consequence. Marx assumed—and rightly so for a competitive economy—that the averaging out process takes place *in reality* (not merely in statistics), i.e. that equal capitals earn equal returns in different employments *in reality* (Baran 1954).

This paper makes critiques on the assumption that this claim of objectivity is important to Marxism. Thus, for the remainder of this section, let us consider what the Marxist labour theory of value presumes to measure.

First, value is an invariant measure of abstract labour time. Whether it is constant capital, the means of subsistence or any other form of expression, a quantity of value is a quantity of labour time:

How, then, is the magnitude of [abstract human labour] to be measured? By means of the quantity of the ‘value-forming substance’, the labour, contained in the article. This quantity is measured by its duration, and the labour-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days etc (Marx 1990, p.129).

As Castoriadis points out (1984, p.270), this is the only way for Marxism to put different capitalist processes under the same “economic laws” of productivity. For example, the suggestion that the organic composition of capital has a tendency to rise over time requires that two points in the history of capitalism, however distant, can be compared with the same set of formulas. Similarly, if Canadian and Japanese labour are both “variable capital,” they are identical with respect to the *unit* of measurement. To be sure, the magnitudes between Canadian and Japanese labour power can differ, as the reproduction of labour power, for Marx, depends “on the

level of civilization attained by a country.” Yet it is also Marx’s point that we are comparing value with value, like with like: “The value of labour-power can be resolved into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence. It therefore varies with the value of the means of subsistence, i.e., with the quantity of labour-time required to produce them” (Marx 1990, p.276). In other words, when we are comparing the values of labour powers in different countries, we apply the same formal method to different historical content: “in a given country at a given period,” we break the means of subsistence down into smaller quantities of labour time.

Second, the units of labour time are expressions of an “identical social substance, human labour” (Marx 1990, p.138). This statement is the prelude to Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism. Because of a separation between production (privately owned means of production) and exchange (commodities brought to market), Marx’s critique of capitalism has an added layer: the reification of a process that is social, not natural. However, commodity fetishism is the mystification of a process that is both social and objective. Just as “gravity asserts itself” when objects fall to the ground, the “labour-time socially necessary to produce [commodities] asserts itself as a regulative law of nature” (Marx 1990, p.168). That Marx, the critic of commodity fetishism and reification, likens the averaging process of socially necessary labour time to a law of nature is no accident. Marx’s answer to the misinformed bourgeois economist, who has no explanation for why two commodities are equal in value, remains a measure of material productivity whereby “different kinds of private labour ... are continually being reduced to the quantitative proportions in which society requires them” (1990, p.168). In fact, Marx’s faith in the measurability of labour time was also carried over into some of his speculations about the future stages of communism (Castoriadis 1984).

In addition to fusing his theory of class struggle with a structural analysis of economic exploitation, the labour theory of value was the means for Marx to develop an immanent critique of the capitalist mode of production. He wanted to unearth the contradictions that will still exist even when every commodity,

including labour power, is exchanged at its value. For this critique to work, let alone be immanent in nature, socially necessary abstract labour time cannot be an obscure measurement. As Aristotle argues (1999, bk.1, 3, 1094b), “the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows.... [It] is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [merely] persuasive arguments from a mathematician.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, we can demand a degree of exactness for the labour theory of value because Marx repeatedly explains the laws of capital on the assumption that exchange value is a quantifiable proportion between commodities:

Let the value of the linen remain constant, while the value of the coat changes. If, under these circumstances, the labour-time necessary for the production of the coat is doubled, as a result, for instance, of a poor crop of wool, we should have, instead of 20 yards of linen = 1 coat, 20 yards of linen =  $\frac{1}{2}$  coat. If, on the other hand, the value of the coat sinks by one half, then 20 yards of linen = 2 coats (Marx 1990, p.145).

Furthermore, labour time is added, subtracted, multiplied and divided as if the integers of value mean something. Marx claims that we can add commodities together to find the “total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of commodities...” (1990, p.129). We can also divide the value of the means of subsistence into the values contained in a bundle of commodities (1990, p.276). Likewise, since labour time is a measure of (productive) duration, an hour of abstract labour can be broken down into minutes of labour, just as it is possible for hours to become days, and days to become weeks.

Lastly, a system of values is its own social substance because it is treated as something different than symbolic expressions of a price system. This aspect need not take us all the way to the infamous “transformation problem.” Rather, the basic starting point is just as significant. As Castoriadis reminds us (1984, p.265), the strong influence of Hegel on Marx does not allow us to assume that Marx used the terms “appearance,” “substance” and “essence” naively. Value is the essence behind the appearance of equivalence—other economists, according to Marx, made the

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<sup>1</sup> The use of this quotation is inspired by Castoriadis’ interpretation of Aristotle (1984).

mistake of confusing the value-form of commodities with the value of commodities (Harvey 2006, pp.9–13).

Having assumed to have properly understood the nature of value, Marx makes all sorts of claims that could never be corroborated through price alone. For example, jobs of all types come with remuneration, but only some forms of labour produce value; some commodities have prices but no value; or, some commodities, like diamonds, have value but their prices might never be “proportional” to their real values (Marx 1990, p.130). Moreover, the ontological difference between value (essence) and price (appearance) allows for changes in one to not automatically be reflected in the other. The surface of the price system could be stable or turbulent, but the added task of a value theorist is to determine whether values remain constant when nominal prices remain constant, or if, beneath a stable level of prices, values are changing this way or that. Indeed, the difference between the purchase of labour power and the use of human labour for valorization opens the door to a situation where wage rates remain constant but the rate of exploitation is fluctuating with changes to the intensity of work (Robinson 1976, pp.38–42). Politically, such potential to increase the exploitation of labour, even in theory, plays into the revolutionary hands of the Marxist worldview. Logically and empirically, however, the more fundamental step involves the effect of increasing productivity on the *values* of money and commodities, including labour power. This step in the theory goes well beyond nominal prices because it involves Marx’s decision to outline the purchase of labour power, the production of variable capital *and* the rate of exploitation in the same language of *value* (Robinson 1976, p.39).

### **Concrete Labour to Simple Abstract Labour**

As was established above, value is an invariant measure of labour time. Whether it is measuring labour time on a movie set, a car factory or a chemical plant, each unit of value is measure of the same thing, abstract labour. As the common denominator of qualitatively different labour processes, abstract labour, in a Marxist framework, is expressed through exchange. More specifically, abstract

labour refers to socially necessary labour time. According to Marx, “socially necessary” is “labour time which is necessary on the average.” This means no actually existing factory, office or plant is the fixed benchmark of “socially necessary” labour. Rather, two commodities are exchanged in reference to a historical social average: “Socially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society” (Marx 1990, p.129).

In his engagement with Aristotle, Marx understands that his theory of value is undermined if the source of value, human labour, is itself incommensurable. If the equivalency of exchange (e.g., 1 house = 5 beds) is based in labour time, things fall apart if the different forms of labour (the builder and the carpenter) are each valued by a different *unit* of productivity. Thus, for the theorist using Marx’s labour theory of value, the first task at hand it is to reduce concrete labour to abstract labour. Since value is not a measure of qualitatively different use-values and socially necessary labour time is itself a social abstraction of different concrete processes, the reduction of concrete labour to abstract labour is the means to treat value as a homogenous social substance. Tailoring and weaving, for example, are the same in a “physiological sense”: they are each “a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.” (Marx 1990, p.134).

With respect to mass culture, methodological problems surround the reduction of concrete labour to abstract labour. In fact, these problems arise right out of gate, when we begin to think about the basic elements of the concept “abstract labour.”

### ***Creativity and Artistry?***

The first problem is how one abstracts from any form of concrete labour that is unique because its creativity appears to be singular. No doubt, this problem is not exclusive to cultural or artistic labour. How is a biological yardstick—brains, nerves, muscles—helpful when the concrete labour of a doctor or a shoe maker is always a

complex composite of our biological capacities? Yet, in the realm of art and culture, the problem of reducing human creativity to abstract labour is acute.

Having formulated a *general* theory of capital, Marx excluded works of art for being exceptional commodities. Like other forms of immaterial labour, artistic labour was not yet, in the eyes of Marx, formally subsumed under capital. Instead, artistic labour was in a “transitional” stage (Marx n.d.). Some artists fit under a theory of capitalist production because they were members of “joint-work” that was done for the purpose of valorizing capital. But artistic labour, as an umbrella category, remained a tricky grey area because the category included the traditional (ideal) artist, like Milton or Balzac.

As a consequence, the valorization of artistic labour is already unclear if contemporary artistic work does not always function as “joint-work.” For example, what can the labour time of Picasso tell us about the value of *Guernica*? How do Picasso’s artistic skills rate against the social average degree of artistic skill? What was, in 1937, the social average degree of artistic skill? It matters little if *Guernica* took ten days or ten years to be completed; with no other *Guernicas* for comparison, it can never be determined whether the time it took Picasso to paint this unique artwork was socially necessary. And without a determinable quantity of value according to abstract labour time, the exchange value of *Guernica* cannot be expressed as *x* coats, *y* yards of linen, *z* pounds of coffee, etc.<sup>2</sup>

More significantly, much of the artistic work in mass culture is a hybrid of Marx’s distinction between classical bourgeois art and artistic labour that has been incorporated into the capitalist mode of production. For each branch of cultural “joint-work”—music, film, theatre, etc.—there are artists who draw (high) wages because their proper names cannot be confused with anyone else—just like Milton, Balzac or Picasso. Notwithstanding any opinions we have about the aesthetic quality of mass culture, the singularity of artistic labour shines at the top of its pyramid, at the heights of celebrity. John Cleese, for instance, is an exemplary comedian who

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of theoretical assumptions that root the prices of art on its production, see (Suhail & Phillips 2012). Similar to this paper, Suhail and Phillips develop this critique from the perspective of the capital-as-power approach.

cannot be substituted with even Michael Palin or Terry Jones, two other members of Monty Python. Or put another way, you are left with nothing if you remove all of Cleese's singular traits from his ability to produce (the use value) laughter. He was on the BBC because *his* brain, nerves and muscles produced comedy.

To some, the potential singularity of artistic creativity is not a methodological problem but, in fact, the solution to understanding the accumulation of capital from mass culture. For Bill Ryan, artistic work falls outside the definition of abstract labour, even when the “transitional stage” of the nineteenth century is now past. According to Ryan, beneath the particular appearances of labour struggles in the entertainment sector is a more essential contradiction that is unveiled through abstraction. Focusing on the universal contradiction between abstract and concrete labour, Ryan states:

The key to understanding the artist-capitalist contradiction lies in grasping the fact that as historically and ideologically constituted, the artist represents the special case of concrete labour which is ultimately irreducible to abstract value. This is because the structures of art make artists incompatible with the structures of capital. The employment of artists in whatever technical form necessitates recognizing and preserving their named, concrete labour. They cannot be employed as labour-power, as anonymous production factors functioning under the sway of capital (Ryan 1992, p.44).

Art can certainly create friction between different social interests, as there is no *a priori* necessity that the intentions behind artistic production will resonate with established social values. Ryan, however, transforms this possible friction between art and business into a structural contradiction of capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, Ryan finds the struggles between artists and capitalists in mass culture to have a common characteristic:

Unlike many other types of workers, capital is unable to make the artist completely subservient to its drive for accumulation. The reason is simple. Since art is centred upon the expressive, individual artist, artistic objects must appear as the product of recognizable persons; the *concrete and named* labour of the artist is always paramount and must be preserved. As socially constituted, artists appear to capital as the antithesis of labour-power, antagonistic to incorporation in the capitalist labour process as *abstract* labour (Ryan 1992, p.41).

Although artworks are the objectification of expended labour, the concrete particulars of artistic production cannot, for Ryan, be flattened into simple abstract labour.

However, much like a drop of ink in a glass of clear water, the very idea that *some* creative labour is irreducible to abstract labour dirties the whole picture of contemporary cultural production. Who is an artist and who is not? I personally agree with James Agee's (2005) praise of silent cinema's four most recognizable comedians—Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon—but where is the platform for me to state that none of their concrete labour translated into socially necessary abstract labour time? What if someone thinks that, of the four, only Chaplin and Keaton are artists? This second discrimination implies that the labour times of Lloyd and Langdon were formally subsumed under capital. Or what of artists that, while exceptional in their craft, will never have the same publicity as prize-winning writers, movie stars, pop singers or fashion designers? The whole idea of "irreducibility" plays on our imagination of artists stamping their "signatures" on the artworks they create. Consequently, what of the most exceptional film composers, make-up artists, set designers and other artists working in the "background" of mass culture? Assuming that we can even agree which set designers are artists and which ones are formally subsumed under capital, does the theoretical place of someone like Hans Dreier depend on whether moviegoers recognize his name?

To some, these questions might appear as nitpicking. However, labour that is subsumed under capital is, in the Marxist framework, beholden to socially necessary abstract labour time. For Marx, the competitive function of creating and appropriating surplus value forces capitalists to design and re-design their manufacturing processes on the basis of what, at a particular moment in time, is socially necessary. According to Marx, if a "capitalist has a foible for using golden spindles instead of steel ones, the only labour that counts for anything in the value of yarn remains that which would be required to produce a steel spindle, because no more is necessary under the given conditions" (Marx 1990, p.295). Thus, if it is unclear how artists of various types are even subsumed under capital, it is unclear

how socially necessary labour time is the system-wide mechanism that determines what is “excessive” in the production of mass culture. This issue resurfaces when we come to the concept of productive labour.

These questions, and the many that follow, are relevant for a labour theory of value that was originally constructed in the nineteenth century. Political economic theories of mass culture that rely on Marxist economics must twist and turn because commodities in *Capital* are generic—unbranded, colourless and flavourless. The fame and fortune of celebrity artists, whose proper names and images are now marketable brands, proves incompatible with a theory of capital accumulation that originally marginalized use value, subjective desire and human psychology from its *measure* of exchange value. Even if “a use-value of some kind has to act as its bearer,” value is “independent of the particular use-value by which it is borne...” (Marx 1990, p.295).

### ***Complex Labour***

Even if we assume that artistic creativity poses no problems for the accumulation of capital from mass culture, the concept of abstract labour is still mired in controversy. “In the interests of simplification,” writes Marx in the first chapter of *Capital*, “we shall henceforth view every form of labour-power directly as simple labour-power...” (1990, p.135). Anticipating that abstract labour time would be the common denominator of differently skilled jobs, Marx argued that skilled labour time is only ever a multiple of *simple* labour. Since two different commodities bear the same social substance, value, the reduction of skilled to simple labour is “constantly being made. A commodity may be the outcome of the most complicated labour, but through its *value* it is posited as equal to the product of simple labour, hence it represents only a specific quantity of simple labour” (1990, p.135).

The controversy surrounds the method by which we reduce skilled labour to simple labour.<sup>3</sup> Somehow, we must be able to determine how much each type of

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<sup>3</sup> For a critical examination of the Marxist skilled labour-unskilled labour relationship, see (Nitzan & Bichler 2009, pp.141–144).

labour productively contributes to a pool of value. Yet, we cannot simply count hours of work because, as Nitzan and Bichler point out, “most, if not all, labour processes involve some skilled labour” (Nitzan & Bichler 2009, p.141). Skilled labour is a wrench in the gears because we must first know the quantitative relationship between skilled labour and simple labour—i.e., by how many multiples is skilled labour a quantity of simple labour.

Unfortunately, the method of reduction is problematic from both the input and output sides of skilled labour. Reduction from the input side often relies on the costs of education and training. For example, Hilferding (1966) argued that the ratio of skilled to simple labour is equivalent to the costs required to make skilled labour what it is. However, not only does Hilferding presume that education and training can already be counted in units of simple labour, the only “hours” of education that can be counted are the ones that are eventually paid for by a capitalist. In other words, my formal university education can hypothetically be broken down into labour time ( $x$  hours of education multiplied by  $y$  years of schooling) because it is a commodity with a price tag. Yet, the exchange value of any informal education or the layers of socialization from one’s family, community and culture are obscure because they are *free* (Nitzan & Bichler 2009, p.143).

The presence of non-commodified education and socialization undermines the logic of equating skill with the labour time of training. And with respect to development of one’s artistic creativity and acumen, the issue is even more dizzying. Assuming that Hilferding’s argument is relevant to any artistic training that comes at a cost, what of internships, apprenticeships or any other training that is not exactly paid for by a future employer? Just as problematically, Hilferding sees the transfer of education to skilled labour as a linear process:

Regarded from its standpoint of society, unskilled labour is latent as long as it is utilized for the formation of skilled labour power. Its working for society does not begin until the skilled labour power it has helped to produce becomes active. Thus in this single of the expenditure of skilled labour a sum of unskilled labours is expended, and in this way there is created a sum of value and surplus value corresponding to the total value which were requisite to produce the skilled labour power and its function, the skilled labour (Hilferding 1966, p.145).

But what if, from year to year, the line between work and education is repeatedly blurred? Film directors could have gone to film school, but they can also receive a lifelong “informal” education from an endless love of old and new cinema. Or an artist can be part of an intellectual milieu, such as the one described by Stefan Zweig in his memoir, *The World of Yesterday* (1943). In such a social environment, a multitude of artists are finding inspiration from their constant interaction with each other. Here it seems that labour and education are two sides of the same coin. In fact, Aristotle might call this ongoing cycle of artistic virtue “habituation.”

Reducing skilled labour from the output side is even more problematic. As Nitzan and Bichler point out (2009, p.142), wage income is the only measure that can be used to compare the productivity of qualitatively different skills. Consequently, we are using price differentials to explain the distribution of labour power, rather than the other way around. And if we carry this logic into the world of mass culture, the great inequality of wage income suggests that a celebrity earning \$20 million per year is producing 250 times the value of someone earning \$80,000 per year, who herself is producing 4 times the value of someone earning \$20,000 per year.

According to Harvey (2006), this type of criticism misses the mark because it takes the wrong perspective. By focusing on the historical existence of skilled labour, we risk overlooking how the “reduction from skilled to simple labour is more than a mental construct; it is a real observable process, which operates with devastating effects upon the labourers” (Harvey 2006, p.59). Thus, we are apparently entangled in a theoretical problem that Harvey argues is short-circuited by the realities of a repressive capitalist system. At the heart of capitalism is a systemic process whereby capitalists mechanize, rationalize, standardize and de-skill labour:

The essential measure of the reduction of skilled to simple labour lies in the degree to which capitalism has created skills that are easily reproducible and easily substitutable. All of the evidence suggests that this has been the direction in which capitalism has been moving, with substantial islands of resistance here and innumerable pockets of resistance there. To the extent that the reduction of skilled to simple labour is still in the course of being accomplished, we have to conclude that capitalism is in the course of

becoming more true to the law of value implied in its dominant mode of production (Harvey 2006, p.119).

But does this systemic process of de-skilling erase our methodological problem? Again, the particularities of mass culture dirty the cleanliness of Harvey's solution.

First, Harvey's reasoning, which explicitly borrows from Marx and Braverman, is antithetical to Ryan's description of the capital-labour relationship in cultural production. For Harvey, Marx's method of just using measures of "simple labour" is "reasonable" because the capitalist system breaks and represses any skill that is monopolizable on the part of the worker (2006, p.119). The outstanding problem, however, is that the business of mass culture seems to embrace and exploit rather than repress and destroy the class of artists that have a virtual monopoly on their fame, image and singular qualities. To be sure, for the majority of creative work that falls outside of this exclusive class of artists, artistic labour is a much more anonymous and precarious activity (Gill & Pratt 2008). At issue, however, is the theoretical conclusion that firms in the business of mass culture are structurally obliged to crush any form of labour that can hold a monopoly on skill. Therefore, the reduction to simple labour remains a methodological problem because the business of mass culture is doing the opposite of what it "should" always be doing: it needs or wants the identifiable, concrete labour of artists to stand out as marks of distinction or non-substitutable brands (Hozic 2001).

In addition to the privilege of popular artists, there is a problem with the generalization that skilled labour is being reduced to simple labour *in reality*. Harvey's interpretation of simple labour builds from Marx's main object of study: nineteenth century industrial manufacturing. Because, individually, each component of the total manufacturing process was often simple, monotonous and mechanical, labour in the "dark satanic mills" of industrial civilization was, from the perspective of capital, easily substitutable. Yet, while Marx's colourful descriptions of factory work are certainly still relevant today, there is now a historical limit to the universalization of his descriptions about the exploitation of *simple* labour. A systemic reduction of skilled to simple labour cannot include any contemporary labour process that is characteristic of what Lewis Mumford calls the "neotechnic

age.” In the last one hundred years, art, engineering, law, medicine, science and technology are complex labour processes, even in their most “simplified” or controlled forms (2010, p.229). In fact, according to Mumford, there is a great need for complex wage labour in the neotechnic age:

Whereas the growth and multiplication of machines was a definite characteristic of the paleotechnic period [~1750-1900], one may already say pretty confidently that the refinement, the diminution, and the partial elimination of the machine is a characteristic of the emerging neotechnic economy (Mumford 2010, p.258).

Consequently, “the qualities the new worker needs,” writes Mumford, “are alertness, responsiveness, an intelligent grasp of the operative parts: in short...an all-round mechanic rather than a specialized hand” (2010, p.227).

### **Productive versus Unproductive Labour**

The ability to distinguish between productive and unproductive labour is important to the Marxist labour theory of value. If “the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is [ignored or] rejected,” writes Mohun, “then other fundamental categories of Marx’s theory lose their theoretical coherence” (Mohun 1996, p.31). “Productive” is being used to refer specifically to the creation of surplus value, and never simply to the physical or mental production of use-values. Only under socialism would the idea of productivity change (Mandel 1976, p.33). Meanwhile, use-value is an important but, ultimately, secondary aspect of capitalism’s law of value. In Marxism, productive labour is exploited labour that valorizes capital.

On the issue of deciding what is and is not productive labour, cultural production proves to be an impediment to the definition of productivity. Theoretically, the Marxist definition of productive labour includes any circumstance where the conditions of artistic and creative production are similar to other forms of wage labour—what is true by definition for other forms of productive labour is good for mass culture. This consistent application of the definition enables Marx to explain why a “literary proletarian” is productive, while John Milton, the great epic

poet, is unproductive (Marx n.d.). Nevertheless, there is spillover. Even if the production of mass culture has been fully incorporated into the capitalist mode of production, mass culture is not just a world of commodities produced for exchange. It is also a system of circulation, where advertising and marketing firms act as intermediaries for productive processes that “created” value directly. Moreover, the ideological and social dimensions of mass culture involve the imaginations and desires of its consumers, whose participation partly create, reproduce and circulate the meaning, symbols and images of this cultural world. What aspects of mass culture are (economically) productive and which ones are not?

### ***Three Definitions of Productive Labour***

The ideological and symbolic aspects of mass culture are sticking points for the Marxist definition of productive labour: both what it is (immediate, immaterial, affective or “social factory”?) and who is valorizing capital (artists, consumers or society as a whole?). There is an anything-but-simple overlap between mass culture and Marx’s definition of productive labour, and this complication has produced disagreements about the nature of valorization in cultural production. By reviewing some of the existing literature, we can see that there are three general methods of defining valorization in cultural production. Each of the definitions has related methodological issues.

The first definition of cultural production tinkers with the labour theory of value, but as minimally as possible (Starosta 2012; Mohun 1996). By not disturbing the concept of production too much, the labour theory of value can retain its universality. According to this definition, we can apply the concept of “immediate producer” to culture and art just as we do to the production of physical commodities, like corn and grain. Thus, terms like “immaterial labour” or “cognitive labour” might modify the type of labour being exploited, but the fundamental tenets of the Marxist labour theory of value remain firmly in place. In other words, immaterial, cognitive or artistic labour is, when subsumed under capital, productive, and if cultural production is carried *beyond* “the point where the value paid by the

capitalist for the labour-power is replaced by an exact equivalent” (Marx 1990, p.302) the capitalist has the opportunity to appropriate the surplus of the created value.

The second definition of cultural production modifies the Marxist concept of productivity in light of a key historical change since the early twentieth century. The proliferation of advertising and marketing has changed the role of circulation since Marx’s time (Baran & Sweezy 1966, p.115). Marx’s argument that each commodity has use value now involves, in the circumstances of the contemporary era, the unceasing sales efforts of firms. Consequently, even if the sales efforts of modern corporations are only an auxiliary to the direct manufacture of commodities, the mode of circulation is now, in this second definition, considered to be productive. Ryan, for instance, infers that it cannot be otherwise for modern consumerism; so many processes of circulation, like advertising and aesthetic design, are *indispensable* “for the conservation of use-value of commodities” (Ryan 1992, p.64).

This conceptualization of valorization, in contrast to the first version, is purposefully taking steps into the broader social world of mass culture. By including circulation in the idea of productivity, workers that mediate the relationship between artist and consumer are considered productive. As Bohm and Land argue, this modification to the definition of productive labour is necessary. Unproductive labour, as it was defined in classical Marxism, included far too much:

Teaching and education in general are clearly part of the reproduction of capitalist value, and should therefore not simply be regarded as ‘unproductive labour’. In a similar way, feminist writers have pointed to the usually unwaged reproductive labor of women doing housework and care work. Equally, we would suggest that artists and cultural workers contribute to the production of capitalist value while falling outside traditional Marxist categories of ‘labour’ (Bohm & Land 2009, p.87).

If the second definition would be described as an expansion of productive labour under capitalism, the third definition of cultural production is expansive to the point of being radically holistic. In the second definition, the valorization of cultural commodities still takes place in the “hidden abode” of privately owned firms, even if this abode now includes advertising, marketing, design and other aspects of the corporate sales effort. By comparison, the third definition of cultural

production demolishes the analytical walls between production, circulation *and* consumption. In this version, the ideological and social dimensions of mass culture are avenues to radically redefine productivity and valorization. Ideology, affect and desire are productive factors (Lazzarato 1996; Gill & Pratt 2008; Haiven 2012). Work and “free-time” are, in the realm of culture, often indistinguishable (Gill & Pratt 2008). Consumption and consumer participation in mass culture produce value (Arvidsson 2005b; Bohm & Land 2012), especially if cultural meaning is esoteric or a mark of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). According to Arvidsson, this vast social network of culture is subsumed under capital by brand management; the latter incorporates the “context of consumption” as a productive factor in valorization (Arvidsson 2005a, p.244).

### ***Problems with the Three Definitions***

The first definition ignores the dynamics of cultural signification and communication at the price of preserving a strict distinction between production and circulation. For example, for Guido Starosta, the mechanical and digital reproduction of culture would never add value; these processes would only *mediate* the value that was first created in the production of prototypes or the “first” copies of artworks:

“The value of the aggregate product [i.e., all the reproductions of a commodity] no longer represents the simple addition of its constituent elements. Instead, the total value is determined ‘first’ and then shared out equally by each individual commodity, which now contains a proportional fraction of the former” (Starosta 2012, p.374).

Similarly, for Simon Mohun, any form of labour that “brings buyers and sellers together” is unproductive, because this form of labour “produces nothing in addition to what is already in existence” (Mohun 1996, p.44). Assuming that a strict separation between production and circulation is, in fact, a reasonable assumption, how could these claims about “primary” value creation ever be applied in empirical research about the businesses of mass culture?

For instance, George Lucas' recent sale of Lucasfilm to Disney for \$4 billion had much to do with the intellectual property of the Star Wars fictional universe, of which many characters, environments and objects were originally created by Lucas in the production of the first three Star Wars films (*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Return of the Jedi*). Is the value of the first three films the "original" commodity that establishes how every subsequent commodity of the Star Wars franchise is an aliquot part of total value? How do we account for the re-use of established characters, such as Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader? Is value being created when reproduction takes place in another medium, such as when the image of Han Solo (Harrison Ford) is printed on t-shirts or movie posters? Or is this just unproductive advertising? When more characters, places and things are added to the Star Wars universe, which aspects are new (productive) and which ones are "already there" (unproductive)? Darth Maul was a new villain for *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, but he is also a particular version of past concepts (e.g., Jedi, the "Darth" prefix, lightsabers, the Force)—what is the proportion between the creation of new value and the mediation of past value?

Consequently, the second definition of cultural production appears to be the solution to the first definition. By stating that the mode of circulation is, in fact, productive, we seem to leave the problem of unproductive labour behind us. However, we now walk with another lingering question: how do we even know that labour in the contemporary institutions of advertising and marketing is productive in a Marxist sense?

The unorthodox inclusion of the mode of circulation into the Marxist labour theory of value rests on the argument that advertising, marketing, branding, artistic creativity and design are now all *necessary* to realize use value. The so-called necessity of it all, however, is difficult to determine. Take for example, the fame of an artist. Tom Cruise is paid \$20 million to star in the summer's next big action-adventure blockbuster. Furthermore, any film with Tom Cruise will incur added costs to advertise and promote both Cruise and the film he stars in. If the labour of Tom Cruise is productive then his singular talents—the fact that there is only one Tom Cruise—somehow add value to the commodity, the movie. Yet, how does one

definitively determine how much value the aura of Tom Cruise added? Moreover, how necessary was the capitalist purchase of Tom Cruise's labour power? If the commodity in the mind of one customer was "a Tom Cruise movie" then the cost of hiring and promoting Tom Cruise was necessary for accumulation. If the movie was watched for other possible reasons—e.g., "I just wanted to watch a good popcorn movie and don't care who the lead actor is"—then it is less clear whether all of the labour surrounding Tom Cruise was superfluous to the realization of use value.<sup>4</sup>

The specific fault of the second definition of cultural production has to do with the decision to *retain* the assumption that capital is a measure of productivity. The circulation and eventual consumption of consumer goods in capitalism draws from the deep wells of social and individual psychology—i.e., desire, fantasy, alienation, bias, predilection, impulse and habit. Yet, if the psychological dimension of consumerism is treated as a factor in productive valorization, we must connect the psychological and ideological effects of advertising, marketing and design to their costs of production.

In the case of the business of mass culture, this connection is elusive. Consumer behavior in capitalism is enveloped in institutional power, which makes it entirely possible that social apathy, injustice, inequality, the length of the working day, stagnant wages, the division of labour, a high concentration of capitalist ownership and other structural aspects of capitalism are also effective in making consumers buy into mass culture. For instance, the business of mass culture is the beneficiary of what Marx discovered in 1844: the persistence of alienated labour causes us to self-estrangle and self-degrade our capacity to express of our species being. In such a situation, human labour is a "mere means" to existence and time away from work is a sanctuary from both physical *and* mental activity (Marx 1988, p.76). Additionally, the family unit, social taboos and a hierarchical distribution of scarcity, both material and immaterial, deflect instinctual energies into socially acceptable forms of sexuality and pleasure (Marcuse 1966, p.35). In fact, it is relevant to the business of mass culture that atomized, immediate forms of

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<sup>4</sup>Although I am using my own hypothetical example, this point of criticism comes from the insights of Nitzan and Bichler, who use "Mexican flowers" as their example (Nitzan & Bichler 2009, p.116).

satisfaction predominate in a system where technological innovation is often barred from satisfying the whole of society *as one community* (McMahon 2011).

These structural aspects of capitalism can effectively limit the range of possibility during free time. Therefore, the blind spot of the second definition of cultural production exists because unless consumer-consciousness is presumed to be identical with what mass culture is selling, exercises in glossy advertising or branding can either be necessary, partially necessary or superfluous to consumer behavior and capital accumulation. Even Adorno, one of the fiercest critics of mass culture, was not willing to make that presumption: “the culture industry has...become total,” but it is “doubtful whether the culture industry and consumer-consciousness can be simply equated with each other” (2004, p.195).

The third definition of cultural production exacerbates the problem of the second definition. In a framework where consumer activity is some sort of productive *input*, the widest definition of cultural production can only fall back on a theory of revealed preferences. To explain, let us first consider the rationale for including the ideology and the subjectivity of consumers in a theory of productivity.

As a set of social significations, a culture depends on the interaction and mutual recognition, either explicitly or tacitly, of its participants. A cultural world is only produced and reproduced if images, ideas, symbols and values function as a *social* imaginary. The business enterprise of modern culture operates on the same logic. As Bohm and Land argue, brands and the symbols and images of mass culture are never “so much things—material artifacts and commodities—as social relations, signifying complexes, frames of action and subjectivity” (2012, p.231). Likewise for Max Haven, the value of Pokémon cards is a good example of why the value of popular cultural objects cannot be found in the costs of material production: “The value of Pokémon cards is clearly imagined. Even in their initial, commodified form, a slip of mass produced, coloured cardboard is by no stretch of the imagination ‘worth’ the money children pay for them” (2012, p.15).

With respect to the substance of economic value, the approach of the third definition is to imagine that valorization takes place in every corner of a cultural world. Society, in this case, is one big “social factory” (Gill & Pratt 2008). With much

of the influence coming from the school of autonomous Marxism, the emphasis is now on “the extent to which emotions, feeling, relationships are ‘put to work’ in post-Fordist capitalism” (Gill & Pratt 2008, p.15). Consequently, consumers are part of mass culture’s “workforce”—their relatively autonomous position in culture helps produce the value of what is eventually consumed (Lazzarato 1996). Bohm and Land use this perspective to explain the value of Apple computers, around which there is a cult of consumption. They state:

Through friendship, play, sex and even love, the production of this cultural, brand value lies beyond the direct control of its owner and managers. Rather, the reproduction of the cultural values and meanings invested in the brand, and its related communities, is secured by the active labour of those consuming the brand and thereby valorizing the brand and contributing to its value (Bohm & Land 2012, p.230).

With respect to a concept of productive labour, the creation, reproduction and reception of cultural and artistic objects are now “articulations of an actual productive cycle” (Lazzarato, 143). For Arvidsson, a physical factory can make material things, but much “of the value of brands derives from the free (in the sense of both the unpaid and autonomous) productivity of consumers” (Arvidsson 2005b, p.130). Capitalists extract surplus-value from cultural activity “by positing the brand as a kind of virtual factory, by giving labour a place where its autonomous productivity more or less directly translates into feedback and information” (Arvidsson 2005b, p.130).

Like the second definition, the methodological problem has little to do with the rationale for showing theoretical interest in the broader social relations of culture. Rather, the issue revolves around the presentation of valorization and productive inputs. By sticking to a theory of productivity, the big question is: how much value is ideology, desire or consumer participation respectively adding to the total value of a commodity? Unfortunately, the only “solution” available is to assume that prices are already indirectly reflecting the ideological and immaterial factors of consumer behavior.

The third definition can only retreat to a version of revealed preferences—i.e., paying for culture at a higher price level “reveals” the ideology and desire

behind the purchase—because so much of this so-called consumer valorization is obscure. Even proponents of the third definition admit to the immeasurability of its inputs (Bohm & Land 2012, p.130). Value cannot be observed directly because, on top of everything else, the “labour” of consumers is unpaid—in fact, they are often paying to participate in a cultural process their emotions and desires are also said to be valorizing! Moreover, the quantitative categories of productivity, such as labour time, are inapplicable to the desires and emotions of consumer behavior. Two people own Adidas shoes, for example; are they valorizing the Adidas brand equally? Are obsessed fans of the Harry Potter novels producing more value than those who read and enjoy the stories with much less intensity? Does so-called value producing consumption need to be reduced to simple labour? Is consumption a skill of various degrees?

As a consequence, the makeshift solution is to work backwards, by first looking at prices. One method is to treat immaterial value as a residual, where brand value is a firm’s market price minus its tangible assets. Or, at the level of individual consumption, the desires and emotions of consumers are revealed through the “premium” price they are willing to pay because this “premium” is the new use-value of cultural commodities:

On a first and most basic level, consumers pay for access to a brand. Within marketing and accounting literature this is usually conceived as the ‘premium price’ that consumers pay for a branded item, with respect to a ‘comparable’ non-branded item (a Nike shoe versus an anonymous shoe, for example). What consumers pay for is access to the communicative potential of the brand, the possibility of inserting the brand in their own assemblage of compatible qualities. The use-value of the brand for the consumer is its value as a means of communicative production (Arvidsson 2005a, p.250).

Looking at price and working backwards, however, creates a faulty logic whereby the value of ideology and other immaterial qualities must be revealed through the prices people are paying for consumer goods. The explanation is supposed to go the other way: how is the ideology, desire and other immaterial aspects of consumer behavior the *cause* of prices? Can the so-called productive value of consumer behavior be verified independently of market prices? Moreover, defining a premium price in contrast to an “anonymous shoe,” for example, is problematic if it is not so

easy to find a “pure” brand-less item that can act as an objective benchmark for differences in value, which we have still not found. For instance, many countries associate luxury and pleasure with the ownership of expensive cars, but where is the generic, anonymous car to reveal to me the value differential of a BMW, Mercedes or Lexus? Even the “average” car, whatever that may be, is branded property.

## **Conclusion**

The methodological issues involving simple labour and productive labour derive from Marxism’s presupposition that capital is fundamentally about the productivity of labour. Marxism assumes that value is a quantity of labour time but, unfortunately, an objective measure of labour values is missing. And for the case of mass culture, what should or should not be included in the concept of valorization seems irresolvable, at least objectively. As we just saw, for instance, the decision to explain consumer behavior with a measure of productivity is creating an irresolvable entanglement of value and price.

The immateriality of mass culture and branding, which are certainly interesting subjects, might be better understood with other political economic assumptions. New assumptions about the political economy of mass culture might also be within reach because theories of capital accumulation, despite other theoretical limitations, are clearly willing to account for the artistry and creativity of labour, as well as the social and ideological dimensions of mass culture. As much as this paper does not provide an alternative framework, it shows how it is problematic to leave a theory of mass culture sitting in the house of Marxism. At one end of the house, we find theorists jumping right into the formal logic of value theory. Here we have arguments about logical consistency or an array of models—from simple commodity production to expanded reproduction (e.g., Wolff 1981; Harris 1972). Problem is, these types of arguments *already* presuppose that value is measured in labour time and that there is a difference between the value of labour

power as a commodity and the value that labour creates in production. In other words, any problems involving empirical research is downplayed or overlooked.

In another room, we find the labour theory of value being treated as just another *quality* of Marx's social philosophy. Shane Gunster, for example, introduces his otherwise excellent study on the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools with the following remark: "It is impossible to measure with any precision the extent to which human cultural activities are actually commodified...." An interesting claim, especially in light of what immediately follows: "we can, however, say that the systematic pressure to harmonize culture with commodity is inescapable" (Gunster 2004, p.4). Building a theory of mass culture this way is not helpful because the descriptive and conceptual language is nevertheless relying on the quantitative dimension of Marx's theory, regardless if this dimension is now an indirect source. Indeed, Marxist social philosophy is still orbiting around the concepts of *equivalent* commodity exchange or exploited labour *time*. It is still assumed that capital is about the growth and appropriation of *more and more* surplus value, which is, itself, the *remainder* of a *greater sum* of produced value. And what of arguments about the structural imperative to *increase* the exploitation of labour, or Braverman's argument (1998, p.69) that workers will often "thwart efforts to realize to the *full* the potential inherent in their labour power"? How does a measurable *ratio* between real and fictitious capital not hide beneath the surface when it is claimed that only *parts* of capitalist business, like Wall Street or the "FIRE" sector (finance, insurance, and real estate), are highlighted for their speculative character (Haiven 2011)? Things fall apart if the substance of these descriptions can never be quantified and empirically measured.

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