

Commodification in contemporary capitalism: A note toward a political economy of bodies-under-work

My PhD thesis is concerned with the production of politics in light of developments in the political economy of work, and the project situates itself within the problematic of the human cost of purportedly new forms of labour. The thesis attempts to make sense of the production of politics in work by drawing together concepts of so-called contemporary work: namely, aesthetic, affective, emotional and immaterial labour. At this stage, I'm working on concepts and methods that can engage these types of labour within this problematic. Although I'm interested in the processes of the commodification of qualities of the body, I want to emphasise my concern regarding how we might understand how the demands of certain kinds of work impact upon the character of political agency. So here I'll explore the concept of body work and examine how it might help me understand how the forms of work that these other concepts attempt to describe might form mechanisms for the production of political subjectivities.

I regard the concept of body work as constituted of three more or less interrelated factors: one, work on other bodies. Two, work on one's own body. Three, as banal as it first appears, work performed by the body. All of these factors of the concept of body work can be brought to bear upon the politics of work today and all of them concern the affective, aesthetic, and emotional abilities and capabilities of bodies. But it is this third, apparently banal factor that interests me most and it is this factor that has the greatest potential for the construction of a conceptual matrix that can help us understand what the work, as conceptualized in aesthetic, affective, emotional, immaterial labour, does *to* us. That is, what are the politics of doing work that requires us to be or become a certain type of subject?

The body has always been a key concern in the critique of capitalism. Marx was not ignorant of the body; the worker in "work does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop his physical energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind."¹ I'll also argue later that Marx provides us with an important theory with which to examine bodies-under-capitalism. But it appears that now the body, and all its impalpable and intimate qualities, is more central than ever before to our enquiries. In this way, the most banal factor of the concept of body work acts as an entry point to questions that follow from a history of philosophy and the opposition between idealist and materialist predications of the subject. I'm not going to dwell on the

¹ Marx tr. Milligan *Paris Manuscripts* 74

critique of the philosophical possibility of 'the subject's irreducible intendedness towards the object' (Spivak) but simply state that the concept of body work leads us anew to the most important question of political economy – the question of value. The concept of body work addresses itself to the question of value and I'd like to sketch this out through an historical materialist approach to a set of questions that I've come to following my inability devise convincing and comprehensive responses to first-order questions such as "what is affect?" and "what are the qualities of bodies?", but I hope this enquiry speaks to the growing prominence of these concerns and that they might offer a jumping-off point in addressing these more fundamental questions.

Why are we talking about the body? Why are we talking about affect? The argument I'm going to make is that there is something about the way economies are operating and the way that labour is managed and organised in work that forces us think about these impalpable properties of the body. Forms of the organisation of work force us to consider properties of bodies in terms of value, therefore I perform another methodological partition of the concept of body work, this time upon the banal factor of all work is performed by bodies, highlighting the body's intangible qualities. How do these impalpable and intimate qualities of the body-under-work produce value?

Call-centre work offers a fruitful empirical hook for this question, but I'm not going to retread all the work done on call-centre work today. But I'll just say this: despite great differences in the organisation of work in different call centres, taking both quantitative measures regarding the intensity of work and qualitative measures regarding the compulsion of a certain character of interactions, we can say generally that work which mobilizes the impalpable qualities of bodies is organised in such a way so that *more of these qualities come to have the potential to create exchange-values, that the possibility of this form of value-production follows from the subject-character of the object of labour – a person – necessarily broadening our conceptualization of labour-power, and that it is this subjective character of a factor of the labour process which extends the problematic of the human cost of work-under-capitalism.*

The potential for praxis comes under siege in the forms of work that mobilize the intimate qualities of the labouring subject. Of course, the rate across the working day and the intensity at which these qualities are mobilized differ extremely. At one end of the spectrum, the effects of work upon the subject is akin to factory labour – the worker, while waiting alert for

the beep in the headset that signifies “action required”, must send their brain on holiday. The labour activity then demanded may be routine and mundane, or it may be complex, requiring the active engagement of emotional self-management, focused attention on the production of an affective relation. When this complexity is coupled with a high-rate of intensity across the working day we have the other end of this spectrum. Notwithstanding, work like this constitutes an assemblage of power relations that demand one becomes a (certain kind of) subject.

In attempting to understand this in terms of the cost of work upon the subject it is important to avoid notions of a self prior to capital and the reproduction of the epistemological problems associated with affective, emotional and immaterial labour's categorisation of work as a deployment of capacities associated with a “private sphere” of life. If we regard this banal factor of the concept of body work as itself being composed of factors that interact dialectically, as reciprocal relations rather than a relation of cause and effect, we can subvert this public/private, inside/outside, productive labour/reproduction of labour paradox. The productivity of labour, that is the valorization and commodification of impalpable properties of the body, is contingent upon a self-management/construction of the body and the management/construction of the body by something Other. These two apparently distinct modes of the production of bodies are in fact relational aspects of the same process of the subsumption of bodies under the power relations of wage-labour and worker resistance to command. Thus, this aspect of the body under wage-labour, the very subjectification of the subject does not appear as a construction or product of a mode of life which contains a distinction between work and non-work. Rather, the body appears to be a site of conflict amidst the labour/capital antagonism, and appears as this in such a way as to invite speculations on Gramscian notions of philosophical and practical hegemony.

But how else might we go about understanding the politics of work following this drawing together the centrality of qualities of bodies in these forms of value-production and the relational character of the production of political subjectivities in work? And how might we do so within an examination of the human cost of work-under-capitalism? I propose that in order to capture the relationality of the production of self in work in a way that is considerate to apparatuses of domination and practices of resistance we must look to Marx's theory of alienation. However, we must first reconfigure the theory of alienation in a way that is sympathetic to the ongoing project of understanding bodies-under-work.