

Marx and Art

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Review essay: Ali Alizadeh, *Marx and Art*, 2019, Rowman and Littlefield.
David Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value*, 2019, Pluto Press.
Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork*, 2019, Duke University Press.

It might seem odd to be talking about art in a journal about the political economy of communication, but I would counter that art is one of humanity's oldest and most stable forms of communication. The decoration of the body and of the dwelling go hand in hand (literally) with human development. The creation of aesthetically pleasing and culturally symbolic artefacts and performance is a hallmark of human society. Art emerges alongside the use of tools, expanding material wealth, increased social interaction and the beginnings of class society. Art is also closely aligned with the aesthetic/spiritual development of humanity and, thus, is directly related to the development, content and dissemination of ideology, including religious beliefs and superstition. In a nutshell, art makes the subjective realm of mental production material through the application of creative concrete [1] labour. Further to this, the contemporary theoretical debate about the political economy of art—particularly, how to properly evaluate or theorise the labour of artistic producers—has resonance with similar issues in communication, such as the valorisation of play on social media platforms. Finally, I think communication scholars can also benefit from an engagement with the aesthetic that is often missing from studies of contemporary media forms.

There is a long history of formulating a political economy of art and aesthetics in the Marxist tradition and it is fertile ground for a discussion of both the dialectic and the relationship between subjectivity and materiality in social history. Each of the writers discussed here make the dialectical connection between the subjectivity of the aesthetic and Marx' materialism by referencing the intimate connections between Marx's own writing and his critical reading of Kant and Hegel. However, they diverge on several key points too, pointing to both the fragmentary 'theory' of art that can be distilled from Marx and also to the complexity of historical and contemporary debates about the 'value' of art. Key themes include defining an intrinsic use-value for art (the realm of the aesthetic) and theorising art work and artistic labour within a Marxist/post-Marxist political economy.

Marxism also has an abiding interest in the nexus between art and ideology in relation to revolutionary politics and the class struggle. Good art is transgressive, according to the Marxist tradition, because it lays bare the contradictions of the social system and can actually help with political education. Necessarily, this is more than a debate about how artistic artefacts, or the

performing arts, are valued in terms of pricing. It is a discussion of art as the product of a specific labour process, what Alizadeh refers to as “concrete” rather than “abstract” labour. This is an important discussion that overlaps in many ways with debates in the political economy of communication about labour, leisure and the complete subsumption of labour [2]. In the latter process, under the social conditions of financialized capitalism, “human potential” is reimagined as “human capital” and “investment” is self-mystified relations of production and worker exploitation. This is a theme for La Berge (2019: 7), who notes that decommodification of labour can be interpreted as either reification of neoliberalism’s desire to decentre labour such that “the end of labour” is assumed (24), or as evidence for the Marxist theory of labour’s real subsumption to capital. My reading is that these two things are identical; neoliberalism celebrates Capital’s penetration of life’s core activities, while Marx’ real subsumption offers a critical perspective. Either way, as Fuchs notes (2018): “ever more spaces that were autonomous from capital have come under its influence and control and have been turned into spheres of capital accumulation, commodity production and the exploitation of labour” (457). The question posed in the books under review here is whether or not the production of art (the work of artists) has also succumbed to the process of real subsumption.

Debates in communication studies about immaterial labour in relation to audience participation in social media (Fuchs, 2009; Miller, 2015) are similar in scope and range to discussions within the political economy of art about commodified, or *decommodified* labour, “a kind of everyday, unwaged, yet formal and professional work” (La Berge, 2019: 3). Dave Beech (2019) makes a parallel, if somewhat different, argument by conceptualising art as non-value producing and non-work which is extended—in terms of postcapitalist politics—to the idea that art is “hostile” to capitalism stemming from the “precapitalist anticapitalism of the noble arts” (37). Both La Berge and Beech rely on a form of exceptionalism to undergird their argument that art exists outside of capitalist relations of production and is not entirely subsumed to capital. To me this is a one-sided formulation that ignores an important insight: the labour of artists may not be governed by strict adherence to the labour theory of value, but, in general, art practice can only occur concretely within an historically determined mode of production.

The other feature common to both La Berge and Beech is the focus on art as non-work, as a form of leisure, or even as politicised and ideological anti-work. There are some faint echoes of William Morris’ utopianism in this position; particularly in relation to the dehumanising effect of labour on the bodies, minds and emotions of the worker. The overlap continues with a clear link to Morris’ view that work should be pleasurable (non-alienating) (Kinna, 2000; Morris, 1884).

Alizadeh’s work is the most orthodox in regard to the value debate in the arts, particularly in articulating an important distinction between neoliberal and Statist valorisations of instrumental value (art is ‘good’ for us) versus a more progressive role for art in which it has the capacity to overcome our unconscious acceptance of bourgeois ideology by “demonstrating to the best of the artist’s productive ability, that we should neither acquiesce to the diktats of capital, nor live in abject fear of them” (2019: 132). While I have no doubt that some art does in fact live up to this very high standard, not all art does and, indeed, we could suggest that some very aesthetically pleasing art has no intention of playing this role and does not even do so accidentally. This is the historic problem of attempting to define any intrinsic use-value in art, particularly in isolation of any information or knowledge about how it was produced and under what social conditions. It was a problem familiar to Marx and Engels, but not one that either of them explored systematically (Solomon, 1979; Alizadeh, 2019). The basic question for aesthetics is: Can a work of art carry an

unalienated and progressive ideological meaning without some intent on the part of the artist? Alternatively, can socially engaged or progressive art (La Berge, 2019) carry its message to an audience if it lacks a basic pleasant aesthetic form. For example, Picasso's *Guernica* may be considered a great piece of 20th Century art by one of its greatest artists, but why?

On one level *Guernica*'s greatness is attached to what Walter Benjamin would call Picasso's "aura" as a great artist. An aura is both the "genuineness" or uniqueness of an artwork and the artist's reputation and is historically embellished over an artist's lifetime via recognition, fame and infamy (Benjamin, 1936: 233). *Guernica* is good art because it was produced by a good artist. On a second level, considered aesthetically, *Guernica* is a great artwork because it is an excellent example of 20th century Cubist expressionism on a large scale. Leaving aside our impressions of Cubism and Picasso's style, *Guernica* is also a great art work because of its attachment to a particular moment in 20th Century history—the bombing of the Basque city of Guernica from the air by German and Spanish fascist planes in April 1937 as part of Franco's advance on Bilbao during the Spanish civil war. Indeed, on one reading, *Guernica* is also interpreted as a commentary on the Stalinist obliteration of the anarchist and Trotskyist tendencies within the nationalist forces, in particular the forced dissolution of the POUM factions (Afinoguenova, 2018). Individually each of these could be an intrinsic value of the artwork and each of them links specifically to an aesthetic interpretation. Then we come to the question of the value of *Guernica* expressed as price, and while it has never been on the market, it has an estimated value of \$US 200 million (ET Bureau, 2018). From a political economy perspective there is almost no way to explain the estimated sale price for *Guernica* in terms of the labour theory of value, and this is the starting point for both Beech and La Berge who seize on the lack of a direct link between most artistic production and the labour theory of value to claim that exceptional conditions apply to the work of artists and to the labour that artists perform. La Berge specifies that her concern is with progressive and "socially-engaged" art, rather than the broader field of aesthetics or the contemporary art "market"; and, in this space, she elucidates the concept of "decommodified" labour which appears at several points and in several guises, none of which is entirely satisfying.

Alizadeh, too, has an explanation for the exceptionalism of artistic labour—it is always concrete labour, and never abstract. Using Marx's distinction, Alizadeh suggests that artistic labour is "concrete" because it only produces use values and these can only be realised in given "material, cultural and historical contexts" (2019, 130). However, "concrete" has another meaning in relation to labour, unlike "abstract" labour it is "unalienated" because it is human labour expended to directly produce use values under conditions where participation in the work is done "consciously and freely"—that is, not subject to exploitative relations of production (94). This produces the satisfaction of "humanity's most basic needs" including works of art that are "inherently useful and valuable" (38). Thus, this non-alienated concrete labour by artists is seized on by both Beech and La Berge as a means of extricating art-as-work from the capitalist mode of production (CMP) as "decommodified" (La Berge, 2019) where, confusingly, "the status of the commodity is preserved, but its circulation is halted and its possibility for exchange is foreclosed" (26). Decommodified labour is unwaged, but that does not mean that the decommodified labourers are freed of the need to work in order to keep themselves alive. However, this problem is not addressed in *Wages Against Artwork*. Instead, non-waged artistic labour is valorised as an antidote to capitalist exploitation and as a "critique" (26) of the total subsumption of labour to capital because it "appears as a strange pause in accumulative temporality" (27). Beech is also oriented to a specific form of non-waged artistic labour that he posits as both unalienated and outside of generalised commodity form. There

is general agreement between Beech and La Berge that artistic work—the labour of producing art—falls outside the typical genealogy of materialist political economy. Despite this, La Berge and Beech are aligned with Alizadeh in attempting to define, analyse and conceptualise art as an artefact of human labour and remove it from the idealist trope of inherent genius and the nihilistic ideology of “art for art’s sake”. I find this formulation—common to all three authors—to be problematic. If the subsumption of labour is proceeding at the pace suggested, then how can the practices of artists be immune? Are we not, in fact, at the point of “life subsumption” or as Vercellone has suggested the “subsumption of general intellect” (Fumagalli, 2015; Vercellone, 2007).

Artwork as decommodified labour

In the opening pages of *Wages Against Artwork*, La Berge stakes a claim to the concept of artistic labour as decommodified: “a kind of everyday, unwaged, yet formal and professional work” by artists (3). For me this raises some further questions that La Berge does not answer; the most pressing of which is: Is there really *any* decommodified labour in a capitalist mode of production? La Berge situates her argument alongside that of the 1970s women’s movement about the unwaged labour of women in a domestic setting, but I am not convinced that this analogy holds. Unwaged domestic labour helps with the reproduction of labour which can then be commodified and sold in competition with other providers of abstract labour power; but artwork produces tangible artefacts which, more often than not, enter the public sphere as commodities. The only way to sustain an argument about the decommodification of artistic labour is to go down the route chosen by Beech—that is, to argue that somehow the labour of artists is exceptional. Put another way, Beech’s argument is that artistic labour exists in a sort of economic bubble carved out from capitalist relations of production.

How is it possible for labour to be decommodified within the capitalist mode of production? Most artists do work outside of a direct commodified relationship with capital, and very few are employed directly by capital as productive (of surplus value) labour. The exceptions are the small armies of assistants who realise the artistic vision of the artworld’s mega-stars. So, for most artists, there is no correspondence between their work and the labour theory of value. The cost-price of artistic works bears little or no relationship to the necessary social labour time of the arts worker. Of course, this is not a blanket rule and it applies more in the fine arts (painting, drawing, sculpture) than it does in the performing arts where there is a closer connection between waged labour and the artefact (a play, concert, etc.). For the most part, labour in the performance sector is unproductive (when state-funded, for example) and only productive when employed by an impresario for profit. Then there are the larger culture industries where artistic labour has a direct relationship with capital—music recording and distribution, mainstream film and even today some social media content creators on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok (Lorenz, 2020). These new platforms and payment systems also raise a question about the status of the semi-professional labour of full-time. “influencer” content makers. For example, some content creators on Tik Tok are paid directly by the platform which appears to commodify their labour even though the payments (approximately 4 cents per 1000 views) are miniscule and totally unrelated to a wage concept (Matsakis, 2020). If we examine this recent phenomenon from the standpoint of La Berge’s concept of decommodified labour, what can we conclude?

Several factors work dialectically to situate art works as commodities, even TikTok videos. The most salient is the ideological pull of commodity fetishism that reduces nearly all relationships

between people and artefacts to a simple commodity transaction. To this we can add the subsumption of leisure and private life into the commodity form. Nevertheless, these broad ideological conditions do not necessarily allow us to make definitive statements about the social conditions pertaining to the labour that produces them. From this we can advance several key propositions:

1. Selling a work of art does not necessarily equate to getting a wage for producing that artefact.
2. Artworks can be commodities in practical and ideological terms (and can be fetishised as such), but this does not equate to commodified production relations.
3. Performative labour—such as producing TikTok videos—remains difficult to quantify as commodified or uncommodified labour.
4. Commodified labour in the culture industries exists on an industrial scale through gallery attendants, museum curators, music studio technicians, advertising, sales, clerical work, stagehands, set and costume designers and so on.

What we are left with is a more general question about the relationship of the aesthetic of art to the political economy of art. Is the aesthetic outside the commodity form? La Berge's conceptualisation of the commodity form and decommodified labour is not necessarily closely aligned with a Marxist understanding of commodities—including labour power. This last point is highlighted by La Berge's definition of decommodified labour as "a kind of work not compensated through a wage or available through a market purchase" (4). The art worker must have a relationship to a market for their product and they must be able to realise an exchange in order to make any kind of living from their practice. La Berge follows a strand of materialist thinking—linked to Adorno and the Frankfurt School – whereby the aesthetic is the realm of play rather than labour. This resonates with Beech's claims for artwork as unalienated labour and, therefore, outside of exploitative and alienating relations of production. I am ambivalent on this issue. Certainly, artistic labour can be—but is not always – outside of commodified relations in that the value of an artefact or production is not measured by clock-time and divided between socially necessary (concrete) labour and abstract labour that produces surplus value. Individual artists (particularly in the fine arts) are not directly producing a commodity in the sense that their surplus labour is appropriated to capital or alienated by the commodity form. However, the general social shape of the products of artistic labour is defined by commodification. The art market operates specifically as a site of commodity exchange, and works are valued according to specific criteria in order to determine a price. We can also add that, in the case of high-end and so-called 'valuable' art, artworks function as investment-commodities in the money-commodity-money value chain (M-C-M) where use value is "only a vanishing moment in the valorization of capital" (Brown, 2012) [3]. In this regard, artworks can effectively become investments—repositories of capital take out of circulation but accruing value in the same way that stocks, bonds and cash reserves accrue interest. For example, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* was sold for \$450 million—allegedly to a prince in the Saudi royal family—and it has not been seen since. As was noted in the *Financial Review*; "You don't pay \$US 450 million for wall decoration", it is art as investment; a "store of value" that appreciates and can be realised at a later date even though it might be an "irrational" asset (Bailey, 2019).

Locating value in art

There are many forms of value embedded in works of art and artistic performance. Following Alizadeh's lead we can nominate five: instrumental, intrinsic, aesthetic, ideological and economic. Each has a different valence in the debate about value. The instrumental refers to some perceived benefit that the arts bring forward in society—such as improving health outcomes or creating employment opportunities in economically depressed regions. There is a clear overlap here with economic value, but for the purpose of analytic clarity, we should confine economic value to a discussion of, price, profitability and the production or transfer of value. The intrinsic value of art is closely related to the aesthetic and the appreciation of beauty as felt subjectively and emotionally by the consumer of art. The ideological is perhaps related to both intrinsic and instrumental value in that art plays a role in defining the aesthetic values of a class (and in either upholding or undermining the power of a class). Both Beech and La Berge tend to focus on arts practice in relation to the potential of art to attack, erode or critique the power of capital.

How do we place a monetary value on art? In some ways this is a simple question to answer—the value of art is determined market forces, the simple arithmetic of supply and demand. According to art conveyancer and critic Michael Findlay, the value of a work of art is dependent on size—larger works being more expensive than smaller ones—and also on factors such as media, colours and the reputation of the artist. Overall, Findlay (2014: 21) observes, the price of art “is governed by supply, demand and marketing”. Thus, the *Mona Lisa*, perhaps the most famous painting in the world, is said to be valued at \$2.67 billion dollars today (DrFazal, 2019). The *Mona Lisa* reaches this astronomical estimate because of its rarity—there is only one—and its provenance as being a work attributed to the well-known Renaissance painter, Leonardo da Vinci. *Mona Lisa* is also perhaps the most heavily marketed painting of the modern era and a marker of Benjamin's argument that once significant and unique works of art become commonplace through mechanical reproduction. The *Mona Lisa* has become emblematic of the complete subsumption of art into the commodity form. The artwork has lost whatever “aura” it might have held in the age of its conception such that it now has “entirely new functions” (Benjamin, 1936: 238). These are mostly symbolic and ideological, but in the digital realm, the starting point for many memic appropriations. For many people, one must also consider that the *Mona Lisa* has become the whole of art; it may well be the only so-called masterpiece that they can name and vaguely describe.

In Marx' terms we would describe the \$2.67 billion price tag as the “exchange value” of the *Mona Lisa*, or, more simply, the price one would have to pay to acquire the painting if it should ever come on the market, as was half-jokingly suggested a few years ago to paydown France's enormous national debt (Hamzoui, 2014). The figure of \$2.67 billion is the nominal value placed on this artwork by the neoliberal market, but we must also be able to measure the value of a painting or other artistic creation in a non-monetary way too. This a key idea shared by all three authors under discussion here.

Alizadeh draws a distinction between the instrumental and intrinsic value of art, and, at one level, this equates to a distinction between the exchange value and the use value of an artwork. This is an important distinction and, as Alizadeh explains, it is traceable through the writings of Marx himself. Marx was not, first and foremost a critic or theorist of art per se, though through a close and careful reading of key passages, Alizadeh pieces together the fragments of what he argues is a cohesive theory of art that resonates with the humanism of the younger Marx and aligns with his later economic works on the labour theory of value, the dialectic between nature and labour and

theories of alienation. However, there is little agreement on what the intrinsic value of art might be. Is it aesthetic and defined by notions of beauty? If so, is this a universal ideal, or one subject to change depending on social setting? Alternatively, is the intrinsic value of art something embedded in the meaning of the work? This is certainly one definition broached by Marx himself, particularly in relation to literature. He famously quipped that he had learned more from some British novelists than from battalions of politicians and professors. For Marx, the intrinsic value of Dickens, Thackeray and others is their ability to strip bare the class relations of their own society, even though they are not, themselves, revolutionaries. But not all art serves this function; thus, the criteria for determining an intrinsic or a use value in a work of art must be broader than political intent, whether overt or unintended.

Does art have an intrinsic value?

Alizadeh insists that a major part of his purpose in writing *Marx and Art* is to rescue the idea that art has an intrinsic value—often equated with art’s use value—that transcends its instrumentality as an embodiment of exchange value or as a didactic statement. In the introduction, the author sets out his claim that Marx himself “was able to provide an important and compelling account of art” which proposes an “intrinsic use-value” for art, that (paraphrasing Marx) amounts to “the practice (and not the outcome) of producing unalienating theoretical or mental objects or artworks” (Alizadeh, 2019: 16, parentheses in original).

But how do we assess this in relation to, for example, da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*? Is the intrinsic value of an artwork its ability to transcend “its creators intent and class position” as critic and art historian Maynard Solomon (1979: 11) notes in the introduction to an edited collection of Marxist writing on art? In other words, is the use value of art equitable with an ability to speak to us in “unalienating” tones across a void of centuries and modes of production? Surely, whatever his motivation for painting *Mona Lisa*, one could not argue that da Vinci’s intent was to transcend his time and place or to reach out to us ideologically beyond his position as a courtier to the wealthy noble elite of 16th Century Florence. According to art historian Donald Sassoon, da Vinci’s intent was much more prosaic, to produce a portrait for a wealthy client. He adds that what we today see as an enigmatic smile was in da Vinci’s time considered “beautiful, not enigmatic or mysterious” (Sassoon, 2001: 6). In this observation we see how accretions of taste and ideology distort and shift the value of this work.

Mona Lisa is among the “most celebrated” works of art in what is known as the Western canon, which already situates it within an epochal political economy and an ideological superstructure, but it is, in essence, a portrait of a wealthy Florentine woman (Sassoon, 2001) with a puzzling (to modern viewers) smile and set in an indistinct landscape that lacks real perspective and cannot be easily placed, despite decades of speculation and claims that it is near either Montefeltro or Bobbio, two regions in northern Italy (King, 2013). Given what we know, it is hard to see *Mona Lisa* as a work of “unalienating” revolutionary art that transcends class, though its value has escalated dramatically over a period of 500 years. Therefore, perhaps the intrinsic value of *Mona Lisa* is precisely its celebrity status and its price as a (suspect) marker of its quality as a piece of art. The value of the *Mona Lisa* is set by the global art market rather than any intrinsic value it stores as a work of art.

Today, the intrinsic value of *Mona Lisa* is like a patina layered down over time and representing both the story of its creation, the unique features of the painted surface itself and accretions of fame

garnered from a mixture of public curiosity, which gives it a place in contemporary cultural imagination and the exalted physical space the relatively small work occupies in the Louvre. It is a “great” painting in that sense, but it is not “great” in Alizadeh’s terms. The *Mona Lisa* is today admired for its celebrity as much as, or perhaps more than, it is for da Vinci’s mastery of oil paint, composition and technique.

For Dave Beech (2019), the intrinsic value of art might be its transformative power in which it becomes a “battleground of political positions” and, therefore, “good” art is that which promotes positive social change—perhaps towards the popular, but nebulous, state of *post*-capitalism. This is also a problematic position in my view because it is a uniquely instrumentalist—if somewhat naively utopian—characterisation of art that subverts and denies the both the aesthetic qualities and the political economy of art.

Art, I want to suggest, does not exclusively belong to the dominant tendencies of contemporary colonial, patriarchal capitalism but is also a space that hosts the counter-tendencies of decoloniality, desegregation, queering and postcapitalism. (Beech, 2019, Kindle location: 152)

Of course, art can have transformative power, but art cannot, in and of itself, be an engine of collective social change, as Dave Beech seems to be suggesting when he writes “artists measure the criticality of their work through the actual social changes brought about by it” (Location 130). Beech’s stance also appears to an idealist position of assuming that artists can—by sheer will power—remove themselves somehow from the social relations that determine a capitalist mode of production.

Beech makes this explicit in *Art and Postcapitalism*, following on from his previous work arguing that art exists outside of capitalism’s commodity relations. La Berge makes a similar point. And this is the point where Alizadeh’s maxim about going back to the original source—in this case Marx and Engels own writing on art, *viz* the mode of production and social relations—earns its place. Marx and Engels were polymaths and certainly took a keen interest in the arts, particularly historical and contemporary literature. Both were in regular correspondence with authors who sought their opinion on novels and even dramatic scripts. Marx himself had flirted with the idea of poetry as a youth, and both were keen amateur critics. However, this biographical footnote does not make them philosophers *of* art. This also means that while Marxist theory is predicated on its understanding of the social totality (everything contained within a society, including the ideas it generated) it is not *per se* a theory *of* art. Finally, given the last point, there is nothing substantial in any of Marx or Engels many published works that points directly towards a theory of art. Instead we have several fragments that art historians and Marxist theorists have post facto found, analysed and claimed as hinting at a consistent position that can be attributed to Marx and/or Engels. If we are honest, this is all we have, and it is not much. The best attempt I have seen to collate the fragments is in Maynard Solomon’s collection *Marxism and Art*. Even so, the totality of Marx and Engels writing about art amounts to only 50 pages, and many entries are a short paragraph of 50 to 200 words. There are literally a handful of substantial excerpts from Marx and Engels on which a theory of art might be built. This is hardly a solid foundation, but we must work with what we have got. Alizadeh is the only author in our trio who makes any attempt to build a cogent theory of art from the fragments we have. Ultimately, I would argue, Alizadeh lands on an instrumental and didactic theory of art and the aesthetic in which “art’s deeper value” is “necessitated by the dynamics and materiality of the dominant ideological discourses themselves” (130), but he also

posits art as a form of ideological antidote to capitalism “that provides us with an understanding that we have been opiated and that we are complicit in our being drugged and deluded” (131). In this vein, Alizadeh argues “good” art can “rupture our addiction to the opium of religion”. It is a shame that this extraordinary claim appears on the last page of *Marx and Art* and, therefore, is not unpacked. Marxists have been making extraordinary claims about the revolutionary power of art for a long time. William Morris articulated this thesis in 1884, and in 1938 Leon Trotsky joined surrealist painters Andre Breton and Diego Rivera in issuing a manifesto for revolutionary artists to join their struggle against Stalinism; seemingly to no avail. I would make a similar observation about Dave Beech, who puts forward the thesis that there is a form of exceptionalism applied to art practice and the art market that excludes it from Marx’ general theory of political economy and that it is possible to bring about revolutionary change through forms of postcapitalist art practice from within the capitalist mode of production.

Art and revolution

The final observation I would make is that for Alizadeh, La Berge and Beech, there is little actual mention of art *and* the class struggle, which leads to the question I am interested in pursuing: What is the relationship between art and the class struggle? I think this must be an important question in any work that seriously claims to be a Marxist theory of art.

David Beech is directly concerned with the question of what role art might play in overcoming capitalism (he is ambivalent on the revolutionary versus postcapitalist methods of supersession) and begins from the uncontroversial perspective that it has some (if somewhat undefined) role in the process. His concern to work forward from the distinction between what he describes as a “traditional left” position of “emancipation *through* labour” and the postcapitalist “programme” of “emancipation *from* labour” and “the more specific abolition of productive labour” (Location, 191). From the start, I want to express strong disagreement with this formulation. Marx never described proletarian revolution as liberation through labour, and he and Engels also clearly articulated very clearly in *The Communist Manifesto* and other writings that socialism would be precisely the breaking of the shackles on the working class imposed by the rule of capital. The idea of emancipation through labour has distinct overtones of a characterisation more akin to Stalinist obfuscation than to an actual revolutionary strategy proposed by serious Marxists. The abolition of productive labour (labour that produces surplus value and alienation in the working class) is an obvious goal of socialist revolution, but it is not achievable within the confines of capitalist relations of production—there can be no *socialism in one artist’s commune*. I do not believe any of the authors discussed here wish for a return to the anti-aesthetic of Zhdanovism (Solomon, 1979: 235-239), which suborns art to the dictates of the party, but I also think that it is idealistic and overly romantic to think that art can escape the mode of production

Beech also finds fault with the postcapitalist project too, “particularly the absence of art within its visions of emancipation” which he ascribes to the contemporary artist no longer appearing as “exemplary of an exceptional type of nonalienated labour” and instead signifying “the typical worker of post-Fordism” (225). I am not sure that I agree with this oversimplification of where artists’ labour sits in relation to the capitalist mode of production; but I do see the fault with postcapitalist theory that Beech is alluding to, its belief in “the complete abolition of work” in a post-capitalist society. I am not *au fait* with postcapitalist theory, but, on my reading of Beech, I would suggest that he and they perhaps suffer from a category error and confuse the distinct

concepts of “labour” and “work” as they appear in Marxist political economy. Reading Beech leads me to the conclusion that postcapitalism is, at its core, a reactionary program that shifts the focus of revolutionary struggle from class politics to an amorphous intersectionalism that is hostile to the working class on ultimately sectarian grounds; it is also technophilic in an unhealthy way. It appears to suggest that the only way to abolish labour in a post-capitalist world would be to completely automate everything and turn all control functions over to artificial intelligence. I am too human to find that a comforting thought.

In summary, this trio of books captures an important theoretical moment in the discussion of the dialectic between the aesthetic and a political economy of art (as both artefact and production process). The exposition of decommodification put forward by La Berge is appealing, but problematic. Dave Beech’s critique of postcapitalism is also convincing, but it is incomplete and Alizadeh’s attempt to fashion a profoundly Marxist theory of art really needs to tackle art in relation to the class struggle in order to be complete.

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Endnotes

- [1] The distinction between concrete and abstract labour is important in Marxist political economy. Concrete labour is the actual work—chair-making, hairdressing, building bridges, etc.—performed by workers and resulting in a distinct product, commodity or service. Abstract labour is “labour in general” not specific to any particular activity. Concrete labour is always necessary to satisfy human needs on both an individual and collective basis. Concrete labour is measured by clock-time. Abstract labour is measured according to the value it produces. Labour as a commodity expresses the social relationship between its concrete and abstract component as the “double nature of wage labour”. Abstract labour is the source of value and surplus value, it is the historically determined formless expenditure of human labour involved in commodity production (for detail, see Sadd-Filho, 1997; Baronian, 2013).
- [2] In Capital Volume 1, Marx talks about how labour is subordinated to capital dialectically and through the process of combined and uneven development. Capital’s aim is to totally control (subsume) labour. Formal subsumption of labour to capital occurs in the initial stages of capitalism and is manifest in a series of production and consumption relations mediated through the class struggle. Formal subsumption occurs on the basis of the level of development of the forces of production—exploitation can only be increased by making the worker labour for longer. On the other hand, real subsumption occurs on the basis of technological advances which reduces necessary labour-time (where the worker produces in order to reproduce their means of existence).
- [3] I am using M-C-M here because this is the term that Nicholas Brown uses, but it is perhaps better understood as M-M because the first investment M_1 does not produce a new commodity before being realised again as capital M_2 . The artwork is a commodity in name (ideologically), but it really is acting like gold bullion, or a term deposit or cash bond that earns interest for the investor.

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