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SEAN SAYERS' CONCEPT OF IMMATERIAL LABOR AND THE INFORMATION ECONOMY

The concept “immaterial labor” is one of the most hotly debated topics in contemporary social theory. In his 2007 work *The Concept of Labor: Marx and His Critics*, Sean Sayers offered an extensive response to several critical redefinitions of labor (Habermas, Benton, Arendt) and immaterial labor (Lazzarato, Hardt and Negri). Sayers returned to the subject in his more recent book, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes*.¹ As one of the few accounts that contests the contemporary Marx critics with regard to fundamental concepts such as labor and immaterial labor, his contribution should be taken seriously.

In this Communication I will summarize Sayers' critical definitions of labor and immaterial labor in response to the critics, and then focus on three problems in his account: 1) Sayers fails to clarify the relation between material and immaterial labor; 2) there are passages in Marx's economic works that are completely ignored by Sayers, and are decisive against the latter's views on immaterial labor; and 3) Sayers' views on immaterial labor do not fully apply to recent debates on immaterial labor in the information economy.

Marx's critique of political economy has been challenged by many cognitive capitalism and information economy theorists. The concept of labor is one of the categories deemed outdated in this regard. Sayers' account offers a well-founded reply to this, but it also suffers from a few inconsistencies. It overlooks the fact that Marx himself adopted the term “immaterial.” I will

¹ A modified version of this text is available in a multi-authored essay collection, *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy* (Sayers, 2011a, 32–47).

argue that this is not an unsound or misleading term if one grasps it in the right context. With this misinterpretation removed, Sayers' critique of the shortcomings of mainstream social theories and the postworkerist tradition is enhanced.

The Concepts of Labor and Immaterial Labor

There are two distinct groups proposing redefinitions of labor and immaterial labor. The first consists of Jürgen Habermas', Ted Benton's and Hannah Arendt's concepts of labor in general; the second clusters around the Italian autonomist understanding of immaterial labor represented by Maurizio Lazzarato, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. A third rather heterogeneous group should be mentioned here as well: those who adopt the preceding criticisms of the Marxian theory (Tiziana Terranova, Christian Fuchs). They focus on new forms of labor in the information economy. Although Sayers' study does not cover them, these scholars provide some useful material to examine whether Sayers' contribution has any crucial impact on the re-working of the "immaterial labor" concept.

Habermas (1988, 82) argues that Marx's concept of work is derived basically from the prototype of handicraft activity producing material goods. For Habermas, Marx fails to discern *instrumental* and *communicative* aspects of labor. The former refers to the technical mastery over natural forces, the latter to the suppression of man's own nature (Habermas, 1973, 71). Benton (1989, 66) stresses that labor is, for Marx, a transformative activity; nevertheless, this understanding is still based on some sort of handicraft production. The definition of labor as transformative activity cannot be extended to some of the primary forms of work such as hunting, gathering or mining, since these "primary labor-processes . . . *appropriate* but do not transform" the labor material (1989, 69; see also Benton, 1992, 59; Sayers, 2007, 432–3). Arendt asserts that Marx fails to distinguish labor from work. Labor is unproductive activity, because "it leaves nothing behind." It is immediately consumed as the effort is spent. Work, by contrast, is productive activity, since it "adds new objects to the human artifice." Labor is concerned with the means of its own reproduction; work, however, produces "anything but life" (Arendt, 1998, 87–8; see Sayers, 2007, 447).

The Italian autonomist tradition draws attention to a particular type of labor (immaterial labor) and criticizes Marx in this regard. The origin of this tradition goes back to Lazzarato (1996, 133), who defines immaterial labor as an activity that produces "the informational and cultural content of the commodity." The informational content involves "cybernetics and computer control," and cultural labor refers to "activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and . . . public opinion" (1996, 143–4; see Sayers, 2007, 443–4).

Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labor has been taken over by Hardt and Negri, and redefined as creation of "immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response" (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 108). In *Empire* they divide immaterial labor into three different types: The first is involved in

industrial production that has been informationalized and has incorporated communication technologies. . . . Second is the . . . analytical and symbolic tasks. . . . A third type . . . involves the production and manipulation of effect. (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 293.)

In *Multitude*, they dropped the first type of immaterial labor (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 108; Sayers, 2007, 444).

The third camp deals with "digital labor" in the information economy. Terranova (2000, 33) points out that the "informational–communicative activities of the Web 2.0 users" exemplify a new form of immaterial labor. While internet users enjoy their time surfing on the internet, they indirectly work for free by "building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces." Fuchs (2014, 102, 359, 362) disregards the notion of immaterial labor, but appropriates the thesis on the exploitation of digital NetSlaves.

Labor and Immaterial Labor in Sayers

Sayers regards Habermas' and Benton's readings as "superficial and unsatisfactory," because Marx's theory of labor sees labor as a material transformative activity. Labor cannot be isolated from the linguistic aspect, or restricted to a particular form of work (Sayers, 2007, 433). "Appropriation is a kind of transformation"; all labor "separates the object from nature" by changing, and making it useable: "it is caught and killed, plucked, extracted, moved, etc. Labor is thereby embodied and objectified in it through a change of form" (Sayers, 2007, 437). Arendt is, for Sayers, wrong to believe that, for instance, service work has no product. All labor effects a transformation of matter; it objectifies and changes the material environment in some way. This means that every type of labor creates a product (Sayers, 2007, 447).

With regard to the Italian autonomist account, Sayers initially claims that all labor is material in its "roots" and "effects." The new types of work are no exception in this regard (Sayers, 2007, 444–6). He emphasizes that the concept of immaterial labor is "unsound" and "it is quite wrong to think . . . that a new category of 'immaterial' labor is needed" (Sayers, 2007, 445). Although modern industry involves information technology, computer control, service sector and cultural production, it is "misleading to describe" these production

forms as “immaterial labor” (Sayers, 2007, 444). Later, he asserts that managers, accountants, computer programmers, designers, etc., do not aim at creating a material product, but their work has “material effects that produce and reproduce social and economic relations” (Sayers, 2007, 445–6).

In the end, therefore, Sayers readopts the notion of immaterial labor, and concludes that “all material labor is ‘immaterial’ in the sense that it alters not only the material worked upon but also subjectivity and social relations” (Sayers, 2007, 448). Sayers seems to have the mental aspect of labor in mind when he speaks of the involvement of immateriality in the material production process. Marx’s analogy of bee and architect supports this conception: “What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (Marx, 1996, 188).

In order to transform the raw material into a final product, the architect needs to design, plan and organize the construction components in his imagination. His mental labor corresponds to what Sayers considers to be the immaterial aspect of material production. Based on what Sayers has claimed in different passages, we can reinforce his argument that social production is material in its *roots* and *effects*, but (partially) immaterial as labor *process*. This indication, however, contradicts his definition of labor as a material transformative activity. On the other hand, the Italian autonomist account does not deny that the labor *process* is material. It asserts only that the *product* of labor is immaterial. Sayers does not deny that all labor performance is a material “expenditure of a certain amount of human muscles, nerves, brain” (Marx, 1987, 272), but this does not clarify whether immateriality is truly an “aspect” of the material production *process* or rather an unsound term (Sayers, 2011, 45).

Immaterial Labor in Marx

Some passages in Marx’s *Theories of Surplus Value*, completely ignored by Sayers, are helpful to understand what makes up immaterial labor. Sayers (2007, 443) claims that the notion of immaterial labor was first introduced by Lazzarato.² Marx’s *Theories of Surplus Value*, by contrast, documents in detail that the notion of immaterial labor goes back to the political economists of the 19th century (Blanqui, Destutt de Tracy, Ganilh, Garnier, Mill, Petty, Say, Senior, Smith, Storch) (see, in particular: Marx, 1965, 144–6, 152–3, 180–4, 238–40, 252–60).

2 Sayers (2011b, 31) modifies this formulation in *Marx and Alienation*: “Hardt and Negri . . . have taken the concept of ‘immaterial labor’ from Lazzarato . . . and extended it to become central to their account of postindustrial society.”

Here Marx adopts the expression “non-material production” (*nichtmaterielle Produktion*), and speaks of “spiritual labor” (*geistige Arbeit*), “spiritual worker” (*geistiger Arbeiter*) and “spiritual production” (*geistige Produktion*) as synonyms for immaterial labor, worker and production (Marx, 1965, 146, 152, 181–2, 240, 256–8, 329, 385–6; see also Marx, 1962, 382, 674; Haug, 2009). For Marx, immaterial labor is the work of actors, artists, clerics, doctors, economists, judges, lawyers, mistresses, orators, police officers, priests, professors, servants, scientists, soldiers, state officials, teachers, writers, and so on. Marx ascribes these types of intellectual or mental work to immaterial production. They exemplify immaterial labor in terms of its *source*, *process*, and *product/effect*. The autonomist view challenges the material/immaterial character of the last component. Sayers rejects this view in one place, but approves it elsewhere.

Put crudely, the term *material* means physical (*stofflich*), corporeal (*körperlich*), objective (*sachlich*), economic (*ökonomisch*), social (*gesellschaftlich*), or real (*wirklich*) (Marx, 1962, 50–2, 98). Materiality is the “fundamental form” of social production, “on which depend all other forms [of activity] — mental, political, religious etc.” (Marx and Engels, 1975, 82). An immaterial product, unlike a material one, is something that is not *graspable* in the ordinary sense. For example, value is “something immaterial, something regardless of its material consistency” (*Wert ist . . . etwas Immaterielles, Gleichgültiges gegen sein stoffliches Bestehn*) (Marx, 1973, 309; Marx, 1983, 230; translation modified). The value abstraction in relations of production is described here as immaterial, on the one hand; while, as part of social production, it is something material, on the other.

Value is physically invisible, and yet it is materially existent. Likewise, the force of gravitation is physically invisible and yet it impacts the material world. So the significant characteristic for the immaterial is that it expresses an appearance form of material reality in different ways. The immaterial as such emerges as the dialectical opposite of material, physical or visible objects, relations and processes.

The *products* of cultural or service work are material due to their transformative character in social relations of production, and yet they do not appear like a chair or table does. The *process* of mental, intellectual or immaterial labor appears, however, to be something non-material since it consists of models, plans or reconstructions in imagination, and yet these are products of biological, neurological, physical and social activities as well.

Intellectual labor of, say, an architect is a product of his/her mental activities, which *appear* to be something immaterial because they are not graspable or visible in the way physical objects are. Nevertheless, intellectual labor is a material activity, for two reasons: 1) it plays a social role within the entire production process, and it is a part of the material reality; 2) every mental activity is a product of biological, neurological or physical processes in the human body.

This means that the same appearance form (immateriality) corresponds to material reality on different (social or neurobiological) levels. In short, labor *product* as a physically visible or invisible object, and labor *process* as the social totality, refer to different levels of materiality. In this sense, I would argue that the immaterial is a dialectical aspect or moment within the material. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether Sayers would envision it in this way.

Immaterial Labor in the Information Economy

Regarding the term *immaterial*, there are two major tendencies in the recent debates on the so-called information economy. The first (Terranova, *et al.*) inherits the term directly from the Italian autonomist camp, and extends it to the digital information economy. The other (Fuchs, *et al.*) disregards the term, but amalgamates Marx with the postworkerist approach. Both accounts derive the (immaterial or material) social–ontological character of the labor *process* from (immaterial or material) objective features of the labor *product*, albeit the first account identifies product and process as *immaterial*, while the second calls them *material*. This reduction of (immaterial/material) *product* to *production process* relies upon a simple formula that equates production as *creation* of (immaterial/material) *products* with production as *value production* and *enlargement of capital*.

In Terranova's and Fuchs' understanding, Web users contribute to creation of users' data that is processed and sold to advertising companies. Based on the assumption that any data is a product of certain online activity, call it material or immaterial, and that this activity creates something economically valuable, both theorists conclude that digital data generation is some sort of unpaid and infinitely exploited work. In short, the sum of *creation* and *price* of a labor *product* equals *productivity* of labor.

Marx, by contrast, saw the labor process as productive primarily based on the relations of production, and not whether a product is created or not. The production process already has, as a premise, that a product is created. But creation of a product alone does not suffice to characterize the labor process as productive activity. Labor is productive if it is hired by capital directly in order to produce surplus value for the capitalist or to contribute towards self-valorization of capital (Marx, 1962, 532).

Sayers' Position

At this point, one must wonder to what extent Sayers' conceptualization of labor addresses the current approaches to digital labor. His discussion of immaterial labor is probably not restricted to a mere contention with the first two camps (Habermas, Benton, Arendt; Lazzarato, Hardt and Negri),

but also promises at least some critical potential for the third group (Terranova, Fuchs). How would his theory have been valuable or useful for the more recent debates otherwise? So one is entitled to question not only what Sayers has said about the previous debates, but also what his account would imply for the more recent discussions.

The productivist model of the first group which regards work as that which creates a material product, and the immaterialist approach of the second group which focuses on anything other than material production — industrial or craft work — reemerge in the third group.

Sayers' critique of the first two groups seeks to show that all labor is material in source and effect, implying that labor is a material activity. However, he fails to acknowledge the distinction between production as creation of a product and production as value production, and to clarify the relation between material as an objective feature of products and material as the social mode of production in general. In addition, his views on the term "immaterial," as I have shown earlier, are highly ambiguous. He oscillates between refuting and appropriating the term. These flaws make his account doubtful. So what is his contribution to those debates?

Sayers' thesis on material/immaterial labor goes beyond superficial descriptions and fetishistic conceptualizations of new forms of labor, and he is at pains to distance himself from the one-sided approaches of the productivist and autonomist accounts. The concept of immaterial labor is used by postworkerist social theorists to support their claim that the Marxian terminology is incapable of shedding light on the informational or cognitive aspects of capitalism. Sayers' criticism targets some of these theorists who hastily declare Marx's legacy outdated. In other words, his account contributes to repudiation of the current attempts to downplay the profundity of Marx's concept of labor. Contra Sayers, immateriality is an appearance form of the material world; immaterial labor is thus a social category that Marx adopted. The term "immaterial" is not unsound, unless it is grasped in the wrong context. It corresponds to a particular appearance form of objectively given entities or relations in social production. Having removed this problem, Sayers' approach is able to avoid an apologetic or even dogmatic defense of Marx, and it gains solid ground to respond to the digital labor theorists. This is why it has merit, and deserves critical attention.

As for Terranova and Fuchs, despite their socio-critical rhetoric, they overstate the emancipatory potential of so-called digital labor and remain firmly trapped within the productivist approach of the first camp (Habermas, *et al.*) and the postworkerism of the second camp (Hardt, *et al.*). Terranova borrows the entire notion, while Fuchs only the argument concerning immaterial labor, from its forerunners. Now the question is whether we should adopt the term, as Terranova does, simply because it represents a new stage

of capitalism and rejects the categories of the past, or drop it entirely because it leads to flawed implications, as Fuchs claims.

With some substantial changes, I believe Sayers' account can offer a third way, one that does not lapse into either eclecticism or fetishistic novelty, but grasps immaterial labor on its material basis.

Conclusion

In Marx's understanding, the *productivity* of immaterial labor rests upon the concrete relations of labor and capital. Here the term *immateriality* refers to some objective features and appearance forms of the labor *product*, such as invisibility or non-corporeality. On the other hand, *materiality* has two meanings in Marx. First, it expresses an objective feature and a physical appearance form of the labor product, as opposed to immateriality; and second, it refers to the social production process as a whole.

The autonomist camp and its followers believe they have found a new complementary opposite to materiality as social reality (an immaterial sphere within social reality) and fashioned a critique of Marx. This approach, however, does not succeed, because it reduces *productivity* of labor to *creation* of (immaterial/material) labor products.

A consistent response to the autonomist camp and other groups would require clarification of the difference between material and immaterial on different levels, and grasp of the relation between creation of product and productivity of immaterial labor in Marx's economic studies. Sayers fails to achieve this, and this undermines his response, in part if not entirely, to the current interpretations of Marx's concept of labor in the information economy debates. I suggest completing his criticism by adopting the term "immaterial."

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