

Historical materialist approaches to concepts: affect, labour and hegemony

In light of political economic developments since 1970 my research analyses labour to examine the processes that produce politics. Power, subjectivity, economic-value, consumption, culture, and every-day life are fundamental to political life, and these concepts all interact within labour. My project is to examine new forms or modes of labour, and I got the idea by thinking about Marx's theory of alienation. If there are ways of working that don't produce commodities that we can touch or hold, how can we talk about their alienation or the alienation of the worker who produces them? Turning this around, I've come to the idea that I should examine the division of labour in the new forms of work – that is the locus of intellectual control over the labour process – the power-relations in work, also to configure the nature of economic-value production in these forms of labour, and to assess the role of subjectivity in the labour-process and examine the processes that contribute to its formation. And to do all this in an effort to rethink this Marxist theory of alienation, hoping to gain some new insight into the politics of work and the production of life.

Now, there is a hatful of concepts and processes, interrelations and crossovers between these varied but intrinsically linked investigations. And when I think about my method, I can't help but think about Alfredo Pareto's profound summary on the difficulties in the presentation of Historical Materialist investigations.

With words that appear like bats: one can see in them both birds and mice.

- Vilfredo Pareto on Marx

Bertell Ollman suggests that this lexical problem of representation is 'the most formidable hurdle facing readers of Marx'. But don't think I'm alone in thinking that this historical materialist approach to concepts is actually its greatest contribution to philosophy. Perhaps the defining quality of things and the interrelations between them is that they are constantly changing. I'd suggest that the fluidity and transience of concept-definitions is both a necessary and inevitable consequence of our attempts at using words to describe things and their interrelations. In this way, historical materialism writes very few prescriptions, except perhaps that, like the world it seeks to understand, it has been subject to considerable development.

I think that, as an epistemological concern, the notion that social relations alter and develop is not contingent on the particular units of analysis, concepts, or categories that we choose to study but rather that the attempt to understand the significance of these concepts and the material phenomena often shapes those concepts and categories. That is, to understand something, we must first give it a name, a concept-label, and this name already consists of a notion of the object that we are attempting to understand. Therefore we should probably expect this notion to alter as we study it further. More

importantly, and more specifically to historical materialism, the method is to consider the concept in relation to other concepts, and it is in this movement of knowledge that our bird/mouse chimera appears. For example, affect, when viewed from the perspective of apparently autonomous collective and anti-capitalist action, appears as a social force with a revolutionary potential; as the inter-subjective glue which binds a multiplicity of subjects to a common aim. Perhaps, it may seem that notions of hegemony are dead. However, when affect is viewed from the perspective of labour something very different appears.

Affective labour is the labour of the creation and manipulation of affects. When an advertising executive or flight attendant participates in their labour process, they produce a commodity. However, the difference is that the commodity they produce is an as yet unknown concatenation of *their* articulation of affect, the consumer's affective response and subsequent reproduction of the informational and affective content of the commodity. With these new forms of labour, affect itself appears to be becoming subsumed under capitalist norms of accumulation. What are the consequences to any notion of a subjectivity which is autonomous from capitalistic norms when a key component of that subjectivity – its ability to create and manipulate affect – is subsumed under the power-relations of labour under capitalism? Can we propose that new forms of affective production form a key function within the ideological *dispositifs* which produce and reproduce contemporary capitalism? How, methodologically, do we square the circle of these new forms of domination in work with new forms of resistance?