

Head Hits Concrete

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Abstractions? In this ecology?

With fires and floods destroying communities, with governments designating certain social groups as expendable during pandemics and crises, can we afford lofty concepts in times like these?

In particular, which is to say in concrete terms, what use can we make of Marx's theory of value, as a tool for understanding and changing our current social conditions?

The Métis marxist scholar and organizer Howard Adams once said that "as Métis people, it is important that we sit down and do some abstract thinking and theorizing about our position in this system...and how we're going to get out of it."

Nowadays, if we're feeling generous, we can say this recommendation applies to all of our relations, not just those of us lucky enough to be Métis.

What's value?

For economist and sociologist Diane Elson, the key political implication of Marx's value theory is that it can help us understand and overcome capitalist exploitation.

But what did Marx mean by value in the first place, and how does it fit into an anti-capitalist analysis?

Toward the end of his life, Marx was adamant that in his book *Capital* he hadn't started out from "concepts" or the "concept of value," but instead from the "simplest social form in which the product of labour presents itself in contemporary society...the commodity."

In capitalist societies, almost everything is exchanged through the medium of money for almost everything else. Qualitatively different things are exchanged constantly, in various proportions, which shows that they objectively have something in common. This common social factor of commodities is what Marx described as value.

Marx used the analogy of weight to illustrate his point. Two very different kinds of objects, sugar and iron are both subject to gravity and can be equated with each other on that basis, in terms of an abstract quantity: how much they weigh.

Gravity isn't a kind of object, but a relation between objects (and energy) that affects objects to a particular degree, which is represented as quantities of weight.

Where value diverges from this analogy is that it's "purely social," as Marx put it. Value isn't an element of the physical mass or of any other material characteristic of commodities, but derives from a particular system of production.

The social determinants of value are human labour in general (in the abstract) and how long it takes on average for workers to produce a given good or service.

The only quantitative measure we actually end up seeing of value is money, expressed in terms of price. Money and commodities are different forms of value, which are exchangeable with each other.

Price can and does diverge from value due to constant market irregularities, said Marx, but nonetheless value and the socially necessary labour time of production remain the centre of gravity around which price orbits.

According to Marx, capital is the circular movement and transformation of value: from the form of money, into the form of a commodity, into more money.

In the *Grundrisse*, he depicted the circulation of capital as “a spiral, an expanding curve, not just a circle.”

Competition between privately-owned businesses is a motor force of development. Propelled by this force, among others, capital doesn't just circulate but accumulates exponentially, leading eventually to the global social and ecological catastrophe of today.

What's the use?

In her 1979 article “The Value Theory of Labour,” Diane Elson argues that Marx's theory “enables us to analyse capitalist exploitation in a way that overcomes the fragmentation of the experience of that exploitation.”

People can already understand something is wrong, she suggests, but in their struggles they don't necessarily make all the connections they could. Struggles tend to be split between what's considered unfair money relations in terms of cost of living and unfair conditions in the workplace. But the process of exploitation is actually a unity, says Elson.

Communist thinker Bruno Astarian contends that workers experience value primarily in the form of capital. Workers are constrained by capital not just in terms of standardization and competition in the workplace, but also on the commute to and from work, and when looking for housing and necessities. These limitations stem, he says, from “the separation of workers from the means of production.”

For earlier marxist writers like Raya Dunayevskaya and C.L.R. James, it was important to distinguish Marx's analysis as being not a labour theory of value, but instead a value theory of labour.

This is a way of saying that, as Dunayevskaya pointed out, Marx wasn't concerned only with the superficial fact of the purchase and sale of labour power on the market, but also with the compositional fact that under capitalism, the capacity for work takes the form of a commodity.

According to Marx, acts of labour preserve and transfer existing value at the same time as they add new value. Most importantly, workers are hired because their labour adds more value to commodities than it costs the capitalist to employ their labour power.

Wages are paid for the time a worker spends at work, or by the piece, or per delivery. The commodities (including services) that are produced, like the means of production (including control of app platforms), belong to the capitalists, not the workers. The property relations of the capitalist system facilitate the specific way that exploitation is carried out, and these relations are reproduced by the system.

Workers are paid for their ability to work, not the value of what they produce or the services they provide, because those don't ultimately belong to them. The capitalist pockets the value added by workers as surplus and tries to pay them as little as possible. Just enough to keep them coming back to work.

Beneath the superficial appearance of equality on the market, of workers freely selling their labour power, lies unequal property relations. Products and services are only commodities, said Marx, if they are produced privately, for sale to others – meaning through private property relations and the market. Most workers have nothing to sell but their own labour power, their ability to work for others.

Actual labour isn't measured with a clock but with a surveillance camera, a motion tracker, and the eyes of the supervisor. What money measures, however imprecisely via price, is the value of commodities – the objectification of average labour time – not the characteristics of each act of labour.

In the capitalist workplace, we function as abstract workers more than as specific persons. The present danger isn't so much that we will be replaced with robots as that we've already been reduced to sentient automatons, free to compete for miserable survival, and free to be cast aside and forgotten when we've outlived our usefulness for capital.

Social materialism

In the final chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital*, which touched on settler-colonial property relations, Marx wrote that “capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, which is mediated through things.”

Today, we can continue to develop our analysis of social and material relations in areas that Marx, in his time, only briefly examined, such as settler colonialism and service work.

In *Capital*, Marx indeed analysed, however incompletely, the commodity as a social form, not just as a physical object. He stressed that the value of commodities is a “purely social” relation, not containing “an atom of matter.” Accordingly, he understood labour power and certain services as commodities.

Industrial development scholar Fiona Tregenna points out that Marx mentioned service jobs in transport, education, and entertainment as examples of value-producing labour. Today, services employ many more workers than they did in Marx's era.

As scholars Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell suggest in a recent article on the importance of service work and sex work, we would do well to dispense entirely with “the productivist metaphysic that would attach a moral value not just to work in general but to goods-producing work in particular.”

Along this line of analysis, going beyond the dominant revolutionary subject of Marx's time – the industrial worker – our expanded and updated view can also take into account social struggles against industrial development by Indigenous peoples.

As Frantz Fanon suggested in his 1961 writings on the relation between racism and class in the colonies, we should stretch Marx's analysis slightly “every time we have to do with the colonial problem.”

Indigenous thinkers and organizers before myself had already pointed out that land can also be understood as a social relation between all living and nonliving things.

While the social and material are distinct, they are also related. In fact, relationality itself implies distinction and diversity, as we are dealing not just with a thing's relation to itself or other identical things. In turn, distinction implies relationality, since no one is an island.

Relationality implies the possibility of change, of the social and material interacting with each other, to generate something new, for better or worse.

The Industrial Workers of the World slogan “An injury to one is an injury to all” can be understood as applying not just to human beings, but also to the land and all the living and nonliving relations that sustain life.

The colonially constructed abstract rights-bearing individual, entitled to roam, shop, sell their labour power, and own property (if only their own labour power), contrasts with the concrete-particular social group, whose members are exploited, excluded, policed, imprisoned, stopped at the border and deported, but despite all this, still resistant.

Value in its form as capital (value valorizing itself) is driven to accumulation, but also annihilation of non-capitalist social forms of relationality with the land. The abstraction of value (as capital) takes a concrete form in each particular industrial development project. When Indigenous people stand in the way, the state and its police step in to make sure capitalist accumulation continues.

Coordination and solidarity across social lines remains a weapon against these concrete manifestations of capital, while theory helps integrate an analysis of particular conflicts within a broader understanding of the overall system. The question is how to extend and consolidate links of communication and support.

Theory of relativity

In 1947, the marxist writer and organizer Grace Lee Boggs wrote that capitalist society's "wealth in productive machinery" is matched by "its poverty in social relations."

"Never have the means of production been so highly developed," she wrote, "yet never have they seemed so inadequate to the task of elementary economic reconstruction."

That same year, Boggs and fellow marxists C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya together made the bold claim that the proletariat's revolt was no longer against politics and the distribution of surplus-value, but "against value production itself."

Decades later, in her 2011 book *The Next American Revolution*, Boggs would emphasize social and ecological reconstruction, writing that in the United States the struggle is not for economic growth, which has already taken place at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and other non-white people, but to correct the "injustices and backwardness of our relationships with one another, with other countries, and with the Earth."

She explained that she felt "kinship" with the Indigenous resistance and community organizing of the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, saying they had "demonstrated the need for a paradigm shift in our thinking."

Like theorists and organizers before us, we don't have to engage with abstractions just for the sake of abstractions, or stay strictly bound to the orthodoxy of past theory, but can develop theory as a tool for use in our current struggles against capitalism and settler colonialism, as they actually develop and play out in our lives.

A better life?

In *Capital*, Marx presented the accumulation of capital as taking place "on a progressively increasing scale."

The full social and material consequences of this exponential development have become clear only in our time.

Marx wrote that the quantitative determination of value by socially necessary labour-time asserts itself like a "regulative law of Nature," like when the law of gravity asserts itself by col-

lapping a person's house on top of them. Now we can see that the house isn't just one person's home but the entire planet.

Our ecological outlook is dire. Our chances for success seem slim. Now more than ever, we've gotta get out of this place if it's the last thing we ever do.

"This place" not in the sense of a location, like the billionaires blasting off for space imagine. Instead we've gotta overturn their system that's arrayed against us.

Today, the states most responsible for climate change aren't willing to really put the brakes on reckless capitalist development, even when communities within their borders have already been devastated by it. Not only that, but they continue to actively facilitate the expansionist logic of capital, almost as if this has entered the logic of the state itself.

Value is a crucial piece of the puzzle to be solved. It's important not just in itself, but also because of its place within the overall structure of capitalism and colonialism.

We have to figure out how to feed that structure through the shredder of history. Or in lieu of that, how to launch the system into the sun. Worth a shot, anyway, whatever the outcome.

Better living, not so much through chemistry as through communism and anarchy, and by no means, under no circumstances, without Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty.

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