



LABOR VALUE AND LABOR AS VALUE

ILL WILL

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The Performative Discourse of Power

With its attacks against state handouts and its rejection of guaranteed income, Macron's speech of November 9th on labor value (or on labor "*as* value") was little more than a rehearsal of what Jospin¹ had said back in 1998 during the Movement of the Unemployed, which terminated in 2001 with the creation of an employment bonus that would be gradually transformed into added work time after 2006. It also replicated Sarkozy's famous "Work more and earn more" speech, which proposed tax exempt overtime pay. However, the measures currently being recommended for adoption (bonuses for extra work, inflation adjustments) contradict Macron's own statements, since they target not the productive and creative individual but rather the needy consumer-individual. In other words, it is not the value of labor and its corresponding wages that the government is trying to augment, it is purchasing power itself, without the slightest change in the power relation between capital and labor. Hence we see no pressure on capital nor any increase in minimum wages, but only clever calculations that may prove too complicated even for Bruno Le Maire, the Minister of Labor, which the President intends to clarify.² Generally speaking, it's the same logic that was applied during the Yellow Vests movement: a supplementary bonus for overtime plus a one-time bonus conceded by the Macron government. Only this time, the initiative isn't coming from the Confederation of French Employers (Medef); and while the allowance will be distributed by employers, they are not asked to contribute anything, it's the state that will pay.

What is more, the inflation allowance is here extended to the unwaged, offering yet another implicit recognition that the wage system no longer organizes the entirety of the labor force of the so-called “active population”—one more sign of what we have elsewhere called labor power’s tendency toward non-reproducibility. In the article cited, Purière pulls in Friot, Lordon³, and even the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts*, on the pretense of restoring the power of “producers” over their work against “capitalist command,” as if that power had once existed, who knows when...perhaps in the blessed days of the Welfare State?⁴ Not a word of reflection on the inessentialization of labor power in the process of valorization. The ideology of the nineteenth century producer and of the skilled worker of the postwar boom are similarly invoked, even though the valorization process is no longer essentially a labor process inasmuch as dead labor dominates living labor and capital is totalized in the unification of its processes of production and circulation (the famous “value chain”).

The case of France is far from an isolated one, since it’s especially in the United States that the phenomenon appeared on an even larger scale. In fact, a record number of resignations was recorded. According to the latest figures of the Department of Labor, 4.3 million workers quit their jobs in August of 2021. Some left in search of better paying employment, others hoping to change their lives. Economists are beginning to speak of a “great resignation.” What emerges here, at least implicitly, is the idea that the labor market is not a market, or in any case, not a market like any other. According to certain less factual analyses on the left, such as that of Romaric Godin in *Mediapart*⁵, we see a renewed questioning of the idea of a labor market and an inkling of a possible resistance to work but without penetrating to the heart of the matter. To do so would mean recognizing that labor power is not a true commodity—this is, however, the bare minimum required if we are to claim with any coherence that there is no “labor market,” or at least, that the labor market is not a market like the others. In this regard, Karl Polanyi is more useful to us than Karl Marx.

In the same vein, the reference made by Godin to the opposition between concrete labor/abstract labor no longer appears valid, whereas it was still pertinent perhaps at the moment of the action-critiques of labor carried out by proletarians during the years 1965–1975. Nowadays it is not so much abstract labor that is critiqued—in fact this has never

been the case, since even between 1960-1970 it was labor “in general” that came under attack—as it is unskilled and underpaid labor. Thus today when hotel and especially the restaurant workers decline to acknowledge what is called “*la coupure*” (the dichotomy or partition), no critique of “abstract” labor is voiced, but only a critique of “concrete” labor, of its organization and its constraints...without real compensation. The same applies, inversely, to the battle of the mayors against Macron’s directives regarding the transition to 35 hours for all municipalities: the resistance is not against labor as such, but is instead focused solely on labor and the benefits it ought to accrue.

It’s not Capital that’s being Attacked

What Godin and company fail to grasp is that in today’s production process the exploitation of labor power is no longer essential to valorization. They conflate the extension of value to all human activities with the capitalization of those same activities, when in fact capital has managed to dominate value almost entirely. Value has not disappeared, certainly, but it is virtually erased from the networks and relationships, operating only by default, as it were. Capital can thus free itself from the “logic of value” and pursue its chaotic course... without breaking down.

Having just written a book about Italian Operaismo⁶, we remain unconvinced by any interpretation that would read today’s limited reactions to the resumption of work after the spell of confinement⁷ as somehow belonging to the same order of revolt (and having, *a fortiori*, the same meaning) as the actions of the Operaist period in Italy. The context of the latter was quite different, involving an offensive and quite generalized critique of labor based on the condition of the “social worker,” a serious and extensive youth revolt that has no equivalent today, not to mention a very different balance of power between capital and labor.

Moreover, the information furnished by the media or over social networks about the recent actions tends to naively lump together the various sorts of job resignations in the U.S., despite the fact that their motivations are highly disparate. Consequently, some interpretations tend to more or less assimilate these reactions to the critical practices of turnover and absenteeism of the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s as if, in

response to capitalist flexibility, wage workers responded mainly with the working class flexibility theorized by Negri in his concept of a *political entrepreneuriat*.

This applies especially to those interpretations that refer to the American situation without noting its specificity, namely, the capital/labor relationship involving a “market” that is barely regulated or framed by state or federal law, but highly contractualized according to the precepts of liberalism. As a result, bosses can fire employees at any time, and the employees can also leave at any time (in theory). In the health crisis of the current moment, the situation has now led to an even greater loosening of this “casual” bond, particularly as the category of a “social leave of absence” has not been invoked as it was in Western Europe.

For all these reasons, the present reactions don’t appear to be analogous to the industrial “refusal of work,” and of the disciplining of the workforce in the big city, expressed by Italian workers coming mostly from the South of the peninsula during the last large-scale proletarian assault that we have seen (1967–1977).

The “revolution of capital” transformed labor, labor time, the content of labor, and its nature. We can almost say that in the dominant countries/powers, value does not (or no longer does, we don’t have to decide this here) have its source in a “rate of exploitation” of labor power calculated according to a questionable mathematical formula, in what used to be a relation of production rooted in, and centering upon, the labor process. It is dominated rather by the capitalization of all human activities, day and night... This doesn’t mean, of course, that there is no more “exploitation” in the ordinary sense of the term. Capitalization, in this domain, is the immediate incorporation of every activity into capital from the moment it is given a price, without necessarily passing through the wage form (cf. casual entertainment workers, self-entrepreneurs, click workers, etc.).

Negative Experience

In these current reactions against work we hear cries of suffering, frustration, and revolt all mixed together, yet that expression is not primarily collective: it is particular, individual, and subjective. To see in this a collective consciousness would be a fiction since, tendentially, it is now the

very notion and experience of a collective consciousness that finds itself altered, dissolved, and decomposed, because work engenders only “negative experiences”—negative in the everyday sense of the term, and not in the Hegelian and Marxian sense of “the negative at work.” Just as proletarians can no longer affirm a worker’s identity⁸, they can no longer claim the “proletarian experience” spoken of both by the journal *Socialisme ou barbarie* in the 1950’s (in its 11th issue) or the Italian operaists of the years 1960–70. The Uberized worker or the micro-entrepreneur is not the mass worker, and he or she does not form part of a mass. At best they clump together with others without forming a “multitude.”

Our abandonment of any reference to a “*prise de conscience*” (a becoming-conscious) or “class consciousness” could be revisited in the (dim) light of this phenomenon of a “loss of consciousness” or, relatedly, to the search for “altered states of consciousness.”

First, there are all those who traffic in conspiracism in its many forms, through social networks (but not only), owing to the tremendous loss of theoretical coordinates or political principles. Without totally sparing the Yellow Vests movement, the latter was at least able to avoid making it into its trademark, and with its actions and in the street was able to go beyond the potential virtuality of the networks; this is less certain as concerns the current demonstrations around the health pass.⁹

Next, and more marginally to be sure, the relatively recent yet recurrent phenomenon of black blocs who express a refusal to define themselves politically or affirm an identity as an intervention group; or the development of rave parties becoming free parties¹⁰ in which participants dissolve their consciousness of reality and abandon their individuality in order to plunge into an imaginary that is supposedly festive and outside the system.

Despite the differences between these extremely diverse practices, they exhibit two common features:

1. First, they don’t seem to have an objective substrate: they exist only in their immediate actions, as if their foundation were placed in parentheses. This was already the case with the Yellow Vests, for example, who either were silent or else didn’t speak much about their professional activity (the question “what do you do in life?” was never considered one’s primary relation, although it usually refers to one’s relation to work), preferring to speak instead of their living conditions in general, and more

from the viewpoint of “subjective perception” than of “consciousness” in the usual sense of reflective consciousness. This “subjective perception” would be expressed, for example in the United States, in *“You only live once, or YOLO.”*

2. Secondly, all the practices have their point of departure in an individual behavior that is expressed collectively, thereby reversing the direction of the individual/collective relation in proletarian class movements (the “proletarian-individual” is a proletarian first and only later an individual, because they are subsumed by their class). Owing to the level attained by the process of individualization in capitalized society today, proletarians are individuals first of all...in the absence of any possibility of class reformation in the Marxist sense of the term—that is, requiring objective conditions and subjective conditions for its formation.

It’s this difficulty in objectivizing struggles (as well as practices and behaviors more generally) that ensures that, at best, as in the case of the Yellow Vests for example, the communitarian impulse finds expression primarily in the community of struggle. The latter then constitutes the struggle’s form of objectivation, but it is a fragile and unstable one, as it rests solely upon the struggle itself. It can therefore easily lose its sense of purpose in a confusion of means and ends, by seeking to persist outside of and after the movement. One sees this today, as the remnants of the Yellow Vests attempt to occupy the arena of resistance to the health pass. Having disappeared, this objectivity thus expresses only one subjectivity among others, without any reference to an a priori social determination.

Notes

- 1 Lionel Jospin was Prime Minister of France between 1997-2002, from the Socialist Party.
- 2 Bruno Le Maire: “When one is paid at the level of the minimum wage, one approaches 1500eu / month.” However, on November 4, *Libération* pointed out that the net minimum wage is 1260 euros per month. But no worries, Macron informs us that the bonuses plus the tax relief makes 170 euros (address of November 9, 2021). If one adds this sum to the true minimum wage, one arrives at 1430 euros. So the tally is almost correct and the Minister of Labor is saved from humiliation.
- 3 See Bernard Friot and Frédéric Lordon, *En travail. Conversations sur le communisme*, La dispute, 2021.
- 4 Reference to an article by Aurélien Purière, former director of Social Security. See “Le gouvernement entretient une situation dans laquelle les salaires sont insuffisants pour vivre,” *Le Monde*, November 11th, 2021.
- 5 Romaric Godin, “La pénurie de main-d’œuvre, symptôme d’un système économique en crise,” *Mediapart*, September 29, 2021, and Romaric Godin and Dan Israel, “La valeur travail, miroir aux alouettes d’Emmanuel Macron,” *Mediapart*, November 10, 2021.
- 6 Jacques Wajnsztein, *L’opéraïsme italien au crible du temps*, À plus d’un titre, 2021.
- 7 In the United States strikes are multiplying, including film crews, John Deere workers, Alabama miners, Nabisco wage workers, California nurses, and Buffalo health care providers. These are official strikes, not wildcats. Note however that in the case of Kellogg, class consciousness is proving “resilient” among the older workers, since the struggle is taking the form of egalitarian wage demands between senior workers who are paid well above the minimum (\$15 per hr) on average, as compared with new workers hired on for much less.
- 8 Which the power of capital denies them in any case, because it is now almost the only identity that is not recognized as that of an oppressed or dominated minority...
- 9 See « Les manifestations contre le pass sanitaire, un non-mouvement ? » published in *Lundi matin*, #302, August 30, 2021.
- 10 See Jacques Guigou, “Comment l’État-réseau accompagne sa rave party cévenole,” August 2020.

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