NEW PROPOSALS

JOURNAL OF MARXISM AND INTERDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY

Our Mandate
This journal represents an attempt to explore issues, ideas, and problems that lie at the intersection between the academic disciplines of social science and the body of thought and political practice that has constituted Marxism over the last 150 years. New Proposals is a journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry that is dedicated to the radical transformation of the contemporary world order. We see our role as providing a platform for research, commentary, and debate of the highest scholarly quality that contributes to the struggle to create a more just and humane world, in which the systematic and continuous exploitation, oppression, and fratricidal struggles that characterize the contemporary sociopolitical order no longer exist.

Cover: Arrival at Cape Town. Acrylic on board. Artist, MJ Lourens, 2009.

New Proposals

Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry

Special Theme Issue: Alientation

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Introduction

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Guest Editors
New Proposals Editorial Collective

Old Philosophical Themes: Marx, Value, and Alienation

In spite of its clear and distinguished pedigree in European political philosophy and theology, the concept of alienation is now associated, almost exclusively, with Marxian critical theory and analysis. Yet, even within the orbit of Marxian thought the meaning and function of the concept of alienation has not always had a comfortable or stable position. Pointing to polysemic and intermittent use in the *Paris Manuscripts*, and the absence of explicit formation in *Capital*, Louis Althusser advised discarding alienation like other "old philosophical themes" (Althusser 2005:10). Granted, there is a degree to which Marx's own deployment of alienation has several different conceptions and connotations, but the *Grundrisse* and other textual sources provide evidence that alienation, its semantic elasticity notwithstanding, remained central to Marx's political economic analysis and his theory of history, even while it appeared to 'go underground,' so to speak, in his late thought.

Part of the confusion around this concept arises from the fact that Marx appears to use alienation as a kind of normative foundation, one which informs his various critiques. A central historical rendering tends to describe workers' inability to fully realize their inner life in capitalist society outside of market forces, hence they are separated from their "species-being."

Adopted from Feuerbach, and initially developed in the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx tends to understand species-being as comprising the distinctive features of human being which when expressed facilitate the conditions for human life to flourish. The ability to freely make and create is central to this conception. But under capitalism the majority of people are unable to exercise their capabilities. In this respect, alienation is a normative assessment of the conditions of life and the potential possibility to fulfill necessary elements of them themselves. One can see residue elements of this sentiment in the language in and around the ideas associated with dignity, humanity, and human flourishing.

In terms of the analysis of capitalist social relations, Marx's conception of alienation is narrower and is applied to studies of exploitation in the labour process. Alienation in this respect refers to how workers are separated or estranged from their products. As a social system, capitalism is structurally dependent upon separating workers from their products and therefore requires dominating means to force workers to comply in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Thus separation implies subordination. Additionally, there is a reconstructed rendering of alienation wherein Marx's concept of alienation can be reduced to "the notion that people

create the structures that dominate them" (Postone and Brennan 2009:316). Herein, alienation is a process by which persons are co-opted to reproduce their subordinate conditions.

While the idea of alienation has never quite disappeared from popular and scholarly consciousness, in recent years the impetus to understand these structures seems more urgent than it did only a decade ago. Indeed, when Leo Panitch, Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber argue that, for many, "crisis is the new normal" (2012:ix), they articulate the conditions under which people both struggle to eke out the means of existence and make sense of the world today as well as the structural constraints which rigorously intercede and perpetuate social misery.

Increasingly, capitalism is at the center of critical attention. This is evidenced by the fact that Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which details the inequalities generated under capitalism (hardly a revelation), seems to have struck a chord in the popular press, so to speak. So too have Milanovic's *The Haves and the Have-Nots* and Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality*. Unfortunately, these analyses, while detailing economic developments more broadly, are silent on issues of labour, working conditions, and the prospects for people to cultivate their inner life under contemporary capitalism. For this reason, alienation still nevertheless provides a useful focus to explore contemporary social thought. There is a need for old philosophical themes.

This special issue of *New Proposals* has three main objectives. The first is to collect recent scholarship primarily concerned with using, refining, or deploying the concept of alienation, showcasing the concept's utility across a range of case studies and disciplines. Following this, the second objective is to highlight the philosophical methodology that underwrote Marx's materialism, thus ensuring that it is not left off the agenda as the New Materialist turn unfolds. Third and finally, given the diverse expressions of alienation each paper in this collection of essays explores the historical, analytical, and practical underpinnings of the concept, its contemporary fate, and speculations on the trajectory of this idea. We hope the results will push readers to undertake a

similar revisiting of the concept and using it in their own extensions of Marxian thought and analysis.

Opening this collection is Geoff Mann's essay which strongly advocates for a renewed concern with value theory. Given capitalism's reality of class antagonism, "as long as these problems persist," Mann writes, "the problem of value is inescapable." The reason for this is clear: Although taking on many different appearances, politics in capitalism concerns the struggle over extraction and exploitation, distribution and allocation of surplus value. Mann captures this with the line, "value theory is always the theory of stakes." But further to this point, and following Postone, value is not value-neutral; so conditioned by capital, a simple redistribution thereof may be ameliorative of some selected aspects of capitalism's harms, but it still maintains the existing social form in which persons are alienated. As Mann writes, value's most important function "is to reproduce capital's hegemony." This provocation to the reform wing of Marxian thought frames the series of treatments and analysis of particular cases of alienated social life in fully functioning capitalism that follow.

The first of these analyses comes from Graham Mackenzie. Exploring some of the materialist elements of rhetoric as a constitutive element of consciousness, Mackenzie engages with First Generation Frankfurt School thinkers to trace the lineage of Western individualism. Bringing Walter Benjamin and Franz Borkenau into conversation with one another, Mackenzie attempts to re-situate Borkenau's argument concerning the materialist basis on which individualism, as a form of consciousness, emerges and circulates. In doing so he explores some of the ways that experience mutates, becoming story and theory, ideology and history. It is tempting to find fault in Mackenzie's exploration, but what appears to be a mere gesturing toward the manner in which consciousness might return to itself, can overcome alienation, to effect material change at the level of the political economy. So Mackenzie nevertheless does correctly identify politics as the arena in which contemporary forms of alienation (i.e. neoliberal individualism) might be overcome: This is one of the paper's strengths, as he builds a compelling case to support the claim that the politics of individualism,

such as they are, probably have their most productive years behind them.

Drawing upon recent developments in mobilities theory, Daniel Newman examines how the legacies of urban transportation design contribute toward the experience of alienation insofar as the priority of the "car system," by which he means individual ownership and collective infrastructure, over other kinds of sustainable options is a structural contradiction to the extent that it has a cumulative detrimental effect on nature while also dislocating people. Drawing upon Marx and Debord, Newman substantiates this claim through a comparative treatment of car systems in Indonesia and Scotland, pointing out that in spite of these places' geographic, developmental, policy, and cultural differences, a prevailing logic of capitalist commodified travel subordinates individual features to consumerism, thus forestalling locally tailored sustainable developmental goals. As alternatives, he looks to better regulation in Finland and to transport collectives in Wales as possible methods that might lead to the replacement of the car system, but still finds some elements wanting. As opposed to being yet another item that "prioritizes products over people," Newman reasserts the use value of cars but argues that the "car system" needs to be better organized through what he calls the "commons of shared community assets." He concludes, "if victories can be won against the might of the car system, other areas in which social alienation operates may follow."

Also drawing upon Guy Debord, by contrast Ailesha Ringer and Marco Briziarelli direct their attention to Web 2.0 social media platforms. Prompted by the tradition of communication and media research on alienation, which examines "media audiences and the paradoxical ambivalent understanding of agency that emerges," they point to a kind of 'double movement' in neo-liberalism. On the one hand users of social media platforms are further removed from "the means, tools, and ownership of production," yet on the other hand these platforms do offer increased "sociability and control over the production of media content." Describing this feature as the "*dilemma of ambivalent spectacle*" Ringer and Briziarelli argue that this is simultaneously a radical escalation and de-escalation of selected elements of alienation. Herein, their contribution is to bring attention to the humanistic elements of "worker's consciousness and the concrete ways they experience estrangement." This is a vital preliminary exercise to undertake, especially to assess the likelihood of the formation of a class consciousness 'from below.'

Finally, to close this special issue, Matthew Greaves identifies the concept of alienation as integral to a proper understanding of Marx's reading of technology. He conceptualizes technology as an active social relation, a relation that should, in other words, be understood as a form of class struggle. Having substantiated this argument, Greaves turns his attention and critique to several prominent approaches to technology and alienation in critical theories of Marxian Internet Studies that, in Greaves' hands, are shown to be economistic, and which foreclose on the possibility of class driven politics. To briefly discuss one of these approaches, Greaves identifies similar, but inverse, theoretical difficulties for class politics as it is conceived by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Here, the possibility for effective class politics is foreclosed upon, in Greaves' account, as they fail to fully account for the capitalist context in which the multitude – the autonomist's new subject of history – finds itself. For Greaves, Nick Dyer-Witheford indicates one of the ways that the grandiosity of these aforementioned claims can be mitigated and a valuable path to move beyond crisis being the 'new normal.'

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Value and Exploitation

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues for the continuing centrality of the category of value for radical critique. Via an examination of the common understanding of exploitation as a violation of the labour theory of value *qua* what one might call an "ethical rule-of-thumb," I argue that the theory of value is in fact the theory of the stakes in the labour-capital antagonism. Any politically adequate theory of those stakes must overcome both the scientific pretensions and the depoliticization of capitalist social relations that underwrite "everyday" understandings of value and exploitation.

After all these years, what could justify belabouring the problem of value? Like 'dialectical materialism', it seems like the anachronistic obsession of grey-haired, table-thumping orthodoxy. Indeed, even for the group who might self-identify as 'labour' specialists – 'labour', as in 'labour theory of value' – the centrality of value *per se* is not a given: one need only reflect on the work of labour economists to drive the point home. Yet, for several reasons, value theory remains a necessary concern for the critique of capitalism today, a necessity produced by a set of categorical, and hence political commitments. These arise because, while many have abandoned (or never undertook) explicit engagements with Marx or Marxism, all oppositional politics must confront the antagonism between workers and bosses that, if not the sole focus, certainly remains central to social life in capitalism.

In other words, while in all cases inflected in historically specific ways, there is what one might call a 'class' dimension to contemporary dynamics, a dimension that unfolds as part of an historically meaningful conflict over a set of political economic stakes. These stakes are the object of the struggle between labour and capital, between labour and labour, and between competing capitals. I think it is fair to say that, while it need not be *the* issue (I am in no way arguing for the primacy of this kind of class relation in the forces of social differentiation) the control and distribution of these stakes help determine, in not insignificant ways, workers' and bosses' conceptions of their place in the space-time of social life, and lead them to shape it in ways both purposeful and accidental. The consequences of these particular agencies, intended and unintended, play an important role in determining the form and content of what we call reality.

As long as these relations persist, the problem of value is inescapable. For in positing – absolutely correctly, in my view – the importance of the worker-

boss, or (in capitalism) the labour-capital antagonism, the question of what is at stake in the struggle is central, and, although we rarely think of it in this way, value theory is always the theory of the stakes. It is value theory that explains why capitalism does not present a harmonious path of shared prosperity and expanding welfare, why capitalism is fraught with contradictions, and why its political economy is so fundamentally characterized by struggle. That few but 'specialists' reflect on value theory (and usually in a particularly 'technical' or exegetical way) is both a cause and a consequence of the fact that, despite the vast range of relations that constitute the labour-capital antagonism, the stakes are usually assumed to be reasonably clear to everyone from the get-go. In other words, the very thing that value theory explains – and it is worth noting we are never without a value theory; it is always there, if only tacit – is taken as both unanimous and self-evident. This can lead to a false sense of confidence in the political basis of intellectual work. It can also underwrite an uncritical acceptance of categories of analysis that might obscure crucial dimensions of power relevant to our central antagonism, and elide important complexities in the operation of the social worlds we endeavour to understand.

What I have in mind is best confronted via the suite of problems and claims that go by the name 'labour theory of value.' Without getting into the often extraordinarily sophisticated (and, if we are honest, not infrequently boring) debates that have raged over the years, one might reasonably suggest that much 'radical' thinking is at least partly motivated by a kind of 'gut-level' commitment to the 'traditional' conception of the labour theory of value, i.e. the proposition that those who do the labour often don't seem to get much of the value.[1] Sustained empirical investigation of the central antagonism demonstrates pretty amply that, despite its best and not inconsiderable efforts, labour often loses. So we write, at least partly, to show how this happens over and over, and how unjust, if complex and contradictory, it is. To conjure the labour theory of value in this sense, as a kind of ethical rule-of-thumb, is, to

paraphrase Diane Elson (1979), to put the theory of value to work as a theory of exploitation. There is a lot of intuitive appeal to this.

However, despite its common sense attractions, there are some important limits to this kind of moral intuition, and not just on the terms of a tired 'reform vs. revolution' binary. The point, rather, is that most closely associated with the work of Moishe Postone: the labour theory of value thus understood is essentially an institutional critique of the criteria for the *distribution* of income and wealth in capitalism. From this perspective – what Postone (1993:24-7) calls the "standpoint of labour" – the principal injustice value theory illuminates is the fact that some significant portion of income and wealth goes to those who do not deserve it, at least according to the ethical rule of thumb. In capitalism, this boils down to where, and to whom, the money flows, and how it accumulates.

To identify this maldistribution of income and wealth as the principal injustice is to assume, tacitly, that the income and wealth in question – the 'accumulatable' and accumulated values – are themselves somehow historically and geographically neutral. They are supposed to operate, for all intents and purposes, in an identical manner, regardless of who gets their hands on them. To understand the labour theory of value as a theory of exploitation is to assume that the stakes – income and wealth, and all the things that flow from them – can simply be redistributed, that the form wealth takes is not itself class-biased. It is to assume that the direction of the flow of (usually monetary) income and wealth, i.e. toward capital, is itself not determinant, not a part of what defines it as income and wealth. The idea seems to be that value (and thus money/capital) can be governed so as to make anyone rich – worker or boss – and rich in basically the same way. Everyone, 'in theory,' could enjoy those good things in life that are presently the class privilege of capital.

I am not so sure. In capitalism, value is a particular social relation, and serves particular functions that make it capital-tropic at its core (Weber 1978:79; Ingham 2004:78-81). But the critique that animates much of modern left politics – that which arguably animates labour politics broadly – tends to imagine that the problem with the modern political economy

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1 For detailed critique of this 'traditional' perspective, see Postone 1993, 2009; Mann 2010.

is that capitalists are in charge. The corollary is that the distributional questions at the centre of a labour-based critique are mostly a question of restructuring the hierarchy so as to reverse the labour-capital polarity, usually via something like 'democratization.' But significant elements of modern political economy are constitutively non- or anti-democratic in any radical sense. Value is a case in point: it is non-democratic by definition, and it constrains in its very being what redistribution can mean today. Value cannot just be redistributed to labour according to an ethical rule of thumb, *ceteris paribus*:

> Marx's 'labour theory of value' frequently has been misunderstood as a labour theory of wealth, that is, a theory that seeks to explain the workings of the market and prove the existence of exploitation by arguing that labour, at all times and in all places, is the only social source of wealth. Marx's analysis is not one of wealth in general, any more than it is one of labour in general. He analyzes value as a historically specific form of wealth, which is bound to the historically unique role of labour in capitalism; as a form of wealth, it is also a form of social mediation. [Postone 2009:39]

Despite the degree to which this contradicts the long-standing conventional or 'gut-level' value theory, Postone is in fact positing, exceptionally succinctly, a two hundred year old idea one can find, quite explicitly, in Hegel's 'system of needs':

> The universal and objective element in labour ... lies in the abstracting process which effects the subdivision of needs and means and thereby *eo ipso* subdivides production and brings about the division of labour. By this division, the labour of the individual becomes less complex, and consequently his skill at his section of the job increases, like his output. At the same time, this abstraction of one man's skill and means of production from another's completes and makes necessary everywhere the dependence of men on one another and their reciprocal relation in the satisfaction of their other needs. ... When men are thus dependent on one another and reciprocally related to one another in their labour and the satisfaction of their needs, subjective self-seeking turns into a contribution

> to the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else. That is to say, by a dialectical advance, subjective self-seeking turns into the mediation of the particular through the universal, with the result that each man in earning, producing, and enjoying on his own account is *eo ipso* producing and earning for the enjoyment of everyone else. The compulsion which brings this about is rooted in the complex interdependence of each on all, and it now presents itself to each as the universal permanent capital. [Hegel 1991:§§198-99]

One can follow this idea, through Marx, to the early Lukács and Adorno. The latter made the point more poetically: "Because nothing is known but what has passed through labour, labour, rightly and wrongly, becomes something absolute, and disaster becomes salvation" (Adorno 1993:26).

Value-in-capitalism thus cannot be class-, geography-, or history-neutral. While workers as individuals can prosper by accumulating value/capital, and certain groups of workers can perhaps benefit from labour-controlled pools of money and capital, workers as a class – and *a fortiori* workers as a transnational class – cannot overcome capitalism by redistributing value. Labour cannot merely take the chair of the Federal Reserve or the Bank of England, for example, and simply 'do things differently,' as if the institutions themselves were not part of the problem. Any labour theory of value that is basically an ethical critique of distribution in capitalism misses the fact that one of the essential functions of value – perhaps its most important function – is to reproduce capital's hegemony. Indeed, it is for all intents and purposes the paradigmatic instrument of hegemony: value is the means by which the particular interests of the hegemonic historic bloc (capital) are generalized, so they become understood as the general interest.[2] Value theory is thus not a theory of production, or of exchange or of labour 'in general,' i.e. transhistorically. It is a theory of capital and capitalism.

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2 Although Gramsci (1971:161, 182) is the standard citation on this process, Marx and Engels (1970:54) made the point in 1845: "every class which is struggling for mastery, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, postulates the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination itself, must first conquer for itself political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, which in the first moment it is forced to do."

What value theory do we need then, and why does it matter? What does it mean, in the era of financialized neoliberalism, to reject value theory as a distributional ethic, the idea, in Postone's words, of the labour theory of value of 'traditional' Marxism?[3] At issue is more than mere analytical precision. Taking the historically and geographically *essential* class character of value seriously can also help us skirt a set of persistent, and potentially debilitating, political *and* analytical weaknesses in our critique. These weaknesses arise insofar as the labour theory of value as distributional critique, i.e. as an ethical-rule-of-thumb, is mobilized as a narrative of loss or decline, a moralizing nostalgia rather than a critical political economy. I would argue that, unfortunately, this kind of romanticism is a discursive staple of current left critique, especially in the wake of the ongoing crisis.

It manifests itself in a couple of common ways. The first is the idea that the crisis exposed the sham of 'fictitious' or 'imaginary' or 'virtual' capitals, values, economies that have been cleverly conjured out of 'real' values by mathematical or financial wizardry. The second is the idea – consistent with (but not necessarily a logical corollary of) the 'traditional' Marxist claim that labour is the sole producer of value – that value is what labour has always produced, and that capitalism represents only the most recent, and perhaps most robust, means by which labour's energies have been stolen, dispossessed, expropriated.

I don't think either of these shibboleths takes us anywhere. On the one hand, the argument that the crisis exposes the massive scam that is financial-

ized neoliberal capitalism is dead-end, and not just in its populist-conspiracist varieties. Value is the 'self-mediating,' historically specific form wealth takes in capitalism. It is the mode through which, via labour as social mediation, wealth is constituted in the class relations that define capitalism as such. As *values*, there is in capitalism no meaningful distinction between 'financial instruments' or securities, and bread. Both are 'concrete' specifications of wealth in capitalism, and both function as such. I suppose it is possible to defend the adjective 'fictitious' in Marx's concept of fictitious capital, *if* one takes it specifically as the capitalization of future values. Nevertheless, the choice of terminology is very unfortunate, because these values and/or capitals are in no way fictitious in the colloquial sense of 'illusory' or 'imaginary.' From a value-theoretic perspective, they are no more 'fictitious' as values than (yo ho ho!) a barrel of rum. Moreover, this 'it-was-all-a-scam' take on the recent crisis is particularly limited because it implicitly romanticizes a 'real' industrial capitalism as somehow more authentic, less perniciously capitalist. But the capitalism of the 1850s or 1950s was no more 'real' than that of today. The nostalgia of the 'real' value school is, as such, really just a return of the irrepressible 'vulgar materialism' Gramsci was so concerned to eliminate. It is ultimately based on the sanctity of the value category itself; the only 'critical' point being that value is in fact, as capital itself asserts, really, transhistorically, 'true' – but only in its 'real' form.

On the other hand, the idea that value is what labour always produces, at all times and places, that value is some 'real' asset, a 'true' and 'productive' contribution' to the world, is untenable. First, it asserts that value is a 'good' thing, a positive contribution to the world, that is not only transhistorical, but is actually exactly like the value that capitalists celebrate when they talk about adding value. Moreover, and perhaps even more important insofar as it is mobilized as a critique of capitalist exploitation, it depends on a tacit but key assumption, rarely if ever specified as such: that there is some 'pure,' transhistorical or even suprahistorical relation between labour and its 'product,' determined by a historically obscure 'natural justice,' that capitalism (and feudalism etc.)

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3 According to what Postone (2009:33-4) calls 'traditional' Marxism, "the unfolding of this contradiction [between society's basic social relations and the forces of production] gives rise to the possibility of a new form of society, understood in terms of collective ownership of the means of production and economic planning in an industrialized context – that is, in terms of a just and consciously regulated mode of distribution that is adequate to industrial production. Industrial production, in turn, is understood as a technical process, which is used by capitalists for their particularistic ends, but is intrinsically independent of capitalism and could be used for the benefit of all members of society. This general understanding is tied to a determinate understanding of the basic categories of Marx's critique of political economy. The category of value, for example, has generally been interpreted as an attempt to show that social wealth is always and everywhere created by human labour. The theory of surplus-value, according to such views, seeks to demonstrate the existence of exploitation by showing that the surplus product is created by labour alone and, in capitalism, is appropriated by the capitalist class."

have contaminated or desecrated. In other words, it is based on the idea that there is an inviolable 'natural' property relation between a worker and her or his product.

In either case – i.e. what we might call a 'short-run nostalgia' frequently expressed in a social democratic yearning for the Keynesian/Fordist gold ol' days, or a longer-run Rousseauian romanticism for a more just 'state of nature' – the critique is simultaneously inadequate to our contemporary political and analytical requirements, and, less important but still interesting, inadequate to the Marxian concepts on which it is founded. Indeed, insofar as the theory of value *qua* theory of exploitation dominates our perspective, the term 'traditional Marxism', which Postone uses to distinguish an analytical orientation, is even more apt than he intended – 'traditional' Marxism in this sense is a Marxism *for* tradition. This is, I would argue, an ultimately unproductive position, one which, when taken to its logical conclusion, leads, among other things, to the contemporary labour movement: irreducibly dedicated to a capitalism it (occasionally) purports to reject, committed to a romantic ideal of industrial capitalist work it nonetheless acknowledges, à la Braverman (1974), as soul-destroying.

The 'so what?' question, I think, demands that we take this even further than Postone. He argues, and I am convinced, that the Marxian critique is not, primarily a 'critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour,' but a 'critique of labour in capitalism' – which is to say that labour in capitalism is the dominant 'form of social mediation', and value 'is the dominant form of wealth in capitalism.' He goes on to say, however – and on this I am not, or am no longer, convinced – that value is 'constituted by human labour-time expenditure alone.' This seems to me both difficult to defend empirically, unless 'labour' is generalized to such an extent that it is synonymous with human agency (in which case it is hard to know why we need it as a concept), and an unnecessary and romantic appendage of the nostalgic moralizing just described.

I take this position for two reasons. First, from a strictly analytical perspective, there seems to me no reason to imagine that this conditionality – value is a product of labour alone – must hold for capitalism in

all its variegated forms over its centuries of existence. As one Soviet-era political economist put it:

> The labour theory of value is among the supreme achievements of the human genius. … The law of value is not, however, something immutable and fossilized. … Any scientific law is a living and evolving phenomenon. … The structure of categories forming the basis of scientific laws also changes: what was formerly imagined to be accidental and unimportant proves to be legitimate and, conversely, the evolution of the subject-matter and method of inquiry enables the inquirer to detach himself from features of the phenomenon in question that were previously thought of as an inalienable part of the law. [Shemyatenkov 1981:224]

Secondly, and just as important, it seems to me that the often desperate effort to discover the congealed labour at the heart of all value is driven by a belief that labour's status as sole-producer-of-value is somehow crucial to anti-capitalist politics. This is, as Marx himself grumbled in his attack on the Gotha Program, to confuse value with wealth.[4] The explanatory contortions performed in the effort to 'prove' this seem to be driven by an unstated belief that this wins labour a meaningful moral victory. It may well, but only according to a capitalist morality.

Of course, one might argue that the struggle to mark this moral victory is crucial to the critique of exploitation in capitalism, and it is true that the importance of the effort, by any means necessary, to improve the daily lot of workers can hardly be dismissed. On its own fundamentally quantitative terms – that the return to labour is less than justice demands – the theory of value espoused here does not invalidate the idea that capitalist relations of production 'devalue' workers, or that it 'exploits' labour, often unevenly, insofar as race, gender and citizenship status can increase the 'rate of exploitation' (note the explicitly quantitative nature of the relationship).

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4 'Labour is *not the source* of all wealth. ... The bourgeois have very good grounds for falsely ascribing *supernatural creative power* to labour; since precisely from the fact that labour depends on nature it follows that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He can only work with their permission, hence live only with their permission' (Marx 1978: 525-6, emphasis in original).

The point is not that the examination of exploitation is invalidated by this theory of value, but that, in the study of the differential levels of mistreatment and expropriation of labour, the questions asked do different work than they are sometimes called upon to do. Those questions do not necessarily put the stakes (as discussed earlier) on the table, or, if they do, it is not necessarily value that ends up on the table. To focus on the distribution of equivalence is not to specify or critique the production and hegemony of equivalence itself. It is, rather, to undertake another version of the natural justice argument, which is to say that there is a 'natural' relation of possession or control between labour and the value produced, a law capital violates by expropriating surplus value. But we would never accept this in anything even remotely like radically democratic or egalitarian social forms; to say, as the left almost always does, that those with more than enough must share with those without is explicitly to reject any conception of an *a priori* claim on the part of the worker or owner to his or her product or possession. We need only reflect on Hegel's elaboration of the right of necessity [*Notrecht*], or on Marx's discussion of 'just wages' (there is no such thing), to see there is no axiomatic relation between labour and a claim on its fruits (Hegel 1991:§§127-8; Marx 1977:769). If there were, the slogan "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs" would make no sense, or it would make sense only as a directive to charity. Moreover, any claim to 'natural laws' is not only a problematic road for all sorts of reactionary reasons, it is also bunk – there is no *natural* relation between labour and its product. We create that relation, and then depoliticize it as natural. Indeed, while we may of course put it to good political work, the labour theory of value in the 'traditional' distribution or natural law sense is basically Lockean, and derives from Lockean claims to property – the very same ones that have caused us so much trouble (Cohen 1995; Losurdo 2011:24, 77-88, 188-95).

The question, ultimately, is this: On what grounds can exploitation be deemed exploitative? The 'distribution' critique of traditional Marxism, from the 'standpoint of labour,' is based upon an attempt to develop and specify, in the value-form, a 'scientific,' objective 'proof' or 'test' of exploitation – those who do the labour don't get (enough of) the value. It is an attempt to discover an essential, objective set of dynamics that allows us to empirically identify exploitation when we see it, and to measure it based on its 'rate,' as demonstrated by some set of threshold characteristics or indices. As such, exploitation, as identified by and subjected to a conventional theory of value critique, relies on a 'productivist' measure of the proper or appropriate rate of return, one that is not that different from 'wage = marginal product of labour'; i.e. it names a metric by which labour can make a just claim, or formulate reasonable expectations, *within* existing productive relations.

But exploitation is not wrong for these 'objective' reasons, it is wrong for reasons we need to specify, not scientifically, but politically. It is not wrong because X% of the 'value' produced by labour is 'expropriated,' legitimately or illegitimately, by capital. One cannot deem some relation exploitative because it violates some god-given or natural ratio of 'just return,' or because it marks a mode of social relationship that crosses a quantitative threshold of maldistribution. We do not say that children 'exploit' their parents, although the 'exchange' is by no means equitable. Exploitation is wrong precisely, and only, because we name it so, for reasons that we rarely bother to think about or specify. These reasons, and the struggle on the ideological terrain upon which they might make sense, are the very content of anti-capitalist *politics*.

Insofar as we put the theory of value to work in the manner I have suggested here, then there is no reason to imagine that value-in-capitalism will always take the same form or emerge from the same relations, nor is there any special merit in being the sole producer of value – the point is to abolish it anyway. To overcome capital is to overcome the rule of value. In other words, labour in capitalism is, catastrophically, condemned to the production of value. Much of the point of having a value theory – indeed, of the Marxian critique generally – is that capital can do nothing, and would in fact cease to exist, without a world in which value in this very specifically capitalist sense *is* wealth. Surely this is not the best we can do. There is no rule as to what must count as wealth. We have infinite degrees of freedom.

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Walter Benjamin, Franz Borkenau, and the Story of the Alienated Individual

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Abstract: In this article I claim that Walter Benjamin's work is important for thinking our way toward revolutionary politics from a linguistic-cultural perspective. I do so by bringing Franz Borkenau's work on what he calls the 'I-form' of speech into contact with Benjamin's figure of 'the storyteller.' I thus argue that Benjamin's figure of the storyteller is important for thinking through Franz Borkenau's account of the emergence of the 'I-form' of speech. Moreover, if we read Borkenau's linguistic account of the emergence of western individualism under the rubric of alienation, then via Benjamin we begin to see the outlines of a political return from the alienated political subject of Western modernity.

Key Words: critical theory; individualism; alienation; marxism; cultural studies

Stories are merely theories. Theories
are dreams.
A dream
is a carving knife
and the scar it opens in the world
is history.

Zwicky 1998:32

I

Walter Benjamin, quoting German neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein, suggests that the sociology of language begins at precisely the moment when, superseding its prehistory, sociolinguistic analysis ceases to understand language instrumentally. In other words, the sociology of language becomes a historical and material force at exactly the moment it becomes conscious – conscious that "as soon as human beings use language to establish a living relationship to themselves and to others, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means, but a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings" (Benjamin 1996c:85-86). So long as the social history of language remains ensnared in the traps of those who trade in the skins and pelts of doctrinaire theories and methodologies, approaches that "treat language as something isolated in itself," as something dead, reified, "obeying what specialists so fondly call 'its own laws'" Borkenau 1981:138), it – both language as such and those disciplines that make a study of it – is complicit in the very real and pressing danger facing all of us today: "the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (Benjamin 2003:391.) It is this ever-present danger to which Benjamin repeatedly draws our attention and against which he himself takes up arms.

Thus, Walter Benjamin's "Problems in the Sociology of Language" cannot, productively, be read

as a mere scholarly gathering and re-presentation of information and ideas concerning the state of socially oriented studies of language at a given coordinate in 'homogeneous and empty time' – that is, in chronological history. Nor, for that matter, can Benjamin's work, in general, be read in this way. This is, at least in part, because his study of language is no different in methodological orientation from much of the rest of his work. To suggest otherwise would constitute a serious misapprehension. At the same time, a no less disingenuous interpretation of Benjamin's work would see his writing as a kind of optimistic exegesis of an imagined ameliorative potential in the continuation of the present, inferred from the detritus of history, from the decayed and decaying artifacts of the past – a mere exercise in speculative utopian idealism, or in idealism's next of kin, positivism. For the idealist "the illusion of the concrete rests on the reification of results," an analytic process, according to Theodor Adorno, that is "not unlike positive social science which records the products of social processes as ultimate facts to be accepted" (Adorno 1984:37). To be sure, Benjamin sees the refuse of history as instructive, but his project is neither, strictly speaking, contemplative, nor positivist. Rather, Benjamin's project is preparatory; it is a "methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution," without, for all that, subordinating this preparation "to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance" (Benjamin 2005b:216). And moreover, if, as Terry Eagleton suggests, Benjamin at times appears to gravitate toward a kind of Archimedean interpretive point in subjective experience, an idealist expression of a material/ideal epistemological binary rendered in rough correspondence to the 'Marxist' base/superstructure metaphor, this appearance remains superficial at best. "To leave the matter here would do Benjamin a serious injustice," serious enough that one could justifiably suspect a willful act of bad faith. "For if [Benjamin] sometimes sees 'experience' as a kind of direct impress or distillation of physical or technological forces, it remains true that he conjures out of such reflexiveness a subtlety of perception marvellously in excess of the model's own crudity" (Eagleton 2009:176).

It is in his ability to conjure meaning to life from the remains of what sometimes seems a dead epistemology that Benjamin can productively be understood as working in the mode of socio-cultural metaphor, a mode wherein we can posit a distinction between live and dead metaphor. "A live metaphor," for Benjamin, "is a [cultural] short circuit" (Zwicky 2003:68) In historical terms it is able to appropriate the energy of cultural "memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 2003:391). In contrast, and with reference to a sociology of language fettered to an *idola organum* for example, "non-metaphorical ways of speaking conduct meaning, in insulated carriers, to certain ends and purposes. Metaphors shave off the insulation and meaning arcs across the gap" (Zwicky 2003:68). In historical and cultural terms, then, a live metaphor is a "tiger's leap into the past" (Benjamin 2003:395). As an intellectual effort devoted to the articulation of a Marxian aesthetic, Benjamin's work engages in revelatory reanimations and re-constructions (as opposed to deconstructions) of live(d) socio-cultural metaphor. His project, in broad terms should, thus, be understood as working against an instrumental conception of language in which the dead are made to toil in the service of an eternal present: "a dead metaphor is one in which the arcing between [past, present, and future, between language and history,] no longer occurs. Its energy has been diverted into and contained by the culture's linguistic grid" (Zwicky 2003:68). Against dead cultural metaphor Benjamin's project is an attempt to write the poetry of revolution. As such, "it is more than ever necessary to blast Benjamin's work out of its historical continuum so that it may fertilize the present" (Eagleton 2009:179).

II

"I, Hlegestr from Holt made this Horn." This is an Old Norse inscription, found on a golden horn of Danish origin dating from around 400 C.E., an inscription that is one of the earliest European examples of "a linguistic peculiarity so striking," according to Franz Borkenau, "that it is a little surprising that … due emphasis has never been laid upon it" (Borkenau 1981:133). For Borkenau, what calls for emphasis here is both the use of the first

person singular pronoun and also the way it is used in this context. In this case, unlike earlier but functionally similar inscriptions, "the 'I' stands before the name of the person who is 'I'" (133). Typically, in earlier inscriptions of this kind, throughout classical European languages and indeed also in Old Norse, the first person subject is referred to in the third person, often using the proper noun only – "Toeler owns this bracelet" (133). As Borkenau points out, "every student of Latin and old [sic] Greek knows that the use of the personal pronoun as found on the golden horn of Gallehus would be inconceivable in any inscription dating from any period of classical antiquity" (Borkenau 1981:133-134).

And yet, modern linguistics, explains Borkenau, appears not to have noticed, or to have forgotten the peculiar manner in which, in fact, 'I' first appears. He readily concedes that linguists could hardly have failed, and indeed have not failed, to notice the contrast "between the ample use of this pronoun in the modern languages of Northern Europe and its scanty use in classical antiquity" (Borkenau 1981:135). To compare classical and modern languages directly is a tendency of those socio-linguistic analyses that assign a central phylogenetic role to a purported internal and progressive logic in language, to 'instrumentality' in linguistic analysis. "Thus is manifested in the field of [linguistics] what in the [sociological] sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics[:] the alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality," an alignment that arises of the desire to "'get closer' to things" (Benjamin 1996e:105), and which results in the tendency to disregard the social, spatial, and temporal contexts that mediate our relationship to those things. As such, in attempting to 'get closer' to things, analysts and observers tend to render social agency a superfluous concern in comparative linguistics; and the overlooked result of this tendency is that "a gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the [structures and entailments of linguistic forms]" (Benjamin 1996a:251).[1] At the

same time, and as a corollary to an emphasis on the search for parsimonious explanations of the linguistic march toward ever greater 'efficiency,' an instrumentally oriented sociology of language remains almost completely blind to the anomalies that falsify its central axioms. "Contradictions [in instrumental theories of language] that cannot be ignored must be shown to be purely surface phenomena, unrelated to this mode of [analysis]" (Lukács 1971:11). For these contradictions, when taken seriously, imply the limits of instrumental language theories, limits which, like the face of death in the contemporary world, must remain hidden from sight – "today, people [prefer to] live in rooms that have never been touched by death – dry dwellers of eternity" (Benjamin 1996d:151).

In the same way that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 2001:68), the limits to an instrumental explanation of the emergence of the 'I-form' of speech in the European languages mean the limits of the world of instrumental rationality in the sociology of language. Thus the analytic blind spot giving rise to the sociology of language's failure to recognize the importance of the inscription on the horn of Gallehus. In other words, this blind spot arises out of the fact that the inscription on the Danish horn exists beyond the logic of a self-contained, instrumentally rational linguistic world. Indeed, "no expediency can be invoked to explain the use of 'I' before names," says Borkenau; rather, in contrast with an explanation of linguistic phylogeny grounded in the logic of progressively rationalized efficiency, Borkenau points out that "'I Harald did it' is, as an inscription, not in the least more useful than 'Harald did it.' The latter, Latin way of expression is shorter, simpler, and more elegant" (Borkenau 1981:136).

Borkenau then proceeds from his introduction of the problem of the 'I-form' of speech to show, rather convincingly, that to conceive of the rise of the first person singular pronoun to widespread and common use as a mere response to a change in verb endings is largely incorrect. And yet, this is the most commonly accepted explanation among grammarians who claim that "the use of pronouns arose because the verb endings became indistinguishable. The verb in *je fais, tu fais, il fait* sounds exactly alike. It is impossible to

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1 In the context of "Critique of Violence" Benjamin is concerned to articulate a critique of a kind of analysis oriented toward forms of violence in relation to the law. However, the form of his argument is also quite serviceable as a critique of approaches to the history of languages.

distinguish between them but by prefixing the pronoun" (Borkenau 1981:136). The emergence of the obligatory use of personal pronouns is thus explained with reference to the emergence of phonetically undifferentiated verb conjugations; this explanation appears parsimonious, a prized quality in social scientific theorizing, but it wholly fails to account for the fact that the 'I-form' of speech makes its appearance "centuries before the endings of [verbs] became indistinct. Thus there is no possibility of using this explanation in the case of old [sic] Norse, the oldest case known to us, because in old Norse the [verb] endings were perfectly clear" (Borkenau 1981:136). The facts appear rather uncooperative where language is immovably conceived in purely instrumental terms.

There is, however, a second view concerning the evolution of linguistic forms over time. And although it does not on its own contradict the instrumental explanation above, this second view of linguistic phylogeny, when taken together with the above critique puts instrumental renderings of language change further into question. At the same time, this second view sets Borkenau's discussion off in a more productive direction. According to Borkenau, there is "a widely accepted theory about the evolution of [European] language [suggesting that] the use of the pronoun with the verb might be regarded as one element in a general development of language from the 'synthetic' towards the 'analytical'" (Borkenau 1981:137). This distinction between synthetic and analytical language is not particularly complicated; it only serves to demarcate, in a general fashion, languages whose signifiers tend to bring together many ideas into a single linguistic representation – synthetic language – from languages in which there is a tendency to try to assign single signifiers to single ideas – analytical language.

> The Latin said 'feci,' expressing in one and the same word the idea of doing, the fact that something was done in the past, and the third idea that it was 'I' who did it. We say 'I have done,' assigning one word to each of these three notions. It is maintained that the general trend of development goes from the synthetic towards the analytical, that the ancient languages are [more] synthetic, the modern languages are [more] analytical. [Borkenau 1981:137]

In view of the argument thus far, an interpretation of the historical linguistic movement from synthetic to analytical must avoid recapitulating the conditioned explanatory reflex of the dominant scholarly ideology, an intellectual maneuver that turns us forgetfully, in the words of Martin Heidegger, toward "those idols [that today] everyone has and to which [we] are wont to go cringing" (Heidegger 1993:110). In other words we must, here, avoid lapsing back into thinking about language change in instrumental terms, in terms of grammatical precision and expediency. For, as Borkenau is quick to point out, "analytical speech is not more expedient than synthetic speech, much the contrary. Nothing could be simpler than the Latin expression 'feci,' which needs three words to translate it into any modern language of North-Western Europe." Moreover, "nothing, also, could be more precise. Students of classical languages know how many of their shades and refinements have been lost in our modern languages without economy of words" (Borkenau 1981:138).

As such, once we do away with an insistent dependence on a metaphysics of instrumentality, once we position ourselves such that it is plain to see that "the transition from the synthetic to the analytical mode of speech cannot … be the result of expediency and simplification," we begin to glimpse the emergent possibility of a different kind of story, one in which the event of the 'I-form' of speech can be attributed "to a fundamental change in psychology. [And] this change of psychology is connected with the deepest changes in the structure of civilization" (Borkenau 1981:138). Thus does Borkenau re-create "the chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation" (Benjamin 1996d:154), amplifying the story of the horn of Gallehus from its historical moment, the one in which it was crafted, so that it resounds in the amphitheatre of experience that is the present – *refero antiquus organum*.

III

Borkenau's rendering of the rise of the 'I-form' of speech maps the chasm dividing the transmission of information from the art of storytelling, a division that manifests as two opposing intellectual approaches to cultural communication. In the mode

of information, communication is never more than a means to address or expedite present practicalities (as defined by existing power structures); storytelling, on the other hand, allows for an interpretation of the present mediated through the past, thus allowing the antagonism between story and information to be characterized in terms of a conflict between past and present. According to Benjamin, "the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time" (Benjamin 1996d:148), indeed, it must explain itself according to its own self-sufficient – that is, natural, timeless – laws. Thus, the present here asserts its dominance over the past via a claim to its own eternal validity. The affinity between information and the metaphysics of instrumentality at play in contemporary histories of language is thus clear. Communicated as information, "no event comes to us without already being shot through with explanations" (Benjamin 1996d:147), and these explanations serve as means, as instruments and tools wielded at the behest of the socio-political exigencies of the moment in which they're articulated, thereby eternalizing and naturalizing the present by way of a kind of 'law-preserving violence' committed against the past. The past is made to serve, to preserve the 'laws' of the present.

Indeed, insofar as the sociology of language insists on instrumentality as a central structuring principle around which to organize the intellectual labour of analysis, it mimes the relationship of the bourgeoisie to the capitalist mode of production. "For the latter it is a matter of life and death to understand its own system of production in terms of eternally valid categories: it must think of capitalism as being predestined to eternal survival by the eternal laws of nature and reason" (Lukács 1971:10-11); in other words, capitalism, like language conceived instrumentally, must be seen to operate according to its own laws, which must be preserved at all costs. Equally, to understand language as an instrument requires that the progression from synthetic to analytical language be seen as both natural and rational – and thus eternally and universally validated according to the law of progress, a vulgar reification

of scientific method in which the present mediates all of history self-referentially, that is egoistically, rather than history mediating the present, as with historical materialism. This constitutes a violence that preserves the present against the past, and against the future as well. But against those who see an eternal present as the end point of history, it is the storyteller who is "capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past" in anticipation that such a spark could ignite the present, like the mythical phoenix in her nest, so that a new and unexpected future might burst forth out of the ashes. This is because it is the storyteller, the historical materialist, who "is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he [sic] is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin 2003:391).

In contrast with those who hawk and trade in information, remaining satisfied to establish "a causal nexus among various moments in history, … [telling] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (Benjamin 2003:397), a storyteller has different aims. Contrasted with information, "a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (Benjamin 1996d:148). In this sense, the event inscribed on the Horn of Gallehus, together with Borkenau's analysis and re-presentation, is in the mode of storytelling, that is, in the mode of historical materialism – which seeks to redeem the past in both the present and future. In other words, the story of the Danish horn, when it comes to us as story rather than information, is not so much an isolated event to be explained as it is an event that reveals itself as a structuring element of the tissue of history, of the tissue of collective memory operating on a cellular level. For "there is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis" (Benjamin 1996d:149) – 'I, Hlegestr from Holt, made this horn.' And, moreover, there are few stories that have been so well integrated into our collective memory than the event inscribed upon the Danish horn, the event chronicling the new use of the personal pronoun. Indeed, "the new use of 'I' [in the early middle ages] reveals the emergence of a new soul, the soul of our Western civilization"

(Borkenau 1981:163). Thus, the story of Hlegestr's horn is no mere means, no tool of the ruling classes, but (and here we recall Goldstein) a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and of the psychic bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings.[2] Put another way, language is, as Marx and Engels pointed out, "practical consciousness" (Mark 1997:421). Thus, Borkenau's reference to the 'new soul' of the West is at the same time a reference to a shift in consciousness, a shift objectively expressed in language.

This new soul, this shift in consciousness, articulated in the syntax of Hlegestr's inscription expresses, according to Borkenau, "a new forcible emphasis upon the individual, a [new] reluctance to treat [the individual] as a simple element in a chain of events" (Borkenau 1981:185), in the chain of tradition. At first glance, this appears to undermine the idea that the inscription on the horn is best interpreted under the category of 'story.' After all, Benjamin suggests that one of the distinctive qualities of stories is that they are lodged firmly in tradition, lodged in collective memory in a way that "permits that slow piling up, one on top of the other, of the transparent layers [of recollection] which constitute… the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings" (Benjamin 1996d:150). But only a minimum of reflection on Hlegestr's horn brings us easily to the conclusion that the object itself (and also the inscription with which we are concerned) *is* firmly lodged in tradition. In part, it is the inscription's revolutionary nature, its profound expression of a point in the constellation of our history that suggests this to us. For by its very nature, revolution, from the historical materialist's perspective, is only possible on the basis of history, real material history. Marx worked this out at length in his critiques of German idealism. And according to Benjamin's powerful interpretation of Marx, revolution "is nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren" (Benjamin 2003:394). The story of the 'I-form' of speech is thus one of the earliest records of the modern struggle to overcome the

domination of the present by the past, of the living by the dead, of the struggle to redeem the past in the present. As such, the inscription on Hlegestr's horn, is a chronicle, an early episode in the history of this struggle, an episode whose setting coincides exactly with the home of the storyteller.

There are two archetypes of the storyteller. According to Benjamin, "If we wish to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, we find one in the settled tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman" (Benjamin 1996d:144). But as Benjamin goes on to point out, in actuality stories arise with the interpenetration of these two archetypes.

> Such an interpenetration was achieved particularly in the middle ages, through the medieval trade structure. The resident master craftsman and the itinerant journeyman worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been an itinerant journeyman before he settled down in his hometown or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were the past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. [Benjamin 1996d:144]

That Hlegestr was a craftsman hardly bears mentioning, since he tells us this himself. But that he was a journeyman, or was descended from journeymen, or rather from seamen, requires some further evidence. Borkenau's theory, in this respect, is incomplete. But drawing from the work of H. de Tourville who writes from the Le Play school of sociology (sometimes called social geography), Borkenau advances a rather alluring theory, particularly given what Benjamin says about the archetypes of the figure of the storyteller.

According to Borkenau, de Tourville makes the claim that changes in the structure of the family (from extended patriarchal to particularist – what we would call nuclear), the result of Scandinavian settlers' encounters with the geography of Norway "where no large patriarchal family could have lived and where a man was entirely dependent upon himself alone," were responsible for that attitude which, in Borkenau's words, "the English describe by the term 'individualism'" (Borkenau 1981:171). However, Borkenau promptly rejects this theory because it is in conflict with the linguistic record he has been at

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2 See Benjamin 1996c:85-86 and Benjamin 2003:138, previously cited above..

pains to trace out; the emergence of the I-form of speech arises in "what is today Denmark and Sweden, more so than in Norway" (Borkenau 1981:171). In addition, Borkenau argues that while Norwegian geography would indeed make large patriarchal families unsustainable, "there are few places in the world where the existence of such [family] units would be more favored by nature than in Denmark" (171), the location where we do, in fact, see the first articulations of the 'I-form' of speech. And yet, while Borkenau raises a number of other salient objections to de Tourville's conclusions, he also suggests that de Tourville's "find is," for all that, "no less of the greatest importance" (Borkenau 1981:172). For it is de Tourville's general approach that inspires Borkenau to look at the movement of peoples over land and sea to help explain the rise of the 'I-form' of speech. De Tourville "argues, roughly speaking that a new type of 'individualism' is the basis of Western civilization and that it can be distinguished, first in Scandinavia, then in England and Germany, and finally in France;" and here Borkenau concurs: "that is exactly what [his] language test, centered round the personal pronoun, reveals" (Borkenau 1981:172).

However, where de Tourville attributes the emergence of the 'particularist' family, of European individualism, deterministically, to the influence of natural geography, to nature, Borkenau attributes the emergence of the 'I-form' of speech to the life of the people in question. For it is only partly true, what Adorno and Horkheimer say in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, that "*mana*, the moving spirit, is not a projection but the echo of the real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007:10-11). Rather, there is, in our experience of nature, and the so-called 'nature of things', always some minute element of projection as well. In addition, Borkenau's study of the emergence and spread of personal pronouns identifies one additional source aside from Old Norse, contributing to this linguistic development – Old Irish. And if we recall that one of Benjamin's archetypes for the storyteller is the trading seaman we are now in a position to see where Borkenau and Benjamin finally meet up face to face, so to speak. For Borkenau, "the basic law governing this entire process

[of linguistic transformation] becomes visible" in the character of the itinerant seafaring journeyman. This process "has no mysterious connection with [natural or ethnic] roots. The Irish, the Saxons, and the Vikings are its carriers, because they are the three peoples who in the course of the Voelkerwanderung make the transition from land migration to overseas migration" (Borkenau 1981:182). And in the course of this migration they become not poorer in communicable experience, but richer in the experience of a certain kind of freedom, communicable via the 'I-form' of speech.

In contrast with those peoples "who moved overland clanwise, with women, children, cattle, and mobile goods," Borkenau argues that it was those who set out "for the crossing of the sea … for a new home and a new sense of activity on the other shore, without the ballast of family and possessions" (Borkenau 1981:181), that became rich in the experience of individual freedom. These people were, perhaps, the first to liberate themselves from the bonds of nature, sublimated and experienced in the form of the patriarchal family.

> The veiled misty line which separates land and sea all over the North has proved to be the frontier between the slavish collective bondage of the individual and the freedom of the person. Up to this line, semi-nomadic migrant tribes prevailed. But he who crossed it sailed into a new, proud I-consciousness – into a new freedom from which the new Western culture was to arise. [Borkenau 1981:182]

Thus does Borkenau, storyteller of linguistic sociology, chronicle the cultural alchemy that turns *mana* – the appearance of subjective agency located in nature – into *aura* – the appearance of subjective agency located in the particular individual.

IV

It is in the telling and re-telling of the emergent history of the 'I-form' of speech that we begin to decipher the stories, theories, and dreams manifest and revealed as mythos of the Western individual – ego. And "though *mythos* originally meant but 'word' (being the Homeric equivalent for *logos*), the

important consideration for the present purposes is that it came to mean a tale, story, fable, a *narrative* form" (Burke 1996:380). It is here that the sociology of language comes to recognize the nature of the psycho-civilizational violence bound up with the aetiologically colonizing (in a sense lawmaking, or norm producing) event of the inscription on the Horn of Gallehus, an event inscribed as an open secret, like a scar, into our collective memory, into the history of the West. For "here 'history' is but a more 'cosmic' word for 'story,' a usage in line with the analogy between books and the 'Book of Nature'" (Burke 1996:381). It is in these 'books,' these stories – chronicles of the movement of subjective agency which at first resides in the cosmos and then, in promethean fashion, moves to the realm of the human subject, the individual – that we catch glimpses of the relationship between ourselves and nature, between ourselves and language, between ourselves and our world – and thus our history – past, present, and future.

This relationship is mimetic; as Marx observed, "consciousness can never be anything else except conscious existence" Marx 1997:414). As such, collective consciousness, the 'soul' of a civilization, exists in mimetic relationship to activity. For "it is the activity of each individual which immediately motivates his [sic] manner of understanding the world and of thinking about himself. … It is because many individuals do the same thing and live in the same manner that they also think in the same manner" (Henry 1984:123). Thus Borkenau's claims about the relationship between that proud freedom into which we, as a culture, sailed via oversea migration, and the subsequent emergence of our 'I-form' of speech. What accounts for the spread of the 'I-form' of speech, of the consciousness of individual freedom expressed in linguistic practice is that "the very greatest capacity for the generation of similarities … belongs to humans" (Benjamin 2005a:694). As such, it is the mimetic faculty – our capacity for generating similarities – that helps account for the fact that not all Europeans were seafaring travelers, but also that by the early modern period most languages of Western Europe had more or less incorporated and made habitual the use of personal pronouns. And

now we see, a little more clearly, how a story preserves itself, storing up its socio-historical energy so that over a long period of time "all these similar thoughts form, [mimetically], what might be termed the ideology of a class, [the soul of a civilization, or a mode of production]" (Henry 1984:123).

At the same time, it is in this history, in Borkenau's story, that we encounter an example of the allure of the beautiful, of the work of art scaled up to the magnitude of civilizations. And moreover, Borkenau's work, his weaving of the story of the language of the west, is yet another confirmation that "never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret" (Benjamin1996b:351). For our ability to decipher, to interpret, to read a secret is bound up in our encounters with stories. To read a secret, to tell a story is, after all, always a task of "interpretation, which is concerned not [solely] with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with [deciphering] the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world" (Benjamin 1996d:153). This is the essence of the work of art, of the beautiful in its veil, that it is embedded in experience in such a way that it is only visible as beautiful through a veil, as a secret. When the object is entirely obscured by the veil, when the veil itself is taken for the unmediated object, we are in the presence of mere, monstrous ideology, superstition, or some such other destructive, all consuming fantasy. On the other hand, in the complete absence of a veil, beauty – culture – disappears, or rather, would never have existed. Under such conditions – conditions that belong to our animal pre-history in which there is no communication between us and our world –we would simply, were we able to go back, have "deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts" (Thompson 1998:8), darting after that which holds our attention only for a discreet period of time, then moving on, the way we engage with information.

Our ability to decipher and interpret, to veil an object such that its beauty might appear, is a function of our mimetic faculty and resides, in its earliest articulations, in the domain of occult practice (astrology, etc). This ability is always more than a simple reactionary "cry of terror called forth by the

unfamiliar" (Horkheimer and Adorono 2007:10). It is also an attempt to enter into a relationship with the unfamiliar, to enter into "an interplay between nature and humanity" (Benjamin 1996e:107).

> If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from the stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading per se, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity. [Benjamin 2005a:697].

After all, what is nonsensuous similarity if not secret semblance, veiled semblance? For what is essential to any secret is that in order that it should not slip into the oblivion of forgetting, such that the object disappears completely behind its veil, it must always be discoverable in the interpretation of objects and events. Hlegestr's inscription is just such an object and event. It provides us with a departure point for an interpretive exploration of the movement of 'aura' in the west. And what it reveals is that 'aura' collects around the 'I-form' of speech, around the individual, as a function of our proud new consciousness. And this pride is based on the feeling of freedom that arises with the emergence of Western individualism, a feeling expressed in a practical consciousness in which the personal pronoun, the 'I,' usurps syntactic priority in the grammar of the West. It does so by generating its own tradition, by the repetition and re-production of similarities.

But if it is the feeling of freedom that veils the object of beauty in this story, then the object behind the veil is the experience of individuality. And as we said earlier, those that sailed into the new freedom of the individual found themselves not poorer in experience, but richer in the experience of a certain kind of freedom, the freedom from kin and the trappings of society. In short, this free individuality, stripped of its veil (and here this stripping is to be marked off from mere absence of the veil), comes to appear as its other, as what Marx identified under the rubric

of alienation and estrangement – this is the revealed secret, the scar, of the 'I-form' of speech. Thus, "the divine ground of the being of beauty," divine because it demands sacrifice in order to halt its slide into to its other, alienation, "lies in the secret … [and] not in the superfluous veiling of things in themselves but rather the necessary veiling of things for us" (Benjamin 1996b:351). In order that our newfound individual freedom not be marched naked into the cruel light under which it is revealed as alienation we sacrifice what might have born the fruit of a harmonious social order, the virginal socio-politics of Western antiquity, to this alienation. Thus the object in its veil is no mere false consciousness, no mere opiate; rather, the price paid for individual freedom is alienation.

What becomes visible in the story of the 'I-form' of speech is that the secret of the freedom of the individual is her social alienation. It is the free individual whose chronicle adorns Hegestr's horn, who leaves home and kin behind, who like Goethe's Doctor Faust feels free to create with impunity, indebted to no one, and who finally becomes the primary bearer of aura through the middle ages and into modernity. So when Marx says that "man [sic] is a species being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but – and this is only another way of expressing it – but also because he treats himself as the actual living species" (Marx 2007:74), he gives expression to what we might call the aura of the free individual. And aura, here filched from the tradition of the patriarchal family, sublimated nature, takes over from the earliest attempts to gain some degree of control over nature proper. Mana – the magic that seeks control over nature, nature which is thought to be inescapable and unchangeable if not necessarily implacable – transfers to the individual who comes to see herself as subjective agent, the 'here and now' of history. Thus, the mimetic faculty, the faculty of generating similarity, via the generation of nonsensuous similarities, transubstantiates ancient mana into medieval and modern aura. In exchange, nature appears to give itself up, to sacrifice itself to the human subject. This occurs "by an unconscious ruse," whereby "human beings first began to distance themselves from nature." This occurs, in other words,

through the technique of play (Benjamin1996e:107). Nevertheless, even if by the transubstantiation of mana to aura via the 'I' incantation, the human subject really does succeed in achieving a distance from nature, there is a price to be paid. It is that we create a second nature, so to speak, a human nature that takes on mythic proportions and which ultimately harvests all subjective historical agency to itself. The reign of the individual is short-lived, and while the 'I-form' of speech remains, the veil of freedom is ultimately torn from the individual, leaving her "to be manipulated [and re-clothed, uniformed,] in the interests of fascism" (Benjamin1996e:101-102), or rather, if we wish to use the most up to date terminology, Neoliberalism.

V

Marshall McLuhan once wrote that "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." (quoted in Lorimer and Scannel 1994:139). This is clear in the story of the emergence of the individual announced on Hlegestr's horn. For if the 'I-form' of speech is, figuratively speaking, a tool (practical consciousness) that aims not at mastery over nature (instrumentality), but instead at gaining a degree of autonomy from it, autonomy that in turn enables a freedom of interaction between individuals and also between ourselves and nature, then it does so, as Benjamin suggests, in *play*. Nevertheless, with the rise of individualism comes, also, alienated existence. And since the experience of separation from family and community gives rise to the chimera of freedom and alienation in the cultural sphere, the mimetic spread of the 'I-form' of speech represents the repetition and reproduction that is "the transformation of a shattering experience into habit" (Benjamin 2005d:120). This repetition and reproduction that helps to account for the spread of the 'I-form' of speech is, according to Benjamin, the essence of play. So if the emergence of individuality at first appears to threaten the stability of aura in the ancient extended family it does this only so that it can take aura, subjective agency, unto itself – so that I, the individual, might imagine myself capable of creating my world. Thus the rise of the 'I-form' of speech is a self-conscious attempt to redeem the individual by asserting the primacy of the present over the past, while at the same time attempting to establish a tradition in which individuality might take over from nature as the agent of history – a project that appears doomed from its inception.

For as we distance ourselves, estrange ourselves, from the realm of nature and from one another, in so doing we "estrange the species from [ourselves]," and thereby in playing the role of individual, "turn the life of the species into a means of individual life" (Marx 2007:74, italics removed). For it is in 'play,' playing at individuality, that we create this distance from nature, which via the mimetic faculty reproduces the I-consciousness, the 'I-form' of speech throughout the European middle ages, modernity, and into the contemporary global world. But as soon as this transformation is complete, history grinds to a halt, for the essence of play – "imitation" – "is at home in the playing, not in the plaything" (Benjamin 2005c:116). It is in the nature of games, of play, that subjectivity, aura, ultimately transfers to the game once individuality ceases "ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself" (Gadamer 2006:107) and assumes the role of 'player,' a reification of the agency found in process of play; in other words, this reification "makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the species" (Marx 2007:75) of the game. It is this abstraction that is at once foundational for the mimetic faculty, for reproduction and repetition, and at the same time undermines subjective aspirations to historical agency – the engendering of habit, of tradition. For, it can "be stated that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition" (Benjamin 1996e:105, italics removed). Thus aura, subjectivity, accrues to the system, the apparatus, the game, in which the individual becomes a token of the authenticity of the game itself, of the mode of production.

While the individual rises up initially against the collective bondage of the ancient world, it is in play, abstraction, that she is once again enchained, all the while singing the tune of the 'I-form' of speech. For the unconscious ruse by which the individual, trickster of the modern epoch, begins to move away from traditional nature contains within itself a second trick that itself goes unnoticed at the crucial moment at which the individual feels himself to be on the verge of mastering history. As such, the individual

in this hubristic state proves ripe for harvest by the machines, the machinations of capital. Thus, "the real subject of the game (this is shown precisely by those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself" (Gadamer 2006:106). And insofar as the game, the mode of production is, without question, capitalism, the players – free individuals, I's – come into view as everywhere the same – alienated playthings of capital. The veil of freedom falls away: "this stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of aura [around the individual], is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness' in the world has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique" (Benjamin 1996e:105), the 'here and now,' the particularity of the individual.

If what remains of Hlegestr's incantation and Borkenau's story is only the self-alienation of the individual (and under contemporary capitalism, capitalism at the end of history, one is hard-pressed to make a convincing case to the contrary), then it appears that nothing remains for us except to continue playing the existing game, seeking satisfaction in our relative successes, or alternately to withdraw from it to the extent possible, a task that ultimately goes against the pleasure principle (and also the necessities of material existence) structured into playing itself. The latter course of action, moreover, seems to require us to give up the 'I-form' of speech and attempt a u-turn in the middle of the one way street of history, a course of action that has generally met with disaster in the latter half of the 20th Century. However, if we wish instead to transcend our reified existence as the playthings of capital, then it seems we must return to a sense of play that continually seeks to restructure and reinvent the games we play. This would involve, at minimum (and would only just constitute a point of departure), a recognition that if the second nature in which we've become enmeshed, the game we've invented as a means by which to distance ourselves from nature proper, is a product of both material social conditions and the mimetic faculty, and not simply an attempt to master nature, then it is possible to reinterpret instrumentality, which in its current

form merely seeks to carry over the impulse to master nature (mana) into our second nature. For this impulse arises out of the hazy recognition that this second nature, "an abstract form of domination," is responsible for the "increasingly fragmented character of … individual existence in that society" (Postone 1996:17). And yet, this abstract form of domination is, more often than not, poorly recognized; thus we fumble about in the depths of the past searching for strategies to solve the challenges of the game in which we have become mere players.

At the same time, even if the 'I-form' of speech (individuality) helped propel our history toward the alienation and estrangement pervading social life under capitalism, this is ultimately a function of the way individuality must play the game of capital. In other words, the contemporary problems associated with individualism, with neoliberal individualism, arise not of the consciousness of individuals as individuals, but of individualism under capitalism. For we have reached a point in history when the individual, indeed all individuals, are the players and capitalism does the playing. This is not to say that there is no agency whatsoever for the individual, but rather, it is to make a distinction between everyday subjectivity and the socio-historical subject. Thus, the philosophy of history here reasserts its centrality as a philosophic-political concern. For while individual subjects under capital do exercise a degree of subjectivity, they remain largely alienated from socio-historical subjectivity. "Subjectivity and the socio-historical Subject, in other words, must be distinguished in [our] analysis;" this is because "the identification of the identical subject-object with determinate structures of social relations has very important implications for a theory of subjectivity" (Postone 2003:87).

As Moishe Postone points out, "It was Marx," and, we should add, Benjamin in the cultural sphere, "who first addressed adequately the problems with which [the] modern philosophy [of history] had wrestled. [They] did so by changing the terms of those problems, grounding them socially and historically in the social [and cultural] forms of capitalism expressed by categories such as the commodity, [by play and mimesis, and by re-production]" (Postone

2003:79). And in so doing, Marx was able to neutralize those bourgeois concepts of socialism that sought to "identify with a social agent the concept of the identical subject-object with which Hegel," for example, "sought to overcome the subject-object dichotomy of classical epistemology" (Postone 2003:87). This is possible because subjectivity and the agent of history now interact with each other, and with traditional nature, via the second nature, the game, engendered by the rise of the 'I-consciousness.' In similar fashion to Marx, but in the sphere of culture, Benjamin was able to "neutralize a number of traditional concepts – such as creativity, genius, eternal value and mystery" (Benjamin 1996e:101). In so doing, the individual, the 'I' of the horn of Gallehus, ceases to stumble about in search of the firm ground of cultural authenticity, of tradition, and takes its stand elsewhere; in other words, "instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics" (Benjamin 1996e:106, italics removed). This means that the alienated individual, no longer the subjective agent of history under capitalism, retains the ability via politics to overcome her reified contemporary existence.

For, the practice of politics takes place, like play, in the mode of repetition and reproduction. But unlike those practices founded on ritual, practices that exist 'under' rather than 'in interaction with' traditional, proper nature, practices "that culminate in human sacrifice," and whose results "are valid once and for all," politics "are wholly provisional ([they] operate by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedure)" (Benjamin 1996e:107). If, in the first case, the aspiration to historical subjectivity is voiced in terms of the problem of the historico-epistemological "knowing individual (or supra-individual) subject and its relation to an external (or externalized) world, to the forms of social relations, considered as determinations of social subjectivity as well as objectivity," then under the rubric of politics "the problem of knowledge now becomes a question of the relationship between forms of social mediation and forms of thought" (Postone 2003:87). Thus the constellations between thought and mediation can be rearranged, improved via experiment and endlessly varied test procedure.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is fond of quoting Samuel Beckett: "try again, fail again, fail better" (Beckett 1996:101). This sums up what it means to understand politics as an endlessly varied test procedure. This is what it means to retain the individual 'I-form' of consciousness and still throw off the yoke of capitalist alienation. And if experiment, repetition, and reproduction – articulations of the mimetic faculty – are indeed central to contemporary human activities, then it becomes clear that we no longer need wait for the game itself to announce the time for revolution. That time is now, here at the end of history, and indeed we need only take to 'play' once again in order to grasp hold of and make real the idea that "every second," from here on out, is an opportunity, a "small gateway in time through which the [revolution] might enter" (Benjamin 2003:397). Thus, praxis beckons us to gather and pay our respects to the alienated individual of history hitherto.

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Alienation and Mobility

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ABSTRACT: This paper will explore matters of alienation in personal mobility. It begins by outlining the present car system that dominates and has led to transport becoming an increasingly large issue in terms of sustainability. The car system will then be located within the process of reification, an approach to alienation that identifies the car as a capitalist commodity pushed onto ordinary people. The paper will go on to explore the legacy that these developments have had on the 21st century landscape with cities made for cars and a countryside rendered car dependent. Possible alternatives to overcome the current car system will be identified, paying specific regard to schemes in Finland and Wales. The paper suggests that mobility should be construed as a common right and that there is a need to see past the current car system.

Key Words: mobility, sustainability, reification, consumption

This paper takes discussions of alienation into a new area, namely personal transportation. The emerging field of mobilities theory is led by Urry (2007), for whom mobility must be recognised as a central concept within contemporary social science because our life today is lived in relation to movement. At any and every moment, we are either on the move, in-between movements or reliant upon others moving. The 21st century is a time of constant flux. His critique of traditional social science claims that mainstream sociology assume stasis – people have generally been seen as static entities tied to specific places. In contrast, the mobilities paradigm encourages us to look at movements and the forces that drive, constrain and are produced by those movements. Such a lens can shed new light on aspects of alienation, specifically following the idea of reification and treating alienation as a social issue played out in the organisation of our communities and shared spaces.

By this line, commodification has moved beyond the economic realm with alienation having entered every aspect of modern life and culture.

The Car System

Mobility is essentially about public space – it is a set of shared places in which we choose to spend time. A road is not simply a means of getting from A to B but also a location in which people come together and social practices are engaged in – norms, habits, conventions are all played out. If mobility is a crucial component of contemporary society, the dominant representation of it within consumer capitalism is the car. The car has grown over the past century to assume a massive degree of social, cultural and economic power. Cars define the modern age: for the vast majority of readers, the automobile forms an essential part of their daily lives as a technology on which, for better or worse, they rely on in some

fashion, directly or indirectly. The significance of the motor vehicle has spread from country to country as one of the most all-encompassing facets of globalisation. This automotive creep has led to the tacit acquiescence to the ascendancy of the car, leading to the dominance of what can be termed *the car system*. We now accept cars as a necessary, almost natural part of our lives. The 20th century was the century of the car and its central position became locked-in to an extent that automobiles emerged as the de facto mobility leader for the 21st century.

The automobile monolith has subsumed all of society under its dominion. Although people invented the car, its status has grown to sublimate the surrounding society by orienting a culture of automobility around itself. The culture of automobility involves an interconnected web of car-based living. As a result, the private car is not only a means of transport, but also becomes a status symbol and a part of an individual's personal space that provides comfort, protection and privacy while travelling. For Featherstone (2004:2) automobility should be understood as a "social and technical system … which links together cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and other novel objects, technologies and signs." Sheller (2004) speaks of our automotive emotions – the manner in which car cultures possess affective dimensions relating to our aesthetics, subjective judgements and sensory responses. By showing how people feel so strongly about their cars, she underlines how automobilised life has become hardwired into our society.

The ascendency of the car system can be found in there being over two billion cars on the world's roads (Souanis 2011). However, the success of the car system is increasingly recognised to have come at great ecological cost: private automobiles are not environmentally sustainable. Transportation makes up a fifth of global oil usage – the vast majority of which comes from cars – and 23 percent of current global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions, almost three-quarters of which are generated by cars (International Energy Agency 2012). As a finite resource, oil will likely run out within the lifetime of many readers of this paper. The carbon dioxide produced in burning it slowly chokes the planet and plays a major role in man-made climate change. The present car system cannot go on indefinitely. Either we run out of materials to construct the cars or we run out of people to drive them. In recognition of the destructive nature of the car system, local, national and transnational organisations are imposing ever more stringent regulations to try to reform the automobile and render it more sustainable, such as the European Union's 2020 proposals targeting the car with a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.[1] As a result, the major car manufacturers have been pushed to improve their vehicle technologies with each new generation of petrol and diesel car more efficient than the last. Increasingly, though, the internal combustion engine is being seen as an intractable problem in and of itself, and there is currently great momentum behind a state-subsidised drive for alternatively fuelled vehicles, most prominently electric cars. Changing the fuel has the potential to overcome a large degree of the reliance on oil, and dramatically cut down on the harmful toxins produced. These benefits increase when renewable energy sources such as solar, hydro or wind power are used over fossil fuel power stations, and further again as alternative materials are developed for building the cars: lighter, less polluting options such as carbon fibre or recycled aluminium. Electric cars are the current great hope for those who want to preserve the idea of private car ownership but with a more environmentally friendly sheen.

Cars and Commodification

The drive for greening cars is of little value with regards to sustainability in that it only addresses the environmental components, while sustainability must be understood as a tri-polar concept also involving economic and social aspects. Environmental protection, rather than social justice or economic fairness, has been the focus of much sustainable transport policy and activity to date. Matters of social equity need be involved in discussions of sustainable transport, ensuring that planning and development aims for an equitable distribution of social benefits. Promoting social equity in transport policy means making decision to conserve and enhance of quality

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1 http://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/g-gas/index_en.htm.

of life, social capital and individual resources. In these terms, the current car system is neither economically nor social sustainable. In the UK, for example, 21 million households are suffering from transport poverty where over 10 percent of income is spent on transport, mostly owning and running cars (RAC Foundation 2012). Transport poverty is especially pronounced in rural areas where owning a car is considered a necessity not a luxury. The countryside is characterised by low population density with jobs and facilities located some distance from the housing stock. With inadequate public transport and long distances rendering active transport impractical, cars are sometimes considered the only option for those living in villages and hamlets. The car system is also damaging in the way that private automobile usage is implicated within commuting practices as two thirds of UK residents drive to work and, as a result, claim to feel stressed, anxious and depressed (Office for National Statistics 2012). Psychological damage is caused by routines of driving back and fore to work each day and community cohesion is challenged by neighbourhoods of strangers who simply drive past one another in their isolated metal boxes.

For Manno (2000), the possibility of sustainability is precluded by, what he calls, commoditization; a generalised Darwinesque pressure for economic evolution to push for ever greater levels of development. In so doing, he links issues of environmental degradation in with wider socio-political concerns, wherein the prioritising of commodities over, both, non-market goods and, also, non-market relationships oppresses those who lack power in or regard for the capitalist system of accumulation. Much of the social damage caused by cars can be found in the presumption of private car ownership. This norm ties the car system into Lodziak's (2000:111-112) ideology of consumerism, whereby "consumption has become the cognitive and moral focus of life." Newman (2013:464) explains that the:

> ideologues of consumption advocate the purchasing of products as an integral and essentially fulfilling part of contemporary living: we do not just need to buy new things, but we need to want to do so. In this scheme, consumption allows us to properly

construct and experience a satisfying sense of self. In this perspective, the supposition that we have moved from passive to active consumers is implicit: we make lifestyle choices in our purchasing.

Any variety of car would be covered by this consumerist characterisation: a greener model simply reflects the latest marketing fad. Newman's (2013) analysis of alienation and the car system outlines how automobility has led to the reification of the car in everyday life. Reification here refers to the dual process whereby people are reduced to things and things acquire the social characteristics of people, a circular process that, both, naturalises relationships in capitalism, while also socialising the objects of capital. For Marx (1973:514-515), this reification is an essential feature inherent in economic value, as:

> The production of capitalists and wage-laborers is therefore a major product of the process by which capital turns itself into values. Ordinary political economy, which concentrates only on the objects produced, forgets this entirely. Inasmuch as this process establishes reified labor as what is simultaneously the non-reification of the laborer, as the reification of a subjectivity opposed to the laborer, as the property of someone else's will, capital is necessarily also a capitalist. The idea of some socialists, that we need capital but not capitalists, is completely false.

We are thus unable to accept the capitalist system without also agreeing to the effect it has on the self-understanding of those who live within it. The impact of fetishising commodities as such is developed by Lukács (1971), who describes the fragmentation of life into distinct and, atomised activities. Objects are converted into subjects just as subjects are turned into objects. Through objectification, subjects are made passive while, concurrently, thingification constructs objects as somehow active. Inverting subjects and objects in this manner ensures that commodities come to control the people who created them. People and their relationships are reduced to the level of traded produce, while that produce becomes all-important in defining the nature of the social world. As a result, the masses come to accept the assimilation of a multitude of cultures and experiences into

identikit sameness. Everyone adopts a standard issue capitalist worldview. With the car so important to the capitalist project, it is little wonder that private automobility should arise as a key element of this reified standpoint.

Highly influenced by Lukács, the Situationist movement applied the idea of alienation to all areas of everyday life. Plant (1992:4) outlines how the development of capitalism entailed the extension of the means, objects and intensity of alienated experience. For the Situationists, no area of experience is free from the permeation of capitalist relations of production and consumption. As such, citizens are reduced to the level of spectators of a world that acts to preclude their active participation. Such alienation is produced by the capitalist system of relations, meaning that it appears to be a part of the human condition rather than a system of class-based oppression. The Situationist analysis of contemporary capitalism took Marxian commodification to its end stage. Here social control is based on consensus and not force; consumers are neutralised through being drawn into *the society of the spectacle*. We thus consume a world created by others rather than creating one of our own. The society of the spectacle is a commodity-based society still premised upon production but reorganised at a higher level. The notion of the spectacle is complex and somewhat diffuse: on the one hand, it refers to media and consumer society, organised around the consumption of images and commodities but the concept also refers to the immense institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism and all the hegemonic methods used by power to render subjects passive to societal manipulation, and obscure the nature of capitalism's deprivations. For Debord (2009), the spectacle represents the decline of being into having, the "historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life." We buy into capitalist so fully and enthusiastically that we become little more than what we consume.

By this reading, we can appreciate the central role cars take in consumption: nothing typifies consumer culture more than the automobile. In the *Situationist*

Thesis on Traffic, Debord (1959) claims it would be a mistake to regard the automobile as simply a means of transportation, rather:

> it is the most notable material symbol of the notion of happiness that developed capitalism tends to spread throughout the society. The automobile is at the centre of this general propaganda, both as supreme good of an alienated life and as essential product of the capitalist market.

Capitalism manufactures demand for the car and mirrors this back through the car system to suggest that car ownership is a privilege, reserved for those lucky enough to benefit from the capitalist system. Cars are capitalism's great gift to society. The car system, then, represents a political act to trick the masses into conformity. In addition to convincing the masses to work hard for their reward, it also acts to preclude what the Situationists called *dérive*, or drift. This idea refers to unplanned journeys through urban landscapes, whereby the aesthetics the city's architecture and geography subconsciously direct travellers. There is no necessary end point; the only goal is to encounter a new, more authentic experience. For Debord (1958), the dérive represents "a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances." This genuine experience is lost within the car system, since cars act to detach humanity, hindering the potential for spontaneity considered so vital to true freedom from oppression. The layout of roads artificially channels humanity, the rules of the road regulate behaviour and the car standardises interaction. By this line, it is inherently alienating that contemporary capitalist society is organised around the imperative of the car, yet this is the situation we are faced with – and most seem to accept. While it was active the movement advocated alternative experiences of life in opposition to the conventional living permitted under advanced capitalism. The Situationists developed the idea of psychogeography, to reimagine unitary urbanism, a call to reclaim the streets from capitalism and introduce a revolution into everyday life. By this line, it is

important to understand how capitalism casts our mobility as automobility and realise that the car system has been made normal through some manner of automobile indoctrination centralising the product (and our relation to it) deep into our culture.

The City and the Countryside

That the car has come to dominate contemporary life is a social fact as true in the city as it is in the countryside. This paper will now draw on a pair of examples that highlight how the prominence of the capitalist car system can be identified in an urban area (Indonesia's capital, Jakarta) and in a rural location (the highlands and islands of Scotland).

Indonesia

Jakarta is the capital city of Indonesia, the largest city in Southeast Asia and one of the most populous urban areas on the planet. It has a population of 10.2 million (12 million in the working week) in an area of around 480km² giving a very high population density of 14,464 people per km².[2] All this in a location originally intended for 800,000 when designed by Dutch settlers. With so many people squeezed into a relatively tight space, it might be supposed that cars were not necessary to move around the city but historical development over the past half century ensures that private automobile use is central to life in Indonesia's biggest city as revealed in the study conducted by Danisworo et al. (2003). Here it emerges that motorised transport in Jakarta is growing by 11 percent a year, with at least 90 percent of the 3.9 million cars in the city privately owned. In contrast, only 2.5 percent of traffic in the city is public transport. As a result, congestion is so bad in the city that they operate a three-in-one policy during rush hours, where there must be a minimum of three people per car though this scheme has simply created a black economy of unemployed, children and students who offer their services to car drivers for a small fee. The domination of cars is reflected in the city's infrastructure. On main boulevards, facilities other than roads are negligible with narrow sidewalks and no cycle lanes. Almost all buildings have drop-

off points for cars and it is rare for a building not to have a car park. Mobility in Jakarta is inherently automobility, it is writ into the culture of the city.

The particular embodiment of the car system found in Jakarta can be traced back to two key political regimes. Initially, the autocratic rule of Indonesia's first president, the nationalist Sukarno, in the period of *Guided Democracy*, tried to make Jakarta look like a vibrant city on the world scale. Investing heavily in a road building programme from the late 1950s to encourage the vision of Jakarta as a modern metropolis akin to those he saw in the United States, Sukarno saw mobility as about national pride. These infrastructure projects involved borrowing heavily from other nations saddling the country with a huge foreign debt. In the late 1960s, he was succeeded by General Suharto, whose *New Order* administration reacted to the country's fiscal problems through three decades of strong, military-dominated government. His chief priority was economic development, which he tied to the policy of promoting cars and building more roads. As Indonesia did not hold sufficient capital, Suharto followed a deregulation policy in transport, privatising the provision of infrastructure and giving up the state's role in planning or providing facilities. Mobility was reduced to the channelling of people and promotion of goods for economic development. Cars won out as the market economy demanded.

The situation of automobile dependency in Jakarta reflects Rajan's (1996:6) view that the car system has not emerged from the choice of the community (there are few civil debates on what we want to do with cars) but rather come from above to shore up the capitalist system:

> Implicitly or otherwise, automobile use has typically belonged to the private domain of individual decision making, even though it is evident to all concerned that these personal decisions … are themselves influenced by the collective outcome of countless individual and government decisions.

Jakarta shows how capitalism leads to business and economic decisions trumping those of ordinary people who must live on busy, noisy and dirty streets in a city blighted by smog and noxious gases.

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2 http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/jakarta-population/.

Scotland

In the British countryside, structural factors render private car ownership vital but nowhere is this necessity more pronounced than in rural Scotland as shown in Gray's (2000) research. A little over five million people live in Scotland, one million of which reside within rural areas and, although only 18 percent of the population live there, the countryside accounts for 94 percent of the land mass in Scotland, 69 percent classified remote rural.[3] There means there is a lot of open space and much distance between developments. Here access to transport has been identified as the single biggest concern of the local population as reflected in car ownership levels and car use; 89 percent of households in rural Scotland have access to a car and cars are used for 76.5 percent of all journeys. In the countryside, settlements are more spread out than in urban areas, with greater distances between housing stock and employment opportunities, leisure facilities and essential services necessary to participate in 21st century society. These distances plus piecemeal distribution of the privatised rail infrastructure and increasing cuts to bus services under Conservative austerity economics combine to emphasise the important of access to cars amongst the populace. This car dependency can be found in a report by the RAC Foundation (2012), which shows that 85 percent of those who live in such areas would find it very difficult to adjust their lifestyle to being without a car, against 69 percent of those residing in towns and cities. Rural dwellers need their car more than urbanites for work (81% to 48%), medical issues (69% to 38%), school (74% to 36%), shopping (73% to 46%) and a social life (68% to 27%).

The need for cars stems from the organisation of consumer capitalist society starting with the notion that car ownership is somehow aspirational and normal. Thereon government privatisation of public transport meant the less profitable, but most important, rural lines have been steadily phased out. In addition, there has been a pronounced centralisation of services under free market capitalism, with a focus initially on the large cities and, more recently, on out-of-town developments sighted around major motorway junctions. The car system is not inevitable

and proper planning and regulation could have curbed its excesses but governments hell-bent on pursuing neo-liberal ideologies have allowed it free reign to shape social experience. Even the House of Commons Transport Committee (2014) recognises such trends. In their latest sitting, they accepted that rural communities, and especially those in Scotland, have become more isolated in recent decades as centralisation and consolidation have led to key infrastructure being organised with a tacit assumption of access to transport that is often not present without access to cars. Chief among the explanations that emerged was the self-fulfilling prophecy whereby lack of workable public transport options mean there is no alternative but to invest in private automobiles, whose normalcy thereon becomes accepted in future planning and budgetary decision making processes. But little is being proposed to redress the transport problems of rural areas, lest to propose tax reductions on fuel, which is more expensive in the most remote areas of Scotland, though even this policy will only act to further reinforce the desirability of private car ownership.

The situation in rural Scotland ties into Paterson's (2007:18) views that the "autonomous mobility of car driving is socially produced … by a range of interventions that have made it possible." He refers to the manner that the capitalist state has worked to ensure that conditions are correct to stimulate demands for private cars thus facilitating the accumulation of capital to shore up the present system. It is no accident that rural development has resulted in a separation of people and services and the lack of state intervention to protect people in the countryside from the subsequent social harms is because it's capitalist nature desires to push them to buy automobiles or, at least, move to the cities as a self-sufficient, community-orientated local way in rural areas of life is of less value to wider system goals than is a large but disparate urban mass. Further, car-oriented land use policies can only thrive when the outright consumption of land for private use is unchecked and seen as morally unproblematic, alongside cheap means to have such destinations connected to resources and services.

In city and countryside, alike, then the car system imposes order onto human activity, compelling

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3   http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/29133747/2.

people to run automobiles and conform to consumer capitalist ideals.

Alternative Models of Personal Transport

Despite existing problems of car dependency in urban and rural areas seeming ingrained and intractable, alternative systems of operating mobility are evolving (often making use of new technologies to create spaces for innovation). Such arrangements recognise the primacy of automobility but seek to adapt it in more sustainable ways rather than simply abandon it wholesale, with examples to be found in Finland's capital, Helsinki, and rural West Wales.

Finland

Finland has a population of a little over five million and a reputation for good public transport services linking the residents to the key services of the city.[4] The Finnish capital has announced plans to transform its existing public transport network into a comprehensive, point-to-point mobility on-demand system within the next decade.[5] This would link together taxis, shared cars, ferries, trains, shared bikes, driverless cars, buses, trams and, also, the Kutsuplus –a minibus that lets riders select where they want to be picked up and put down via smartphone. It has been suggested that the Finnish set up would render car ownership essentially pointless in the city. The driving force behind this move is that the younger generation want practical travel options. With incomes falling and motoring costs rising, cars are an increasingly unwelcome burden rather than being valued as the liberating symbol of personal freedom they once were. A recent report shows Generation Y (18 to 29-year-olds) hold different attitudes to cars than their predecessors (TNS 2013). For Generation Y, being debt-free is suddenly sexy, while less than one in five consider car ownership a reflection of personal success. This is reflected by the lower car ownership levels among Generation Y (68%), compared to the previous Generation X (81%). Young Helsinki residents view transportation differently from their

parents so are thought to be more flexible to reshaped transport provision. They want simple, flexible and inexpensive transportation leading to a mobility model based on how services are provided in the telecommunications industry.

Like internet service providers or mobile phone companies, people would move around by paying by the kilometre, or by purchasing a monthly package with kilometres included. This integrated approach goes beyond traditional public transport, with transport procured in real time through a single app giving residents a variety of options at the touch of a screen. Users specify a start and destination while the software acts as a journey planner to identify and book the most efficient means of completing the trip. This approach allows users to tailor their journeys point-to-point, offering all the convenience of owning a car without much of the cost. The city's transportation will continue to be run as a public utility but will include competition to make sure that the services which most benefit residents succeed as commuters exercise their right to choose what works for them. This is Nordic capitalism in action: public authorities facilitating capitalist innovation to improve the overall standard of living, partnership between the state and private sector to promote the most comfortable standard of living practicable for citizens.

The Helsinki vision, then, falls within the scope of what has been referred to as the Nordic model of strong government utilising the private sector, what is often referred to as a social democratic middle ground beyond free market capitalism and state socialism (Wooldridge 2003). As other European economies continue to suffer from the global economic crisis, the Nordic model of capitalism is gaining increasing attention. The Scandinavian approach makes a pragmatic judgement on public services: as long as they work, it barely matters who provides them and this is just what has been proposed for Helsinki – making use of the more sustainable private businesses that provide mobility services such as bus companies in order to topple the dominance of the unsustainable automotive industry. Of course, this model of strong government would not appeal to the particularly libertarian take on Marxism held by the Situationists but they would have been impressed with the oppor-

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4 http://www.indexmundi.com/finland/population.html.
5 http://www.hel.fi/static/public/hela/Kaupunkisuunnittelulautakunta/Suomi/Esitys/2014/Ksv_2014-06-03_Kslk_17_El/4612BA69-A916-4377-BA22-B9E1D340618C/Liite.pdf.

tunity for spontaneity provided by residents being able to select from such a diverse array of mobility options on a whim and travel wherever they desire without the need for pre-planning. For those who can tolerate a role for the state, at least in the immediate future, the Finnish approach offers the prospect of changing our relationship to the automobile and posing a significant challenge to the primacy of the car system within the urban environment.

Wales

Pembrokeshire is a rural county in West Wales combining expansive coast with sparse countryside. It is the 18th most densely populated local authority in Wales, with 77 people per km² meaning that there are only four counties with a sparser spread of residents.[6] In light of the generally underdeveloped geography of the area, agriculture and tourism are the heart of the economy. There are no motorways in Pembrokeshire, only four A-roads that carry the county's traffic, little of which is dual carriageway. While the main towns in the county are well served by trains and bus routes, those living in more remote villages and hamlets do not tend to have easy access to public transport so are largely dependent on cars. This reliance locks many into car dependency with other areas of their spending duly restricted. Some decide they no longer want to live in an area where participation in everyday life is dictated by car ownership, so will leave their homes leading to community break up. For those that do travel back and fore in their cars, the carbon footprint is significant. To overcome these challenges to sustainability, REV Cymru have emerged as a collection of community car clubs.[7] Unlike many car clubs, they use only plug-in electric cars, powered largely by renewable energy.

The founding member is based in Cilgwyn, located with the National Park near the small of village Newport. The Cilgwyn Community Group is a collective of around 40 households with a history of growing their own food, locally distributing it by bicycle, encouraging and installing renewable energy, sharing renewable electricity, and developing a local currency to trade. In March 2013, a £25,000 grant

from the Big Lottery Village SOS saw the group purchase a Nissan Leaf and became the first electric car club in Wales. They operate a membership scheme with the vehicles booked out for certain periods. They currently have 15 members with over 50 bookings per month. Members book online, entering their destination and time on any chosen day. Other members can see bookings, so they can arrange to share a lift or request an alteration (if someone without a car needs the vehicle booked by a car owner, the member in most need gets the club car). Income is generated from membership fees and mileage charges are re-invested back into the scheme to make it self-sustaining. Cilgwyn Community Group bought a second Leaf but, rather than use this for their own members, they leased it to another new electric car club: the St David's Eco City Group. Over the following year, four more clubs sprung up in villages across the county. There are also hopes to continue this expansion with clubs outside Pembrokeshire as the group attempt to spread the message of this sustainable mobility to other rural communities across Wales.

What started as a scheme primarily looking to provide environmental sustainability, quickly became more about the socio-economic needs of community members. Economically, the cars provide access to transport for those who might otherwise become isolated due to their inability to run a car of their own thus sharing the cost of motoring across the community. They calculate members save money if they make proper use of the car club as compared to private vehicle ownership. In term of social impact, the clubs are slowing down the trend for centralisation of services and amenities, curbing the drain to urban areas, by making more remote communities viable again. In addition, they judge community cohesion to have been enhanced by bringing neighbours together through their shared asset, rather than leaving them to the socially atomising private car system. There has also been an increase in community pride accompanying the clubs. This is a bottom-up attempt to reclaim power from the car system for local communities in the countryside and, as such, represents a stand against the worst excesses of consumer capitalism that can be readily adopted in other

6   http://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/content.asp?nav=101,649,1928.
7   http://www.revcymru.co.uk/.

such areas. While the Situationists gave little attention to the countryside, the way this model brings ordinary people together in a shared experience of the built landscape would have impressed, especially so as they do so on their terms rather than being corralled into the dominant system of commodified private automobiles that capitalism attempts to push onto people as consumers.

Each of these models, urban and rural, offer a foretaste of contemporary living freed from the car system. The models offer glimpses of hope from within a capitalist system that encourages consumerism and promotes automobility, which should be considered and developed in order to, either, reduce the harmful effects of capitalism or point towards something more positive beyond. Here mobility is not fetishised but, rather, exists as a way to move people around and ensure that communities function properly as it should do freed from the consumerist imperative that has transformed mobility into automobility.

Conclusions

The alienating nature of commodity capitalism and the subsequent manner that the car system has organised mobility around consumption-based lines should be considered in the light of Newman's (2016) argument to conceive mobility as a part of the commons of shared community assets. Mobility should not be carved up based on the ability of citizens to own cars for such division should be considered to constitute harm in zemiological terms as significant as many of those penalised by criminal sanction within legal systems. Work is essential to earn money, medical services are vital for health, shops crucial to buy food and clothing, while leisure facilities are central for

socialisation: these aspects of the social fabric cannot justly be reduced to the by-product of a capitalist commodity. The idea that citizens must buy into the car system to take part clearly prioritises products over people, conflating the constituent parts that form the bedrock of a society. In particular, the idea that the young, elderly or poor might be shut out of ordinary life because they cannot afford to buy or run a car is a challenge to notions of a fair and democratic society. This is an argument for social justice in mobility. Commoning points to our right to shape our own lives, to have control over who and what we are and to and the system of automobility curbs this.

Capitalism transforms life into a quest to get the money necessary for living the prescribed acceptable life. It pushes us to act always with an end point capitalist achievement in mind, meaning that we often overlook the content of our actions on the way. The logic of alienation is that the individuals are made into an inherent other, rendering them foreign to what they do, who they are and to other people as we live out our lives at a distance from our true essence, one step removed through capitalist commodities we use and rely on. When private cars are considered to be needed in both urban and rural areas, it is important to realise that the car system holds sway throughout society and has ensured that, in place of communities, we are left with collections of consumers. Cars are the products of the economic arena and should not be allowed to shape our lives in the social to the degree that they do. Moving beyond the presumption for private automobility offers a means to fight back against one particularly pervasive aspect of commodification – if victories can be won against the might of the car system, other areas in which social alienation operates may follow.

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The Ambivalent Spectacle: A Critical Inquiry on Web 2.0 Media and Alienation

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ABSTRACT In this paper we test the limits of one of the more influential critical inquiries linking media to Marx's notion of alienation: Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as applied to web 2.0 media landscapes. While in need of qualification and historicization to interpret web 2.0 media, we argue that the idea of the Spectacle provides a useful holistic perspective capable of reconciling the ambivalent phenomena of alienation that can be found in this new context. Thereafter, by exploring how web 2.0 media practices are consistently tied to labour and value creation, we argue in favour of a materialist approach to media, which treats means of communication as a means of production. Furthermore, we contend that in the new media landscape, Debord's Spectacle becomes a useful heuristic for understanding (new) mediation as alienation, what we term, 'Spectacle 2.0.'

KEYWORDS: new media, Guy Debord, Karl Marx, alienation, spectacle

Introduction

A consistent body of critical literature has steadily drawn on Marx's concept of alienation to examine mediated communication as one important manifestation of the dialectics of modernity, i.e. being capable of connecting and simultaneously isolating individuals, emancipating and coercing them, and finally democratizing the polity and commodifying/trivializing culture. In this context, mediation, understood as the social and technological process of mediating social relations via communication, becomes a powerful example of how alienation prevents people from experiencing 'genuine' social relations, which in Marxian terms, consists of people relating to one another by "free conscious activity" (Marx 1978:77).

In the specific context of the web 2.0 landscape – referring to Internet based platforms such as blogging and social networking – media are considered

the foundational ground of new social movements, radical democracy and the renewal of the public sphere (Castells 2009). Co-currently, media are also examined as a congenial capitalist platform, a new subsuming level on which the audience is exploited by digital labour. This happens through highly ambiguous practices, which are synthesized by Terranova's (2000) concept of "free labor," which we understand to be the voluntary expression of subjectivity and gratuitous production.

Examining the context defined by web 2.0 media, Marxist media scholars have dealt with alienation mostly in relation to media audiences and the paradoxical ambivalent understanding of agency that emerges. This notion of agency is linked to productive practices such as user-generated content: The higher the agency in freely producing content, the greater the risk of finding a level of estrangement

from the real productive process, other users and the content produced. For instance, in the prototypical case of Facebook, the user is unaware of the extent of their unpaid work and subsequent exploitation of how their private life, and the social networks they belong to, have been commodified.

In fact, web 2.0 media exemplify ways in which the mediation of the Spectacle (Debord, 1967) could run shallower, and also run deeper. On the one hand, web 2.0 media appear to give back to the audience what traditional mass media have subtracted: sociability and control over the production of media content. Yet, on the other hand, web 2.0 media appear to alienate users from the means, tools and ownership of production, and from each other. We call this the 'dilemma of ambivalent spectacle,' and suggest that it is a powerful heuristic for understanding our increasingly mediated lives.

The media mentioned in Debord's corpus – newspapers, TV and radio – adopted a functionalist broadcast logic of "one to many." By contrast, new social media offer a much wider variety of social relational forms, variously described as "many to many," "few to few," and "many to one." These differences have important consequences for the study of alienation. Consider that if traditional 'mediated alienation' dissolves the subject, the object and the process of producing meaning via communication, then web 2.0 media, with its proverbial free labour, provides qualitatively thicker kinds of communicative relations that build on high interaction, participatory culture, and the agency of linking the moment of production to the consumption of media content. In fact, in such a media scenario, surely there is room for both alienation and exploitation (Fuchs 2010), because in the porous boundaries established by web 2.0 media, the "active" user of social media freely generates content and value, which is then appropriated by media corporations such as Facebook and YouTube.

Reflecting on that ambivalence, in this paper we test the limits of one of the most influential critical inquiries linking media to Marx's notion of alienation: Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle as applied to web 2.0 media landscapes. This is because, relative to existing literature, Spectacle more effectively conciliates the humanist and structuralist implications of the concept of alienation.

Building upon a political economic approach to media, we demonstrate how social media can simultaneously be understood as alienating and de-alienating social experiences. While in need of qualification and historicization to interpret web 2.0 media, we argue that the idea of the Spectacle provides a useful holistic perspective capable of reconciling the ambivalent phenomena of alienation. Thereafter, by exploring how web 2.0 media practices are frequently tied to phenomena of alienation and exploitation via the notion of the Spectacle, we argue in favour of a materialist approach to media, which treats means of communication as a means of production.

While there is a long tradition that has understood communication as a means of production (cf Gramsci 1971; Althusser 1971; Volosinov 1973; Williams, 1977) this remains a minority view. Instead, as Peck (2006) claims, most of media research still operates by the idealist assumption that 'consciousness determines social being' which assumes that mediated alienation is limited to 'alienated ideas,' ideology and false consciousness. While, not necessarily disagreeing in identifying media mostly as semiotic agents, we are convinced that the effectiveness of the media spectacle can only be understood when grounded in the concrete ways in which it mobilizes labour and creates and extracts value out of it.

To advance our argument, we briefly show how a consistent body of literature tends to treat mediation as tightly related to alienation. Then, we concentrate on the Spectacle as one of the most accomplished synthesis of such a critical view on media. Finally, in the second half of the essay, we test the limits of the Spectacle by contextualizing it in the web 2.0 media environment. With important differences in mind, we introduce "*Spectacle 2.0*," and use it to describe how web 2.0 media practices offer an important qualification of the relation between mediation and alienation that reveals the complexity of the post-Fordist, information driven, and capitalist productive system.

Ultimately, by the operationalization/historicization of Debord's spectacle we mean to provide an understanding of alienation as it materializes in media

phenomena and practices. We consider this endeavour particularly timely in a context in which, while currently functioning as powerful metaphors of the social process as well as the material sphere in which current forms of valourization, exploration of labour, power structures, ideological practices as well as counter-hegemonic social struggles find their condition of possibility, information and communication technologies remain incredibly ambiguous in its overall social significance. Indeed, by using the spectacle we try to recover a concept that can articulate the complexity of a media saturated world in which mediation represents both the source of aspiration to form some kind of (dis-alienated) general intellect characterized by absolute awareness and absolute socialized agency through "hyper-connectivity," but also the constant threat of being completely insulated from it, being overwhelmed by "too much" information and of being controlled by a capillary kind of surveillance.

Mediation and the Alienated Spectators

We understand Marx's conception of alienation as a compound account of the breach that estranges people from their practical activities, material processes of social (re-)production and other people. For Marx, history always partially escapes us because we make history but not under the condition of our own making, so alienation leads to a contradiction between an anthropological condition of human beings and particular historically determined circumstances.

Such a tension between 'nature' and 'history' becomes evident for Marx when one examines the different kinds of productive activities, particularly, the distinction between (waged) 'labour' and 'work.' In *Capital*, Marx maintains that "Labor which creates use-values and is qualitatively determined is called 'work' as opposed to 'labor'; labor which creates value and is only measured quantitatively is called 'labor', as opposed to 'work'" (1867:138). The two aspects contradict each other when it comes to alienation because while work is an expression of our free, conscious, imaginative practical activity, waged labour frequently requires coercion, abiding to oppressive rules and being placed in a system of production that detaches the worker from their own product, colleagues and individual assertion.

Consequently, waged labour causes multiple kinds of alienation to the workers, thus disrupting the moment of genuine creative activity intrinsic in the experience of "working:"

> This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as *loss of realization* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*. [Marx 1867:22]

With these comments in mind, alienation represents for the humanist Marx of the *Manuscripts* a way to critically evaluate the (lack of) authenticity of the relationship that a given subject has with an object as well with other subjects. An alienated condition subverts the nature of social relations to the paradoxical point that "the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates" (Marx 1867:22). Even more paradoxical is the estrangement materialized in the phenomenon of commodity fetishism:

> The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [Marx 1867:165]

This assessment of human relations naturally leads to the question of mediated communication, for in contemporary societies it is one preponderant way in which people come into relation with each other. Mediated communication represents a modernity promise of sociability via means of communication, which, like labour, is constantly felt in highly ambiguous ways.

While the analytic category of alienation was originally mostly applied to labor, for some it may appear less intuitively applicable to media. However, we are convinced that media should be considered as material means of production at two different united, but also distinct, levels. This is for two reasons. First, media are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural commodities. Second, because of their preeminent role as cultural agents in shaping the collective imagery of a given society, media are also responsible for the production, distribution and consumption of ideas, values and beliefs. Together, this process controls the production, distribution and consumption of socially shared meanings that materially reproduces a given society by mobilizing social practices such as consumption.

Mediation as Alienation

Alienation represents both an outcome and a precondition for reproducing a capitalist system. In this sense, media as means of production and (re)production of such a system can become a powerful agent as well as a metaphor of alienation, a conceptualization of modernity understood in its contradictory nature (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). In fact, mediating human communication via technology has also consistently produced fear, anxiety and dystopic images, which materialize in different forms, as the literary and scholarly tradition of mass society theory confirms, that is, mediation as the loss of contact with nature (Peters 1999).

In the limited media literature that specifically covers alienation, the concept has frequently been deployed to study the loss of signifying and interpreting the agency of the media audience. Herein, from a cultural critique point of view, 'mediated alienation' has been mostly understood as an impoverishment of people's capability to critically understand and produce ideas. Accordingly, 'mediated alienation' may concern the estrangement of the TV viewer, the radio listener or the newspaper reader from the text at the level of determining its content, and its significance. This is evident in critical media literacy projects where the "culture industry" estranges people by providing escapist diversion, and consistent distraction, which is then enacted through the cultivation

of false psychological needs that strip people of the intellectual autonomy and individuality needed to understand their predicament. While the culture industry thesis mostly implies a level of passivity of the alienated audiences, Althusser (1971) offered an alternative reading of mediated alienation based on his idea of the "ideological state apparatus" (ISAs). ISAs, which include media, school, religion, family, law, politics, economics, communication and culture, function through a dialectics of coercion and consent to interpolate subjects into ideology. Mediation in Althusser functions as both alienation from real social relations as well as enrollment into imaginary social relations. This is because, through media, audiences are alienated from the material processes that produce a given reality, but paradoxically find a moment of identity building and de-alienation in the ideologically mediated environment. In other words, interpellation entails a contradictory process of alienation by which individuals acknowledge, respond to, and therefore consent to ideologies, which leads them to understand themselves as subjects (cf Durham and Kellner 2001).

While much political economy scholarship on media provides a needed materialist analysis of media, diametrically opposed to culturalist notions of alienation, it tends to dismiss the humanist dimension of the workers' consciousness and the concrete ways they experience estrangement. For instance, Mosco (2009), McChesney (2008), and Herman and Chomsky (1988) all provide a structural analysis of media institutions, which are created by alienating and exploitative systems already in place and create the conditions of possibility for alienation, but without necessarily dealing with concrete phenomena of alienation. Smythe (1981) argues that, "the principal product of the commercial mass media in monopoly capitalism [is] simple: audience labor power" (26). Watching TV requires the audience to do emotional and cognitive work, which lends itself to, "learning to desire and buy particular brands and commodities" (Fisher 2012:172). Smythe's thesis has been both advanced and problematized mainly by Jhally and Livant (1986) who focus on the act of watching as labour itself and argue that the surplus-value comes from "extra-watching," i.e. watching more commer-

cials than are required to pay for the program. Still, there is much value in Smythe's observations as it relates to alienation.

In quick summary, mediation can be considered as a way to reconceptualize alienation from the specific perspective of technology of communication. While this has a long history of emphasis, when they do occur, more often than not studies that attend to media and alienation confine their efforts to alienation from ideas and 'meaning,' or alienation from social institutions. In the former (culturalist), alienation is reduced to a humanist concern, in the latter (structuralist) it is reduced to a structuralist concern of the creation of value and exploitation. For this reason, we consider one conceptualization of mediation that seems to conciliate those two important dimensions into one synthetic framework, and therefore more effectively secure the relation between mediation and alienation: Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

The Spectacle

Almost fifty years ago, Debord (1967) in *The Society of the Spectacle* claimed that under the conditions of late capitalism, "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles: everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (thesis 5). Drawing on Marx's ideas of commodity fetishism and alienation, Debord claims that, "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (thesis 4).

The alienating power of the Spectacle partially derives from reification, where, according to Lukács (1971), a historically determined social structure comes to be considered as natural, universal, ontologically existing as an object. The taken for granted nature of the Spectacle allows the paradox of consistent inevitable presence and the capability of being undetected. The Spectacle constitutes a formidable mediation, which alienates the spectators by standing in between people's "actual" life and how they perceive it:

> The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence

of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. Materially, the spectacle is 'the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man'. [Thesis 215]

Debord associates the Spectacle to a particular stage of capitalism, "when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (thesis 42). This ruling of the commodity form is linked to the fundamental shift in the twentieth century from a production-oriented economy to a later configuration organized around consumption, media and information:

> In all of its particular manifestations − news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment − the spectacle is the model of the prevailing way of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. [Thesis 7]

This quote demonstrates that the Spectacle represents a pre-constituted gaze of the world that is mainly propelled by mediated visual communication, "when the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior" (thesis 18). Alienation derives then from *the impossibility of experiencing reality in its true nature*, as the Spectacle works as a cognitive interface between the mind and reality. This is indeed a powerful form of mediation.

To elaborate, the Spectacle does not dominate through 'hypnosis' or 'subliminal' propaganda but through a totalizing social organization in which social control is built upon a flexible mix of force and consent. Hence, it is a tool of social pacification more than social oppression, a kind of "ubiquitous opium for the masses" (thesis 44). Consequently, similar to the Gramscian notion of hegemony, institutions such as schools, media, the parliament, and similar, are considered as organic components of the Spectacle. The Spectacle rules by "mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in controlling use" (thesis 46). Its force consists in its pervasiveness and in being able to mediate any aspect of social life.

However, unlike Gramscian hegemony, the Spectacle is not a deliberate distortion, the outcome of a class based political project. Rather it is a, "*weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into a material force" (thesis 5). To be clear, the subaltern, the dominant group, and society as a whole, experience the alienating effects of the Spectacle.

To sum up, Debord provides rich analyses of how a media saturated society translates specific sets of social relations, proper of late consumer capitalism, into spectacular representations abstracted from real vital processes of people. In this sense, Debord has advanced Marx and Lukács's study of alienation phenomena, by focusing on the moment of consumption, and exploring at the level of images and re-presentation, the condition of fragmentation within the totality of the Spectacle. Much like Debord uses 1960's capitalist development to historicize Marx and Lukács's analysis of alienation, we turn to web 2.0 media to historicize Debord's Spectacle.

Spectacle 2.0: Mediated Alienation

While several decades distance us from the original development of Debord's theses, the interest for the Spectacle has remained constant, if not augmented. Especially in media studies, the work of Debord was advanced by the self-titled critical and cultural tradition, and by semioticians such as Baudrillard's postmodern study of signs as the new commodity in a later stage of the Spectacle (Best and Kellner 1999). Indeed, given CNN's coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, 9/11 as a televised event, and the global iconography of desperation and dispossession, eviction and protest, linked to economic crises, it is difficult to deny the heuristic value of the Spectacle.

Nevertheless, the social historical circumstances that originally produced Debord's scenario have changed in substantial ways. Therefore its capability to alienate people may have changed as well. Subsequently, we have decided to use web 2.0 as a lens to test the limits of the Spectacle, because, compared to traditional media examined by Debord, newer media are considered by many popular media pundits to have a positive social effect at a revolutionizing scale. Contrary to these pundits and commentators who understand this to be 'Spectacular Emancipation,' we think there is good evidence to understand it as 'Spectacular Alienation.'

Therefore, based on such a perception, it is worth giving attention to whether web 2.0 media demystify the Spectacle, whether the criteria defined by Debord are applicable in this new media, and lastly whether, web 2.0 media contradict the previously stated tight relationship between mediation and alienation.

In his rhetorical essay, Halloran (2001) describes the emancipatory potential of the Spectacle in its ability to enhance lived experiences and create a sense of togetherness, or a collective spectacular experience. Studying the 1927 anniversary pageant of the Saratoga Battlefield, Halloran defines the spectacle as, "a public gathering of people who have come to witness some event and are self-consciously present to each other as well as to whatever it is that has brought them together" (5). For Halloran, the Spectacle is more than the visual and auditory creations of a cultural event; rather, it is a collective experience, "In gathering to witness a spectacle, I become part of it. … together we experience something, and in that shared experience is the germ of a public" (6). Located within this collective experience is the emancipatory potential of the Spectacle, for if we all create shared meaning by becoming a part of the Spectacle, then we can be emancipated from alienation from others, which is produced under a capitalist system. Breaking from Debord's emphasis that the power of the representation subsumes the power of lived experience, Halloran articulates that lived experience is actually more spectacular than the "text" and is able to "overwhelm" it, thus generating potential ground for emancipation. Halloran is careful to note the ambivalence of the Spectacle though, stating that,

> much of the rhetorical power of any spectacle may come from this very quality of being 'on the verge,' of being so ambitious in concept that it turns out to be impossible to realize fully and in actual performance teeters on the boundary of the sublime and the ridiculous. [Halloran 2001:9]

It is within this ambivalence that we approach the Spectacle, and agree with Halloran that lived experi-

ence is paramount to understanding the Spectacle. Yet we depart in a key way: the text, specifically, the production and control over the production of media 2.0, complicates this over-reliance on lived experience; one cannot be formed without the other.

Social media are not exempt from broader modernist assumptions about the possibility of human emancipation. Indeed, with their lower barriers of entry, in some respects, they are a more pronounced exemplification of it. For instance, based on current political economic analysis of media, the notion of informational capitalism (Castells 2009) confirms the original intuition of the increasingly central role of media in our economic system. In fact, "the process of capitalist restructuring undertaken since the 1980s that describes the increasing prominence of information and communication within capitalism under conditions of globalization and rapid technological development" (18) seems to be in line with Debord's primordial description of a society of the Spectacle, in which "social life has been replaced by its representation" (thesis 1).

Under such a perspective, the spectacle of web 2.0 media seems to have enhanced both its representational power and its capability to reproduce consumer capitalism by reinforcing the functional relation between entertainment and value creation pointed out by Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry (1972). In this sense, several scholars have scrutinized new media practices from the perspective of value creation (e.g. Dyer-Witheford 1999; Fuchs 2010; Scholz 2008); from the perspective of the ambivalent exploiting of the internet user (Terranova 2000); from the idea of surveillance through monitoring of personal media practices (Willcocks 2006); and finally, from the idea of invasively intruding into people's private sphere (Dalsgaard and Paulsen 2009).

Uniting these studies is a rejection of the depiction of social media as enhancer of social and individual freedoms. Instead they find this depiction to be an instrumental ideology. In practice, what has occurred is the creation of value in digital environments by commodifying user-generated content. Subsequently, the overall argument states that the Internet has been incorporated into a dominant corporate model of capital accumulation, which is grounded on the exploitation of unpaid labour based on the activity of creating content by users while involved in blogging or social networking (Cohen 2008).

In this context, what makes the web 2.0 spectacle even more pervasive is that in practice web 2.0 links the moment of production and the moment of consumption, turning the 1960s spectator into a producer/user, or a "prod-user" (Bruns 2008:i). At this point it is worth recalling Debord's claim that

> With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses. The *entirety of labor sold* is transformed overall into the *total commodity*. [Thesis 42]

With these remarks in mind, the Spectacle 2.0 enhances the commodity form logic by overlapping the moment of production and consumption, to the point in which the user consumes their content. In fact, the liminal position between production and consumption of the 'prod-user' reveals the extensiveness of a spectacle that develops simultaneously, "in the cultural social commercial, intellectual, economic social realms" (Bruns 2008:5). In the case of Facebook, this particular phenomenon is becoming a functioning representation of a much larger political economic project that provides a renewed liberal model for the public sphere, private associationism (Briziarelli 2014), as well as providing the social and cultural capital necessary to function in the current informational capitalism (Fuchs 2010).

It is within such porous boundaries of producing/consuming that the active user of social media "freely" generates content for media corporations' interests. In fact, an extreme level of alienation can be found in the paradox of voluntary production of user-generated content and the invisible dimension of labour associated to it. This corresponds to the conceptual distance between the creative and subjective expression of an individual updating their Facebook Wall, and the unpaid labour of producing content and being active around the Facebook platform. At the level of labor needed to sustain the material infrastructure of the Internet, scholars argue that exploitation and alienation happen because audience's work on digital media is alienated from

itself, and from the tools, products and objects of labor (Fuchs 2014). Andrejevic (2014) argues that the new media form of this is the "digital shadow," or our profiles and data that are, "increasingly being used to determine our life chances, our access to resources and benefits, even our mobility, in the digital era" (182). However, alienation also takes place in the way in which the material labor and resources needed to run the Spectacle 2.0 remain mostly invisible: from the mineral extraction industry necessary for ICT, to labour practices at Indian software companies and to Google in Silicon Valley (cf Fuchs 2014).

To sum up, social media can be examined for their capability to facilitate capital subsumption of previously un-commodified aspects of people's lives. As Debord argues, "capitalism's ever intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment" (thesis 122). Moreover, we contend that in Spectacle 2.0 media exploitation, the associated degree of alienation is more pronounced compared to traditional media of Debord's original Spectacle. That is because if, for instance, TV audiences worked by watching media and in exchange received media content as a kind of wage, in social media, the audiences' work of paying attention to advertisements is not exchanged with media text because in many web 2.0 platforms the users create content.

In the end, the Spectacle 2.0 goes back to the idea of mediation as a corruption of genuine social relations that uses the rhetoric of neoliberal freedom of producing and consuming to hide multiple forms of exploitation and the alienation of web 2.0 workers. To put it in Debord's words:

> What spectacular antagonisms conceal is the unity of poverty. Differing forms of a single alienation contend in the masquerade of total freedom of choice by virtue of the fact that they are all founded on real repressed contradictions (thesis 63).

The Heuristic Value of a Historicized Spectacle

While not necessarily disagreeing with scholars such as Caraway (2011), who criticize the Autonomist Marxist theories for not being able to discern alien-

ation and exploitation from emancipation, making the Marxist category of labour opaque, we think that those perspectives effectively exemplify the ambivalence of what we have defined as the Spectacle 2.0. In fact, the ambivalent spectacle can be seen as a working manifestation of the mutation in the productive and extractive logic of post-Fordist capitalism, according to which apparent contradictions such as alienation/conscious free activity, exploitation/emancipation, subjectivization/objectification are consistently sublated into capital accumulation. That is indeed one of the most eloquent examples of what Harvey defines as flexible accumulation (Harvey 1992:141).

In this sense, this essay meant to accomplish two intertwined objectives. First, we highlighted the value of the notion of the Spectacle as a framework to understand alienation that can conciliate 'culturalist' and 'structuralist' tendencies of a political economic approach to media. Our project aimed at testing whether Debord's account of media and alienation could still be useful to understand the context characterized by web 2.0 media. We are indeed convinced that a historicized adaption of the Spectacle still holds considerable heuristic value. Kaplan (2012) claims that Debord's account still "serves up a severe indictment of contemporary capitalist culture. Isolation, fantasy, ideological blindness, manipulation have come to absolutely define our shared social world" (458). The idea of the Spectacle functions as a synthetic representation of a world made up of representations in which reality seems more grounded by its semiotics than its material concrete field.

Second, the application of the analysis of alienation in the context of web 2.0 media also allowed the assertion of a materialist perspective of media that treats it as means of communication, signification and production. In fact, casting light on how web 2.0 media can re-assert and aggravate the alienating effects of the Spectacle gives visibility to how the political economy of mediation provides new dialectical ways to consider alienation. Alienation takes place at the level of production, distribution, circulation and consumption of cultural commodities as well as collectively shared representations.

Conversely, by highlighting how the Spectacle 2.0 can also provide occasion of de-alienation, we

meant to point out that the concept of alienation needs to be re-contextualized in much more dialectical terms. According to this dialectic, the same dynamic that alienates Facebook users at one level may simultaneously reinforce affective relations or a re-familiarization of civil society with the political process.

Finally, the Spectacle also contributes to define a method of analysis that we consider extremely useful when it comes to examining contemporary societies: The idea of social whole. Debord's Spectacle reminds us of the importance to interpret capitalism in holistic ways because the critique of the Spectacle must be "integral" (thesis 121), refusing to examine phenomena in isolation and abstraction from the social whole. In this respect, now more than ever we need to reactivate the interest on alienation understood in its 'spectacular' totality and enrolling interpolating people into new forms of labour.

In fact, as a holistic and dialectic perspective of capitalism, the spectacle provides a framework to critically explore how in the context of web 2.0 media, subjects produce, consume and reproduce both processes of subjectification as well as precarious forms of (digital) labour, which is incorporated within by the commodity form and organically produced by means and practices of communication. In this sense, two important aspects of contemporary capitalist phenomenology seem to confirm the pervasiveness of the spectacle, in both its alienating and dis-alienating sides. On the one hand, the increasingly salient perspective of what could be defined as boundless work, which describes how productive activities – previously confined by specific spaces, specific times, specific modalities – colonize every aspect of our life: effective relations, entertainment that turns diversion from work to the implementation of work, and the fact the same media metaphors are used for labour and leisure.

On the other hand, the ambivalent context of the so-called Spectacle 2.0, produces subjects and a sense of sociability that indissolubly combine exploitation, informal and affective relations, utopic aspirations, perceived freedom, the will to share, and the undefined boundaries between free time and 'free' labour. The subjectivities created by the spectacle are thus not simply 'spectators' but also 'actors' who actively manage social impression, moralize neoliberal logic by re-signifying current informational capitalism through the idea of the gift economy, and replace the hetero-directed productive logic typical of the Fordist model with an apparently dis-alienating self-directed one (Salecl 2010).

The combination of those features creates a neoliberal subjectivity, which is both created as spectator and at the same time actively reproduced by the very subjects operating in the context of knowledge work as actors. Byung-Chul Han (2015) makes sense of such an ambiguity through the notion of a transparent society. He notices how transparency in the context of new media has become a normative trope dominating public discourse that calls for increased translucence of the political process and the freedom of information. While the author considers transparency as a condition of possibility for a true democracy, its positive (as opposed to negative) dialectics also created a major exposition to collective control and exploitation in current capitalist societies. Accordingly, media-powered transparency, becomes a false ideal, which leads to an insatiable appetite for performance, disclosure, and uncovering, a process that for Byung-Chul Han operates with the same logic of pornography: as an immediate display without meaning. Thus transparency, as a manifestation of the Spectacle 2.0, creates an alienating experience in which the subject is subjected to a performance that adds to the picture but he/she does not actually make it. At the same time, the social interaction occurring in social media may exemplify the condition of disalienation through the promise of hyper-connectivity, sociability and transparence.

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Cycles of Alienation: Technology and Control in Digital Communication

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ABSTRACT: The Marxian concept of alienation, usually identified with the factory, has of late undergone a number of redevelopments to account for proletarian activity on digital networks. These positions are, however, marked by disunity and conflict in their interpretations of digital technology and class activity. This essay considers several Marxian theories of alienation in high-technology capitalism. From the findings, I suggest a theory of alienation in digital communication that highlights the skill invested in users through human-technology co-developmental processes, what I call cycles of alienation.

KEYWORDS: alienation, technology, Marxism

Introduction: Alienation and Communication in High-Technology Capitalism

Among scholars in what Christian Fuchs and Nick Dyer-Witheford (Fuchs 2012; Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford 2013) call Marxian Internet Studies (IS), the theory of alienation has generally remained in favour.[1] Its development in IS has, however, been uneven. Competing traditions claim alternative moments of alienation germane to their program and objects of study.[2] Dissimilar interpretations of Marx indeed colour the use of alienation today, with its relevance tied not only to combined and uneven moments of production in contemporary capitalism, but to alternative epistemological traditions within Marxism.

As I've argued elsewhere (Greaves 2015), Marxian IS has shown a tendency toward polarization when dealing with user-technology relationships. The field oscillates between an instrumental relation to technological change (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004) and a determining technological form that acts as a proxy of capital (Dean 2005, 2012; Fuchs 2013; Fuchs and Sevignani 2013). The operative distinction in theories of alienation in Marxian IS is likewise found in the dominating power of one pole within human-technology relationships. This is perhaps to be expected, as the problem of subject and object is the pivot upon which Marx's theory of alienated activity turns.

Before comparing contemporary theories of alienation in Marxian IS, I begin with some general remarks on alienation in Marx, developed through readings of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the fifteenth chapter of *Capital Volume*

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1   See, for example, Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), Dyer-Witheford (2010), Andrejevic (2011), Fuchs (2012), Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford (2013), and Fuchs and Sevignani (2013).
2   This is much like the development of alienation within and outside of Marxism more generally. See Musto (2010).

One, "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry," and an originally unpublished chapter of *Capital,* "Results of the Immediate Process of Production." I argue that alienation and alienated activity are essential to understanding Marx's conception of machinery as an active relationship determined by class struggle. I also draw from labour-process theory's design critique of industrial technology – specifically, implications from David Noble's work (2011) which suggest that the form of alienated activity in capitalist production is determined in struggle between the working class and capital. I introduce the autonomist-Marxist concept of 'cycles of struggles' to capture the historical circumstances through which alienation proceeds, what I term 'cycles of alienation.'

With the cycles of alienation concept in place, I review prominent theories of alienation and digital-communication technology. What I term foreclosure theory, rooted in political economy, identifies the dominant political codification of technology in capitalist construction. The co-development of proletarian user and technology appears in foreclosurist positions as economic subordination and political subjugation. The activity of users is oriented and/or captured by processes of capital accumulation that exceed their control. The agency of digital proletarians, manifest in lines of technological development, is displaced by capitalist ownership, which determines the form of technology and alienated activity.

Opposed to the foreclosurist position of technologically-constituted control, recent work in the autonomist-Marxist tradition discovers alienated activity within affective forms of labour. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004) argue that alienation arises in the circuits of production that constitute the dominant form of postmodern capitalism, what they identify as Empire, in somewhat different ways than the Fordist factory. Under conditions of Empire, alienation manifests as estranged potential among proletarians. Of primary interest here is the question of universalized knowledge/skill among a multitude of groups, and whether capital, in raising the skill of proletarians, produces above all, its own grave-diggers. Dyer-Witheford (1999, 2001, and 2010), similarly, develops a critique of alienation in contemporary capitalism through

what Marx identifies as estrangement from our species-being, or separation of proletarians from control over the common direction of our species. Dyer-Witheford (1999:71-72), unlike Hardt and Negri (2000:366-9, 2004:111), however, allows for proletarian estrangement from the technologies that support capital accumulation. It is, therefore, through Dyer-Witheford that I return to the cycles of alienation concept, here in the context of what he terms 'high-technology capitalism.'

Out of the critique of foreclosurist and autonomist positions, I suggest a theory of alienation in digital communication that highlights the skill invested in users. Returning to the "1844 Manuscripts," I argue that struggles over the process of production yield the content of alienation and, in turn, suggest possibilities for overcoming the moments of alienation that Marx identifies, what we may call dis-alienating practices.

Marx, Labour Process, and Cycles of Alienation

While alienation as an economic or philosophic concept predates Marx, it's in the "1844 Manuscripts" (1992) that alienation first emerges from capitalist social relations. In alienation, Marx historicizes what was in G.W.F. Hegel the problem of the individual's objectification as such, inverting a philosophy Marx found "standing on its head" (Marx 1990a:103). "For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of the Ideal, is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought" (102). Unlike its development by Hegel, alienation is for Marx a particular form of existence that arises with the wage relation, as Marcello Musto argues (2010:82). This is clear from the concept's elaboration in the "1844 Manuscripts." Here Marx describes four forms of alienated activity: (1) estrangement from the products direct producers create; (2) estrangement in the processes of production; (3) estrangement from our species-being (our control over human sociality); and our (4) estrangement from one another

(Marx 1992:23-334). Today, alienation appears as coterminous moments of estrangement present in capitalist life. Yet these moments do not emerge fully formed from the foundational estrangement of capitalism. Alienation is historical, but of equal importance is that the abstract, conceptual form of alienation suggests an impellent power.[3] The character of alienation is fluid, its moments determined by, among other things, the imperatives of capital, working-class activity and social power, ideology, and historical circumstances. Maxine Berg notes a similar progression in Marx's discussion of manufacturing. "Though [Marx] clearly intended it to be an abstract model, he included many historical signposts" (Berg 1994:62). In general, we can call this 'the concrete historical character of alienation', and it's most easily seen with the second moment that Marx identifies, in which changes in the labour-process, mediated by class struggle, determine the objective form of alienation in production. In a more recent example than those of Marx's time, managers in postwar American machine shops responded to articulations of class power by machinists with the introduction of technology that relocated skill from unionized machinists to machine programmers (Noble 2011). Capital, put another way, responded to a contumacious working class with technology designed to wrest control over the labour process from workers.[4]

In the "1844 Manuscripts" moments of estrangement appear as a developmental relation – from separation of control over the commodity, to that of labour-process, to life process more generally and our subjective relation one another. Modern labour processes that estrange individuals from their activity within the working day yield individuals estranged from their species-life (Marx 1992:328). Likewise, "an immediate consequence of man's estrangement

from the product of his labour, his life activity, his species-being, is the *estrangement of man from man*" (329-30). The impellent and developmental logic behind alienated activity in the "1844 Manuscripts" is recuperated by Marx in another text unpublished in his lifetime, "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" (1990), originally written for the first volume of *Capital*. The first moment of alienation corresponds analytically to what Marx describes in "Results" as the *formal subsumption* of labour to capital. Subsumption is a specialized term in Marx. It refers to the results of generalized wage dependency confronting forms of labour, as the relations of production now find their determinate moment in the sale and purchase of wage labour.

> When a peasant who has always produced enough for his needs becomes a day labourer working for a farmer; when the hierarchic order of guild production vanishes making way for the straightforward distinction between the capitalist and the wage-labourers he employs; when the former slave-owner engages his former slaves as paid workers, etc., then we find that what is happening is that production processes of varying social provenance have been transformed into capitalist production. [Marx 1990b:1020]

Formal subsumption occurs when "the labour process becomes the instrument of the valorization process" (1019). Capital discovers pre-capitalist forms and becomes their manager. During the actual working day, however, the logic of valorization has yet to really impose its transformative potential, and the character of labour power remains essentially pre-capitalist in content. The formal subsumption of labour to capital "does not itself imply a fundamental modification in the real nature of the labour process" (1021). Capital, in this instance, merely oversees the existing labour process, without fostering transformation. Under conditions of formal subsumption, "the relation of capital/labour is marked by the hegemony of the knowledge of craftsman and of workers with a trade" (Vercellone 2007:15). As a preliminary stage, Marx characterizes this circumstance as "the *loss* of the object," or final product (Marx 1992:235).

The objective and subjective degradation of the

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3 Alienation is commonly read to *compel* behaviour, rather than suggest the impellent power of capitalist imperatives. Thus alienation is alienated or compelled activity, in one form or another. "The worker becomes a slave of his object," as the power over the production process is estranged from its previous holder (Marx 1992:325).

4 In a more recent example than those of Marx, managers in postwar American machine shops responded to articulations of class power by machinists with the introduction of technology that relocated skill from unionized machinists to machine programmers (Noble 2011). Capital, put another way, responded to a contumacious working class with technology designed to wrest control over the labour process from workers.

worker follows from the first form of estrangement. They are consequences materialized in the processes of *really* subsumed labour, the subsequent stage of development following mere formal subsumption.[5] With this second stage, transformations begin in the labour process toward its intensification. The imperative to improve production begins to appear.[6]

> The *social* productive forces of labour, or the productive forces of directly social, *socialized* (i.e. collective) labour come into being through co-operation, division of labour within the workshop, the use of *machinery*, and in general the transformation of production by the conscious *use* of the sciences, of mechanics, chemistry, etc. for specific ends, technology, etc. and similarly, through the enormous increase of *scale* corresponding to such developments. [Marx 1990b:1024]

Under the real subsumption of labour to capital, science is applied to production; specifically technological change augments the labour process. Through this process, the objectification of workers, rooted in the wage relation, is expanded and intensified. Industry is, for example, able to eschew the predominance of handicraft methods through mechanization, as Marx notes in *Capital* (Marx 1990:504). F.W. Taylor (1911) makes a similar claim to the owners and managers of production, arguing in *The Principles of Scientific Management* that rule-of-thumb methods, directed by workers, can be displaced by the careful application of scientific study and calculation to labour process. The application of science by capital allows for the intensification of labour toward the accumulation of relative surplus value, whereas increased surplus value within mere formally-subsumed production may only be generated absolutely, by extending the length of the working day. The real subsumption of labour to capital is thereby the objective form of the valorization imperative that compels the production processes toward constant

and continuous improvement. Capital "has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour" (Marx 1990:342).

Marx is, again, defining a general tendency, more abstract than concrete. Changes to the labour process are, however, by no means linear nor determined by mere abstraction. While the economic calculations of management materialize in machinery and technique, lines of development in the labour process emerge from the conflicts between capital and workers over the working day, the labour process, and a plurality of other aspects of production. "The establishment of a normal working day is therefore the product of a protracted and more or less concealed civil war between the capitalist class and the working class," Marx writes (1990:412-3).[7] The activities of workers may, in other words, act as countervailing forces to those of capital in its determination to control and develop the labour process for its purposes. Perhaps the most influential study of this elaborate course is Noble's *Forces of Production*, which details the different technological choices available to twentieth-century American capital in its drive to automate the labour of skilled machinists. Two technologies appeared as the predominant choices in this pursuit, one "lent itself to programming in the office, and management control over the labour" (Noble 2011:151), while the other resembled the approach used with later player pianos,[8] in which "machinist skill ... was acknowledged to be fundamental and irreplaceable store of the inherited intelligence of metalworking production" (150). The decision by management to implement the former comes about through a desire to wrest power from a strong machinists' union, as well as the postwar ideology of total factory automation.

If surplus-value is central to the manifold notion of alienation introduced above, Noble believes that, in the production process, the improvement imperative is generally subordinate (most evident in times of

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5 Although Marx makes reference to the terms formal and real subsumption in what we commonly understand as *Capital* proper (1990:645) and in the *Grundrisse* notebooks (1973:499 and 690-712), their exposition comes in "Results" (Marx 1990b:949-1084), unpublished in English until the 1970s.
6 On this point see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London: Verso 2002:95-121.

7 An anonymous reviewer of this article suggested this reference.
8 As Noble points out, the novelist Kurt Vonnegut worked for GE during the early years of his writing career. Vonnegut's book *Player Piano* was at least in part inspired by his time at GE, during the period. Noble 2011:166. See also Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano*. New York: Avon, 1970.

crisis) to the reproduction of class domination. Any amount of worker control in productive methods is in other words contingent upon its simultaneous cooperation with management.[9] It requires the acceptance of alienated activity, a condition that is not, of course, absolute. "When the goals of profit-making and efficient production fail to coincide with the requirements of continued domination, capital will resort to more ancient means: legal, political, and, if need be, military" (321). While this is no doubt accurate in exceptional circumstances, the insight cannot be untethered from the generalized profit-centered motive manifest in the labour process. Class domination is intimately tied to production, and the production process requires reproducible and expanding profit for its success. It contains imperatives irreducible to direct control over the labour process, as more flexible forms of production in the post-Fordist era have demonstrated.[10]

The production process, guided by capital, is malleable enough to allow for differential paths within the general need to reproduce class domination and expand profit. If the content of alienation is the result of class conflict, basic imperatives and tendencies of capital also make their way into lines of technological development. Content refers here to the concrete reality of alienation, its materiality determined by class struggle and class peace. This includes the loss of control for workers inherent in the objectifications and estrangements of really-subsumed labour. Control, in other words, is situated within the valorization process, constituted in part by alienated activity and determined through an active class relation.

The content of alienation can therefore be understood as cycling, with its moments mutually reflected in one another. The lived experience of alienated activity is determined, in part, by the political reality of workers. The autonomist-Marxist concept of a cycle of struggles will help to frame the fluidity of

alienation and move forward my argument. Nick Dyer-Witheford explains: "In periodic restructurings capitalism constantly increases in technological intensity and the scale and scope of its social organization, but these shifts answer to and are answered by changes in the composition of labor that create new points and agents of antagonism" (2001:160). Drawn from the history of twentieth-century class struggle, Silvia Federici and Mario Montano's "Theses on the Mass Worker and Social Capital" (1972) lays out the general methodology for capitalist transformation through the cycle of struggles concept. They identify the transformation of labour-power from "passive, fragmented receptacle of factory exploitation" to "international political actor, the political working class," formed during the global struggles of the first quarter of the century (6). The international class composition[11] of this movement would see vanguards begin the fight, based in crystallized divisions within the working class that separated the forefront of struggle from the masses. In the 1930s, Taylorism would decompose the mass-vanguard dichotomy through which this iteration of the international working class was composed. Out of the destruction of hard-won skill, the "mass worker" emerges. From organization around the Taylorist factory, a new political manifestation of the working class. In "Archaeology and Project: The Mass Worker and the Social Worker," Antonio Negri (1988) adds the latter subject to this history of transformation. The subjective character of the mass worker grasped the power they held, but the displacement of trade unionism from the vanguard of struggle in the 1960s and 70s had taught workers that the relationship between capital and labour-power had been transformed. The mass worker, with its origins in the factory, was recomposed as the socialized worker, exposed to multiple capitalist antagonisms outside factory walls. Negri's analysis is, in this way, a genealogy of the revolutionary subject "from the working class, i.e. that working class massified in direct production in the factory, to social labour-power, representing the potentiality of

9 Erik Olin Wright champions class compromise with capital as a desirable outcome of contemporary class struggle, what he calls a "*positive class compromise within capitalism*" (2002:22-44).

10 I am referring to the expanded capacity of proletarians to produce surplus value outside of what was once more simply conceived as the working day. This may now occur through the commodification of labour power outside of the wage relation and direct command of capital.

11 Class composition refers to political relations within the proletariat based on the level of development of what Marx call the organic composition of capital, or the ratio of machinery to human labour in the production process. See Dyer-Witheford (2010: 498-499) and Pasquinelli (2014:189).

a new working class, now extended throughout the entire span of production and reproduction" (205).

As Dyer-Witheford's summation suggests, technology remains a reactive force in the cycle of struggles concept. Technological development is still a product of the working-class, as capital manoeuvres to decompose the associations through which working-class power is articulated. The direction and codification of technological development comes from capital and is motivated by control, as shown by Noble. This movement is condensed by Marx in the oft-quoted section of *Capital*: "It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt" (Marx 1990:563). In "Lenin in England" (1979), Mario Tronti would generalize this discovery. He argued that capitalist development is commonly subordinate to working-class struggle and organization. Innovation is directed toward the replication of ruling-class domination, just as Taylorism fractured working-class power.

In the cycles of struggle approach, as in autonomist thought more generally, class conflict directs changes to the forces of production. This is a central point in the concept of alienation as I develop it here: struggles and their results form the content of alienation. A cycles of alienation approach, in the first place, guards against the tendency to ossify the content of alienated activity in criticism by fixed, fast-frozen categories. The activity of proletarians, whether on networks composed by capital or otherwise, is generally irreducible to foreclosed political action – as mere reproductions of capital. Moreover, the technical basis of contemporary capital is such that engagement with identifiably-digital technology requires no comparable collaboration to that identified by Noble. If it was indeed the case that class struggle from below imprinted itself on technological development (Federici and Montano 1972 and Noble 2011) as capital reacted against workers, proactive transformations are now more readily possible. The diffusion of productive technologies and technical capacities across populations indeed suggests multiple points for the reconfiguration of technology toward non or anti-capitalist outcomes.

Co-Development of Class and Technology for the Accumulation of Capital

If, in *Forces of Production*, alienation is materialized in technical development through the mediation of class conflict, this insight becomes amplified and extended in studies of digital communication. The co-development of subject and object often appears, within Marxian IS, as the domination of the latter by the former (Greaves 2015). Although more generally meant to denote the interruption of working-class political activity through ideology and its manifestations in technology (195-204), foreclosure theory presents a particular form of design critique, in which capital commands proletarian activity in digital communication.

As the cycles of alienation concept means to demonstrate, the content of alienation and the constitution of agency in online activity require consideration in light of historical change. This process involves reassessment of the conditions and analytic purchase of the moments of alienation in their present forms. In an analysis of Facebook, Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani (2013) discover updated forms of estrangement. Against hegemonic claims that praise user participation on digital networks, Fuchs and Sevignani argue that digital media not based in communist ownership transform users into labourers; non-communist sites render communicative and cooperative activity for the accumulation of surplus value. For the pair, there's been something of a shift in alienated activity. They depart from Marx's use of species-being, (which they understand as sensuous activity) and from the fourth form of alienation, alienation from one another. The moments that Fuchs and Sevignani identify are instead "alienation from oneself, the alienation from the objects of labour (instruments and objects of labour) and the alienation from the created products" (257). As with Marx's work in the "1844 Manuscripts", the terms of alienation are constituted historically, although this is implicit, rather than developed.

The emergence of Facebook as a dominant medium in contemporary life is based in qualitative changes in the process of capital accumulation, as capital adapted to the crises of Fordism, what David Harvey calls flexible accumulation (1990:141-172).

Taking Harvey at a very general level, we can say that the hegemony of Fordist mass-industrial society in the United States involved the combination of Taylorist productive methods and a Keynesian labour/social contract. In the 1960s and 1970s capital encounters a number of barriers to surplus-value accumulation that it cannot overcome in its Fordist form – working class, proletarian and anti-capitalist social power; excess capacity; high fixed-capital investment; and falling consumer demand. Subsequent economic restructuring emphasized flexibility in production against the rigidities Fordist life.

The dissolution of Fordism was also a decomposition of proletarian dissent that grew from its contradictions. The accumulation of struggles for liberation, Hardt and Negri write, "was the motor of crisis, and they determined the terms and nature of capitalist restructuring" (2000:239). Eliminating the power of these attackers was inherent in the post-Fordist project. Hardt and Negri (273-274) argue that the flexibilities associated with life and labour today are a corrupted form of the rejection by proletarian youths of rigid, disciplinary Fordist society and its labour contract. The direct forms of refusal captured in the social experiments of the 60s and 70s and the valuation of creativity, communication and mobility are turned against those posing demands. Materialized into a mode of accumulation that valorizes communication and knowledge, capital embraces flexible forms of labour organization. Importantly for the purposes of this paper, the content of alienation, like that of labour process, transforms as the cycles progress.

Yet, some continuities remain. In the theory of technological mediation developed by Fuchs and Sevignani one can see parallels to the really subsumed labour of industrial workers. Marx deals extensively with the objectification of labour in the chapter "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry." From his study of Manchester factories and the work of technologists like Andrew Ure and Charles Babbage (Roth 2010:1234), Marx argues that factory labour is rendered mechanical as it develops; the worker is incorporated into the vast factory apparatus. "The machine does not free the worker from work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content" (Marx

1990:548). Similarly, Fuchs and Sevignani argue that our communicative activity and cooperation on Facebook function to better position users for capital. Activity is instrumentalized on the platform, directed toward the accumulation of data that will inform targeted advertisements. In this form of unwaged labour, users are alienated from the algorithmic processes and platform decisions that underwrite the accumulation of value. Users therefore lack the means to collectively change the medium. They "do not have the decision power to influence Facebook's rules and design, such as the content of the terms of use and the privacy policy, the privacy settings, the use of advertisements, which user data is sold for advertising purposes, the standard settings (e.g. opt-in or opt-out of targeted ads), required registration data, the placement of commercial and non-commercial content on the screen, etc" (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013:258).

Mark Andrejevic (2011) has identified additional concrete detail in the alienated activity of content creators. Like Marx in the "1844 Manuscripts," Andrejevic begins with the estrangement of the worker from the products of their labour. In what Andrejevic calls the online economy, this is the estrangement of user-generated content. He argues that the alienation of users from their data is a necessary condition of online exploitation. Data-driven marketing is able to flourish in the space created by this condition. In particular, an industry of predictive market analytics emerges to facilitate the valorization of user activity. Users are in effect also alienated from the tools of production in this mode. The activity of exploited users is estranged in the act of value creation, as the capitalist-codified technology directs user activity. "The goal of predictive analytics," for example "is, in a sense, both pre-emptive and productive, predictive and manipulative: to manage risks before they emerge or become serious while at the same time maximizing sales. The goal, in other words, is to integrate possible futures into present behaviour and thereby to manage the future" (Andrejevic 2011:281). Additional forms of technological mediation are introduced into the valorization process toward the intensification of surplus-value. The creation of content online is turned back upon users, as activity online is mobilized by capital to narrowly

delimit possible futures. Data is captured, alienated and returned as deformed passages in online activity, tailored toward commodity consumption. Alienated activity is deepened by intensifying technological codification by capital.

Alienated and compelled activity appear here as the basis of exploitation. The manifestation of capitalist imperatives in technology renders online activity for its exchange value. This rendering is what the philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg (1999:87-9) identifies as 'technical codes,' or the social values and economic tendencies manifest within technologies and technical systems. For Feenberg, technical codes situate objects by the socially-determined values to which they're attached. With capital, exchange value is the appearance value itself. With technical change in capitalist society, in the factory or online, the accumulation surplus value is the structuring technical code.

While the accumulation of surplus value is primary in the creation of capitalist technologies for surplus value accumulation, it is by no means necessarily the determining moment. We can identify the mediating presence of socially-determined biases present in technology that exceed the economic relationship. This is apparent in the ideologies of capitalist command and total automation from Noble's analysis. With digital technology, the estrangement of control reappears as the alienated processes through which futures are constructed. Combining Feenberg and Andrejevic, the management of user horizons by predictive analytics is as a political form of alienation in its second moment.

The alienated basis of surplus-value accumulation is at once both expansive and personal in digital communication, constituted by universal technical mediation in the most unremarkable activities we engage online. Content producers are said to be in a poor position to resist their alienated activity. The interactions of users present a mystified impression of genuine participation. Fuchs, for example, questions the participatory character of online activity, arguing that digital communication promotes the accumulation of capital, while users remain estranged from decisions concerning the operating of sites (2013). While this is patently correct,

such an understanding leaves us with impoverished conceptions of alienation, alienated activity and technological change, underscored by any number of movements that push back against the intrusions of digital capital. Such protests are often characterized as trivial or aesthetic, and no doubt these types are common – concern with changes to Facebook users' 'timelines' led to a number of protests immanent to the site, including a few hundred thousand account deletions. We should not, of course, confuse radical or transcendent demands with requests that capital can easily allow, nor with so-called 'clicktivism.' Such protests ultimately affirm the power of capital online and, taken to the extreme, could be considered a form of collaboration. However, by ignoring user protests we displace their motive force in technical development. We run the risk of ossifying the relations of production in technological development, treating the power imbalance between capital and proletarians as universally determining.

The recognition that user inputs can influence development in a proactive way remains an important one. Returning to Feenberg, we can say that the failure to transform technology lies neither with the technology itself nor with capital, but with the left and its failure to better incorporate solidaristic and communistic technical imperatives in its demands and movements. Were the social values inhered in technological development solidaristic in origin, non-alienated technological forms could emerge. These social values would not imply a repudiation of new technology but embrace non-capitalist technical codes (Dyer-Witheford 1999:214-215 and Feenberg 1999:222-225). It is, in short, a failure of organization, despite attempts at incorporating such values in digital communication, which in turn suggests the weakness of the left generally. In absence of large-scale movements to recode technological futures, Fuchs and Sevignani (2013:268; Fuchs 2011:51; Fuchs 2013:213 and 221), look toward communist digital architecture to facilitate the development of better technology. In doing so, however, they ignore the potential of user activity to recodify capitalist-encoding.

Drawing from autonomist-feminist work on domestic labour in the 1970s and from the political

economy of social networks, Laurel Ptak's Wages for Facebook campaign has drawn attention to the social relationships through which Facebook functions and those which, in turn, it supports. The campaign identifies the unique position users, as direct producers, hold in the online economy and therefore their ability to disrupt its normal functioning. Ptak situates the recognition of such power within a greater praxis. Struggle against the valorization of users' free labour may emerge *a priori* in the development of class solidarities (a perspective which highlights users' class activities rather than architectural finality) and subsequent technological recodification. Ptak, in this way, points to possible disalienating activities through the crucible of class conflict. Exploitative in the Marxian sense, the expansion of free labour in the online economy generates its own contradictions, especially among a technologically-literate proletariat.[12]

Co-Development and Liberation: Estranged-Gravediggers Online

Autonomist-Marxist theories within IS find more political potential in online activity than those of the foreclosurists. The knowledge and skill of users tends to occupy a central position and are likewise important to contemporary moments of alienation. Unlike the reactive form of technological development in Fordist capitalism, the highly technologized social field of the twenty-first century is readily available for appropriation because there appears today a simultaneous levelling of knowledge among proletarians, matched with an investment in skill. This social investment is tethered to a "qualitative leap forward in the technological organization of capital" (Hardt and Negri 2000:272). The generalized knowledge/skill of users is however impeded or deformed by capital's desire for accumulation. Radical aspirations

are taken down unhelpful paths; commodification denies proletarian self-determination, as we proletarians are estranged from our autonomous becoming.

The socialized worker of Negri, identified through the cycles of struggle genealogy, is similar to the subject of contemporary autonomist-Marxist IS, or perhaps more correctly is its predecessor or emergent form. Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy identifies the heterogeneous multitude as the political subject for capitalist transformation, the progeny of those that opposed the strictures of Fordist capitalism. "Empire creates a greater potential for revolution than did the modern regimes of power because it presents us, alongside the machine of command, with an alternative: the set of all the exploited and the subjugated, a multitude that is directly opposed to Empire" (2000:393). The multitude, as the name suggests, is composed of differentially exploited groups, "singular and determinate bodies that seek relation" (30). Although there is a recognition of uneven circumstances, subjects labour under certain common conditions, what Hardt and Negri regard as the hegemonic dominance of 'immaterial labour.' The normative quality of immaterial labour includes increased emphasis on communication and intellectual forms of production. In the multitude, immaterial labour operates as two dominant principles or forms. "The first form refers to labor that is primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions. This kind of immaterial labor produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products. We call the other principle form of immaterial labor 'affective labor,'" which "is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. One can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile)" (Hardt and Negri 2004:108). Given the normative tendencies of immaterial labour, the multitude is defined by the inclusion of "all those whose labour is exploited by capital … and not *a new industrial working class*" (Hardt and Negri 2000:402).

Crucially, the multitude is capable of appropriating the tools of Empire for its radical desires. The

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12 There is at the moment a robust debate concerning whether or not online activity produces surplus value, to which Fuchs and others have contributed. See for example Fuchs (2010 and 2013), Fuchs and Sevignani (2013). Against Fuchs, Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012) argue that the Marxist labour theory of value is difficult to apply to value creation in 'informational capitalism.' Fuchs replies that they misunderstand value (2012a). Jin and Feenberg (2015) argue that Fuchs reduces users to their economic function. Robinson (2015) criticizes Arvidsson and Colleoni as well as Fuchs, though he retains a Marxian understanding. The sense in which I use exploitation is most closely aligned with Fuchs and his use of Smythe, though I remain convinced that Fuchs's particular foreclosure theory has serious limitations, as I've argued.

"invention power," or the power to transform technology and social relations also found in socialized workers (Negri 2005), is evident in its constitution. "The scientific, affective, and linguistic forces of the multitude aggressively transform the conditions of social production" (Hardt and Negri 2000:366). The second form of alienation is therefore qualitatively different for the postmodern multitude than for those exposed to either advanced industrial technology or the digital networks constructed by the foreclosurists. Technologies created for the accumulation of surplus value online do not require the separation of proletarians from appropriative skill. In *Empire*, alienation spreads through networks organized by capital. It appears as a loss or lack of potentiality for the multitude in their experience of life processes (23). It is a degraded future under the command of capital that is returned to the multitude. Communication and cooperation are reformatted toward the production of value, as internet communication becomes the site of a very particular form of proletarianization. Alienation is here an affective condition. "When our ideas and our affects, or emotions, are put to work, for instance, and when they thus become subject in a new way to the command of the boss, we often experience new and intense forms of violation or alienation. Furthermore, the contractual and material conditions of immaterial labor that tend to spread to the entire labour market are making the position of labor in general more precarious" (65-66).[13] Alienated activity, deeply affective or emotional, is treated as an infection that spreads through immaterial labour. Something similar is suggested by the fourth form of alienation and Marx's theory of the commodity fetish (1990:163-177). However, the co-development of user and technology is not of itself alienating, at least not in the way that Marx describes the labour process in 1844.

> As a consequence of this division of labour on the one hand and the accumulation of capitals on the other, the worker becomes more and more uniformly dependent of labour, and on a particular, very one-sided and machine-like type of labour.

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13 An expanded elaboration of the immaterial labour hypothesis is outside the purview of this essay. As Camfield (2007) notes, in any event, its terms change from 2000's *Empire* to 2004's *Multitude*.

> Just as he is depressed, therefore, both intellectually and physically to the level of a machine, and from being a man becomes an abstract activity and a stomach, so he also becomes more and more dependent on every fluctuation in the market price, in the investment of capital and in the whims of the wealthy. [Marx 1992:285]

The exceptionally communicative and interactive form of production, enabled by multiplication of connections available through the online economy means that endogenous methods of control expand outward exponentially. Outside of labour directly mediated by digital technology, alienation in Empire involves the manipulation of affects, as in service work and traditionally feminized forms of waged and unwaged labour.

Empire is said to alienate *through* communicative networks. As in the third and fourth forms of alienation, the multitude is alienated from control over the direction of its existence and from one another. Likewise, the separation of users from that which they produce would seem to correspond to Marx's initial moment of alienation. Despite differences between texts in Hardt and Negri's development of immaterial labour, class relations dictate the form of command that constitutes alienated activity in both *Empire* and *Multitude*. This insight fails, however, to be extended to technology itself. The pair thus critique the limitations of alienation as it applied to industrial production: "Alienation was always a poor concept for understanding the exploitation of factory workers" (Hardt and Negri 2004:111). If Marx intends alienation to include the historical separation of workers from control over the industrial labour process, Hardt and Negri develop the incompatible position that capitalist social relations under conditions of Empire can be overturned through *hybridizations* between individuals and digital technology (Hardt and Negri 2000:367). Guiding Hardt and Negri's view of hybridization is the implied belief that digital communications technology is necessarily available for the multitude to realize their radical desires. Capitalist technological codification of productive technologies appears rather unproblematic, as distinctions between (the thoroughly modern conception of) subject and object

are dissolved in one hybridized unit. The invention power of the multitude supersedes undesirable materializations of technical code. The estrangement of user from technology is reconciled. Technologies productive of surplus value in the postmodern era are available for appropriation by the multitude, through a generalization of knowledge, what Marx in the *Grundrisse* (1973:706) calls 'the general intellect.' Carlo Vercellone comes to a similar conclusion, when he identifies the "increasingly collective nature of technical progress" (2007:31). The obverse side of this potential is that collective, communicative and affective aspects of production – held within the greater part of the multitude – are the raw materials appropriated by capital.

Here, class struggle between the multitude and Empire does not appear to materialize in productive technologies. The second form of alienation is displaced in the concept's re-evaluation, suggesting a near universal ability to appropriate the tools of production toward the political goals of proletarians. While an optimistic assessment, the implied neutral codification of technology dislocates the potential, inherent in critical theories of technology, to identify not only points of necessary recodification but contradictions and antagonisms inherent in the digital technologies of capital.

In a critical theory of technology, political codes of both technology and alienation would appear related through struggle between capital and workers, both waged and unwaged. Struggle over the conditions of use/labour and the content of technology creates new lines of development that concretize and codify technology by socialist alternatives. Such a position would affirm the alienated content of technology and labour process, while situating this same content within a dialectic of class conflict. Proletarian-technology combinations may then appear inconsistent and antagonistic. While capitalist command may render certain technological usage apolitical, as Jodi Dean argues,[14] struggle

would appear as a re-conditioning device, both for proletarians and their tools, in which new lines of technological development and subjectivity appear as the result of conflictual and contradictory imperatives and actions.

Within the autonomist tradition, Nick Dyer-Witheford has retained criticality while simultaneously highlighting the inventive power of proletarians. "If the capital relation is to its very core one of conflict and contradiction, with managerial control being constantly challenged by countermovements to which it must respond, then this conflictual logic may enter into the very creation," and, we can add, development, "of technologies" (Dyer-Witheford 1999:71 – 2). Technologies are sites of struggle in this account, instead of mere passageways through which struggle occurs. In "Digital Labour, Species-Becoming and the Global Worker" (2010), Dyer-Witheford focuses his attention on the relatively neglected fourth form of alienation, species-being (485). Like Hardt and Negri, Dyer-Witheford argues that proletarians are separated from control over our activity by capital. The historical plasticity of humanity, our ability to adapt and change, which he calls species-*becoming*, is directed from without.

> Marx understands the unfolding of species-being as determined by class and conflict. Alienation, the central problematic of the Manuscripts, is not an issue of estrangement from a normative, natural condition, but rather of who, or what, controls collective self-transformation. It is the concentration of this control in a sub-section of the species, a clade or class of the species–who then acts as gods (albeit possibly incompetent gods) – to direct the trajectory of the rest. [487]

Emergent forms of commodification block autonomous moments of species-becoming, subordinating species-life to capital: "micro-systems of control assembled from digital, genetic and mechanical components which approach a life of their own" (494). This estrangement, however, is also manifest in technological development and its control.

The identification of capital in the technical – a devil in the details – is a key point of departure for Dyer-Witheford within autonomist IS. Although

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14 This is a central aspect of Dean's communicative capitalism hypothesis. Similar to Fuchs, Dean argues that digital communication operates through a 'fantasy of participation'. "Under communicative capitalism," Dean writes "communication functions fetishistically as the disavowal of a more fundamental political disempowerment or castration" (2009:33).

Dyer-Witheford ultimately affirms the dissolution of the subject-object distinction, replaced by 'cyborgs,' 'flesh machines,' or the 'cyber-carnal,' the process of dissolution takes place on the combined and uneven terrain of capital. Instead of proliferating combinations, however, Dyer-Witheford endorses the establishment of non-capitalist criteria by which to judge and transform technology, "tantamount to a call for the reappropriation of the means of production" by proletarians within a framework of collective planning. (Dyer-Witheford 1999:215-216). The technical knowledge and capacities of proletarians could then be turned against capital through communist recodification of the technical. This would surpass the purely reactive form of technological development, assigned by the original cycle of struggles approach, to include a critical inventive-power in proletarians.

A dialectic of class struggle is equipped to identify moments of alienated technical code for recodification (Feenberg 1991, 1999), and Dyer-Witheford's emphasis on the inventive-power of proletarians suggests paths for the communist recodification of technology to travel. As I've suggested, alienation generally, and alienation from control over technological development more specifically, provide a useful lens through which to view technical development. The other side of this is the discovery of disalienating moments that could help generate criteria for recodification, as the problem of capitalist codification cannot be resolved at the abstract level.

Foreclosure theory has attempted a dialectic similar to what I'm suggesting. Unlike a model of active class struggle, however, the dominant power in production is seen to determine proletarian political claims (Fuchs 2013; Fuchs and Sevignani 2013; Dean 2005, 2012). Marxian IS is indeed no stranger to the claim that capital and the state reappropriate political and emancipatory tendencies. Rao et al. (2015) have recently identified corporate appropriation of the open-source movement as a response to the struggles of digital proletarians. The skill and knowledge of proletarians, identified by the autonomists, here proceeds under terms appropriate for capital. As with the demands of those that rebelled against the epochal conformities of Fordism, the terms of social or technological transformation reappear in the service of

capital. Likewise, increased sociality and connections have been transformed into an apparatus of capitalist (Andrejevic 2011) and state surveillance.

If capital finds ways to reinscribe alienation in emancipatory activity, there remain contradictions in capitalist accumulation online that allow for moments of disalienating practice. The emphasis capital places on computer-science requires a simultaneous development of skill in digital workers. Alienated from our direction as a species, such skill presents possibilities for disalienating technological practices. Kate Milberry notes that democratically-motivated hackers introduce solidaristic imperatives into lines of technological change. "Tech activists recode software in a way that anticipates the progressive social change its authors pursue; in this way, their theory of social change begins on practice" (2012:110). Johan Soderberg identifies affinities between theories of the Second International and the utopic mythology mobilized by hacker groups, in which the recodification of technology is tied to an emancipatory, if deterministic, view of new technology (2013). Gabriella Coleman recognizes a variety of new technological forms that emerged from Indymedia coders, as they responded to different needs and discourses within a group culture of collectivity (2004). Technology therein is developed to support a politics of "globalization from below."

As the cycles of alienation concept suggests, the active transformation of alienated conditions in the current cycle is multidirectional. Its forms are not determined by an ossified productive relation – not as the accumulation of value nor as reactive forces against proletarian organization, as sometimes conceived. Rather, the development of digital technology is an active relationship with reference to the radical proletarian body invested with technical competency. Key in this, however, is a general recognition of the role critical, dialectical conceptions of technology need to play in identifying contradictions in contemporary capitalism and points for technological recodification. This is especially so if we are to heed Dyer-Witheford's suggestion (1999:215-216), drawn from Feenberg (1991; see also 1999:222-225) and others, to create new criteria for lines of technological development.

Conclusion

Contemporary theories of alienation within Marxian IS are marked by polarization. This is especially so with theories of Marx's second moment of alienation – estrangement in the process of producing. Fuchs and Sevignani argue that capitalist digital media provides almost none of the liberating potential identified by its proponents, as its functioning still rests upon a capitalist base. Instead, the alienation of digital labour is similar to the foundational estrangement of capitalism – the separation workers from control over their labour-power – as the pair recall Marx's dialectical criticism of factory labour from volume one of *Capital*. Fuchs and Sevignani, however, fail to address the knowledge of users as a basis for disalienating technological change. User activity is instead mystified, gaining only the appearance of genuine cooperation, when in fact the ever expanding connections only provide value for site owners. For Andrejevic, the foundational estrangement of the online economy – estrangement from that which we produce – allows space for technological codification by capital to deform future activities on the internet. The integration of "possible futures into present behaviour" (Andrejevic 2011:281), is a corruption of user control, and an example of ideology materialized in the technological mediation of class relations.

Dyer-Witheford and Hardt and Negri find commonality here with Andrejevic's analysis of alienated activity. The estrangement of control, identified by each, conforms to a moment of Marx's alienation. However, Hardt and Negri's failure to identify alienated technical codes in the capitalist form of digital technology presents a significant discontinuity with Marx. This is fully realized in Hardt and Negri's hybridized figure, whose creative power for technological change meets no equivalent estrangement by capital. Although Dyer-Witheford retains hybridity, his critical conception requires reflexivity in human-technological combinations. This may be a case of affirming the subject-object dichotomy, while ultimately attempting to dissolve it with the cyborg, but the slippage smuggles in the critical conceptions of technology necessary for anti-capitalist and non-capitalist recodification – for disalienating technical practices.

I developed the cycles of alienation approach to highlight activities that inform technological change. In this conception, technology emerges from social and economic struggles. The concrete technological outcome is, however, by no means clear. In technology, counter-hegemonic groups discover a plurality of opportunities, while capital finds the ability to extract surplus value or extend its command. If the paper at hand is an attempt at recovering Marx's alienation in the context of political struggle over digital technology, with any luck the concept has wider applicability to concrete circumstances.

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