New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry
Vol. 11, No. 1 (Summer 2020) Pp. 18-33

Value Proposition: Canadian Freelance Writers at the Intersection of Exploitation and Alienation

Robert Bertuzzi
University of Toronto

Abstract: Over several years now, scholars have redressed a deficit in critical communication research in Canada as it relates to questions involving cultural labourers. One such example of this type of inquiry pertains to the deteriorating working conditions of freelance writers. Their overall penury has revivified interest in Marxian categories of analysis, especially around his concept of exploitation. Yet in 25 interviews I conducted with freelance writers, what was demonstrable was the need to extend this notion of a "missing Marx" by incorporating other concepts from his *oeuvre,* in particular, alienation. Historically, a dichotomous rendering has prevailed as to whether exploitation or alienation provides a better explanatory framework for understanding the work-life histories of labour. Ultimately, I argue rather than privileging one over the other, the two phenomena operate relationally – mediated by the category of value. Value generation remains rooted in longstanding techniques constitutive of the journalistic labour process. To that end, this analysis pays particular attention to technologies of the intellect contributing to the exploitation and alienation freelance writers undergo.

Keywords: labour process, freelance writers, Karl Marx, exploitation, alienation, value

Introduction: The Spectre of Exploitation

Recent decades have seen income inequality come to the fore of public opinion and public policy discussions (Lewchuk, Procyk, and Shields 2017). The labour organizer and scholar, Jane McAlevey (2020), has written that "inequality is the root cause of today's problems" (3). Such anxieties have found expression in various social movements from municipal living-wage campaigns in the mid-1990s to the current "Fight for 15" minimum-wage struggles (Luce 2017). Causal to this phenomenon of inequality are labour markets re-regulated towards more precarious arrangements for workers in an asymmetrical labour-capital power dynamic. In studies of Canada's most populous region, the Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) working group has found that 50 percent of adult workers in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area are employed precariously (Lewchuk, Procyk, and Shields 2017).

This expansion in precarious work has come to affect workers in sectors previously thought to be immune from such tendencies, and to exacerbate such conditions in sectors where insecure work has a historical presence. Authors of the PEPSO report note many formerly employed as full-time workers in the arts and media now work as freelancers (Lewchuk, Procyk, and Shields 2017). According to Nicole S. Cohen (2011), journalism, in particular, "a once secure, well-remunerated form of labour, thanks largely to a long history of unionization ... has become an increasingly insecure form of work" (119). Although the use of freelance workers in news media is centuries old, a confluence of economic re-structurings and technological changes are assumed to have accelerated this tendency especially since "the Great Recession" (Cohen 2016).

This set of developments has resulted in a small but still expanding body of literature investigating

the working conditions of freelance writers[1] in the Canadian news media context (Cohen 2011, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2017; D'Amours and Legault 2013; Gollmitzer 2014, 2018, 2019; McKercher 2014; Salamon 2016, 2018, 2019). Much of this research has concerned itself with the declining material conditions of freelance writers in a period of intensifying precarity and growing inequality. An outcome of this is that several of these investigations have adopted a decidedly Marxian tenor: "Marx's concept of exploitation is key to the analysis of cultural work yet is most often absent" (Cohen 2016, 38). Relatedly, researchers investigating cultural workers have interrogated why this labouring class tolerates such low levels of remuneration. Responses here range from the perceived autonomy and flexibility associated with freelancing, to creative labour obscuring exploitative employment relations, to inferences suggestive of the thorough interpellation of freelance workers into neoliberalism's hegemonic order (McRobbie 2015).

In Marxian circles, an "immiseration theory" associates deepening exploitation with worsening deprivation, and consequently, with the formation of class consciousness and collective worker response (Colletti 1972). Despite historical evidence to the contrary (Feldman 2000), Marxian-informed investigations of Canadian freelance writers have been consonant with some variant of the immiseration hypothesis (Cohen 2016; McKercher 2014; Salamon 2016). However, Margaret Zamudio (2004) argues exploitation alone cannot explain worker opposition to capitalist work relations. Accounts that overdetermine the causal ability of exploitation to engender resistance at the point of production fail to consider the powerful animating force that is alienation (Harvey 2014). Whether the lived reality of exploitation or alienation would best serve to catalyze workers is another longstanding tension in Marxian scholarship (Sharma 1979). Even in the current historical juncture with levels of income and wealth inequality unseen for at least a century, David Harvey (2018a) avers "universal alienation" may resonate still more acutely amongst populations for the purposes of politicizing them.

In interviews I conducted with 25 freelance writers from across Canada, evident was the presence of alienation in shaping their work-life histories. This study, then, could be read as an intervention counterbalancing exclusive attention upon issues of inequality and exploitation over several years now. But rather than continuing to propagate the privileging of one of these two concepts over the other, I attempt to dehierarchize exploitation and alienation – viewing them relationally instead. In order to do this, I adopt a narrow focus that concerns itself with the ways in which capital logics make the journalistic labour process a site where freelance writers produce value. A critique involving the category of value wishes to eclipse the exploitation-alienation binary because neither is sufficient in capturing the freelance-writer experience. Before undertaking this multi-level analysis, it will first be necessary to present findings from interviews I undertook with the freelance writers in this survey. And in order to contextualize these findings, I first provide an overview of the research investigating freelance labour in the current historical moment.

Freelancing Writing: Subjectivities of Study and Producer Choice

In Canada, freelancers comprised five percent of the journalistic labour force in 1996. Two decades later, that figured had increased to 17 percent (Wilkinson 2019). This structural transformation has its parallels in the U.K. and across Europe as well (Norback and Styhre 2018). Despite the seeming insecurity, interviews with freelance writers indicate high levels of job satisfaction. Female freelance journalists in the U.S. claim they are "happier working for themselves" (Massey and Elmore 2011, 672). Maria Edstrom and Martina Ladendorf (2012) find freedom and flexibility are qualities freelance writers in Sweden most appreciate about their work lives. In Norway, informants' discretion over the workday, as well as with their work assignments, are the most prized features of being freelance journalists. Freelance journalists in Australia exhibit a more complicated relationship with the prevailing discourses and performances around free-

1 The nomenclature of freelance writer rather than the more historically used freelance journalist follows from the convention established by Cohen (2011, 2012, 2016 and 2017). This more accurately depicts the empirical reality that journalistic work conceived of as writing/recording/filming stories for newspapers, magazines, radio, television or online news platforms is not remuneratively lucrative enough for most freelancers. This leaves workers in this field seeking additional employment as instructors, editors, researchers, etc.

dom, autonomy, and flexibility. In one instance, an interviewee observes the freedom freelance journalists enjoy is the freedom to work seven days a week (Das 2007). In a binational comparison involving freelance writers from Canada and Germany, Mirjam Gollmitzer (2014, 2015) finds workers in both countries enjoy the autonomy they possess over their immediate labour process along with the agency they have in structuring their workday.

In contrast to these subjectivist accounts of autonomy, within flexible regimes of accumulation, and marked by precariousness, Quebec-based researchers, Martine D'Amours and Marie-Josee Legault (2013), claim risk is a more appropriate heuristic for examining the labour conditions of freelance periodical writers. This follows from Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of a "risk society" in which the traditional communal organization of everyday life in feudal society gives way to a project of individualization in modernity (Beck 2001). For the authors, the detraditionalization that occurs in the transition from feudalism to modernity evolves further in late modernity to encapsulate destandardization. This refers to the "creation of a risk-fraught system of flexible, pluralized underemployment, in which both risk and responsibility are being shifted to workers" (D'Amours and Legault 2013, 89). They conclude by pointing to a troubling lack of collective action demonstrated by freelance magazine writers given the level of risks they endure (D'Amours and Legault 2013, 89). Here, Beck's (1992, 2001) individualization thesis is inadequate as it is too consonant with the broader aims of the neoliberal project (McGuigan 2009). Subsequently, this has helped spur a turn towards the theoretical oeuvre of Karl Marx to attempt to interpret the activity of this class of workers.

To this end, Errol Salamon (2016) has chronicled the types of oppositional strategies freelance writers in Canada have adopted to combat corporate news media incursions upon their intellectual property right. Most prominent among the tactics deployed to date are class-action lawsuits and boycotts. Freelancers have used these gambits against publishers because of the latter's use of copyrighted material without compensation. Overall, it is possible to detect in Salamon's (2016; 2018) work an indebtedness to Marx's dialogical logic in which all social phenomena are pregnant with their contrary. This refers to his ability to demonstrate how the same digital technologies that have contributed to the declining living standards of freelance writers, by enabling media convergence and fostering media concentration, have contributed, positively, to undermining the interests of news media corporations by helping to facilitate resistive actions against rights-grabbing contracts (Salamon (2016; 2018).

What co-exists with these episodes of resistance is the material and cognitive dissonance Salamon (2019) detects in interviews he conducts with freelance writers. Those participating in Salamon's (2019) investigation demonstrate a "freelance class ideology" (118)**.** An outgrowth of their location in the division of global media labour, these workers experience precarious employment conditions that do, simultaneously, afford relatively greater amounts of flexibility, autonomy, and control over the immediate labour process. But the insecure conditions under which they labour leave them in a bifurcated position of employing their subjectivity in individualized and entrepreneurialized ways, while also having, in other instances, a need and desire to act collectively.

In her study of Canadian and German freelancers, Gollmitzer (2018) detects what she terms an "entrepreneurial self" and an "ethical self" that is "present in everyday work experiences" of those she interviews (179). This identifies a professional subjectivity that oscillates between a praxis of entrepreneurialism and ethicalism. The considerations of this ethical self are to a public service conception of journalism, and more specifically, to a duty to participate in the guardianship of democracy. The entrepreneurial self can be understood "as a form of subjectivity that aligns with market needs" (Vallas and Christin 2018, 5). In an examination of Norwegian freelance writers, Birgit Roe Mathisen (2017) categorizes her informants as being either entrepreneurs or idealists. The former group emphasizes the purported freedom that derives from entrepreneurship. By contrast, the idealists are characterized by their commitment to undertaking substantive journalistic projects even if this means living in penury.

Ultimately, Gollmitzer (2018) wishes to develop a more "nuanced account" as a means to contrast Marxian-influenced investigations, which have, accord-

ing to her, tended to represent freelance writers as agents of one-sided class domination in the material and ideological project of neoliberalism. She cites the work of Cohen (2011, 2012, 2016, 2017) as exemplifying this type of scholarship. In the latter's focus upon the structural position of freelance writers as precarious labourers in a global supply chain of media workers, it is possible to conclude these workers occupy "false consciousness," and that they have "internalized the interests of the ruling class erroneously as their own" (Gollmitzer 2018, 196). As a means to expand boundaries of understanding outside of this predominant reading, Gollmitzer (2018) posits that an identity of professionalism, at the individual level, can help inoculate freelance writers from the imbricated articulations of neoliberalism.

Yet even as Gollmitzer (2018) attempts to enfold other analytical frameworks into the study of freelance writers' experiences, she endorses Cohen's (2012, 2016) assessment of the manner by which news media corporations exploit freelance writers. This exploitation, which I will examine at length, necessitates a group response in the form of unions and other workers' organizations in Cohen's estimation (2011, 2016). Before freelance writers can achieve their redistributive aims, labour organizations will need to devise means to negate the "individualism and structural competition that characterizes freelance media work" (Cohen 2016, 231). In part, this is because neoliberal ideology has "interpellated" freelance writers "into entrepreneurial discourses" (Cohen 2016, 124). This is also an outcome of the material organization of their labour market: "entrepreneurial behaviour is not just a condition of neoliberal ideology, but also an imperative because of how work is organized" (Cohen 2015a, 525).

Catherine McKercher's (2014) observance into the lives of freelance writers begins with an appraisal not of exploitation, but of alienation. She notes how it lacks salience presently because of perceptions of Marx as a chronicler of nineteenth-century capitalism. Creative labour discourses have contributed to the diminution of alienation's relevance as well. Best known among these is Richard Florida's (2002) "creative class" thesis. For Florida (2002), knowledge and creativity come to serve as primary inputs in a growing number of labour processes. These processes nullify alienation because they engage the mental, the affective and the communicative in comparison to the bodily requirements of industrialized manufacturing. He even goes so far as to argue "that creative work cannot be taylorized like rote work in the old factory or office" (Florida 2002, 133). Among Marxian scholars, alienation has lost valence because of purported essentialisms contained within the "species being" formulation within a broader context repudiating humanistic values (Chari 2015).

To conclude, McKercher (2014) concurs the social relations undergirding precarious cultural labour are obscured, to some extent, because these labourers "have a different degree of autonomy, or subjectivity than factory workers" (220). Yet in their relationship to employers, freelance writers are like the pieceworkers of industrial capitalism. Piecework is a keyword in understanding the feminization and devaluation of freelance labour (McKercher 2014, 220). It is a key analytic of understanding for Cohen (2016) as well: "Because freelancers are not engaged in an employment relationship and are not paid a salary, it appears that they sell only a finished piece of work" (47). As freelance writers are outside the standard employment relationship, publishers come to exploit them through the expropriation of intellectual property rights, as well as by not paying them for the full amount of time that is needed to complete a piece (Cohen 2016, 47).

Workers' Inquiry in a New Millennium

The importance of workers' subjective experience in forging an oppositional consciousness has not been a historically prominent feature of Marxian inquiry. Harvey (2006) explains this as attributable to Marx's inclination "to deny the authenticity of experience ... in pushing so strongly the revelatory power of theory" (114). Yet just prior to his passing in 1883, Marx (1997) constructed a survey consisting of 100 questions he entitled, "A Workers' Inquiry." In the preamble to the survey, Marx (1997) provides a rationale for authoring it, consisting of three related suppositions. The second of these axioms states members of the working class are best positioned to articulate the degradations they experience daily under command of capitalist social relations, and that there will be no external saviour for the working class. Jamie Woodcock (2014) has interpreted this second postulate to mean investigators

attempting to further this tradition should not treat their participants as "passive subjects to be researched" (497). Workers are not only the most advantageously positioned to describe the conditions that affect their lives, they are the only social group poised to transform their circumstances (Woodcock 2014, 497).

Even as Marx's (1997) only foray into this type of social scientific survey did not elicit a single response from workers, the crises that have beset capitalism in the new millennium have reinvigorated interest in workers' inquiries (Haider and Mohandesi 2013; Woodcock 2017). This follows from a period of renewal in workers' inquiries, which occurred in the mid-twentieth century, in factories in Italy, France and the U.S. (Haider and Mohandesi 2013). Those earlier efforts saw different assemblages of Marxist sociologists, activists, and rank-and-file workers begin to conceive of a way to establish "the joint production of social knowledge from below" (Wright 2002, 22). What has come to distinguish workers' inquiries since that time is the notion of "co-research" (Woodcock 2017, 28). This refers to the active participation of investigators alongside workers in an explicitly political project (Brook and Darlington 2013).

This project did not adhere closely to the central tenets of "co-research." It is therefore better to conceive of it, within the genealogy of workers' inquiries, as "a from above" project with the aim of producing knowledge and theoretical insights through access to a particular class of workers (Woodcock 2014). This level of inquiry should precede "a from below production" that has the formation of political organization as an intended outcome (Kolinko 2002). The project does, however, remain faithful to an ethos of providing informants with an opportunity for a subjective accounting of their experience as freelance writers. This measure is in keeping with the historical spirit of workers' inquiries, dating back to Marx's (1997) preamble.

The interview schedule I employed consisted of three sections, counting 60 questions. The design of the interview schedule was of a semi-structured variety. This modality operates at a meso-level between open-ended interview schedules and the type of yes-no questionnaire Marx (1997) constructed. This mid-point interview tool better aligns with a phenomenological interest in how humans consciously perceive the object world (Ritzer 1988). In its sociological application, phenomenology prioritizes the intentionality of human agents within social contexts, and how they make sense of commonplace experiences (Ritzer 1988). Again, this is consonant with the second directive Marx (1997) delineates in the preamble to his questionnaire, i.e., workers' understanding and articulation of their own work-life histories.

The sample size of 25 interviewees exceeded the minimum recommended number of 15 as suggested by Steinar Kvale (1996) in his book on interviewing as a research method. Others such as Greg Scott and Roberta Garner (2013) have recommended interviewing until a saturation point is reached. This is the stage in the interview process when responses converge upon the same themes without any significant novelty. Based on the interview schedule prepared, the saturation point was reached prior to the 25th interview. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to over 120 minutes. I conducted one formal, in-depth interview session with each respondent with subsequent follow-ups limited to instances where it was necessary.

Demographically, 19 of the 25 participants were female. The remaining six identified as male. Though I did not formally record their ages, the chronological span of the informants seemed to stretch from mid-20s-to-mid-60s. With regards to the sample's racial/ethnic composition, only one participant identified as a visible minority. Other demographic data came from a survey of the respondents. The response rate for the surveys was 52 percent. From this, I calculated respondents earned an average income between $37,000 and $49,000 during the previous year. The range of weekly hours worked spanned from 37-to-46 hours. All those who returned surveys had some level of post-secondary schooling. Nine of the 13 respondents possessed a university degree. Of those nine, three had an advanced-level degree. I have anonymized interviewees by assigning pseudonyms, but I have included information that provides the contours of a life history without jeopardizing their identity.

Labour's Love, Lost

I began the interviews by asking participants about their work histories prior to becoming freelance writers. The intent of this question in designing the interview

schedule was to prime the pump of conversation, and to try and elicit a partial life history with respect to their employment record. Yet this initial questions proved to be one of the most revealing contained within the interview schedule. Immediately, it was possible to observe the strong conditioning influence work histories have upon present outlooks involving their choice of occupation as freelance writers. For instance, Helen Vitalis spent her teenage summers picking produce as a farm worker in British Columbia. What arose from these experiences was a realization that she was unsuited to do "rote work or anything that was unvaried. I was just more bored with it than anything." In other cases, informants undertook a mid-career change into freelance writing due to their discontentedness. According to Rhonda Schmidt, her clerical career in the insurance industry would end with a pension, but no accomplishments other than having a pile of business letters neatly ordered on the corner of her desk. The disenchantment felt by Sarah Simpson was, perhaps, even more acute. She described the end of her tenure in corporate marketing in the following manner: "Yeah, I didn't like going to work, so it was … Maybe there will be a snowstorm … or maybe I'll be sick and won't have to go."

A global survey of workers finds what Schmidt and Simpson describe to be commonplace for a plurality of people on a daily basis (Crabtree 2013). The persistence of these levels of estrangement since the advent of industrial capitalism means alienation is "the critique that refuses to disappear" (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman 2015). As Harvey (2006) outlines, for Marx, "the impoverishment of the labourer under capitalism had as much, if not more to do, with the degradation forced upon the worker in the labour process, than with the low wages and high rates of exploitation" (108). The concerns of a scientific Marx do not so much eclipse his humanistic investigations. But in exploitation there is a political concept more broadly comprehensible to working peoples than that of alienation (Sharma 1979). Yet the issues confronting labourers are never just wage stagnation, but also that so much of current economic activity is meaningless for those engaged in it (Harvey 2018b). Such a context makes comprehensible the desire for less alienating work when wage labour is an unavoidable circumstance among those interviewed.

Further to this, for a plurality of participants interviewed, the most significant and attractive element of becoming a journalist and freelance writer was the act of writing. In the words of Diana Mill, "I have always been a writer. I've always written in a journal and written poetry even before I was in journalism school … I couldn't just quit writing and never write again." Over multiple generations of survey data, journalists have demonstrated a tendency to view themselves as writers (McIntyre 2012). This does not serve to obscure or deny the extant exploitation present. In the words of one participant, what all freelance writers wanted was "(word) rate change and more control over our (property) rights." It does, however, illuminate the parallel track of alienation that accompanies exploitation.

What a Way to Make a Living: Not Working 9-to-5

In one of the earliest in-depth studies of British journalists and their relationship to their occupation, Jeremy Tunstall (1971) divines the creative impulse as the second-most cited reason for pursuing journalism as a career. Those he spoke with noted a collective wish to avoid the perceived routine of the standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., white-collar job, as the primary reason for wanting to be journalists (Tunstall 1971). In my interview schedule, two questions about participants' relationship to the 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday elicited the most visceral set of responses. For those interviewed, the standard work day connoted a lack of control over the allocation of their time. Consequently, this equated to a lack of flexibility to attend to appointments, pick-up children from school, etc. This was especially important to the female participants who comprised a majority of the sample in this study. Additionally, operating in accordance with the 9-to-5 paradigm signified employment within a large, bureaucratically structured work environment. This was anathema to those I interviewed, and this reaction proved consistent across demographic lines within the survey sample.

Jordan Kovich, a Montreal-based freelancer, gave, perhaps, the clearest articulation of his antipathy to working in an office environment from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. This stemmed from his childhood experience of watching his father: "It terrified me … 9-to-5 very quickly became 9-to-7, 9-to-9, and even later … during peri-

ods when he had to work that much it wore down on him … and I never wanted to have to go through that … It just never seemed worth it to me … I get to talk to people and chat to people and go out and see some incredible things, talk to incredible people." When I asked him what he found so dystopian about his father's work-life trajectory, he responded by saying: "The routine. The idea of going and doing the same thing at the same time at the same desk for 40 years … At least I get to be creative. Get to put my words down on paper … Whereas I don't think you really get to do that when you are working with Excel all day."

Others still had found themselves working within public-sector bureaucracies for a time. One such respondent was Catherine Moores. Upon completing her master's degree, she found a position within the Ontario civil service. It was there that she began freelance writing for magazines because she was so "bored" with the work on offer. She described it, thusly: "It's nice money and you meet some fun people. But it's a bit demoralizing, and I'd be sitting there reading magazines." The reader of periodicals turned magazine writer remembered asking herself, "What am I doing here?" Her response to this question was to leave the civil service as quickly as possible, embarking upon a multi-decade career as a freelance writer and editor.

Alienation from Without

As a legal term, alienation traces its history to the Roman Empire. There, it made reference to the transfer of property from one party to another (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman 2015). Therefore, to alienate is to relinquish a claim to something (Sharma 1979). Others have ascribed a different set of meanings to the concept. Theologians, for instance, have used it to infer separation from god, philosophers to indicate separation from truth, from self, from power, and anthropologists to describe various social configurations in which human capacities for attainment of a fulfilling life go unrealized, or are under developed at both the individual and group level. Subsequently, commentators have attributed alienation, variously, to a transhistorical human condition, to modernity, and more specifically, to capitalist social relations (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman 2015).

Marx's (1988) analysis draws upon all the aforementioned traditions. As such, he designates four dimensions of alienation workers undergo within systemic relations of capitalist production. In the first instance, private property rights enable the owning class to appropriate the goods workers create. Secondly, the same property rights that facilitate the private appropriation of collectively-produced commodities also facilitate control over how commodities are produced in and through the labour process. In these first two dimensions of alienation, capital objectively displaces labour from both the product and process of fabrication. The next dimension of alienation is the denial of the development of "species-being" in humans' metabolic relationship with nature, i.e., how humans must work to transform nature to meet needs, and in turn, how this transforms human nature. This is an ideal-type construction positing what human potentially could be outside of, and beyond, capitalism. Lastly, the relinquishments that occur along the first three levels of analysis lead to the estrangement of humans from one another (Marx 1988).

Marx (1988) penned these theoretical precepts nearly two centuries ago, yet they continue to have empirical correlates into the present. For example, the premise and promise of a creative class has some parallels with Marx's (1988) concept of "species-being." Yet the former is characterized by precarity, inequality, and competitive individualism rather than new forms of cooperation, "where subjectivity, the group itself in its affective and collaborative pulse, is the primary thing we produce together" in "art after capitalism" (Holmes 2013, 166). Max Haiven (2014) observes a contradiction in creative class discourses in that they situate themselves in an extreme form of possessive individualism. This acts to reproduce the hierarchies, inequalities, and divisions of capitalist social relations: "Be as creative as you like ... just colour inside the lines of the individualist" (211). It is precisely the objective structure of these freelancers' labour market that fosters this competitive individualism (Cohen 2016). A consequence of this was participants' observation that attempting to organize collectively in opposition to work conditions in the industry was akin to trying to "herd cats." This serves to demonstrate the degree of estrangement freelance writers experience among themselves.

Even to the degree anti-Marxian scholars (Blauner 1964; Crawford 2009; Murphy 1993) have identified a lack of worker concern with owning the means of production, this fails to consider how this ownership structure shapes the organization of workplaces and its work processes – the latter being crucially important to freelance writers in this investigation. For Marx (1977), three qualities define the labour process in its transhistorical expression. The first of these is the ability of humans to engage in "purposeful activity"; the second is a requirement people have an object to work upon for the purposes of transforming it into something meeting a need; the final trait is the employ of tools/technologies to mediate the relationship between the subject (human activity) and the object (nature) of transformation. In less anthropological, more contemporary terms, the labour process refers to the terrain of control between labour and capital vis-à-vis technologies utilized in the workplace, the overall configuration of work processes, the organization of relations between workers and management and between workers themselves (Yates 2018). It is a struggle over the objective conditions of worker alienation for the purposes of capitalist exploitation (Spencer 2000).

Fordist automation and Taylorist planning and surveillance, which define the industrial, and even non-industrial, division of labour, and accompanying labour processes of the twentieth century, continues to haunt these freelance writers into the new millennium. Whether informants had experienced these conditions directly, such as those who undertook a mid-life career change, or whether merely observed in the figure of a parent, the perceived disciplining effects were uniform to a remarkable degree. The antidote to such empty work experiences has been the pursuit of a more fulfilling occupation via freelance writing as numerous informants made clear. Respondents ostensibly register a relative amount of autonomy historically granted to journalists and freelance writers. This applies to the control they exercise over the immediate production process as well as operating beyond bureaucratic structures as suggested by their independent contractor status (Cohen 2016). Also implicit in this is a recognition of freelance writing as a sphere enabling, unevenly, the at least partial expression of creative impulses (Haiven 2014). Consequently, the efforts of these freelance writers to try and minimize their alienation may have served to make exploitation more tolerable. Neoliberalism here operationalizes alienation as a highly individualized response to the worst depredations of the Fordist-Taylorist world of work. In sum, the dominant labour processes of the twentieth century are labour processes of domination for the freelance writers in this study.

Alienation from Within

Thus far, this analysis has focused on alienation from without the journalistic labour process. Such an approach, however, overlooks the alienation constitutive of journalists' work processes. Informants' subjective accounts make clear their ability to identify the former, but the latter was more difficult to detect. This may derive from what Bill Ryan (1992) names the "art-capital" contradiction. This is in reference to the "irrational" manner in which cultural labourers, such as freelance writers, produce commodities (104). This conflicts with the logic of calculation and instrumentality informing most capitalist accumulation strategies. Because of this, the labour processes of cultural workers cannot be subjected to the logics of scientific management (Ryan 1992, 104). This analysis informs Cohen's (2016) position that freelance writers "retain control over their immediate labour process, which fuels feelings of autonomy and job satisfaction" (46). And even as she chronicles rationalization and de-skilling in the journalistic labour process of freelance writers, she concludes, "Control over production can be surrendered if it is not an impediment to exploitation" (Cohen 2016, 47). This affordance means that it is exploitation, not alienation, that this group of workers experiences most acutely (Cohen 2012, 2016)

For more than a century now, the activities of newsgathering and news writing have comprised the main elements of journalists' work process (Ornebring 2010). The first of these two acts involves conceiving of story ideas, conducting research and interviews, and collecting images and audio. Once the journalist has gathered these materials, they would then undertake to write a story or script, depending on whether they are working at a print, broadcast, or online news source (Cotter 2010). Respectively, newsgathering and news

writing are the conception and execution[2] of the journalistic labour process (Braverman 1998).

Certain norms circumscribing conception have served to reify the subjective interests and orientations of freelance writers. Specifically, I refer here to news values and the objectivity doctrine. These are instantiations of intellectual Taylorism in which the judgment of reporters and freelance writers becomes an object of capital's control costumed under an ethical veil. In the words of Georg Lukacs (1971), reification is "at is most grotesque in journalism ... (where) subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament, and powers of expression are reduced to an abstract mechanism, functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their 'owner' and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand" (100).

Contestation over freelance writers' subjective orientations in the newsgathering process are captured by criteria external to them, guided by the hegemonic consensus of the objectivity credo and its accompanying news values. These reifications are the autonomous mechanisms Lukacs (1971) obliquely identifies. And as naturalized precedents, these categories are "a social process that goes on behind the back of producers ... (and) therefore appear(s) to the producers to have been handed down by tradition" (Marx 1977, 135). The objectivity doctrine and concomitant news values present themselves as a series of cultural and ethical values but they are equally determinative as economic categories, shaping the commodity character of the stories freelancers pursue. In one manifestation of this, those whom I spoke with recalled spending several hours a day searching through listservs, e-mails, and social media feeds in search of story ideas they thought might be of interest to editors. The fetishisms of freelancing, however, resulted in participants insisting they could pursue any story of interest even as they would bemoan the lack of opportunity to write the articles of greatest import to them.

The generational transmission of newsgathering practices, concepts and values has its parallel in news writing as well. Once again, beneath the appearance of labour process autonomy resides the essence of sedimented alienation preserved in historical precedent. Despite the long-ago obsolescence of the telegraph from the journalistic toolbox, the inverted pyramid news story it helped engender remains the foundational news writing technique (Canavilhas 2006). Yet prior to the advent of the inverted pyramid in the middle of the nineteenth century, with its top-heavy style of attempting to answer the who, what, where, when, why of a story in its lead paragraph, newspaper writing was considered a literary genre. It displayed "an elegance and classical scholarship rarely displayed today" (Kesterson 1967, 18). According to Michael Schudson (1978), the inverted pyramid is at odds with the "desire to write a good story, not a safe story, or an objective story, but one finally crafted and forceful in its emotional impact" (187). Evidence for such observations was plentiful amongst the informants in this investigation. Norma Lynn Smith mused about the possibility of doing a master's degree in a narrative nonfiction writing program. She had extensive experience in composing feature articles for newspapers. However, even in this slightly less structured format, Smith felt limited in her ability to use the breadth and depth of the English language in order to create more vivid and dynamic accounts of those she was profiling.

The naturalization of certain norms and forms, as comprising the routine elements of the concrete labour practices of newsgathering and news writing, makes it more difficult to detect the imperatives of abstract labour in the articles freelance writers conceive of, research, and write. This set of historical processes confront freelance writers as the ambient background in which they enact their everyday work practices. Although obscured in the journalistic labour process, alienation is no less present: "Abstract labour beings to quantify and shape concrete labour in its image; the abstract domination of value begins to be materialized in the labour process itself ... the goal of production in capitalism exerts a form of necessity on the producers ... the goal has escaped human control" (Marx 1977, 182).

Claims of "relative autonomy" within the journalistic labour process of freelance writers arise from a perspective of there being no external authority directly governing worker conduct (Cohen 2012, 142). But as the above demonstrates, alienation is immanent to the newsgathering and news writing practices of freelance

2 Despite one seeming to follow the other in discrete fashion, these two categories operate more dialectically than they do linearly. In writing one may realize the need for more or different sources of information in an iterative spiral.

writers. Marx (1977) may have noted, specifically, how the "secret of profit making" is revealed in "the hidden abode of production," but it is in the labour process that alienation is detectable as well for Canadian freelance writers even as they simultaneously find satisfaction, pleasure and autonomy in and through their work. In a period of intensifying exploitation, labour process analysis need not absent alienation as a category of understanding to maintain relevance even with the need to transcend a dichotomous reading of these phenomena. But prior to engaging with the latter aim, it is requisite to situate, first, the sites and means by which exploitation occurs.

Exploitation in the Age of Digital Copyright

Historically understood, exploitation is a social relation. A key element of this relationship is the ability of a ruling faction to establish the rate at which they will appropriate the surplus, above subsistence, the subordinate group is able to produce (Mandel 1970). Under capitalism, detection of this phenomenon is more elusive for owners and workers alike (Elson 2015). The source of this deceptiveness, for Marx, can be located in the differential measure in output between labour power and labour. Necessary labour is the part of the day dedicated to reproducing this capacity to work, i.e., the portion the capitalist compensates (Mandel 1970). This amount is less than the total number of hours capital hires labour on a daily basis. Surplus labour is the differential in hours between the minimum amount of work required to reproduce labour power, and the actual amount of labour workers perform. This uncompensated labour is the source of surplus value for capitalists (Elson 2015). The labour process remains a privileged site of analysis since it is where this exploitation occurs (Thompson 1989).

This is an assessment Cohen (2012, 2016, 2017) shares as it pertains to freelance writers. In spite of the "relative autonomy" freelance writers ostensibly enjoy, she wishes to re-centre labour process analysis in order to examine, "valorization and exploitation, the motor of capitalist accumulation and production, which is fundamentally structured around the extraction and appropriation of surplus value" (Cohen 2016, 46). This extraction takes place within two arenas in her estimation (Cohen 2016, 46). The first of these to be examined is the domain of intellectual property regimes. Exploitation can now be located at the level of contested property rights between labour and capital: "Copyright's primary function is to guarantee its owner exclusive right to exploit the work and to extract surplus value from workers" (Cohen 2012, 150). Elsewhere, she describes this phenomenon as follows: "By owning the rights to writers' works, publishers can continue to extract surplus value from workers' labour power long after they pay for an article" (Cohen 2016, 51).

Canadian legal precedent has assured independent contractors, such as freelance writers, ownership over the works they produce. The property rights associated with their works have enabled freelance writers to resell their articles in other markets in an acknowledgement of their precarity. But media concentration and technological convergence have made it possible to alter what was an already iniquitous power relation between publishers/editors and freelance writers (Cohen 2012, 2016). Horizontal and vertical integration, when combined with copyright-stripping contracts, has meant news media operations can monetize a freelance authored article across multiple platforms whilst having paid for it only once. Control over freelance writers' legally enshrined copyright protections by some of Canada's most powerful media corporations confirm there is nothing primitive about strategies seeking to accumulate capital through processes of dispossession and the subsequent collection of rents.

As Marx conceptualizes, capital is value in motion with value being a quantitative measure of socially necessary labour time (Harvey 2018b). This objective measure of value is the quality making commodities fungible (Mandel 1970). The labour theory of value therefore refers to the historically average quantity of labour needed to produce commodities for exchange on the market as measured by the amount of time needed for their creation. The overall circulation of capital passes through four distinct but interrelated stages. The first is the production process where workers' labour power combines with other inputs of production, such as raw materials and technologies, in the creation of commodities and concomitant surplus value. These commodities then move to market as organized by merchant capitalists. It is there that the surplus value

generated in production is realized as money in consumer exchange (Harvey 2018b). Subsequently, money realized at the point of exchange is distributed as wages, taxes, profit for producers and merchant profit (Harvey 2018b). The final two distributive categories of money are finance capital and rent.

As monopoly-finance capital comes to characterize the broader political economy, rent-seeking as a facet of this configuration occupies a more prominent role in the accumulation of capital (Mazzucato 2018). Rent-seeking is profitability that stems from non-competitive pricing, the exclusion of competitors, the employ of monopoly power to disadvantage labour, and engagement with other activities not considered to be directly productive of value (Mazzucato 2018). As rent-seeking occurs in the distributive realm, not that of production, it is a form of surplus profits (Zeller 2008). Outside of the abode of production, it may come to appear that capital is not characterized by value in motion but rather by money in motion (Harvey 2018b). Money appears to beget money within the growing tendency of finance-dominated, accumulation regimes (Zeller 2008).

A decade-long, class-action lawsuit, filed by the freelance writer Heather Robertson against *The Globe and Mail* newspaper, is illustrative of the manner in which intellectual property monopolies generate super profits. In 1995, Robertson's publisher entered into agreement with the newspaper in which a submitted piece by the author would appear one time in exchange for a fee. The agreement made no mention of reproduction in any electronic databases (D'Agostino 2015). Yet subsequently, the article appeared in multiple electronic repositories owned and operated by *The Globe and Mail's* parent company (D'Agostino 2015). In order for individuals or institutional actors such as libraries to access these digital archives, license fees must be paid to the proprietor (Zeller 2008). Exclusive ownership over this trove of freelancer articles yields the additional accumulation of monies as created by the artificial scarcity of monopoly property title (Zeller 2008). This results in a phenomenon in monopoly-finance capital that Harvey (2018b) refers to as "prices without values." This means access to (intellectual) goods display a price but they do not express value. The expropriation of freelance writer copyright is exploitative as news media corporations alienate ownership over the product, but it does not occur at the point of production. The labour process is therefore not the loci of analysis here. Intellectual property rights are not a means to extract additional surplus value from freelance writers after a single payment as Cohen (2016) suggests. Rather, this is a form of market exchange that takes place in the distributional sphere between consumers wanting access to such goods, and those that exercise the power of monopoly rents over that access.

What a Piece of Work: Value Generation Inside and Outside the Standard Employment Relationship

The industrialization of the journalistic labour process over the course of the twentieth century has served to rationalize and standardize conception and execution, newsgathering and news writing. In opting to pursue careers as freelance writers, these workers have attempted to regain greater control over their work methods[3] even as these efforts expose them to new modalities of exploitation according to Cohen (2016). Their positionality outside the standard employment relationship veils the exploitative character of the employee-employer relationship: "(The) arbitrary per-word form of payment ... obscures a large portion of the labour time that goes into the writing of those words" (Cohen 2012, 148-149). Here, she references the uncompensated time freelance writers expend in conceiving story ideas, sending story proposals to editors, conducting research, attending events, doing interviews, and writing and revising articles. The components Cohen (2012) identifies above comprise the near totality of the journalistic labour process from conception to execution.

As a means of overall assessment, Cohen (2012, 2016, 2017) points to freelance writers' categorization as piecework labourers as the second specific way by which they experience exploitation. In piecework, "it appears that they sell simply a finished piece of work ... not the labour time required to produce that piece"

3 Interviews with participants in my investigation indicate feelings of constraint in working with prevailing formats even in magazine writing or long-form narratives. This may be attributable to the periodical industry adopting its own equivalent of the inverted-pyramid form in the "nut graph," "hourglass," and the "champagne-glass" method (McKercher and Cummings 1998).

(Cohen 2012, 147). Historically, though, there is little to distinguish how newsgatheirng and news writing differs for staff reporters in comparison to freelance writers at newspapers, magazines or digital outlets. Since the tasks freelance writers engage in are the same, largely, as those of staff reporters, then one may conclude the researching, interviewing and editing paid staffers conduct also goes uncompensated in some proportion beyond necessary labour. Piecework may help to account for freelance writers' toleration for precarity, for as Marx (1977) outlines, it gives workers a "wider scope ... to individuality, tends to develop ... worker's sense of liberty, independence and self-control" (697). But he ultimately concludes that "the piece wage is therefore only a modified form of the time wage" (Marx 1977, 694).

The literal measure here, then, is whether freelance writers are productive workers in that they generate surplus value. This designation of productive labourer Marx (1977) explores in his elucidation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* poem. In this brief discussion, he first describes Milton as a "silkworm" when he wrote the poem because it was not created in a relation of production. Later, he says Milton becomes a merchant when he sold the piece to a publisher for a fixed fee. In exchanges of this kind, the piece once more has a price but no value. It contributes to an increase in the circulation of money, but not to growth in the production of surplus value (Harvey 2018b). It is only when a writer "turns out work for his (*sic)* publisher in a factory style (that s/he) is a productive worker" (Marx 1977, 1044).

As outlined earlier, the objectivity doctrine, news values, and writing formats such as the inverted pyramid are constitutive to the labour process of freelance writers. While journalistic work processes may appear to be shaped by the logics of craft modes of production, in essence, they are long industrialized. Consequently, freelance writers' positionality outside the standard employment position cannot immunize them from the effects of the Taylorist techniques they deploy regularly.

Cohen (2016) does give attention to what she refers to as "conceptual technologies," such as the inverted pyramid, but in the main does not link them systematically to the role they play in generating and circulating value. She writes, "conceptual technologies" have "changed the form of reporters' writing and challenged their autonomy ... (but) freelancers have tried to restore these ties (to art forms) by regaining their status as independent workers and remaining outside of the employment relationship" (76). Paradoxically, then, being outside the standard employment relationship is to offer protections to freelance writers against the alienating effects of these mental techniques. Yet freelance writers' status as independent contractors is one of two ways in which they experience the exploitation of unpaid surplus labour. Such seeming incongruities reach a measure of resolution when viewed through an analysis of the labour process as the source of value generation. It is then that the phenomena of alienation and exploitation become cognate irrespective of freelancers' relationship to their employment contract.

Conclusion: A Full-Value Accounting

The capitalist crises of the new millennium have resulted in a revival of interest in Marx's concepts of analysis. Such efforts have included several book-length treatments examining and critiquing the category of value (Holloway 2010; Henderson 2013; Massumi 2018). Yet labour process scholars have sidelined, mostly, Marx's labour theory of value in the decades following the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* in 1974 (Spencer 2000). Contradictorily, one of the many critiques levelled in opposition to Braverman's analysis of the labour process is his disregard for Marx's labour theory of value (Jaros 2005). His apparent neglect of the labour theory of value is reflected in the title of his *magnum opus,* as it ostensibly links deskilling solely with the monopoly conditions of capital. Others, still, have accused him of the opposite tack. That is, he did not examine with sufficient rigour the mechanisms of profit making under monopoly conditions, i.e., monopoly pricing, mergers and acquisitions, and the collection of rent that becomes more pronounced in non-competitive markets (Littler and Salaman 1982). But in the following, Braverman (1998) presents managerial control of the labour process as existing expressly for the purpose of attempting to extract more surplus value from workers. Attendant to this is the alienation encapsulated in the tendency towards deskilling. Upon the craft chassis of formal subsumption and absolute surplus value extrac-

tion sits the industrial motor of real subsumption and relative surplus value:

> In order to ensure management control and to cheapen the worker, conception and execution must be rendered separate spheres of work, and ... the study of work processes must be reserved to management and kept from the workers, to whom its results are communicated only in the form of simplified job tasks governed by simplified instructions, while it is thenceforth their duty to follow unthinkingly and without comprehension. [Braverman, 1998, 81]

An understanding of capital as value in motion is unable to abandon the labour process and the labour theory of value for these categories of analysis connect valorization in production, to realization in exchange, to the remainder of the circuit of capital in its distributional components (Spencer 2000). As Moishe Postone (1993) notes, "the form of social domination (that) characterizes capitalism ... is grounded in the value form of wealth itself," which is generated in and through the labour process (30). Additionally, Postone (1993) describes how in order to receive "full value" for the time spent labouring, workers are compelled to conform to temporal norms, in the production of these commodity pieces, that are alien and foreign and confront them as such. The working to the temporal requirements external to the control of freelance writers, as determined by socially necessary labour time, is the source of the structurally deeper forms of alienation and exploitation they experience. This is the "abstract mechanism" Lukacs (1971) identifies as the source of journalists' reification.

Impoverishment, in this guise, is not merely the exploitation that occurs at the point of production, but also the degradation workers experience in the labour process (Harvey 2018b). It is the latter that accounts for the lines of flight desired by the respondents in this study as they expressed a need to move from work that was more alienating to work organized and experienced, in freelance writing, that was even slightly less alienating. But rather than perpetuate debates in which one of these two concepts is assigned greater analytical power, or as having more political resonance, I have attempted here to bring exploitation and alienation into conversation with one another through an articulation of the labour theory of value, and how it is realized in the journalistic labour process of freelance writers. For exploitation and alienation operate relationally as mediated by the category of value, and value generation remains rooted in historical techniques constitutive of freelance writers' labour as consistent with their designation as productive workers. To the degree freelance writers do not produce "in accordance with the laws of beauty," it is because they continue to produce in accordance with the laws of value (Marx 1988, 77). Neither labour process reforms in the journalistic field touting multi-skilling, nor redistributive measures re-allocating a larger portion of the value freelance writers generate addresses the above. It is only a workers' movement that can negate the motion of value. And it is only in this manner freelance writers can realize the occupational fulfillment they have sought over the course of their work-life histories.

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