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# The New 'Hidden Abode': Reflections on Value and Labour in the New Economy

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## **Abstract**

This paper engages with the works of Autonomist Marxists, such as Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson, who have argued that the so-called 'new economy', which is characterized by a new importance of immaterial labour, knowledge and processes of consumption, gives rise to a new law of value and changed labour relations in what they call the 'social factory'. While we see a lot of value in this emerging body of literature – particularly in terms of its potential for critiquing relatively narrow debates in critical organization and management studies – this paper critiques the highly optimistic analyses put forward by Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson, especially with regard to their claims for a new autonomy and freedom of labour emerging out of the 'new economy'. We counter these claims by showing how in contemporary capitalism, despite the discourses of autonomy and freedom, labour is continuously subjected to control, measurement and governance.

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## Introduction

In 2000, Roy Jacques wrote of the 'curious paradox' that 'despite having defined its role as value maximisation, at no point in its history has managerialist writing inquired into what value is or how it is created' (Jacques, 2000: 199). In March of the same year, Arthur Andersen ran seminar series on the 'new economy' in Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen. Contrary to Jacques' suggestion that managerialists were not concerned with 'what value is or how it is created', these were the very questions that Arthur Andersen executives, and managerialist pundits like Kevin Kelley and Jonas Ridderstråle, were grappling with. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that Andersen were, at the time, auditors for Enron, the Texas based energy company that seemed to have discovered a modern day form of alchemy where money could be created from thin air. Of course, it eventually transpired that the success of this paradigm of the 'new economy' had a rather more prosaic explanation in the form of fraudulent accounting practices. The subsequent scandal, which broke in 2001, brought both companies down (Rippin and Fleming, 2007). Combined with the turbulence of the 'dot-com bubble' bursting in 2000, and the bankruptcy (also involving fraudulent accounting) of WorldCom in 2002, these events signified a peak in the discourse of a 'new economy' (De Cock et al, 2001; 2005).

Jacques' (2000) call for a new theory of value, commensurate with the changing political-economic realities of knowledge-based capitalism, was echoed by a host of management gurus, politicians and think tanks, but it was not only the managerialists who were proclaiming a fundamental change in capitalism during the 1990s and 2000s. Coming from a diametrically opposed political position, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Empire* (also 2000) managed that rare feat of becoming an academic bestseller and landing on the coffee tables of the chattering classes (Vulliamy, 2001). Improvising on alchemical themes also popularized in 1999 by managerialist writer Charles Leadbeater in *Living on Thin Air*, Hardt and Negri suggested that the 'old economy' had undergone a process of 'postmodernization' or 'informatization' so that the old models of production had been revolutionized and new concepts of labour were required to appreciate these changes. Writing in the tradition of Italian Workerism, or *Operaismo*, and Autonomist Marxism (Wright, 2002), Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) suggest that today's labour has been so completely transformed that it has become 'immaterial', meaning that the delivery of services, the creation of symbolic values associated with commodities, and communication had become the most central pillars of economic and social life. This concept of immaterial labour provides the basis for Hardt and Negri's development of the idea of 'real subsumption' whereby capital and social life are no longer clearly separable and value production shifts from the material production of tangible commodities to the immaterial production of social relationships, knowledge and affect.

While Hardt and Negri have been critiqued from a variety of angles (Boron, 2005; Passavant and Dean, 2003), there has been growing interest in their arguments in critical organization and management studies (Mandarini, 2005; Shukaitis, 2008). In this paper we particularly focus on the work of Adam Arvidsson (2006, 2007, 2009) who has largely embraced Hardt and Negri's work to suggest that the dominance of the marketing, brands and media culture has led to the production of new subjectivities engaging in active processes of 'symbolic consumption'. While he is clearly critical of the capitalist fetishization of marketing and brands, Arvidsson (2009) sees in these creative acts of symbolic consumption possibilities for the creation of new values, and, ultimately, the creation of what he calls a new 'ethical economy'. This implies that today's capitalist 'new economy' renders possible the emergence of 'a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism

(Hardt and Negri, 2000: 294), a new kind of autonomy and freedom of labour and work. This is a grand ethical and political claim, which makes a detailed study of the theoretical and analytical framework put forward by these Autonomist Marxists necessary.

Part of this hope for a new free society, expressed by Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson, is their claim that a significant portion of today's labour is 'free' in the double sense that it is both relatively autonomous and unpaid (Arvidsson, 2006: 130; Terranova, 2004), which directly challenges Marx's (1976) 'labour theory of value'. This, then, opens up the following questions, which go to the heart of how we conceptualize labour, work and value production in capitalism. If there is no pay for labour, then how can there be exploitation? Equally, if labour is relatively autonomous, how can managers command and control it? We will explore these questions by re-reading Marx's conceptions of free labour and his labour theory of value. We will argue that, despite the capitalist transformations identified by Autonomist Marxists, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater and remain alert to the way Marx's analysis of capitalist value production can still be productively applied to a critique of today's so-called 'new economy'.

The analyses put forward by Autonomist Marxists have obvious and important implications for critical organization and management studies, although Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson seem often unaware of the relevance of the debates in our field. We will hence start this paper by broadly outlining these debates; specifically the work that has been done in labour process theory (LPT) and Foucauldian studies of organization and management. We will then discuss in quite some detail the theses on the transformations of value and labour put forward by Hardt and Negri as well as Arvidsson. As mentioned above, an important aspect of their theses is the claim that the new realities of value production in the 'new economy' render labour more autonomous and immeasurable. We will spend the second half of the paper to interrogate this claim from a variety of angles.

### ***Value in Organization and Management Studies***

In the fields of critical organization and management studies and sociology of work managerialist notions of value have been critiqued for at least the past three decades. Building on the work of Braverman (1974), Burawoy (1982) and others, it has particularly been labour process theorists (see, e.g., Smith, Knights and Willmott, 1991; Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1994) who have been discussing the specificities of the creation of value and surplus value in the labour process (see also Jaros, 2004, 2005; Böhm, 2006). While bearing in mind the manifold conceptual differences within labour process theory (LPT), it is probably fair to say that the bulk of research in this field has concentrated on the struggles between capital and labour in the capitalist workplace, which, according to Thompson's (1990) 'core labour process theory', should be seen at the heart of (surplus) value production in capitalism. Thompson and Smith, for example, write that 'management must, under competitive, standardizing, and differentiating conditions, seek to release and realize productive labor from living labor power' (2001: 61). For Marx (1976), this is essentially how value is produced. What LPT adds to Marx's analysis is to highlight the task of management to continuously make the labour process more effective and efficient in order to squeeze more value out of living labour power:

LPT therefore prioritizes the capital-labor relationship as a focus for analysis of work and employment relations; sees the transformation of the labor process and labor power as central to capital accumulation; argues that there is a control imperative arising from the need to reduce indeterminacy; and that such dynamics and potentially divergent interests generate the conditions for resistance, compliance, and consent. (Warhurst et al., 2008: 98)

What particularly interest us in this outline of the 'core' of labour process theory (cf. Thompson, 1990) is the explicit focus on the continuous 'transformation of the labor process and labor power', which, in our view, is precisely the starting point for writers such as Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004)

and Arvidsson (2006) who emphasize the changing nature of work in today's so-called 'new economy'.

While Warhurst and his colleagues are keen to point to the ever changing nature of the labour process, their key critique of the 'new economy' discourse is that 'there has been a continual tendency to present service work as somehow involving a break with one or more of the features of the capitalist labor process. Yet, for LPT in principle', they argue, 'these features apply equally to manufacturing or services, though they may be manifested in different ways' (Warhurst et al., 2008: 98-99). In other words, for LPT scholars, today's capitalist labour relations are characterized by both change and stasis. While, on the one hand, the labour process and its control mechanisms are continuously being reformed and adjusted, LPT maintains, on the other hand, that the labour that is going on in the capitalist workplace occupies a central position for generating surplus value in capitalism. Hence, the key for capitalists and managers has always been the control, disciplining and exploitation of labour in the workplace, which explains why most LPT studies primarily focus on a close empirical scrutiny of workplace labour relations.

This view has been challenged by the emergence of Foucauldian perspectives on the labour process (Böhm, 2006). Two of the most prominent Foucauldians have been Knights and Willmott (1989; see also Knights, 2001; Willmott, 1994, 1997), who have argued that power cannot be 'reduced to a property of persons, a dominant class, a sovereign or the state. Rather, it is dispersed throughout the social relations of a population in a diverse set of mechanisms and a multiplicity of directions' (1989: 553). Echoing the post-Marxist sentiments in wider social theory of the 1980s (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), Knights and Willmott's (1989: 549) main concern has been to argue that social reality – and therefore value production – is the product of a plurality of disciplinary techniques of power and knowledge rather than simply the outcome of the capital-labour class struggle. Following Foucault, they argue that 'forms of power are exercised through subjecting individuals to their own identity or subjectivity, and are not therefore mechanisms directly derived from the forces of production, class struggle or ideological structures' (1989: 553). The key Foucauldian insight here is that value production should not be reduced to economic relationships. Instead, one should think of a plurality of historical, social relations producing 'regimes of truth', or governmentalities, as Foucault calls them. That is, the economic value produced in the workplace is always related to the wider values that make up social relations.

Whilst these Foucauldian insights have been valuable extensions of the economism often attributed to Marxist analyses, it is curious to see that most Foucauldian studies in critical organization and management studies have still very much focused on the workplace (Böhm, 2006; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). That is, while a Foucauldian analyses could be seen to point to a radical break with the workplace focus of LPT, this break has arguably not been visible enough in critical organization and management studies. It has therefore been left to writers outside this field to explore possibilities of combining Marxian and Foucauldian analyses to formulate new concepts that are able to critically engage with the apparently new realities of so-called 'late capitalism' (Jameson, 1991).

It is our thesis in this paper that, if LPT is really to place 'the transformation of the labor process and labor power' at the centre of its analysis, and if Foucauldian studies of organization are to take seriously a broader view with the 'production of organization' (Cooper and Burrell, 1988) beyond the workplace, then greater attention needs to be paid to consumption and social reproduction, matters that have been at the heart of Autonomist Marxist theories of 'late' or 'new economy' capitalism.

## ***The New Value Proposition: Hardt and Negri on Immaterial Labour***

Building upon ideas that Negri had developed in the late 1970s concerning the death of the Marxist ‘law of value’ (Negri, 1991: 172; Marx, 1976; Böhm and Land, 2009a; Toms, 2008), Hardt and Negri’s influential book *Empire* developed the idea that labour had been so completely transformed that it had become ‘immaterial’. Whilst Marx had argued that the physical labour of producing material commodities was the only source of value under capitalist relations of production (Marx, 1976; Böhm and Land, 2009a), Hardt and Negri put forward the thesis that material production was no longer of central importance to value production and had been subsumed by immaterial production: the delivery of services or creation of symbolic values associated with commodities, including knowledge, and communicative acts that (re)produce the forms of social organization that facilitate material production. As they write:

Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production as *immaterial labor* – that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 290; also 2004: 108)

This concept of immaterial labour provides the basis for Hardt and Negri’s development of the idea of ‘real subsumption’ whereby capital and social life are no longer clearly separable and value production shifts from the material production of tangible commodities to the immaterial production of social relationships, knowledge and affect. Crucially for Hardt and Negri and others working in a similar vein (e.g. Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Virno, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006), this shift towards the real subsumption of the social opens up a new political front upon which labour contests the very ground of capitalist social reproduction. As Hardt and Negri put it, perhaps giving rise to Žižek’s (2001) playful suggestion that they might have written the ‘new communist manifesto’:

Today productivity, wealth, and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks. In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labor thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 294)

The central idea here is that value is produced no longer through the material production of commodities, as was the case in Marx’s time, but through the reproduction of the social: through the production of cooperation, association and organization.

This immaterial labour, Hardt and Negri argue, has become hegemonic (2004: 145) in that regardless of whether it quantitatively dominates economic activity, it has become the paradigm for work today. For Toyota’s semi-autonomous production teams it is the work of social cooperation that is key to production and replaces the material labour exerted on the production line as the main source of value (cf. Dawson, 1994). Even for the employee in a retail outlet selling clothes, much of the work is not just filling rails and processing sales but also presenting the correct forms of aesthetic accomplishment, engaging customers, and actively contributing to the cultural content of the commodities on sale (Pettinger, 2004, 2008; du Gay, 1996; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Similarly, for symbolic analysts, or knowledge workers, operating in communities of practice, the key to value production is not so much the specific knowledge commodity being produced, but the on-going social interactions that enable a collective process of innovation and learning through the co-production of a collective social identity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al, 2002; Amin and Roberts, 2008; Orr, 1996; Land, 2009). Whilst Hardt and Negri are quite aware, therefore, that such ‘immaterial labour’ does not quantitatively dominate contemporary labour markets, they do suggest that it is qualitatively transforming the nature of work and how we understand labour and value production (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 285-288).

For some commentators, however, and despite their caveat that their argument relates to qualitative rather than quantitative domination, it can seem that Jacques as well as Hardt and Negri have fallen prey to the same illusions that entranced the managerialist writers in the late 1990s and early 2000s with their apparent production of value from nothing but air. As Warhurst and Thompson (1998)

have argued, the postmodern ideal of networked organizations populated by knowledge workers belies a reality that is characterized by highly routinized service work where most ‘growth has occurred not in knowledge work but in the low-paid “donkey work” of serving, guarding, cleaning, waiting and helping in the private health and care services, as well as hospitality services’ (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998: 5; Thompson, 2005: 84-85).

Although initially targeting this critique at managerialist proponents of a knowledge economy, Thompson has more recently brought it to bear on Hardt and Negri directly, suggesting that the authors had lost sight of workplace realities and fallen prey to an ‘unhealthy and uncritical dependence on mainstream business and management writings on the knowledge economy and knowledge work’, where what we read in the book ‘is barely different from what can be found in business literature’ (Thompson, 2005: 75; 81). For Thompson, Hardt and Negri have neglected the realities of work – often highly Taylorized and controlled – in favour of embracing managerial hyperbole, confusing ideology and rhetoric with reality. This places them in a parallel position to the labourers at the heart of their analysis, developing the idea of a ‘refusal of work’, whereby labour resistance appeared to have deserted the factory and traditional unionized forms of struggle over pay and conditions, in favour of a refusal of capitalist labour altogether (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 261; Wright, 2002; Thompson, 2005: 88). Following this hypothesized, though, as Thompson notes, empirically unsubstantiated, desertion, Hardt and Negri move their own analysis of immaterial labour out, beyond the factory walls and into the ‘non-spaces’ of global capitalist social reproduction.

Thompson’s critique is well targeted. His recognition that even immaterial labour under informationalized production remains subject to measurement is backed up by both theoretical and empirical studies of such work (Dowling, 2007; Toms, 2008; Harvie, 2005). Indeed, measuring the productivity of such labour, and capturing its value, is central to the endeavours of management in knowledge intensive enterprises and the service sector. Similarly, the idea that productive cooperation is immanent to the activity of labour itself, and therefore relatively autonomous of capitalist control (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 294) neglects both the strategic decision making that lies behind decisions to decentralize production, for example externalizing production to drive down costs and defend the core against market fluctuations by outsourcing risk, and the persistence of vertical forms of control, through budgets, finance, targets and even direct control (Thompson, 2005: 86; also Barker, 1999). Indeed, so long as we remain at the traditional point of production – Marx’s original ‘hidden abode of production’ (Marx, 1976: 279) – and maintain some concern with managerial agency and strategy, it would seem that Hardt and Negri’s celebration of the autonomous potential for communism, which they find in immaterial labour, is entirely fantastic.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether we should wholly throw the baby out with the bathwater. In the following section we therefore turn our attention to consider the specific issue of marketing and branding in the production of value through chains of production and consumption that necessarily extend beyond the factory walls. It is our contention that in this sphere there does indeed lie a new ‘hidden abode of production’ where the dynamics of value production have been transformed. Unlike Arvidsson, however, we are less than sanguine about the prospects of brand management ushering in an autonomous political subject that is able to reconcile the production of economic value with an ethical and political co-production of values.

### ***The New Value Proposition: Arvidsson on Marketing and Brands***

Paralleling Hardt and Negri’s exodus from the workplace and into the social factory, Adam Arvidsson’s analysis of media culture suggests that capital, in the form of ‘signifying complexes’ that include trademarked logos, brands and cultural products, has today completely saturated our life-world (Arvidsson, 2006: 30). Rejecting the pessimism of a Frankfurt School style of analysis,

wherein such a subsumption means standardisation and passive, alienated consumption (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979), Arvidsson takes on board the insight from cultural studies that people are active and creative in their symbolic consumption. Crucially, for Arvidsson, this active symbolic consumption is itself creative of value. Taking place within the social factory, the consumption and circulation of ‘signifying complexes’ is the cornerstone of social reproduction whereby a *common* is forged, without which communication and collective action would be impossible. This moves his analysis well beyond concerns with the bare physical, or material, reproduction of labour power (cf. Jacques, 2000: 211) to the kinds of labour that reproduce what Lazzarato refers to as the ‘basin of immaterial labour’ (Lazzarato, 1997: 137):

[T]he use-values of consumer goods should be conceived as something more than their ability to respond to extra-social needs or desires (coming from the ‘stomach or the fancy’). Rather, recent consumer research would prove that these use-values consist mainly in the qualities of goods as means of production: their capacity to be deployed within an ongoing immaterial production process by means of which such a common is constructed. (Arvidsson, 2006: 19-20)

There are two points to make here. The first, linking back to the discussion of Hardt and Negri above, is that it is through communicative action that the social is reproduced. If immaterial labour is at the heart of informationalized production, then it is both a means to the production of directly consumable commodities (knowledge, affect, experience, service etc) and the product of that labour. It is only through on-going communication that a ‘common’, or social terrain upon which productive communication can take place, is forged. In this sense one of the most important products of immaterial labour is the potential for further productive communication – in short, the reproduction of labour power – a concern that takes this analysis decisively beyond classical Marxism, which considered reproductive labour to be unproductive, at least in terms of economic value (Harvie, 2005).

The second main issue arising from Arvidsson’s suggestions concerning the actual production, circulation and consumption of immaterial commodities in the form of brands and as such offers a significant extension of Hardt and Negri’s analysis of contemporary value production. Concerning himself explicitly with the *substance* of value, Arvidsson writes that:

[C]ommunicability is... the substance of the monetary value of the brand... What consumers pay for it access to the communicative potential of the brand, the possibility of inserting the brand in their own assemblage of compatible qualities. The use-value of the brand for the consumer is its value as a means of communicative production. (Arvidsson, 2006: 131)

Citing the commonplace example of a Nike trainer (e.g. Quinn, 1992: 60), Arvidsson suggests that the key value added for this product is what the brand signifies and enables the consumer to do. Companies like Nike are able to charge a premium for their trainers, which in terms of material performance may be entirely indistinguishable from cheaper competitors, and even produced in the same workshops, by the same workers (Klein, 2000), because of the meanings associated with the brand. By wearing Nike trainers, a consumer is able to mobilize this meaning as part of their identity work, producing themselves as a social subject in relation to significant others, thereby constituting a community of consumption whose logic transcends the simple moment of consumption of the material, or immaterial, artefact that is the bearer of meaning. This is one of the key analytical, and political, points that distinguishes Arvidsson’s analysis from more traditional critical theoretical readings of media and brand culture (e.g. Gardner, 1979). For Arvidsson, there is no simple subordination of play and life to the logic of commodity consumption. Rather, the logic of capital becomes coterminous with the reproduction of life itself and particularly with cultural reproduction. This means that a dualistic distinction between real, or ‘authentic’, community on the one hand and ‘synthetic’ or commoditized community and culture on the other, can not be maintained (cf. Land, 2009). As Arvidsson puts it:

Capital (in the form of propertied symbols, and signifying complexes: advertising, brands, television series, music and other forms of content) is socialized to the extent of it becoming part of the very environment, the bio-political context in which life is lived. The other side to this equation is that life comes to evolve entirely within capital, that there is no longer any outside. (Arvidsson, 2006: 30)

Of course, this means that all of life becomes work as the very production of sociality becomes the production of a common from which capital is able to extract a surplus. This flow of value occurs, to paraphrase Foucault on power, at the micro-physical level, moving through the very capillaries of social production and friendship. Indeed, one of Arvidsson's examples, Lego's Bionicles (Arvidsson, 2006: 81; 102), illustrates the point nicely.

The Bionicle is a fairly simple product: a plastic Lego toy based on alien/robot hybrids. The actual material commodity is a pretty simple, relatively inexpensive, kit of plastic components in a box that, if the user follows the accompanying instructions, enables the user to build a 'Bionicle'. The genius of Lego's marketing strategy is a combination of cross marketing and community management. As well as the toys themselves, users can purchase Bionicle bedding and curtains – for example to decorate a child's bedroom – as well as films, computer games and books. Through the mobilization of these artefacts and cultural products, the Bionicle user is able to connect to the product in several aspects of their life. Not only does this enable the designers to trawl the message boards and chat rooms for new ideas for products but even more importantly, 'the overall story within which the brand evolves are socialized and made to evolve through customer interaction' (Arvidsson, 2006: 102). The counter side of this is that this evolution of the brand lies beyond both the immediate sphere of consumption and beyond the control of management. One of the authors' sons is a big fan of Bionicles and, as well as owning several of the toys and the full set of DVDs, takes the Bionicle concept beyond consumption and into the production of his social life and friendship networks. For example, when his friends call up, it is often to talk about Bionicles they have invented. When playing with friends, games are often structured around the Bionicle world so that the ubiquitous childhood toy – a stick found in the woods – become Bionicle weapons, rather than King Arthur's sword, as had been the case just a year previously. Of course, this does not make this play, or the friendships thus mediated, any less real or authentic. The point is simply that these children's social lives are thoroughly imbued with brand culture so that the brand evolves within the flows of autonomous social and cultural reproduction.

So how are we to understand this circulation in relation to the production of value? Arvidsson argues that what is central in the production of brand value is the production of *interest*. The predominant locus of value for a brand-based firm is sustained interest in the brand, through which brand value can be realized. This interest, or attention, is reproduced throughout life as we relate socially and culturally via brands. Indeed, a perhaps extreme illustration of this point is made by Arvidsson in the opening pages of the book where he cites the example of an avid Apple aficionado who claims only ever to have slept with people who use a Mac! Through friendship, play, sex and even love, then, the production of this cultural, brand value lies beyond the direct control of the logo's owner or brand managers. Rather, the reproduction of the cultural values and meanings invested in the brand, and its related communities, is secured by the active labour of those consuming the brands. This labour is 'free' in the double sense that it is both relatively autonomous and unpaid (Arvidsson, 2006: 130; Terranova, 2004).

To the extent that this 'free labour' is unpaid, the Marxist 'law of value' is challenged. If there is no pay for labour, then how could one mobilize such concepts as socially average, or necessary, labour time in order to distinguish necessary and surplus value? To the extent that it is relatively autonomous, it also seems to escape capitalist command and control. Nevertheless, according to Arvidsson's analysis, it is this free labour that is at the heart of contemporary capitalist value production. By mobilizing brands in their production of identity, life-style and community, consumers actively reproduce and extend their value as signifying complexes and increase their potential as a use value for others. As such, free labour is the main source of brand equity and value. This leaves us with two questions, one of control and one of measurement. It is to these questions that we now turn, first to consider how brand management seeks to govern the production of immaterial value so as to realize it as economic value, and second to ask whether the model of value

production renders value immeasurable, or whether what we are witnessing here is merely another obfuscation of value production and its secretion in a new 'hidden abode' whose workings should be subject to further analysis.

### ***Organization as Value: Community and the Ethical Surplus***

Political entrepreneurship is a matter of accumulating profits (or in any case a surplus), not through the direct exploitation of material labour, but through the exploitation of community, affect and communicative flows. (Arvidsson, 2006: 89)

Following Lazzarato (1997; 2007), Arvidsson points to the character of the 'political entrepreneur' as the paradigm of productive activity in the postmodern, social factory. For Lazzarato (2007: 91; 93), this concept highlights the impossibility today of maintaining a distinction between political activity and the economic activity of the enterprise. The reason for this is that what is being produced, through activities like networked organizing or brand management, are not so much things – material artefacts as commodities – as social relations, signifying complexes, frames of action and subjectivity. For Lazzarato, this production of meaning and subjectivity is the proper sphere of politics so that we cannot simply bemoan the passing of 'real' politics and its apparent subordination to consumption, as is often the case in the press or in party politicians' hang-wringing over the delegitimization of Politics and voter apathy, particularly amongst the young. Rather, we must recognize that in the current situation, consumption and branding *are* political at precisely the same moment as they are economic:

Marketing is no longer merely a technique for selling, but a mechanism that is constitutive of social relations, information and values for the market – one that integrates the techniques and 'responsibility' of the political. (Lazzarato, 2007: 92)

So how, then, can we understand the relationship between a form of capitalism in which production is primarily concerned with the production of political values, and through that process produces economic value? Lazzarato and Arvidsson offer us two models for this. The first is the example of Benetton and its Post-Fordist model of production. The second is found in brand management more broadly.

As Lazzarato (2007) explains it, Benetton defies conventional understandings of value production. It is an organization without workers, factories or distribution networks, all of which are indirectly managed through communication networks, but not directly owned or controlled. This means that:

The extraction of surplus-value is no longer the result of the direct exploitation of labor; on the contrary, exploitation is organized by the small and medium-sized units of production, or self-exploitation is self-organized by 'enterprise-individuals,' called 'autonomous labor' in Italy. Surplus-value derives from the production and control of flows, primarily financial and communicational flows... the function of the entrepreneur is thus to encourage the flows and capture them. (Lazzarato, 2007: 88, italics removed)

The main concern, then, for such a virtual, or networked, organization is not the direct management of the labour process, as this is outsourced and subcontracted to smaller productive units, or even delegated to 'teams' whose interrelations are themselves marketized (Barker, 1999; Procter and Mueller, 2000). Instead:

Benetton's principal preoccupation is... to structure the productive networks that already exist independently of it. Its relationship with the networks is political in the sense that its basic function is no longer that of organizing the 'time and method' of factory labor, or establishing differentials of productivity by means of productive innovation... but to ensure the 'social construction of the market' within an autonomous productive fabric. (Lazzarato, 2007: 89).

In this sense we can understand the *business* of Benetton as the structuring of social relationships and the organization of flows. That these flows are, by necessity, relatively autonomous means that modernist methods of management focussed upon control, coordination and command are no longer applicable. Instead, the political entrepreneur must steer these autonomous flows in such a way as to

ensure that their realisation of values produces a surplus economic value that can be siphoned off as profit.

Whilst Lazzarato's reading of Benetton probably overstates the case, at least in terms of the autonomy that he presumes characterizes the productive networks that actually produce their 'commodities', he seems to be quite on target in his more general claim that production has become socialized. Both empirically, and discursively, management is increasingly concerned with managing social relations within and without the workplace so as to align these relations with production (Sewell, 1998). We have already mentioned teamworking in this respect but perhaps even more paradigmatic is the concept of a 'community of practice', which has moved from an academic concept within social learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to an applied managerial tool through which knowledge workers have their necessarily autonomous labour of collectively stewarding expertise governed by management, but not directly controlled (Wenger et al, 2002; Land, 2009; Amin and Roberts, 2008). Wenger et al (2002) deploy the metaphors of cultivation and gardening to explain this model of management, which can only be deployed indirectly by creating the conditions for the autonomous development of a community that will be broadly in line with the interests of the organization.

A similar process of cultivation and steering governs branding more generally. As Arvidsson puts it:

[B]rands both work as a means of production to be employed in an autonomous process of constructing a common, and as embodiments of a new form of capitalist domination that governs that productive autonomy through particular kinds of empowerments. (Arvidsson, 2006: 13-14)

This 'autonomous process of constructing a common' by 'empowered' consumers does not directly produce an economic surplus, but rather an 'ethical surplus' (Arvidsson, 2006: 13). Arvidsson takes this concept of an ethical surplus from Arendt (1958) and characterizes it as consisting in 'a social relation, a shared meaning, or a sense of belonging, that was not there before' (Arvidsson, 2006: 10). In short, there is a *new* – here framed as 'surplus' – common produced through these social interactions. If these interactions can be managed so as to circulate through a specific commodity form which becomes indispensable to their on-going reproduction, then the authentic reproduction of social relations and community will produce a surplus for the owner of the brand by augmenting brand equity. To put the same idea in a slightly different way, and using terminology from actor-network theory, we could suggest that the brand manager is able to shape these social flows of meaning and subjectivisation in such a way that the brand becomes an 'obligatory passage point' (Callon, 1986) through which social reproduction must flow. It is the ability to connect to socially reproductive flows in this way that simultaneously produces an ethical surplus and an augmentation of brand equity that can be realized as economic value.

There are two implications of this analysis. The first of these is that it becomes impossible to separate an authentic process of collective subjectivization – or community – from a synthetic one (cf. Land, 2009). Brand consumption cannot simply be reduced to passive consumption by the masses, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) might have it, as to be effective brand management must pass through an authentic moment of collective subjectivization. Without real libidinal investments, and the ethical surplus thereby produced, there would be no production of surplus value in the form of brand equity. The second implication is that the production of value remains essentially a problematic of *organization*. As the reference to actor-network theory suggests, the key concern for the entrepreneur is still social organization, albeit for the political entrepreneur this organization concerns the government of flows beyond the immediate, disciplinary confines of the factory. Perhaps, then, we should consider this as a political economic movement away from what, with a more ontological project in mind, Cooper and Burrell (1988) referred to as the 'organization of production', toward the 'production of organization'. It is precisely by shaping the production of social organization, in all of its messy, affective and libidinal aspects, and steering that production

through the semiotic and material circuits of productive commodity consumption, that brand equity and economic value is possible.

This, then, is how we understand the concept of the ‘social factory’ but it leaves us as yet with another problem. If capital and society are coterminous in the way that this analysis suggests, then where does that leave the project of critique and how should we understand the concept of ‘labour’? Has value really become, as Negri and others have suggested, immeasurable?

### ***A New ‘Hidden Abode’: Re-reading Marx’s Labour Theory of Value***

In order to answer this question, we turn to Marx and a discussion of the concept of ‘free labour’, precisely because it is this free labour that Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson see to be the cornerstone of today’s hegemonic mode of immaterial labour and the resulting argument that we now live in a social factory.

There is nothing new about the idea of a ‘free’ labourer. Marx used this term to refer to the worker who is ‘free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale’ (Marx, 1976: 272). These two aspects of the ‘free’ waged labourer are inseparable because the first sense of freedom is dependent upon the second. Without dispossessing the rural peasant of access to the land necessary to reproduce their labour power independently, there would have been no ‘free’ labour to work in the factories. On the other hand, this was a genuine liberation; it opened up new possibilities for geographical mobility that had previously been impossible, as the peasant’s access to land was secured only by their servitude to the landowner. Marx compares these two modes of labour directly when discussing the *corvée* system, in which:

The necessary labour which the Wallachian peasant performs for his own maintenance is distinctly marked off from his surplus labour on behalf of the boyar. The one part he does on his own field, the other on the seigniorial estate... In the *corvée* the surplus labour is accurately marked off from the necessary labour. (Marx, 1976: 346)

This clear separation is not, however, the case for the ‘free’ labourer for whom the working day is an undifferentiated mass of ‘labour’ where surplus is indistinguishable from necessary. Indeed, at face value it appeared that the factory system had erased the distinction between necessary and surplus labour, and thus rendered redundant the law of value. After all, how could one determine necessary value in such a situation? As Marx writes:

[If] the free worker gives the capitalist 6 x 6 or 36 hours of surplus labour every week... it is the same as if he worked 3 days in the week for himself and 3 days in the week gratis for the capitalist. But this fact is not directly visible. (Marx, 1976: 346)

The genius of the factory system was that it concealed the exploitative aspects of labour – the surplus that the labourer provided ‘free’ to the capitalist – by giving the appearance of a single mass of labour for which the employee received a wage. To understand and analyze this production, and appropriation, of surplus value it was necessary for Marx to move beyond the appearance of waged labour, and the formality of the employment contract, and descend, as he put it, into the ‘hidden abode of production’ (Marx, 1976: 279). It was here that Marx discovered the two-fold nature of labour and the indeterminacy of the labour process. Of course, it was precisely this insight that was rediscovered in the 1970s by Braverman (1974: 54), giving rise to labour process theory (Thompson, 1989: 72). Central to this school of thought is the capitalist problematic of converting the potential for labour (*labour power*) into concrete, value producing *labour*.

Without rehearsing the whole issue of the indeterminacy of labour power, what we want to consider here is the way in which the factory system conceals the relations of production and appropriation within a single, undifferentiated process of labouring. This resonates with contemporary concerns over immeasurability and the de-differentiation of immaterial labour in the works of Hardt, Negri

and Arvidsson. If Arvidsson is correct that ‘life comes to evolve entirely within capital, that there is no longer any outside’ (2006: 30), then this is perhaps just a deeper obfuscation of the production of value. Under the factory system, necessary and surplus labour were combined to such a degree that they became indistinguishable, whereas formerly they had been spatially and temporally separated. Now, with the real subsumption of the social factory, we are witnessing a further shift where the ‘necessary’ and ‘surplus’ labour of social reproduction appear indistinguishable. Both occur simultaneously and throughout the full circuit of production. But this does not mean that we should simply give up on the analytical and critical project of distinguishing these elements. Indeed, as the last section of the paper argued, the structuring and organization – or governance – of association and social interaction so as to both produce and expropriate a ‘surplus’ is one of the key concerns of contemporary management. This is the case both for producing the forms of social cooperation that Hardt and Negri (2000: 295) suggest are central to immaterial labour, and for producing and realizing brand value through the autonomous communicative labour of symbolic production/consumption in brand communities. Far from lying beyond measure and control, these processes of organization/production are governed and continually subject to processes of evaluation.

This becomes apparent, for example, in the way the government has been evaluating and measuring culture and the arts – as we discuss in some detail in another paper (Böhm and Land, 2009a). We argue that by identifying cultural and artistic work as an important aspect of the ‘new economy’, UK policy makers have been keen to apply, what De Angelis (2006) calls, ‘external’ and ‘immanent’ measures of value to culture and the arts in order to, first, capitalize on the cultural industries for continuous economic growth, and, second, use culture and the arts as instruments for the social reproduction of labour. The reason why this case is of importance in the context of this paper is that it shows that the brave new world of immaterial labour – of which cultural and artistic work is a prominent example – is, contrary to the claims by Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson, being measured, controlled and governed, precisely because it has become an important part of value production not only in the economy but also social reproduction as such.

It is also worth mentioning at this point that the actual measurability of exchange value was never the key driving force of Marx’s (1976) ‘labour theory of value’. As Harvey puts it, Marx was more concerned with the question ‘how and why does labour under capitalism assume the form it does?’ (1999: 37). We can therefore invert the usual formation of Marx’s model to give us a ‘value theory of labour’ (Elson, 1979) precisely because ‘the concepts of labor and value mutually imply one another: by labor we understand a value-creating practice’ (Hardt and Negri, 1994: 7). Crucial to understanding the evolution and organization of capitalism and the labour process, then, is a nuanced appreciation of the changing nature of labour. It was never intended as a fixed ‘metaphor’ (cf. Jacques, 2000), or even as a rigid analytical category, but rather as a political ‘weapon’ through which struggles and points of contestation over the production and expropriation of value could be understood and engaged (Cleaver, 2000). Today, it seems this process of labouring and valuation must be understood not only in *the* organization but rather through a general *process* of social organization that includes the full circuit of production, consumption and social reproduction (Dyer-Witford, 1999).

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper has been to engage with the works of Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson, who – being prominent Autonomist Marxist authors – have argued that the so-called ‘new economy’, which is characterized by a new importance of immaterial labour, knowledge and brand communities, gives rise to a new law of value in what they call the ‘social factory’. This new law of value is primarily enacted in the spheres of culture, society and consumption, where the production of value does not take place on the Fordist production line, the traditional workplace, but in

marketing and brand communities. This argument put forward by Autonomist Marxists has not only economic, organizational and managerial relevance, but profound social and political implications. The ethical and political point to argue that we have economically moved from one era of capitalist production to the next is that Autonomist Marxists connect this transformation to the prospect of immaterial labour creating the possibility ‘for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 294). That is, what ‘state socialism’ did not manage to achieve – namely the rise of a communist society – because of its autocratic, hierarchical and dictatorial setup, ‘new economy’ capitalism will achieve without even wanting or realizing it. The ‘new economy’ is the Trojan Horse of communism, of a new free society, so to speak.

In this paper we expressed our doubts about this kind of Spinozian optimism by showing how ‘new economy’ immaterial communities of socialized workers are in fact subjected to new hierarchies of value. In the case of Arvidsson’s social production of brands we argued that brand management continuously seeks to govern the production of immaterial value so as to realize it as economic value. In this way we have questioned the autonomy that Autonomist Marxists often associate with new forms of immaterial work. Part of this claim for a new freedom of work is also the idea that the ‘new economy’ model of value production renders value immeasurable. We argued that what we are witnessing can merely be seen as another obfuscation of value production and its secretion in a new ‘hidden abode’ (Marx, 1976: 279). That is, ‘the complete integration of Media Culture into everyday life’ (Arvidsson, 2006: 30), rather than rendering new possibilities of freedom possible, can simply be seen as part of the continuous ‘transformation of the labor process and labor power’ (Warhurst et al., 2008: 98) that aims at producing ever increasing rates of surplus value.

In this respect we agree with labour process theory (LPT), which has argued that the political economy of the labour process – and particularly the critical study of the concrete control and management processes in place – is still as important for a critique of capitalist social relations as it has always been. Where we differ from Thompson, Warhurst and their colleagues is the conception of the boundaries of the labour process. In our view, Autonomist Marxists do point to important economic and social transformations of the labour process, which we would be ill advised to ignore. While their analyses often seem hopelessly utopian, what critical organization and management studies can learn from Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson is the realization that the boundaries of the labour process and work have expanded to include wider aspects of society, culture, consumption and social reproduction. While this is not necessarily denied by both LPT and Foucauldian studies of organization and management, there have only been rare occasions of empirical scrutiny of labour and work processes beyond the capitalist workplace, i.e. the factory shopfloor or company office.

Of course, we ourselves have not been able to provide empirical evidence, as the main purpose of this paper has been to lay out the main features of the theoretical and analytical framework needed to conceptualize and discuss contemporary forms of the ‘transformation of the labor process and labor power’ (Warhurst et al., 2008: 98) and the implications for an understanding of the production of value. By no means do we claim to have looked at this in a comprehensive way, as we mainly focused our debate on the evaluation of the theoretical and analytical arguments made by Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson. Much more research would have to be undertaken to closely analyze the new control mechanisms that render labour in the social factory determinate. Labour process theory provides a range of valuable concepts for such an analyses, which, however, would need to be applied to the study of wider processes of consumption and marketing work, rather than just the workplace. We would equally need to consider the manifold resistances, contestations and contradictions in the new circuits of value. If indeed Hardt, Negri and Arvidsson are correct in their claim that the ‘new economy’ can potentially give rise to a new freedom, ‘a more elementary form of communism’, then we would need to enquire about how exactly this is supposed to come about, given that our analysis in this paper points more towards an argument that highlights the ‘real

subsumption' or complete commodification of social relations. There are clearly political tensions at work here, which would have to be explored in more detail. Last but not least, we call for the attention to the global realities of labour relations, which are often at complete odds with the utopian 'new economic' discourses put forward by Autonomist Marxists (see, for example, the contributions to Passavant and Dean, 2003). What arguably transcends the different views on value and labour expressed by labour process theorists, Foucauldian organization and management scholars as well as Autonomist Marxists is their shared blindness to the concrete realities of work outside the privileged world of the West. But this would be for another paper to explore in more detail.

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