

The disvalues of alienated capitalist natures

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Abstract

This engagement highlights the antagonism between wealth and the commodity value form posed at the heart of Marx's work. In doing so, it considers methodological possibilities for both understanding and intervening in the fabricating of new alienated capitalist values from beyond-human natures.

Keywords

commodity form, cross-disciplinary solidarity, performative economics, value(s), wealth

Capital begins with wealth, not the commodity. So asserts John Holloway, in an exuberant paper that starts by repeating the opening sentence of Marx's defining work:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as¹ 'an immense accumulation of commodities', its unit being a single commodity. (Marx, 1974 [1867]: 43)

Holloway argues that the subject of this sentence is the wealth that *appears as* an immense accumulation of commodities. Wealth is *not* the externalized commodities whose appearance as wealth is assumed in the capitalist mode of production. Wealth instead is the restless human desire to express, create and relate beyond the cage of commoditized exchange. It is the immanently generative interplay of diversely embodied life that always exceeds the creation and accumulation of commodified objects. It is the densely rich and relational skein of entanglements from which commodities, including human labour and now billable ecosystem

service 'work', are created as alienated and tradable things.

In this reading, *Capital* begins by asserting the antagonism between economized market value – the value that becomes represented by the currency of money – and the multiplicitous beyond-market *values* that commodity value comes to replace (Graeber, 2001). These values include the intrinsic values emanating from an entity-in-itself (which already is also connected with and dependent on others, Hannis, 2015); the affective values that elicit love and care for the person, entity or relationship thus valued (Sullivan, 2009); the culturally diverse values and value practices that during 500 years of colonial 'New World' conquest have frequently resisted capture into the commodity value form (Clastres, 2010 [1980]); and the values that open one's heart, confer

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meaning and permit the appreciation and creation of beauty. None of these values and associated practices fit fully into the commodity form. Frequently, they exist in varying modes of recalcitrance and resistance to the alienations required by commodification (Holloway, 2015: 24).

The particular antagonism introduced at the start of *Capital*, then, is simultaneously the question that Marx asks throughout his work, namely, ‘what would richness (or wealth) look like in a society in which the capitalist mode of production did not prevail?’ (Holloway, 2015: 5). Ultimately, this is a normative question. It points to the possibility of both understanding and disrupting processes of commodification *as practices that can be intervened in*, so as to value, in themselves, the riches and relationalities that always already exist beyond the commodity form (see discussion in Bollier, 2017).

As posed in the discussion paper ‘Value in capitalist natures: an emerging framework’ authored by Kay and Kenney-Lazar (2017) and based on a panel discussion involving ‘eleven critical scholars of nature–society geography’ at the 2015 conference of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), a relevant question then becomes: how can ‘Marxian value theory’ (somewhat undefined in the paper) help to both clarify this tension, and to care for the diverse, generative and excessive wealth that in capitalism comes to be valued as alienated commodities? Geographers have long exhibited an interest in this ‘value-nature nexus’, as well as in documenting how new economic values are made and captured through ‘muddling’ human labour with aspects of beyond-human nature (cf. Gareau, 2005: 128). A glance at the references in the paper suggests as much. I was surprised, therefore, to read that geographers and political ecologists should now be tackling ‘the tricky questions of value head-on’. Marxian analyses are also not alien to political ecology specifically. The ‘subfield’ emerged at least in part through a Marxian political economy applied to analysis of capitalism’s propensity towards environmental crisis (e.g. Atkinson, 1991). Many of its protagonists have been influenced by class analyses in seeking to understand the complexity of how particular

environmental discourses operating as ‘State Science’ become constructed and empowered to serve privilege while subjugating the wealth of local and indigenous knowledges embedded in places, landscapes and commons (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1997; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Stott and Sullivan, 2000). Value/commodity chain analysis has similarly been a strong focus in geography and political ecology, working with many of the calls for attention posited in the paper (Robbins, 2010). And political ecology has been brought into conversation with ecological economics precisely to clarify processes of value and valuation in policies for environmental improvement (Kallis et al., 2013).

Perhaps less clear in these works is the possible contribution that might be made specifically by engagement with the Labour Theory of Value (LToV) in the making of capitalist natures (although see Kallis et al., 2013). The LToV unmasks the fetish of value residing in the objectified commodity set ‘opposite living labour as an *alien power*’ (Marx 1993 [1857–1858]: 454, emphasis in original), drawing attention to dimensions of activity, materiality and life that become captured through processes of commodity-making. The LToV thus points to both the domains of life and activity from which capitalist (exchange) value is alienated and to the unequal accumulations of surplus value – manifest as both profit and rent – driving the engine of commoditized production requiring this alienation (cf. Luxemburg, 2003 [1913]).

Part of the discussion in ‘Value in capitalist natures: an emerging framework’ thus revolves around extending concepts of work to natures-beyond-the-human, as in references to ‘the work that nature does’. I think, however, that a category error is creeping in here; or, at least, that a false question is being posed – that is, does nature labour? Natures-beyond-the-human are immanently (re)generative, but it seems to me that nature labours only to the extent that ‘it’ is conceptualized, calculated and alienated as such. Current social constructions of nature as a service provider doing free work that should be paid for may confer trading possibilities between people as owners and buyers of the newly calculated and commodified ‘labour’ performed by nature. But the work that goes into creating the

symbolic layering that abstracts dimensions of nature-beyond-the-human into billable units of service value is all (too) human, as are the buyers and sellers of the billable units that may thereby be paid for (discussed further in Sullivan, 2013).

At the same time, perhaps ‘Marxist value theory’ can take us only so far with regard to understanding how exactly economized value today comes to reside in ‘capitalist natures’. We exist in an era wherein information and communications technologies, unimaginable when Marx was writing, permit enhanced large-scale data-feeding and practices of surveillance, while hitherto impossible connectivities permit vanishingly rapid and invisible (or ‘dark’) value-accumulating exchanges (Mackenzie et al., 2012). Arguably, then, analytical approaches are needed that both recognize the immeasurable contribution of Marx’s critique of political economy and extend this contribution so as to connect with the technological and organizational specificities of the contemporary moment.

It is for this reason that with colleagues in the Leverhulme Centre for the Study of Value (www.thestudyofvalue.org), I have turned to the analytical and methodological promise of performative economic sociology, Actor Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies in seeking to understand how new economic exchange values are made in practice in a range of domains, including other-than-human-natures (Bracking et al., forthcoming; also see Gareau, 2005; Goldman et al., 2011). These performative approaches amplify the insights of the LToV by disassembling, and thereby clarifying, the world-making actions of multiple calculative devices, institutional practices and structuring value discourses that in combination make new economically valued units that often can also be traded as commodities. The ethnographic and data-rich analyses that such approaches encourage can illuminate the calculative and other machinations underscoring the exchange values that become visible in variously marketized structures of action and decision-making. As such, an emphasis on how new economic value is made can assist with making visible some of the practices of assemblage that bring together multiplicitous actors, materials, organizations, institutions, calculative devices and so on,

that otherwise are mystified in the appearance and exchange of a commodity as an alienated economically valued entity (e.g. see Ehrenstein and Muniesa, 2013; Carver and Sullivan, 2017). At the same time, the triad of value, values and valuation calls for foundationally cross-disciplinary engagement (Bracking et al., forthcoming). This means that if value is to become a ‘unifying analytical framework’ for understanding the production of ‘capitalist natures’, as urged by Kay and Kenney-Lazar, this framework will benefit from creatively cross- and trans-disciplinary approaches and solidarities beyond the boundaries of Marxist and critical geography.

Finally, perhaps the aspect of Marx’s oeuvre that can assist most fully with the tasks of understanding and refracting ‘capitalist natures’ is his emphasis on how alienation is enacted. Alienation is foundational to the commodity form. It is present as human psychosocial relationships, otherwise in a ‘movement of becoming’ (Marx, 1973: 488), are abstracted through the commodification of labour. And it is at the heart of how organic and nonorganic ‘things’ become ripped from their relational contexts as they are manufactured, conceptually and materially, either as variously commoditized labour (‘ecosystem services’) or as marketed commodities whose trading may generate surplus value that can be captured and accumulated.

To return to Holloway, however, alienation is also the locus of hope. Alienation is where struggle arises: ‘between the dragging of wealth into the commodity-form and the forces that push against and beyond the process of commodification’, and between identification with processes of commodity creation and a dis-identification that overflows, pushes back and acts for change (Holloway, 2015: 13). This perhaps means pointing to what might be better understood as the ‘disvalue in capitalist natures’: measured both by the suffering frequently caused as the richness of human and other-than-human lives is disciplined into the commodity form and by the inequities that are consolidated as surplus value may accumulate from these commodities. Again, these struggles point to the antagonism between the alienated commodity form and the immanent wealth and values of ‘life’s nature’ from

which it is abstracted. As Nealon (2016: 113) writes, they embody the biopolitical and participatory challenges that arise from clarity that ‘life is a mesh of emerging forms, not a competition among pre-existing organisms’. In arriving at this place, then, perhaps we as scholars concerned with ‘building bridges’ to strengthen possibilities for pushing back against ‘capitalist valuation’ might be encouraged to combine our own alienated labours towards contestation, as well as documentation, of the alienating fabrications of ‘capitalist natures’.

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Note

1. Other translations write ‘appears as’, for example, Marx (1990 [1867]: 125), in Holloway (2015: 4).

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