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Law of value based on contact and representation : An ethnographic study

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Abstract: The aim of this text is to depict the evolution of change in representations of labor and value in a neoliberal society. This evolution is shown through ethnographical studies of small companies in the Upper Silesia as well as the work performed in such companies. The study argues that due to the influence of neoliberal ideology, the social functioning of labor and value has evolved from the class paradigm in the industrial society to a discontinuous structure of the set in the contemporary society. Labor has also changed its measurable representative features. For example, labor is no longer perceived through the lens of worktime or effort, but rather through the lens of value. The text constitutes an analysis of the changes in the labor and value structure and how this structure is perceived in a neoliberal society.

Key words: neoliberalism, labor, value, ethnography

Słowa kluczowe: neoliberalizm, praca, wartość, etnografia

In Marx's works the production sphere and the circulation sphere are distinctly separated from each other. In the production sphere, the worker sells his labour to the owner of the means of production, while in the circulation sphere, the product of labour is turned into capital and here appears the idea which Marx defined as the surplus product. What is crucial in Marx's work is the realization of the fact that the capitalist economy generally has to be based on illusion, or rather on a series of illusions. The worker selling his labour is convinced that

he enters into an equal contract; at the same time, however, he cannot be aware of the processes related to the product of his work. The question is how those illusions operate today in the world of global economy based on a paradigm of neoliberalism. Although Marx's presentation of the Capital's working scheme is still valid, its setting in the common vision of the world has certainly changed. Nowadays we recognize labour, as well as our position on the market, in a different way; today, perhaps, we put more emphasis on other economic instruments. However, two facts still remain immutable. Firstly, the Capital has to be based on illusions out of necessity. Secondly, such illusions become the basis for the image of the world and, as a consequence, for acting in it. In my research I aimed to analyse the ways in which the labour, production and creation of value—and, as a result, the capital—are organized in contemporary neoliberal economics. These notions undoubtedly alter their cultural and linguistic meaning due to the paradigmatic changes in the very structure of global economy. I decided to limit my research to the analysis of the setting of several small companies, the work performed in those companies as well as capital circulation. I was particularly interested in the issue of ideas about economic processes that have been the basis of the categorization of the world (linguistic image of the world), and as a result have become the basis of actual actions in such world (none of the tested entrepreneurs had specialist knowledge of economy or management and all of them, to a lesser or greater extent, remain successful).

How should we understand the term enterprise? Frédéric Lordon emphasizes that it refers predominantly to a certain way of perceiving the world, which takes into consideration the first person perspective and his/her desires.

Also ambitious development of an enterprise that requires referring to cooperation raises the issue of the forms of such cooperation. It is about the problem of political participation of the collective production processes in the organization and expropriating the products of such collective activities.¹

Thus, the problem in question applies to at least two issues. Firstly, the enterprise, as a peculiar basis of social existence, creates an area of fulfilment of a certain desire (a desire expressed in the first person), the desire of an owner. Secondly, such enterprise deals with value (or rather values), that is such entities which produce capital. If other people are necessary for the accomplishment of such desire, then those people also operate as a kind of value, since their activities and functions (based on an individual desire) are submitted to the first-person desire. Therefore, for Lordon, the enterprise functions within the general market space, where it creates its own social unit driven by the peculiar desire. In other

¹ F. LORDON: *Kapitalizm, niewola i pragnienie. Marks i Spinoza*. Trans. M. KOWALSKA, M. KOZŁOWSKI. Warszawa 2012, p. 21–22.

words, the enterprise is the difference between the market, as a form, and a particular individual's desire as the realization of such form.

I claim that the neoliberal ideology has made a change in the perception of labour and value. Discussions about the status of immaterial labour can be an example of such change. Even though, from the perspective of political economics analysis, the abovementioned ideas function as separate ones, they do not differ so much within the social practice. The key to understanding the change in the attitude is not the notion of labour, but the notion of value and property. In my article I would like to demonstrate that in the social space, the work is not done by a man, but by a thing which has its own value equal with money (capital).² In neoliberal ideology, possession of the thing or the product (e.g. an iPhone or a particular car) makes the access to a certain desire possible. The sheer possession of such thing multiplies the value of the owner in the social network, which translates into capital (what is interesting, diplomas of certain universities or specialist knowledge also function in the same way). Exactly the same attitude concerns the possession of a particular brand in the wide range, as well as the possession of just the general form. However, it should be emphasized that it does not mean the physical work has vanished. What it really means is that in the social perception, on the awareness level, it changes its symbolic reference and is conceptualized differently, as a matter of fact, in the same way as the value. In a more general sense, it cannot be said that the processes characteristic of capitalism, described at least since the days of Marx, have disappeared or changed radically. It rather means that neoliberalism has altered the ways of forming them within the social network; therefore, we rather deal here more with change on the awareness level.

The consumption of labour-power is at same time the production process of commodities and of surplus-value. The consumption of labour-power is completed, as in the case of every other commodity, outside the market or the sphere of circulation. Let us therefore, in company with the owner of the money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the note "No admittance except on business." Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. The secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare.³

² J. WEEKS: *The Law of Value and the Analysis of Underdevelopment*. "Historical Materialism" 1996, No. 12, p. 94.

³ K. MARX: *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. B. FOWEKS. London 1976, p. 279–280.

Towards an ethnography of the capital

My research into the labour process and production of value was conducted by means of participant observation, discourse analysis (especially in the aspect of labour and enterprise) and in-depth free-form interviews. The field of research was limited to the Upper Silesia, due to the existence of a particular ideology of the cult of (physical) work in this region. The change in the attitude towards such work was symptomatic here and significant for the understanding of more general shifts in the ways of labour conceptualization. The work ideology in Silesia has already been widely described in ethnographic literature; therefore, I will not elaborate on that in significant detail.⁴ Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that it related closely to industrial capitalism and constituted the legacy of the working conditions in Silesian mines and steelworks, peculiarly understood religious ethos (*ora et labora*), as well as many other cultural and historical factors. In a general sense, it can be said that carrying out physical work (or rather the peculiar attitude to carrying out such work) constituted the basis for creating the cultural identity of the Silesians.

In my research, that Silesian mythology of work appeared to me as the symptom of changes in the perception of the intersection of labour and value in the neoliberal model. Such an attitude becomes visible in the relation between those performing physical work and the entrepreneurs; the third element I employed was the intellectual work, which is always less valorised than physical work. In the structural sense, there exists a parity between intellectual work (university employee, writer, teacher, etc.) and entrepreneur's work. However, in Silesia I could observe that while intellectual work was significantly less valorised, the attitude towards an enterprise was ambivalent. As long as a person carries out physical work, running the company is not perceived as performing labour.⁵ The moment when the person either becomes self-employed or starts his or her own company, the work involving circulation of value turns into work in the strict sense. What is interesting, at that point also the attitude towards intellectual work began to change. It stopped being recognized as incomplete work (not-work) and began to be regarded as the same work as entrepreneur's work, only involving the area which does not bring income (work without value, empty).

⁴ See: M.G. GERLICH: *To my prawdziwi Górnoślązacy... studium etnologiczne*. Katowice—Warszawa 2010.

⁵ At this point it is difficult to grasp the moment of historic transition of the attitude towards the way a company is run. While until the first decade of the 21st century the company was associated with something not entirely legal, later, due to the quite successful undermining of the state's or community's role, the approach changed. Criminal activities did not so much begin to be positively valorised as operating on the edge of the law started to seem acceptable. At the moment when the state intervened in those areas with some regulations, the conviction that it "disturbs" the entrepreneurs was confirmed.

The division into material and non-material labour, due to the change of the work's nature in contemporary capitalism is not connected with the work's character as such, but with the change in the perception of objects producing the value. In the perception of non-material as well as material labour, we deal with the subject of labour regarded as an object. Such an object can be a derivative of knowledge or physical work. However, it is not about its production, construction, or transformation of nature, but about the value that this object represents and makes possible through reference to money.⁶

Nature-culture

In the anthropological understanding, nature is treated as a field of something that the human being, in spite of functioning in it, has no access to, whereas culture is limited to the area of human activity and endeavours. It can be said that in anthropology, nature is comprehended as an active being, independent from man (the universe as a whole, as well as the natural world, within which the sphere of human activity, that is to say culture, is created).⁷ Michael Jackson, on the other hand, associates this opposition with the functional aspect, where culture is everything that results from human activity, while the remaining part is nature.⁸ However, such a distinction is currently not sufficient. Generally speaking, as Ludwik Stomma points out, it is impossible to separate nature from culture, since the "natural" will always be expressed in the "cultural."⁹

The problem crucial for me can, however, be revealed when we assume such operational distinction into culture and nature with a small addition. The notion of "nature" is not about something that actually refers to some extracultural reality, but about something that, as a part of cultural reality, is recognized as natural. For that reason, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the way in which the notion of "nature" with reference to capitalism has been changing in the historical perspective. The notion of "nature" in modernity referred to something which, although in a way organized, was not recognized by man yet. Therefore, "nature," like modern capitalism, was characterised by a kind of organization; however, the organization was not yet available to the human being. The fundamental difference lay in the fact that capitalism, despite everything, was a sphere created by man. In other words, it operated in the field of culture (or rather: political

⁶ J. WEEKS: *The Law of Value and the Analysis of Underdevelopment...*, p. 94.

⁷ W.J. BURSZA: *Od mowy magicznej do szumów popkultury*. Warszawa 2009, p. 28.

⁸ M. JACKSON: *Existential Anthropology. Events, Exigencies and Effects*. New York—Oxford 2005, p. 124.

⁹ L. STOMMA: *Natura: kultura*. "Polska Sztuka Ludowa—Konteksty" 1997, No. 1–2, p. 141.

economics). The understanding of the role of natural sciences was based on the cumulative rule—such sciences aimed at getting to know the natural world as a whole, which was supposed to be organized, logical, etc. Capitalist processes were recognized in a similar way; however, they were not placed on the side of nature.¹⁰ A radical change took place sometime around the 1960s, when capitalism, in neoliberal writings, ceased to be rational, feasible to grasp (culture), and instead it became the “natural” area, separate from any (cultural) interventions, which can be studied just like nature in the works of modern naturalists. Current political model is, after all, based not so much on the discussion whether another system can be imagined, but on the discussion whether it can be influenced (culture—state interventions) or not (nature—free market).

The issue of understanding capitalism in terms of nature is not new; however, it explains a lot of processes that can be observed in the ethnographic experience. At the moment, while examining the labour processes, we should not look at them from the perspective of methodology (conveying the labour today in a better or worse way), but from the viewpoint of ontology, where everything that produces capital is regarded as work. The circulation of objects transforms a collection of objects into value (capital). In neoliberal capitalism it does not mean the process (work), but the possession; therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the ways in which things—use values—come into being and how they produce value (what such production appears to be).

Property as an illusion of labour

Three of the cases I observed concerned a special form of things management, which was treated as work due to the fact that it yielded capital (sustained the circulation of capital). The first case involved something that can be described as non-material labour. Person X, while working for several years as a forwarding agent in a big transport company, has gained access to a lot of information, contacts and private connections linked with the carriage of goods. Person X quits the job in this company (stops functioning in the area of selling his work time) and on his own, in extralegal form, organizes transport for the fellow entrepreneurs, charging them a little for every kilometre of cargo transportation. Such a small fee constituted a very considerable amount every month. Person X was not working in the material or non-material sense—he was just enabling direct contact between the entrepreneur

¹⁰ I am talking here in a much simplified way; however a kind of culmination in the perception of capitalism in the area of culture is John Maynard Keynes' political economy.

owning a transport company and someone who wanted to freight some commodities through a shipping company. This person's work consisted in having and sharing knowledge (treated as an object/thing directly providing income). In the second example, Person Y, thanks to own work, loans and numerous different factors, becomes the owner of a substantial collection of specialist machines and devices enabling transport and, among others, construction works. Person Y makes such machines and devices available for a fixed charge (as a legally operating company). For people who begin their business activity but do not possess the means for a loan or purchase of their own equipment, it is a profitable transaction. Person Y's work consists in managing the collection of possessions (machines and devices, in Marx's terminology that would be the collection of means of production). And finally, person Z accepts outsourcing orders connected with women's work—it means delegating work requiring precision and concentration, which a machine cannot perform. This work consists in very careful (by means of a scalpel) cutting of car gaskets from the elements burnt-on during the production. Therefore the company hires a subcontractor who, through specific task contracts or beyond contracts, has a collection of people who can carry out such work.

One of the problems of my research was the way the examined subjects function within the wide economic system or market. The certificate shows that none of them has had anything to do with the theoretical side of economics. Thus, how is it possible to operate on the market without elementary economic knowledge? The examined person Z worked physically for some time, trying more or less to obtain money and idea for his own business activity. Thanks to going abroad, having marketable skills and special qualifications, as well as some illegal activities that this person did not want to talk about, he managed to collect money for the business activity (we can, in some sense, talk about primitive accumulation here). Person Z has, more or less, functioned as part of widely understood discourse about resourcefulness and doing business. Such discourse constitutes a combination of a certain personal experience and observation carried out during work in another company (where this person was watching the way the work was organized, as well as the model of running the company by the management), the things that "are said" about running the company (in more or less formal conversations with people already running small businesses), as well as the combination of so-called folklore knowledge (based on the knowledge obtained from popular films, jokes, legends about entrepreneurs and media narrations). For instance, it could be concluded from the conversations with person Z how much he is impressed by the popular figure of a gangster/businessman (such a combination stems from the popular belief that "the first million has to be stolen").

Around the year 2000 there appeared a series of comedy films portraying the experiences of Polish gangsters, that is to say the people whose model of

primitive accumulation was based on criminal activity.¹¹ Those films proved to be really popular; as a matter of fact, I have heard numerous references to such films during my current research. The model of creating their own identity of an entrepreneur, at the moment of primitive accumulation, that is the moment of gathering funds to set up a company, related very strongly to the conduct of such gangsters. Nevertheless, it does not mean the reproduction of criminal activity (even though I have observed actions on the edge of the law, and even have been able to learn a bit about some activities that were outright breaking the law, the reference to business activity is rather meant to present a certain behaviour pattern, cynical attitude towards the world, the law and radical orientation towards profit). Therefore, a certain entry point for the creation of a company is a collection on the symbolic level, containing both the directly heard information (from the more experienced entrepreneurs) and popular culture clichés and forms. On the other hand, there is the level of conception about the business activity itself, i.e. a certain idea and the access point built on the basis of such a symbolic level.¹² There exists also the third level, that is to say the level of real economic and social processes that are detected and analysed by, for instance, political economy or critical theory. The in-depth interviews, as well as participant observation confirm that the cases I examined construct their activities at the intersection of three overlapping levels. What is essential here is the last level, the level of real economic processes forming the social processes. In Marx, this level corresponds to the base level. It means that the level of reality creates the specific form of the conceptualization of the world (folklore talks about the linguistic image of the world), which becomes the basis for understanding of what is conveyed on the level of symbolic discourse, as well as the desire being the cornerstone of setting up one's own company. To paraphrase Marx's famous saying: "the key to understanding entrepreneur's physiognomy is to understand the general form of economics."

Value based on contact

As Ladislau Dowbor wrote, the rich buy property, while the poor buy goods which allow them to survive.¹³ Such a distinction is extremely important here, as it presents the contemporary models of the real value relationship. In my research

¹¹ Examples of films: "Chłopaki nie płaczą" ("Boys don't cry") 2000, directed by Olaf Lubaszenko; "Kiler" 1997, directed by Juliusz Machulski; "Poranek Kojota" ("Coyote's Morning"), 2001, directed by Olaf Lubaszenko.

¹² F. LORDON: *Kapitalizm, niewola i pragnienie...*, p. 20–22.

¹³ L. DOWBOR: *Demokracja ekonomiczna*. Trans. Z.M. KOWALEWSKI. Warszawa 2009, p. 16.

it is clearly visible that there exists a certain threshold of the owned capital, which can never be crossed by the examined entrepreneurs, at least according to their views. The point is that their companies are based solely on the circulation of value, and to be more precise, the circulation of certain things/objects (knowledge can also be such an object). For instance, person Y will be able to increase the collection of machines and devices he owns, but without exceeding the ownership threshold of the brand of a given machine. In other words, the resourcefulness can be based on the infinite movement of value (where it obtains the capital from), but it will not even get close to the ownership of the value itself. Let me give an example. In the age of consumerist lifestyle, the owned consumer goods are what reflects one's social status. For instance an iPhone has both practical worth (making calls, listening to music, etc.) and representational worth value. The owner of the iPhone, due to the cultural characteristics connected with this device (creativity, youth, etc.), also has a social value just because of the fact of owning the iPhone (symbolic capital). The social worth of the iPhone's owner increases proportionally to the amount of things/objects fitted with the desirable cultural features and values. Such a collection of values can increase and change infinitely; however, the real value, which produces capital, stands on the side of the owner manufacturing iPhones. The general process of value (at this level corresponding to the ownership of the whole iPhone brand) has its embodiment in the particular value process (having a certain iPhone). In reference to my research, such a relation looks as follows: all the people running companies base their activities on reproducing the general ownership relationship at the level of their enterprise. It has to be emphasized that in the social perception, there is no difference between owning a small company (e.g. the ones I examined) and owning, for instance, the property right to manufacture certain products that most often stand on the side of corporations.¹⁴

There is a fundamental difference in the sheer notion of value, which in the neoliberal economics shows the axis between labour and capital. The levels and areas to which refers are certainly diversified and they work and function in various manners, but I would like to approach the way that value appears to the entrepreneurs at the level of real economy. From the perspective of a Marxist analysis, I am interested in the level of commodities fetishism, treated not as a separate addition to the Marxian theory of value, but as a mode of creating the way of conceptualizing the world, whose consequences are specific value, specific labour and specific capital.¹⁵ For Marx, the objective economic base is

¹⁴ The analogy gets even more visible after analysing the discourse concerning "oppressing" the entrepreneurs by the state. From this perspective the entrepreneurs having a small company identify with enterprise in the form of a corporation, even though at the level of precise analysis, they correspond better to the position of such a corporation's employee.

¹⁵ I.I. RUBIN: *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*. Trans. M. SAMARDZIJA, F. PERLMAN. Montreal—New York 1990, p. 5.

conditioned by a fetishist illusion which allows transforming the objectified economic categories into “objective” forms of thoughts.¹⁶ In other words, the goods illusion forms the way of looking at the reality as such. One could find numerous specific examples of such mediation, for instance in the relationship between the owner and the employees. The observable attitude of entrepreneur Z towards his employees was based on looking at them as a thing that is followed by a certain value and, as a result, capital. The more workers entrepreneur Z had, the greater value such a collection of things produced.

From the entrepreneurs’ perspective, their business consists in owning a certain number of things (transport machines, knowledge, manpower) which, when put in motion, produce capital. So, such things have a certain value, but what kind of value and how is it created? From the perspective of how the things are perceived by the entrepreneurs, labour consists in owning certain resources, that is to say things having a practical worth (a car for the transport of goods); in turn, the practical worth represents their exchange value that is transformed into capital. However, the objects/things in the collection itself have yet another kind of value. First of all, there is the value resulting from contact. At the elementary level, the sheer possession of things appoints a given identity of the owner (particular entrepreneur, or one or the other kind of consumer—an iPhone makes a hipster, etc.)—as such, the bigger the collection of things having a specific practical value, the greater the value of the person being the owner of such a collection is. In the cultural space, the owned consumerist commodities create a certain identity. In the area that I examined, the size of the owned collection of things (practical values) is directly proportional to the exchange value that this collection represents. In the case of Person X, whose work was based on the fact of having a collection of knowledge about transport, the more connections he had, the more he was worth. One shipment, being a derivative of one connection, translated into e.g. the value of 0.10 PLN per kilometre. Let us suppose that this connection assumes transporting the goods twice a week between Łódź and Prague (546 kilometres), which amounts to 109.2 PLN every week and 436.8 PLN every month. If there were two connections on the same route, Person X would earn 873.6 PLN etc. After contacting the entrepreneur being in possession of the means of transport with the entrepreneur wanting to transport something, the whole work consists just in possessing the collection. Person Y, owning a collection of machines and vehicles, operates in a similar way. The bigger the collection, the greater the exchange value; the capital and the labour consist here only in the very fact of ownership.

If the collection represents a certain value, then the greatest value and capital appear through the possession of a certain brand, patent, etc. Thus, the real capital is not produced until the level of ownership of production resources, which

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 6.

nowadays very often takes the form of the ownership of the value circulation resources. If person Y owns a certain collection that represents a certain value, then owning the very brand of such construction equipment allows having the ownership over such collections of companies that generally produce certain value and certain capital. I have to refer one more time to the iPhone example. The very possession of the iPhone is connected to its particular practical worth (making calls, etc.) as well as the exchange value (the iPhone costs such and such amount of money); moreover, the iPhone has the value resulting from contact (the more gadgets like that, the bigger the social and cultural worth of this person is) and finally, what is the essential stake of these deliberations, value resulting from representation, that is the value that appears through the ownership of the very brand, in the form of the iPhone.

Ownership as labour

The stake of neoliberal capitalism is the transformation of work relationships. At this point it is essential to extend or rather transform the notion of labour. Firstly we need to realize the fact of the very change in the notion of nature (natural world). The human activities referred to as labour apply to the transformation of nature. What is crucial within the neoliberal capitalism is the relationship of value, which constitutes the basis for identity as well as represents labour (“everyone who wants to work will make a pile,” “only through hard work can you achieve something”). Thus, the objective indication of labour is the size of the collection of what one owns. The key here is to acknowledge three notions as “natural”: labour, value and ownership. Producing each of them is prohibited since it is recognized as natural (it is the level of value creating the representation of value, capital—owning the very form of the iPhone). Such prohibition applies to the whole sphere of political economics. The manner in which each of the abovementioned notions functions today, the way they were created during historic development, and the way they are formed in the social capital circulation have been prohibited. Production of labour, production of value and production of ownership seem as the natural features of things and people, hence the perception of ownership as the representation of labour.

Let us get back to the previously mentioned mythology of work in the Upper Silesia. During the period of industrial capitalism, only the production work was subject to mythologization. It was about the direct transformation of nature. In my research determining the transformations of labour, mythologization constitutes, as I have already mentioned, one of the symptomatic indications of the change connected with the neoliberal ideology. Person H is a formal contrac-

tual worker in a great plant (belonging to an international industrial concern). Moreover, he works in the forest industry. After Person A opens a business venue, Employee H enters with him into an informal arrangement to additionally work in such a business on the organization of a fuel-related company. In the Upper Silesia, in many cases the work mythology caused people to combine work with fun from the early childhood days;¹⁷ that is why employee H was not only a common physical worker dealing with simple activities (the loading and unloading of fuel), but also designed and made boxes for coal, constructed the chutes for eco-pea coal, and even took part in reaching the potential customers.

The in-depth interviews enabled me to find that the approach to physical work is completely different than in the mythological attitude towards production work in the industrial age. Those transformations date back at least to the beginning of the century, as we can talk of a certain kind of strengthening of the Polish model of neoliberal capitalism (it started to be identified as a natural state). During the industrial age, the mythology of labour applied to the sheer performing of physical work. Carrying out work was already treated as a prize, as salary in this mythology constitutes a relative phenomenon. The attitude towards physical work in Silesia has been described several times, so it only remains for me to add that the essential issue is to connect the Silesian identity with labour. Doing physical work was not only the transformation of nature, but also a performative gesture of reproducing the identity based on work. Let us get back to Employee H. His justification of the attitude towards work is based on something completely different and that is where the very model of perceiving labour and value is revealed. Thus, transforming the nature ceases to be labour, while everything that allows for acquiring ownership rights becomes labour. In the industrial model of approach towards work, work stops being itself and becomes also the axis of the Silesian identity. Thus, labour appears not as labour but rather as a performative identity ritual. In the neoliberal model we encounter the same transformation in the perception of labour. Here, each activity carried out is not work, but rather owning a certain collection of goods

¹⁷ There is no place here to elaborate on that, but I would just say that it was connected with a specific “lack of time” mythology (observed also in the Czech part of Silesia) and the notion of “szporność” (thriftiness). The free time that the adults had (very often in the region making their living not only off industrial work, but also their own land) was spent on activities loosely connected with work (it is a feature characteristic of peasant classes as such). In Marxist terminology, we would say that the free time was spent on activities connected with non-productive labour (e.g. men: simple carpentry work, mechanics; women: “sztrykowanie”—knitting etc.). Children and young people in many cases copied this model of spending free time; that is why a lot of people, among whom I conducted my research, had numerous practical skills—starting with mechanics, through agricultural labour, transport, electric work, plumbing, etc. For instance, the described worker X designed and built a lift mounted on a tractor relying only on elementary parts, such as pieces of sheet, screws, etc. With reference to “szporność” and free time in Silesia, see: I. BUKOWSKA-FLOREŃSKA. *Rodzina na Górnym Śląsku*. Katowice 2007.

is what is perceived as work. The performative identity ritual stops having the form of a live spectacle and begins to have a form of a static exhibition. The literal displaying of commodities proves the amount of the conducted work and not its performative enactment. Thus, the examined Employee H did not justify his “Silesianness” through reference to the performed work, but through reference to the goods that he can buy thanks to the “Silesianness” (that is to say, the ability to do physical work), without resorting to loans, etc. For Employee H, the constitutive element was building a house for cash—that was why he was practically working triple shifts, frequently availing himself of drugs or using informal contracts in order to sleep off several hours after the night shift and before second or third job.

Labour here is not strictly connected with transforming the nature or producing a certain value; it is rather a measure enabling the access to given values. Thus, as a non-material, abstract force, it finds its representation in the very value that it enables. Understanding the intensity of work appears in the social perception only through the prism of its results. In this way the entrepreneur (Person X, Y, Z) as well as the employee (employee H) carry out work exactly to the same extent. The work of Employee H does not differ from the work of Person X (making his specialist knowledge available); in terms of quality, it is not different than the genuinely hard and exhausting work of Employee H. Therefore, such work, as “invisible,” available only through its results, is measurable only through the size of the collection of things that allows access to.

From the use value to the value based on contact

In Marx, the commodity, that is a thing, can have two kinds of value—use value and exchange value. The use value determines the “usefulness of a given thing,” namely, it refers to what such thing carries with itself, what kind of needs it satisfies. According to Marx, such value is represented in the use or consumption of a particular commodity/thing; however, it is essential to add owning of such thing to that.¹⁸ “They [use values—M.R] constitute the material content of wealth, whatever its social form may be. In the form of society to be considered here they are also the material bearers of... exchange-value.”¹⁹ Therefore, the collection of things having a certain use value fulfils two functions. As individual things within such a collection, they satisfy some needs (of communication, prestige, safety, nutritional needs, etc.), but they also serve as carriers of exchange

¹⁸ K. MARX: *Capital...*, p. 127.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

value. Thus, in Marx, a certain thing/product has the use value (qualitative); however, in a form of the collection, the same things have also the exchange value (quantitative). The bigger the number of things/goods having a certain use value, the greater exchange value of the collection as a whole is. While the use value appears in relation to the one who owns, the exchange value appears in the relation between the one who owns and the “social form.” In other words, the exchange value of the collection of use values can occur only within the network of social exchange, where it represents a certain exchange value.

Let us now take two commodities, for example corn and iron. Whatever their exchange relation may be, it can always be represented by equation in which a given quantity of corn is equated to some quantity of iron, for instance 1 quarter of corn = x cwt of iron. What does this equation signify? It signifies that a common element of identical magnitude exist in two different things, in 1 quarter of corn and similarly in x cwt of iron. Both are therefore equal to third thing, which in itself is neither the one nor the other.²⁰

Thus, every practical thing in the collection of goods has reference to the third element, meaning a certain form that the product takes on in the social circulation. I have already used the example of an iPhone. iPhone has a certain use value, but what matters the most is the fact that it also has the reference to the third element. From the iPhone brand owner’s or seller’s, i.e. middleman’s point of view, the use value does not count; what counts instead is the third element, that is to say the exchange value. In other terms, while one iPhone has a certain use value, it can also function as an exchange value in the market circulation. However, it is also a representative of that third element, where its value is determined by the amount of the individual products sold. Such a third element is the value represented by the whole collection of iPhones, thus this value is on the side of the iPhone brand’s owner and coincides with the surplus of value. In Marx, the surplus occurs through seizure of the fruit of the worker’s labour. In the cases that I examined, such surplus is the effect of circulation (a kind of work) of commodities and things; therefore, it corresponds to representing a certain circulation, representing the ownership of a particular collection.

This is how the issue looks like from the perspective of economics; however, when we consider it from the perspective of entrepreneurs and employees, we have to refer to slightly different categories. In the social circulation, such a game of values not so much appears different, but the economic circulation is defined with different terms and differently presented within linguistic categories. Therefore it is not about the precision of economic terminology, but the way such terms function in the social circulation, which cultural forms are applied in order to use them. As I already mentioned in the beginning, the entrepreneurs that I examined, as well as the workers, certainly do not have any knowledge

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 127.

about the mechanisms of economics; their expertise is the conglomeration of their own experience, common knowledge and observation, but at the same time it is so significant that it constitutes the starting point for activity (work and the functioning of the company).

The way of manufacturing goods, as well as the emergence of value and surplus value belong nowadays to the sphere of “nature” of capitalism. It is, therefore, the area of unavailable and incomprehensible processes. That is why the processes connected with value do not function today within the area of economic phenomena, but in the area of natural phenomena. Things/commodities, having the use value, behave as if the use value, that is Marx’s third element, was a part of them due to the very nature of things and, what is more relevant, as if they did not have the dimension of the exchange value. What does it mean? Owning one specified thing/commodity which has the use value does not automatically appear as something having the exchange value. It is about the fact that the process of acquiring a thing appears as a hidden process; it is the very owning that counts and it cannot be connected with purchasing. If labour functions within the at least covered register, then purchasing is somehow equal with revealing such a register. Things/commodities in the popular culture function in exactly the same way. People just have them. It stems from the close connection between cultural identity and consumption. Exchange value in the social perception does not accompany individual goods/things that we own, but the whole diversified collection of those things. Such a collection has the exchange value only as a whole. Let me refer again to cultural identity—its connection with consumption makes it manifest itself only through owning certain things. Such a collection of commodities/things somehow creates a human being as a whole, like a great diversified, divided body without organs.²¹ The value of such a collection is thus determined through the amount of things that form it. In other terms, the value of such a collection is based on contact, as it is defined in the study of folklore, and the rule of magical thinking states that things which are in contact with each other are identical. Therefore, the value of such a collection appears only as a whole—in other words, such a collection (of identities) of things has its value due to the fact that it represents a certain value as a whole.

Even though Marx was not entirely convinced about the sheer possibility of carrying out an analogy between the phenomena of language and economics, I think that because of the change in the perception of the notion of nature, I can risk the statement that such an analogy does exist between the phenomena in language and the phenomena in economics. However, it is necessary to be extremely precise here. It does not mean that linguistic phenomena coincide with economic phenomena in the strict sense. This analogy is valuable only in

²¹ G. DELEUZE, F. GUATTARI: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. MASSUMI. Minneapolis—London 2005, p. 149–152.

reference to the perception of economic phenomena and not to what they are made of. It means that the analogy between language and economics is exhausted on the level of perception of the form itself. As Kojin Karatani points out, it is not labour and materials that produce value. Value comes into being thanks to the form of value that makes the material and labour turn into the subjects of economics.²² In the language, we deal at first with the categorization of reality, placing its subjects into the general linguistic form (creating the image of the world) and only such a general form makes a particular linguistic speech act possible.

During my research I noticed that the basis of functioning on the market is to create a certain form of categorization of reality first. Watching a company being set up, as well as the interviews, enabled me to observe that the desire (the one that Lordon wrote about) makes a specific form of reality, identical with the form of value, occur. It means that the person who wanted to set up a company started to perceive the reality around them through the prism of the possibility of transforming things into value and, as a result, into capital. That is where the convergence between language and economics exists. In the worldview of the person I examined, a forest was not categorized in any special way; however, because of the desire to set up a fuel-related company, it began to “be run through” the prism of potential value. The situation was similar in the case of transport. The person was previously connected with transport and this kind of work was for him a representation of certain value. After the company had been set up, work ceased to represent the value and it started representing the cost of obtaining capital. When, due to high temperatures during the winter, the sales of fuel decreased, transport began to function as a representation of capital, since the person changed the profile of his business activities from fuel to transportation.

Conditions of ethnographic studies over the capital

The fundamental core of neoliberal “revolution” was the change in the perception of economic processes. Such a change in the perception necessarily took place within the cultural space, that is to say it involved forces that at the elementary level create a certain image of the world, within which human beings organize their experience. However, the aim is not to change anything in capitalism; the entire effort of contemporary capital is based on the desire for

²² K. KARATANI: *Transcritique. On Kant and Marx*. Trans. S. KOHSO. Cambridge—London 2003, p. 228.

everything to stay the same old way. That is where the way of perceiving social and economic processes and what actually happens in the socio-economic sphere split or at least seem to be splitting. The symptom of such a “split-up” is the support for flexibility of work or formal lack of redistribution on the side of the workers and people who should care about something completely opposite. So what is it that happens that the workers, precariat, small entrepreneurs (whose status does not differ from the status of the workers) express demands which are clearly contrary to their interests? In my opinion, that is where the role of ethnography and anthropology is, namely, to determine the ideological frames and ways of categorizing the world, within which its perception formally changes, while the real relationships remain unaltered.

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