***Capital* and the Labour Process**

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Readings of *Capital* are never innocent let alone uncontentious. Currently making conceptual and political waves are theories of cognitive capitalism. based on claims that ‘material production’ is no longer a source of value, that labour time is not a significant object of interest for employers and that the real subordination of labour is reversed (Vercellone, 2007; Moulier Boutang, 2012, Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2009). Located in the post-operaismo tradition, such commentators prefer to focus on Marx’s ‘Fragment on Machines’ from *The Grundrisse* as a blueprint for an end to scarcity and an imminent transition to postcapitalism or communism depending on the degree of optimism (Pitts 2016). These arguments have received a considerable boost with their popularisation by Paul Mason. He argues that whilst *Capital* was an historic achievement full of brilliant insights, it is in essence history. ‘Info goods’ are corroding value and labour is no longer the ultimate source of profit. Info capitalism is strangled by its own contradictions; hence postcapitalism will be born on a tide of networked, collaborative zero cost production. One perceived consequence is that antagonism is displaced from the labour process and employment relationship and ‘the class struggle in cognitive capitalism increasingly takes the form of a distribution struggle’ (Jeon, 2010: 19). In slightly different terms, politics shifts from the factory to the social factory, radical demands focusing on a universal basic income and full automation replacing the ‘drudgery’ of wage labour (Mason, 2016; Srniceck and Williams, 2015).

In this article we make a partial defence of the relevance of Marx’s writings on the labour process in *Capital* and the privileging of that terrain for understanding of contemporary economies, though not necessarily for other social relations. Nothing written a century and a half ago can be entirely timely, for example with respect to the growth of complex managerial and employment systems. However, the tools of analysis of capital-labour relations in the production process and contested terrain around control, science, technology and effort remain a vital source for critical researchers if they are prepared to simultaneously apply and innovate. In the rest of the article we explain how this task was undertaken by Braverman, subsequent labour process theory and research community with which we are associated. We argue that these efforts broadened conceptions of managerial regimes and restored a focus on labour agency, whilst at the same time utilised – with benefits and limitations – a ‘narrow’ reading of *Capital* in that it focused on the transformation of the labour process within different accumulation regimes. The second half of article is taken up by an exposition and critique of current claims that production and the labour process is no longer a significant site for the creation of value and for labour-capital contradictions. *Capital* remains a better guide to analysis and action in the present conjuncture than ‘The Fragment on Machines’.

**Part 1**

**Marx’s *Capital*– concepts, legacy, tendencies and relevance.**

In *Capital* Marx developed a theory of capitalism as a totality, with different spheres – production, circulation and reproduction – that formed an integrated but contradictory system of political economy. Marx’s theory of capitalism moved focus from market relations to production relations as core to the political economy. While waged labourers and capitalists meet in the market place as sellers and buyers, it is not through these roles as market transactors that value is produced and reproduced. Rather, value creation occurs in the ‘hidden abode’ beyond the market place, in production, where both actors are transformed into new agents of *worker* and *capitalist*. In *Capital* Marx laid out the architecture of the capitalist labour process. ‘The simple elements of the labour process are (1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work’ (Marx, 1976: 284). These elements exist in all political economies, but it is only in capitalism that production is animated for the purpose of producing exchange value, from which the capitalist derives profit. The components of the labour process are: labour; raw materials or an object of production; and tools, techniques and technology through which objects are transformed into use values, which under capitalism, must serve the purpose of generating surplus value and profit for the capitalist. ‘The production process, considered as the unity of the labour process and the process of creating value, is the process of production of commodities; considered as the unity of the labour process and the process of valorization, it is the capitalist process of production, or the capitalist form of the production of commodities’ (Marx, 1976: 304).

Animation of the components of the labour process require organisation and coordination – an authority structure to bring workers and managers together, and because workers only offer ‘labour power’ for sale (an *embodied capacity* of the living worker) there is always a control imperative (or authority/power) required to convert this potential into work that is productive of use, and more importantly exchange value. Exchange, for Marx, is unequal but hidden, as workers do not receive a full return on their effort, and the production process disguises the extraction of surplus value from workers. Due to accumulation forces within capitalism, labour power is constantly pressured to enhance its productive power, which typically divides between extending the length of the working day (time in work) to intensifying productivity in the labour process through applying science and technology, including the social technology of organising the work and workers in more productive patterns.

Marx suggested that the rise of modern industry threatened craft work. A growth of the ‘collective labourer’ and rise of detailed labour specialised in a limited range of tasks and dominated by the manufacturer and technology, meant skilled labour declined because of the productivity advantage of ‘…one-sidedly specialized workers’ (Marx, 1976: 458). He goes on to argue that, ‘Machinery does not just act as superior competitor to the worker, always to the point of making him superfluous. It is a power inimical to him, and capital proclaims this fact loudly and deliberately, as well as making use of it’ (Marx, 1976: 562). The move into modern industry reorganised the labour process and technology embodied deskilling and subordination for labour, themes that later labour process theorists, especially Braverman, developed further. With the application of science and technology, Marx suggested that production was no longer the outcome of worker’s skill and initiative, but capital, which harnessed the ‘*general* products of human development, such as mathematics, to the immediate process of production’ (Marx, 1976: 1024). This movement altered the position of labour from formal to realsubordination , which we discuss in the next section. below.

Accumulation depends on expanding controls over labour, employing technology, drive and intensification tools to generate more surplus value. Commentators have critiqued aspects of Marx’s formulations of these trends. Too tight a periodisation implies set trends, a throwing-off of one type of labour process for another more superior one, say replacing handicraft work with factory-based mechanisation. Marx’s periodisation in *Capital* was rather technologically determinist and linear – over-emphasizing the impact of technology on industrial organisation (Lazonick, 1990). He also overstated development of industry, suggesting decline of sweated trades through the development of modern industry or the move from cooperation to manufacture/modern industry as somehow inevitable, when these trends have been shown to be historically variable (Lazonick, 1990; Littler, 1982).

However, Marx’s intellectual legacy remains relevant today and concepts such as labour power, surplus value and the social division of labour are recurrent references for understanding work in contemporary capitalism. Take the issue of control. Marx noted that ‘the labour process exhibits two characteristics. First, the worker works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs…Secondly, the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the worker, its immediate producer’ (Marx, 1976: 291-2). Control is present due to ownership obligations – the capitalist owns both the labour time of the worker and the product of the labour process. However, labour time for Marx is constantly fought over in *Capital*. Marx quotes factory inspectors reporting capitalist ‘small thefts’ from workers’ meal-times and recreation times, described in reports as ‘petty pilfering’s of minutes’...’snatching a few minutes’ or ‘in the technical language of workers ‘nibbling and cribbling at meal-times’ (Marx, 1976: 352). Sports Direct, a major retailer in the UK, was recently accused of such nibbling, docking 15 minutes pay for being late by 1 minute, and detaining workers for so long with excessive and intrusive searches that minimum wage legislation was infringed (Management Today, 2015).

Of course, key concepts can still be unpacked and modified in their (re)application. Marx largely operated with a single dominant model of control, what he termed ‘despotism in the workshop’. This formulation underplays the variety of control strategies connected to the growth of management as a class of supervision, for example production management differed from personnel or what is now called HR managers, to offer competing ways of relating to and managing workers based on the embodied nature of labour power and technical, managerial expertise. Another example would be the way in which Marx highlighted the embodiment of labour as consisting of male, female and child categories, especially, and today we would extend these to the emotional and aesthetic aspects of labour, for example (Bolton, 2004; Warhurst, et al 2000).

Finally, there is the question of labour agency. In *Capital*, the labour process is structured through class struggle between labour and capital, with the role of law taken largely as an expression of class interests – with the factory acts, limitations on the length of the working day, requirements for children’s education, protective legislation towards child and female labour all examples of the legislation that came out of class struggle in production relations (Marx, 1976, 517-32). Marx reported on resistance by workers in the labour process, but ultimately displaced this to wider class struggle that would ultimately lead to the overthrow of capitalism in the so-called gravedigger thesis, whereby ‘the proletariat would be compelled to challenge and transform class society by virtue of its objective location in the system of production, although the struggle would increasingly shift to a wider terrain and be expressed through a political party’ (Thompson, 1990: 115). The passage of time has progressively weakened any claim that there is a relationship between the capitalist labour process and wider class identity, but the teleological nature of the thesis left less space for an understanding of the capacity for self-organisation and resistance in the workplace, and the development of a more specific and distinctive ‘politics of production’.

**Origins of the rediscovery of the labour process debates**

The revival of interest in a Marxist analysis of the labour process owes some debt to French and Italian writers. The former were concerned with the consequences of technological change (especially around the broad idea of automation for workers’ control in the workplace (Thompson, 1983). Gorz (1967: 126) argued that ‘the contemporary transition from mechanisation to automation will bring about a crisis in the organisation of work and the technique of domination founded upon it…Manual and intellectual work will tend to go together and cause the rebirth of humanism of work which was destroyed by Taylorism’ (quoted in Smith, 1987: 31). Italian theorists saw the development of the Fordist mass worker as equivalent to Marx’s idea of ‘abstract labour’ and as a positive step towards turning wage struggles into a more general struggle against work and wage labour itself (Baldi, 1972). Later contributors focused on workers’ struggles for autonomy and around *refusal of work*, which was much more consistent with critiques of how capital was transforming the labour process and the emergence of the mass worker. They were dismissive of demands for workers’ control mechanically produced through automation. This orientation, we argue below, was eventually abandoned by autonomists through their emphasis on the social factory. Nevertheless, what both traditions offered was an interest in Fordism and the labour process and a critique of the model of work in actual existing socialist societies – most especially the Soviet models, where there was a lack of workers control and a view of technology (and the means of production) as neutral – and not, as Marx had argued, saturated with capitalist social relations, hierarchy and division of labour between mental and manual workers (Sohn-Rethel, 1998).

However, the major contribution to the explosion of interest in Marx’s understanding of the labour process goes to Harry Braverman, who’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) ignited interest across the social sciences (and humanities) especially among radical economists, labour historians, industrial relations writers and sociologists of work. We have elsewhere catalogued the reaction of writers to Braverman’s reading of Marx and evaluated what had been taken forward, left behind and developed from Braverman’s book (Thompson and Smith 2009; Smith 2015). Braverman followed *Capital* in emphasizing production not market relations, and with this labour power, technology, and the reserve army of labour. But he added a thesis on skill bifurcation between management (and allied technical cadre) and a mass of unskilled workers, through an extended discussion on the role of Taylorism and Scientific Management, which, like Marx’s discussion of the work of Andrew Ure or Babbage in *Capital*, can be seen as an *ideal* reading to Taylor’s work, rather than examining the actual diffusion of Taylor’s practice across American industry and beyond (Merkle, 1980; Nelson, 1980; Littler, 1982; Lazonick, 1990). There is some continuity with Marx, as Braverman assumes a certain periodisation in the development of the labour process, here with Taylorism very much the apex management control system.

Though Braverman’s concern with skill and scientific management has been most critiqued for its focus on a narrow range of phenomena, it did stimulate an important line of inquiry around science and technology. This saw writers like Cooley (1976, 1980) and Noble (1979) expanding Marx’s idea of the embodiment of capitalist rationality within the design of technology in capitalism. For them the idea that fixed capital is neutral, and that design is for the general good, ignored the context of design, which incorporated capitalist social relations of production within the forces of production. Braverman was right to focus on management in the workplace, but connecting work to capitalism as political economy is also critically important, and working within an implicitly American context meant this was not always evident in Braverman. He nevertheless provides key points for developing empirically-orientated labour process writing, an engagement with the objective materialism of capitalism that goes back to *Capital*, which offered a rich and concrete account of the labour process in particular industries (cotton, wool, potteries, bread and match making etc.) and occupations, albeit based on secondary analysis from new professions of factory inspectors, parliamentary reports and medical doctors.

**The development of labour process theory – post-Braverman**

The positive of the post-Braverman debate has been workplace-bounded research on working in a whole range of industrial sectors. These detailed case studies of workplaces offer rich accounts of the actuality of work and subjectively lived experience of capitalist social relations for workers and managers. These offered, in essence, a control – resistance - consent model of labour processes – where all management control strategies produce worker resistance tactics and strategies (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). This focus on class *at work* went beyond what had been in the late 1960s and early ‘70s a concern with class as a connection between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ components within Marxist debates about ‘degrees’ of class consciousness, which were rightly abandoned as largely dead-ends. Our argument is that the narrowing of the focus away from the idea of the working class as gravedigger and towards the diverse ways in which labour agency is executed in real labour processes, actually emerges from the nature of labour power, and capitalist labour process, with its structured antagonism creating different ways in which workers exact autonomy and resistance in diverse contexts (Edwards, 1986). This research unites labour market and labour process interactions, and is both narrower, and broader, highlighting as it does multiple of points of resistance in the workplace.

Though this ‘narrower’ reading of *Capital* had many positives, a focus on the workplace and the dynamics of skill loss and control strategies tended to lose touch with a wider connection to political economy. A key writer trying to reconnect the two is Michael Burawoy (1979; 1985), who theorised typologies of production regimes, and was systematic in connecting the micro analysis of work (informed through rich, direct ethnographic accounts of working) with macro political economy and state regimes – creating a politics of production, with the workplace at its centre. What Burawoy did through a theoretical and empirical approach was to show the role of managerial agency and the variety of labour control regimes operating under specific socio-economic conditions. But his concept of factory regime was too broadly formulated – identifying long historical periods in which workplace social relations were explained by a particular regime of accumulation. It thus suffered from an absence of meso level or intermediary concepts that could link regimes of accumulation to workplace dynamics. Examples of more recent attempts to create more active linkages between political economy and workplace relations can be found in Thompson’s (2003, 2013) work on ‘disconnected capitalism’, which traces the negative impact of financialization on outcomes for labour in the workplace (see later); Smith’s (Smith, 2003; Liu and Smith, 2016) analysis of China’s emerging global labour systems and worker mobility, or Taylor et al’s (2015) work on global value/supply chains and the role of worker agency. Taken together, the intent of such recent work has been to identify new forms of accumulation within the full circuits of capital, whilst maintaining links to value extraction and labour agency within production. In this writing there is a recognition of the value of labour process research, inspired by Marx’s *Capital*. As we discuss in the following sections, this comes into partial conflict with new thinking about the nature of value, forms of capitalism and the material and immaterial nature of labour produced by systemic shifts in technological foundations of capitalist society created by the internet and social networking.

**Part 2[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**Capital and labour transformed?**

Cognitive capitalism theory (CCT) is a successor to (largely discredited) conceptions of post-Fordist accumulation regimes. Though influenced by knowledge economy and informational capitalism perspectives, the specific derivation is from a combination of Italian (post) operaismo[[2]](#endnote-2) and French regulation school influences (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2009; Vercellone, 2007; Moulier-Boutang, 2012; and see Turchetto, 2009; Jeon, 2009 and Boffo, 2012 for lineage and variations).

The core of the theory is that CC is a third type of capitalism (after mercantile, industrial) with a distinctive system of accumulation based on knowledge value (Moulier Boutang, 2012: 57). A new system of accumulation is characterised by a profound transformation of the antagonistic relation of capital and labour, and the conflicts that derive from it. Value extraction is based on knowledge that cannot be measured and is produced by the ‘general intellect’ through socially cooperative labour or outside the workplace in the ‘commons’ (notably through the web and on-line communities) or by biopolitical labour in the production of social life itself (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Mason, 2016). Because of an abundance of use-values and minimal cost of reproduction, scarcity disappears other than that of time and attention (Moulier Boutang, 2012: 66/72), whilst information ‘corrodes value’ in general and the price mechanism for digital goods in particular (Mason, 2016: 142-3). Any account of value based on labour time in production, material production or commodity-producing labour is held to be in crisis.

CC, with its increase in abstract knowledge and intellectual powers in production is associated with ‘a radical change of the subsumption of labour to capital and indicates a third stage of the division of labour’ (Vercellone, 2007: 15). This tradition is also characterised by seeking to identify an emblematic figure of labour based on a specific ‘class composition’. In the contemporary period, it is immaterial labour; defined variously as that which is cerebral, affective, communicative or relational, or that which contributes to the informational or cultural content of a commodity. As a result, there is a (qualitative) hegemony of intellectual labour or ‘diffuse intellectuality’.

Vercellone frames this change by using Marx’s distinction between formal and real subordination of labour.. Marx made this distinction to emphasise the ways in which capital’s use of machinery and science in what was then the modern factory enables new and more powerful mechanisms of control and value extraction, overcoming what was previously just the general control of the employer that lacked the means to affect the actual mode of working (Marx, 1976: 1011). Thus, three stages of the division of labour are envisaged by Vercellone: formal subsumption of labour in the early factory system, real subsumption beginning in the industrial revolution and reaching its peak in the standardised mass production and ‘Smithian’ division of labour of the Fordist era, and finally the general intellect under CC in which real subsumption is reversed. Purely physical labour power is consigned to the Fordist and Taylorist era of industrial capitalism. Unlike that era, cognition and conception are now no longer appropriated by capital, and living labour is no longer incorporated into science and machinery (Vercellone, 2007, 16).

To the extent that any of these theorists refer concretely to the organisation of work - specialisation, standardisation, codification and managerial interest in individual performance are all said to be decreasing (Moulier Boutang, 2012, 54 and 65). Autonomous labour is ‘outside measurement’ and beyond management (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 6). As for any engagement with ideas of managerial hierarchy or the firm, it is to largely repeat post-Fordist and mainstream business notions of the horizontalization of corporate forms and networks displacing markets and hierarchies and prefiguring a postcapitalist future, except with an emphasis on digitalization (Moulier Boutang: 61-5; Mason, 2016: xix).

Despite reference to capitalism in general, much of the argument rests on interpretations of developments within digital industries: ‘the new information technologies, of which the digital, the computer, and the Internet are emblematic in the same way in which the coal mine, the steam engine, the loom and the railroad were emblematic of industrial capitalism’ (Moulier Boutang, 2012: 57). Mason emphasises the growth of ‘non-market production: horizontally distributed peer-production networks, that are not centrally managed, producing goods that are either completely free, or – which being Open Source – have very limited commercial value’, with Wikipedia as the primary example (2016: 143).

Whereas the concept of formal and real subordination was developed by Marx through his analysis of the labour process in Volume One of *Capital*, the general intellect is taken from *The Grundrisse* and in particular a series of unfinished notes – ‘The Fragment on Machines’. Here it is envisaged that at some time in the future knowledge developed through science and technology will become the source of real wealth rather than labour expended in production. This would mark the possibility of a transition to communism. For CCT that time has arrived (see Vercellone, 2007: 15). However, there is a partial critique of the contradictions of cognitive or info capitalism. This emphasises the efforts by capital to offset the losses incurred in the law of value in production by enforcing it elsewhere. Capital uses its monopoly position in networks to manufacture scarcity through the extraction of rents based largely on intellectual property (see Vercellone, 2007: 33-34), or expropriates value produced in the wider society from the ‘general intellect’. The distinction between profit and rent collapses and capital becomes purely ‘parasitic’ (see Boffo, 2012: 261).

**Critique 1: the subordination of labour**

A number of underlying claims associated with the hegemony of the general intellect are clearly at odds with trends in the labour market. Low paid, low skill service jobs have been the engine of growth and there is extensive evidence of under-employment and a decline in graduate-level jobs (CIPD 2015). The best that could be said about job growth is a polarisation, with increases in professional and IT work partially offsetting the low-wage service jobs. Given the focus of this article, we want to concentrate on the labour process dimension and in particular claims concerning the division of labour. Assertions of spontaneous social cooperation and autonomy bear little relationship to workplace research. Any (uneven) increase in decision latitude over tasks is constrained by decline in employee voice mechanisms’, limited wider organisational involvement and higher levels of work intensity (Findlay and Thompson, forthcoming). As developments from call centres, to Amazon warehouses and retail indicates, labour time remains a fundamental focus of managerial attention. Indeed, the use of tracking and monitoring software provides tools that FW Taylor could only have dreamed of.

Such trends are also connected to a wider increase in performance management in large organisations. In the private sector, it is primarily linked to cascading and often punitive targets, aided in many cases by electronic monitoring and tighter work flow (Taylor, 2013: pp. 46-7). What has become fashionably known as knowledge management (KM) is also part of enhanced performance exposure. KM is particularly significant in knowledge-intensive industries, the supposed heartland of creative and cooperative labour. Of course these characteristics *are* present, but alongside the use of IT systems to capture, convert and codify the tacit knowledge of expert labour in order to speed up the innovation or molecule to market process (McKinlay, 2005).

The use of IT systems to capture tacit knowledge is now part of a widespread recognition of the emergence of digital or knowledge-based Taylorism that includes the capacity of artificial intelligence to incorporate living labour into machine systems. Brown et al (2011) refer to digital Taylorism as the extraction, codification and digitalisation of knowledge into software prescripts and working knowledge. In manufacturing this is driven by the development of engineering systems that allow global operating companies to ‘calculate, to compare and to standardise processes worldwide’ (Westkämpfer, 2007: 6).

Finally, the misapprehension of the present is sustained by a misreading of the past – notably the designation of the ‘industrial stage’ of capitalism as based on physical labour, ‘devoid of any intellectual or creative quality’ (Vercellone 2007: 24). As Marx (1976: 270) noted, labour power is always an ‘aggregate of those physical and mental qualities’. Not only were there significant numbers of design, engineering or other conceptual jobs under Fordism, those involved primarily in execution still contained tacit knowledge that employers are now seeking to identify and leverage (Warhurst and Thompson, 2006).

**Critique 2: Actually existing capital**

We are told little or nothing about how capital is actually organised in companies or value chains, or how money is made through particular business models. Of equal importance, CCT overestimates the extent to which capitalism is defined and dominated by internet-based companies. If we look at data about which industries and firms dominate the global economy we find that though Apple is currently the most profitable company in the world, it is far from the largest either by revenue or capitalisation and many of the other ‘exemplary’ internet firms are marginal. Global capitalism is dominated by energy, finance and telecoms/utilities and sometimes retail or tobacco. If anyone examines how Exxon Mobil, Wal-Mart or Toyota makes its money, it does offer a major corrective to the CCT narrative of immaterial production and zero cost reproduction at the heart of economic value. The global dimension and the dynamics of value chains are also a key consideration as cost control through the supply chain (Froud et al 2014) and specifically, very low direct labour costs in suppliers (Cleland 2014) are key factors in business models. In his critique of Mason, Fuchs (2016: 232) refutes claims that value has collapsed in the digital sector, pointing to profits made on the basis of product innovation, exploitation of direct and indirect labour and (most significantly) targeted advertising. Capital can and does adapt to technological change and find new ways to monetise and monopolise, precisely in those social media and Web 2.0 sectors (Tyfield, 2015). The focus on networks as the central coordinating mechanism is little better than fantasy economics. A key trend across all sectors is the concentration of capital. In contrast to the daydreams of global commons, concentration is particularly marked in virtual and vertical integration internet-based or new media (Fitzgerald, 2015; Keen, 2014). Peer production and genuine sharing economy projects exist in specialist niches, whilst digital platforms such as Uber and Air B&B develop hierarchical business models, utilise flexible (self) employment and seek to dominate more traditional markets. It is telling that is hard to find any substantive, collaborative peer production example in Mason other than Wikipedia. The power and resilience of capital is obscured by designating it as purely parasitic and this formulation evades any attempt to analyse its actual workings. It is true that in some sectors, intellectual property is a source of value capture, but rent-seeking through monopoly is not a new feature of capitalism and nor does it exhaust how firms use their power in markets and value chains.

**Critique 3: Value inside and outside production**

Commentators influenced by autonomism defend the labour theory of value (LTV) or a version of it, but not as envisaged in *Capital*: ‘the Autonomist perspective emphasizes the idea that “labour”, understood as value-producing activity, has moved outside the workplace and employment relationship, and so is no longer under the direct control of management’ (Böhm and Land, 2012: 232-3). For this reason, they argue that, labour process theorycan no longer argue for a ‘privileging’ of the labour process as site of analysis within the capitalist circuit of production (2012: 218). In contrast, we do not seek to defend the LTV – past or present – but do argue that the labour process remains a central site both for the creation and extraction of value[[3]](#endnote-3). The organisation and productivity of labour are often the focal point of managerial intervention to control costs within corporate operating profit margins and favourable cost ratios. Such interventions are part of complex struggles over claims to the same limited value added fund between lead firms and suppliers, and between labour and capital across and within those firms (Froud et al 2014).

However, research on the rise of finance-dominated regimes of accumulation shows that there has indeed been shifts in the circuits of capital (Stockhammer, 2008; Thompson, 2013). Pressures to meet capital market requirements and service debt influence non-financial firms to focus on leveraging value through financial extractions and assets compared to the rate of return on manufacturing and operational investment. Shareholder value pressures involve and impact on the labour process through ‘taking labour out’ via headcount reduction, outsourcing and supply chain harmonization; reducing labour share through downward pressure on rewards; and working labour harder through tightened performance management, cascading financial controls and work intensification (Cushen and Thompson, 2016)

Nor do these observations exhaust the range of new value creating practices. Willmott (2010) makes an effective case for a post-Marxian emphasis on the sphere of circulation. In particular, he emphasises another aspect of financialization – the monetization of intangible assets or ‘symbolic artefacts’, notably brand equity. Willmott, along with others influenced by Arvidsson’s (2006) work (Fuchs, 2016) highlights the participation of unwaged user-consumers in the creation of these assets, alongside the labour of waged workers such as product developers, brand managers, advertising specialists and stylists. User consumers or prosumers make their contribution by making assessments of products and services on Web 2.0 sites such as Facebook, Trip Advisor and You Tube.

There can be no doubt that such ‘shadow work’ contributes indirectly to value production in some sectors. The problem with the wider claims is their over-extended nature. This takes a number of forms, including exaggerating the number of industries where user-consumers play a significant role and over-estimating its contribution in value terms. Further unwarranted extension comes from applying the ‘value in the totality of social life’ perspective to encompass all activities that reproduce labour power such as housework and education (Böhm and Land, 2012: 226) and seemingly all consumption activities ‘beyond the internet’ (Fuchs 2016: 236). Fuchs includes as ‘productive consumption’ deleting spam, installing software updates, working on the train, time spent on online dating platforms, self-assemblage of IKEA furniture and using ATMs and self-service bars in restaurants. Aside from the difficulty of demonstrating direct or measurable links to value production, neither reproduction nor much of consumption practices are new, therefore telling us little or nothing about contemporary capitalism.

**Critique 4: Labour agency and (not) reinventing the gravedigger thesis**

As we indicated earlier, there have been two versions of a politics of production: the gravedigger thesis and the labour process tradition of linking mobilization to more contingent forms of workplace resistance and recalcitrance. The versions of cognitive or post-capitalist political economy examined in this article tend to shift the graveyard, whilst rethinking the digger. Whereas the ‘struggle against work’ once meant challenging capital inside the workplace, now that struggle is said to have moved outside. Rationales for a politics of postcapitalism and post-work rest on extremely pessimistic readings of the struggles of waged workers. In recent accounts from Mason (2016) and Srnicek and Williams (2015) the *working* class (in both developed and developing economies) is presented as fragmented, divided and in thrall to consumption and debt, whilst the labour movement is largely defeated, demoralised and sclerotic.

For most influenced by such perspectives, this does not mean abandonment of the gravedigger thesis. The operaismo tradition has moved from the mass worker to the socialised worker and more recently the ‘multitude’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Mason is sympathetic to the latter formulation and explicitly uses the term gravedigger to identify a ‘new social force’ and historical ‘agent of change’ based on the ‘educated and networked human beings’ (2016: xvii, 212). Their battlefield is ‘all aspects of society’ and evidence can be found in city squares and streets across the globe. Fuchs (2016) rightly describes these views as naïve. The rich and powerful are also (better) networked and a collection of heterogeneous struggles does not add up to an agency with any significant degree of common interests or identities. Unfortunately, the latter point also applied to Fuchs’s own gravedigger, whereby a global collective worker is created because ‘consumers and users have become part of the working class’ (2016: 137).

Capital and the production process do not produce a social force that can act as a universal liberating class. However, the capitalist labour process does continue to produce many of the conditions that shape and stimulate a diversity of labour struggles and forms of organisation. Free from the gravedigger thesis and a conflation between the labour movement and the movements of labour, it is possible to have a much more realistic appreciation of that diversity of labour agency and more grounded understanding of how those grievances can be mobilised and connect to wider struggles and social movements.

**Concluding comments**

We have argued that whilst there has been changes in the circuits of capital and the character of labour, claims that ‘value production shifts from the material production of tangible commodities to the immaterial production of social relationships, knowledge and affect’ (Böhm and Land, 2012: 224), are inconsistent with what is happening with actually existing capital and labour. In *Capital’s* treatment of the labour process, Marx combines brilliant conceptual insights with a sustained empirical observation that lays bare the ideological distortions of contemporary economists and other commentators. It is hard to make an empirically-based critique of autonomist and related perspectives. This is not for want of available counter evidence, but because for such perspectives a normative orientation is dominant and there is a ‘cavalier attitude’ to the validity of facts and numbers (Jeon 2010: 3). Moulier Boutang (2012: 54, 60), for example, is aware of challenges to his claims, but is dismissive of ‘the empirical approach’, taking refuge (with others) in supposedly ‘exemplary industries’ or ‘paradigmatic work’.

When it is not driven solely by their own political desires, some of the tendency towards excessive speculation derives, as indicated earlier, from reliance on ‘The Fragment on Machines’*.* Pitts (2015) notes that in his claims such as automation reduces necessary labour to an amount so small that work would become optional, Mason represents ‘peak Fragment’ and inherits its weaknesses around value and labour. A series of short, speculative notes constituting a ‘thought experiment’ (Mason, 2015: 188), the *Fragment* has been the basis of ‘endless as well as obscure exegeses’ (Turchetto, 2008: 306). For this reason, it (and other elements of the *Grundrisse*) should be treated with care and read in context (Choonara, 2015). Whatever the validity of Marx’s arguments about the development of science, technology and automation as a basis for a transition to a post-capitalist future, it is clear that we are far from this point. As we have shown, not only is much of value capture taking place in traditional ways and through non-digital sectors, capital has been extremely successful in finding new ways to valorise new ICTs and social media, both within and outside the labour process. In this sense, Marx’s emphasis on the incessant expansion of the commodity form under capitalism is still pertinent.

Without this recognition, earlier claims from Mason that information ‘corrodes value’ or ‘dissolve markets and ownership’ (Mason 2016) or that we have moved to an era of the ‘rule of science’ (Moulier Boutang 2012: 54) are susceptible to accusations of technological determinism and utopianism (Fuchs, 2016: 237; Pitts, 2015). Whichever of these interpretations is dominant, the arguments attribute to (Info) technology transformative powers that it does not and cannot independently possess. In abandoning Marx’s critique of the social character of science and technology and the consequences for the division of labour, a key aspect of the radical legacy of *Capital* is wrongly consigned to history.

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**Endnotes**

1. Some sections of Part 2 draw on Paul Thompson and Kendra Broken, ‘Kognitiver Kapitalismus. Wider Eine Fragfwürdige Diagnose, West End, Frankfurt: IFS. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Operaismo refers to an intellectual and political tradition that formed in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s and whose contemporary prominence is associated largely with the various works of Hardt and Negri. Post-operaismo broadly refers to the development of this tradition in a new era after Fordism and the mass worker. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Mazzucato and Shipman (2014) for a discussion of the dynamics of value creation, transfer, extraction and destruction. Though not labour-oriented, the analysis shares with other radical political economy perspectives a focus on struggles over value as it actually manifests in company accounts. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)