



## Life put to work: Towards a life theory of value\*

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### abstract

Starting from the recognition that only a ‘labour theory of value’ is able to provide a measure of the value of the surplus, in this essay we’d like to pose the question of how the labour theory of value must dynamically adjust to the capitalist system and the succession of different modes of accumulation. Specifically, we focus on structural changes that have invested and partially modified the process of enhancing the transition from industrial-Fordist to ‘bio-capitalism’, at least in that area of the world where this transformation has established itself and is present. It is in this passage that the labour theory of value - intended primarily as a theory of value-time work - requires a redefinition that is able to grasp the qualitative changes that have overtaken and undermined the traditional theory of value labour. In particular, it will be considered a specific form of value creation: one linked to the concept of affective labour. Finally, in the last and final section, we discuss the hypothesis of the theory of life-value, nodding briefly to the related theoretical problems in view of a future research agenda.

‘What a long, strange trip it’s been’<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

It is with the establishment of the capitalist mode of production as predominant that the articulation of a theory of value that is able to explain the process of accumulation becomes inescapable. In fact, the emergence of capitalism entails the necessity to analyze the relationship between productive factors and final outputs in terms of value. As a consequence, temporality (in both its logical dimension – *before and after* – and its historical dimension – *today and tomorrow*) is entirely incorporated in the process of

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1 J.Garcia – R.Hunter “*Trucking*”, Grateful Dead, *American Beauty*, 1971.

accumulation and generation of value. Thus, capitalist surplus-value, which is to say the ability to produce accumulation, occurs in time, resulting from a non-linear dynamic movement, characterized by irreversibility (*path-dependency*), discontinuity and crisis.

Accumulation requires measuring value. This measure is necessary since it makes functionally possible the distribution of surplus generated by the development of productive factors. On this key point, the theoretical debate has been structured around a twofold identification of a theory of value based on labour, on the one hand, and a theory of value based on utility, on the other (Lunghini and Ranchetti, 1998).

As a point of departure, we assume that only a labour theory of value is able to perform the measuring-function of the value of surplus. Subsequently, we pose the question concerning how the labour theory of value should dynamically adapt to the evolution of capitalism and to the succession of its different phases of accumulation. More specifically, we will focus on the structural transformations that have heavily affected and partially modified the process of valorization during the shift from industrial-Fordist capitalism to biocapitalism<sup>2</sup> (Part 2), at least in those areas of the world where this changes are tendentially established (Federici and Caffentzis, 2008).

Within the framework provided by this epochal shift, the labour theory of value – primarily understood as a theory of value-labour *time* – requires a redefinition that is potentially able to grasp the qualitative transformations whose historical appearance has put to question its traditional configuration (Part 3). As for this issue, in Part 4 we will consider a specific form of value-creation, linked to the concept of affective labour. Finally, in the last section, we will discuss the hypothesis of a *theory of life-value* and the related theoretical issues, paying particular attention to the elaboration of a research-agenda to come (Part 5).

## Transformations of biocapitalism and effects on the labour theory of value

The advent of biocapitalism entails an adjustment of the process of valorization. From this perspective, the main points to emphasize are the following:

- The production of wealth and value is no longer based solely and exclusively on material production, but is increasingly based on immaterial elements, namely on intangible ‘raw materials’, which are difficult to measure and quantify since they directly result from the use of the relational, emotional and cognitive faculties of human beings.

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2 With the term biocapitalism, we refer to a process of accumulation that not only is founded on the exploitation of knowledge but of the entirety of human faculties, from relational-linguistic to affective-sensorial. Biocapitalism points to a broader set of meanings than the ones entailed by the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism. Although we regard it as convincing in accounting for contemporary social and productive transformations, we also note that it runs the risk of being misunderstood as an approach whose only relevant object of study is the exclusive role played by knowledge. For further analysis, see Fumagalli (2007; 2010), Fumagalli and Vercellone (2007), Fumagalli and Lucarelli (2007; 2010), Vercellone (2003; 2006; 2007), Morini (2007; 2010).

- The production of wealth and value is no longer based on a uniform and standardized model of labour organization, regardless of the type of good produced. Rather, production is performed through different methods of organization, characterized by a network-structure whose implementation is due to the development of technologies for linguistic communication and transportation. As a consequence, the traditional, hierarchical and unilateral factory-form is replaced by still hierarchical structures that are displaced throughout the territory along subcontracting productive chains, marked by cooperation and/or hierarchy.
- The previous Fordist phase was characterized, at the productive level, by the following references: seriality, standardization, specialization of labour and tasks. At the level of exchange, it privileged mass-markets and orientation to the product. At the level of labour organization, it stressed the centrality of managerial command and an obsessive focus on the processes of execution (a reflection of the systemic denial of the workforce relationality). The current phase presents different peculiarities: life itself is put to work and the role of working relations is emphasized, directly incorporated within the productive activity. Thus, economic management assumes as its object living life rather than static life. In this context, the value of labour becomes increasingly vague, ever-changing, dependent on a variety of subjective evaluations.
- The new organizational culture of enterprises is centered around the concept of 'human resources'. In fact, some new organizational models refer to the need to embody knowledge within enterprises. However, this knowledge is not explicit or objective, but rather relational: it encompasses the dynamic of a subjective knowledge that is 'deeply rooted in action and in the engaging commitment to a specific context'. Cognitive labour organizations are interested not only in explicit knowledge, but also and more importantly in subjective (tacit) knowledge, everybody's opinions (Nonaka, 1994), and everything that relates to 'motivation' (even drive-led motivation).
- In biocapitalism value lies, first and foremost, in the intellectual and relational resources of subjects, and in their ability to activate social links that can be translated into *exchange value*, governed by the grammar of money. Thus, what is exchanged in the labour market is no longer abstract labour (measurable in homogeneous working time), but rather subjectivity itself, in its experiential, relational, creative dimensions. To sum up, what is exchanged is the 'potentiality' of the subject. Whereas in the Fordist model it was easy to calculate the value of labour according to the average output and professional skills based on workers' education and experience, in bio-capitalism the value of labour loses almost any concrete definitional criterion.
- Intellectual labour is more autonomous than material labour. However, this is not a natural, originary and immutable given. In the course of capitalist history, this higher autonomy finds possible explanations in the particular development of labour organization and production, especially in specific historical phases (intellectual labour directing and organizing material labour). Is this explanatory narrative still valid today? Nowadays, are not biocapitalist production and labour organization showing different features? What exactly does the distinction between intellectual and manual labour mean? In order to grasp their actual function, it is necessary to express both kinds of labour in a 'determined historical form' rather than by means of a general category. As

a consequence, the condition of a proper analysis of value is a critique of this intellectual-material separation that actually appears as scarcely representative of a social reality more and more concerned with the subsumption of every difference.

*The complexity of the world is atomized and made functional to a productivity criterion.*

- Another conceptual separation, fundamental in the Western tradition, is that of mind and body. Nonetheless, nowadays we witness a progressive melting down of dichotomies<sup>3</sup> (which is not, per se, a negative trend) and, simultaneously, we note that existence has become entirely productive. Therefore the body (a controlled, monitored, artificially hygienist body) is explicitly incorporated into productive mechanisms. It follows the creation of new and unprecedented market niches: plastic surgery, fitness and body building, nutritionism, beauty industry. The ‘sexualization of bodies’, which is so evident today, appears as cold, putatively technical and neutral. Nevertheless, those bodies at work fully belong to the realm of the deactivation of affects and desires or, to better specify, to the channelling of both human drives toward the market. The hegemony of the productive function, actually lacking any reasonable legitimacy, continues to establish the rhythm of an undisputed productivity that extracts added value from everything, including the already mentioned knowledge, working experience and existential *savoir-faire*.

*In the name of the market, contemporary capitalism tries to reconnect yet another historical separation, that of soul and body.*

- Working performances change both quantitatively and qualitatively. As for the material conditions of labour (quantitative aspect), we witness an increase regarding working hours,<sup>4</sup> an overlapping of labour tasks, the impossibility of distinguishing between working- and life-time and a deeper individualization of industrial relations. Moreover, working performances are more and more immaterial. Relational, communicative and cerebral activities become increasingly interrelated and central. Those activities require education, skills and attention. In this context, the separation of mind and body, typical of the Taylorist labour organization, tends to disappear in an inextricable mix of working *routine* and intense participation into the productive process. This subjection is no longer disciplinarily imposed by a direct chain of command. Rather, it is most often internalized and developed through form of subtle conditioning and social control. As a consequence, contractual individualism ends up representing the juridical and institutional framework within which the process of individual imitation-competition tends to become the guide-line of working behavior.

- The role of knowledge becomes crucial. In fact, the traditional creation of value by means of material production is supplemented by the creation of value by means of knowledge-production. In both cases, the ‘labour’ factor is decisive and its

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3 For example: production-reproduction; manual-intellectual labour; working time-life time; production-consumption. See Fumagalli, 2008.

4 We would like to note a fact too often overlooked. After a century-long decrease of working hours (during the industrial-Fordist paradigm), starting from the early 1980s this parameter begins to grow again. This recent increase in working hours is a structural element inherently linked to the shift to biocapitalism.

subordination to capital ratifies, through exploitation, the necessary condition in order for profit to realize itself.

- The ‘unpaid labour’ of women (Picchio, 1997; 2000), namely the work of reproduction and care, is configured as an interesting archetype of contemporary production. Once the analysis is focused on the *dis-measure* of labour within the current cycle of accumulation, then *unpaid labour* can properly show its (striking) exemplary characteristics. First, because we realize, when attempting to *measure* the value of social reproduction (domestic work, care, relational services), that this value is greater than the sum total of paid work. Secondly, and more importantly, because unpaid labour perfectly describes a process that represents the essence of working performances in their generality, since we define the current phase of capitalism as based on an *anthropogenic* model – production of men by means of men – (Marazzi, 2005), where life must work for production and production must work for life (Hardt and Negri, 2000). From this perspective, nowadays the value produced by labour structurally exceeds its monetary retribution. To put it differently, when the productive process incorporates knowledge and affects, desires and bodies, motivations and opinions, then it is clearly evident that what is actually sold is not entirely paid.

The main point we would like to emphasize is the following: the concept of biocapitalism refers to the production of wealth by means of knowledge and human experience, through the use of those activities, both intellectual and corporeal, that are implicit in existence itself. We might add that every process of production reflects not only material realities, but also social contexts. Thus, relations of production not only characterize different modes of production, but also societal forms. Gradually, the process of production turns into a process of production and reproduction of itself, which is the fundamental activity of a living organism. Although this basic idea is shared by all social forms of life, it becomes absolutely central in biocapitalism.

However, the process of knowledge accumulation is individual by definition. Even more radically, it is a defining element of a singular identity through language and memory (Locke, 2006). It is exactly because of its singular nature that contemporary *biolabour* is in constant need of relational activity, which in turn becomes an essential tool for transmitting and decoding cognitive activities and stratified knowledge in the individual. From this standpoint, cognitive capabilities and relational activities are inextricably linked to each other, and represent the basic elements of the *general intellect*, namely the widespread intellectuality glimpsed by Marx in the *Grundrisse*.

This *general intellect* is the new source of (surplus) value and, in order to fully actualize its productive potentiality, needs ‘space’, namely the possibility to develop a net of relations (Vercellone, 2006). Every singularity becomes a ‘knot’ in the network of collective intelligences, that organically connect economic and desiring flows. In other terms, if confined to the individual, knowledge is unable to grow productively. Surely, it might be functional to the generation of a personal process of valorization. Nonetheless, it cannot produce exchange value and, consequently, wealth accumulation (in its commodity form). Thus, biocapitalism is necessarily reticular (as opposed to linear) and hierarchies amongst different knots are intrinsically complex and related to elements of social control that pervade the space within which wealth is created and

accumulated. Indeed, it makes perfect sense from a biocapitalist perspective to be supremely interested in *differences*. Difference, even under the appearance of knowledge of indigenous or local systems, has become a highly valued commodity to be spent on the market. After all, globalization works precisely through the plural incorporation of alterity (Braidotti, 2008). As is clear, this topic would deserve further development. However, at least this key issue should be addressed: within biocapitalism, precisely because of its being reticular/non linear, a static idea of identity – perceived as permanent essence – is simply unthinkable. On the very contrary, identity ceases to be a stable datum to gradually become a process of identification that is incessantly constructed and restructured through different faces, roles and circumstances, both at the individual and the collective level. The identity of the multiple I – as we think of it – is configured as a field rather than as an essence. It is not a sort of metaphysical reality, but rather a dynamic system defined by potentialities and limits (which is to say, by relations) that can be theoretically recognized and practically transformed. To a certain extent, it is possible to argue that this eternally dynamic process guarantees the existence of a transformative force (whose peculiar production is surplus value) that we call *general intellect* and that develops different singularities.

It is important to stress that the shift from a production of money by means of commodity (M-C-M') to a production of money by means of the commodification of *bios* [M-C(bios)-M'] has modified the mode of production and the process of exploitation.

The new features of a productive activity that is tendentially immaterial, based on the exploitation of learning and networking economies, as well as the pivotal role of a precarious subalternity that prevents a new form of wage regulation, open up for biocapitalism the question of a proper modulation of the theory of value.

The first problem concerns how to measure the value of labour. In fact, it closely relates to the productivity of the *general intellect* and of relational activities (conceived as sources of the process of value creation in biocapitalism).

The second problem deals with the 'source' of the value of labour. It refers to working performances, on the one hand in the context of the dichotomy between the necessity of social and relational cooperation and its exploitation by means of learning and networking economies, and, on the other hand, the privatization of knowledge and the control of individual working performances (Hardt and Negri, 2000). As for labour organization, this contradiction assumes the form of a demand for social cooperation and, simultaneously, a hierarchical imposition organized around the individualization of bargaining and the income blackmail (whose condition of possibility is a widespread social insecurity). Therefore, cooperation and hierarchy are the cornerstones that regulate labour relations in the contradictory and unstable framework provided by biocapitalism. It is in this context that arises the question concerning the tendential melting down of the distinction between working- and life-time. Here, we are witnessing a process of assimilation between labour and life which generates a potential contradiction within the working subjectivity itself, creating idiosyncrasy and instability in the basic organization of individual lives. This contradiction recalls the dualism between man and machine, especially in a situation, such as the biocapitalist one, in

which the *mechanical* productive tool increasingly tends to be incorporated in the brain/body, namely a non-transferable element of individuals and immediately internal to labour-power itself. Moreover, the relationship between concrete labour (whose peculiar production is use value, potentially 'creative') and abstract labour (determined by capitalist conditions of production) generates at the same a potentiality for freedom and autonomy and a necessity of repression and brain lobotomization.<sup>5</sup>

## Towards a life theory value: Knowledge, affect, image

Labour in biocapitalism has multiple features that open up new analytical scenarios. Those characteristics refer to: relational activities (*relational labour*); learning and knowledge-transmission activities (*linguistic and cognitive labour*); imaginary and sense-making activities (*symbolic labour*); corporeal and sensuous activities (*corporeal and sensorial labour*); affective and caring activities (*affective labour*). To sum up, labour in biocapitalism is the *ensemble* of the vital-cerebral-physical faculties of human beings. For simplicity's sake, we define it as *biolabour*.

Regardless of its prevalent form, biolabour is characterized by the following features:

- The *separation between working-time and life-time* is overcome. When working performances imply vital faculties, then the definition of a temporal limit between working-time and life-time becomes impossible. Whereas it might fictitiously exist from a juridical standpoint, it is *de facto* ineffectual since there is no difference whatsoever between life and labour. Life appears to be totally subsumed under labour (here the role of new linguistic-communicative technologies is pivotal).
- The *separation between working-place and life-place* is overcome. In fact, multiple as it is, biolabour is *nomadic labour*. It requires a kind of mobility that produces *working non-places* rather than traditional forms of *domestication*. From this perspective, we do not argue for a coincidence of working-place and life-space, but rather for an expropriation of the working-place, with all the problematic consequences that derive from it in terms of labour identity.
- The *separation between production and reproduction* is overcome. This overcoming is the first effect of a putting to work of life itself. We conceive of life not only as life immediately subordinated to productive activities, but also as life directed towards its reflexive social reproduction. Nowadays, this process is exemplified by feminine caring labour. However, we might suggest that the tendential melting down of this distinction implies a partial overcoming of gender-based differences. In other words, we want to pose the problem of *difference tout-court*.

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5 The emergence of biocapitalism entails not only a metamorphosis of the relationship between concrete and abstract labour, but also a modification of the concept of productive labour (whose process of 'abstraction' produces surplus value). The limits of this essay do not allow us to deal with this issue. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the base of bioeconomic accumulation needs a constant expansion and ends up including the time of reproduction, education and consumption. See Fumagalli (2007); Amendola, Bazzicalupo, Chicchi, Tucci (2008). On the relationship between productive and unproductive labour in Marx, see Negri (2008).

• The *separations among production, reproduction, circulation and consumption* are overcome. The act of consuming is no longer reducible to the purchase of a material commodity or a service, as the economic science has traditionally taught us. In biocapitalism, the act of consuming is simultaneously participation of the public opinion, an act of communication, and self-marketing. Nowadays, consumption is participation of the public opinion because it is dominated by increasingly dynamic and specific *conventions*. As in financial market stakeholders behave according to a tacit convention that influences their actions through *ad hoc* linguistic-communicative practices, so in the context of monetary realization we witness the development of behavior- and consumption-oriented conventions (Fumagalli, 2007). From this perspective, the incentive to consumption is not based on the necessity to satisfy needs, but rather on the necessity to show a belonging to the common sense. That is precisely why consumption is also an act of communication, form of advertising, and process of branding (Arvidsson, 2006). Advertising, conceived of as the emblem of biocapitalist communication and monetary realization, does not refer to the purchase of external commodities, but rather induces individuals to valorize themselves. It is *marketing of oneself*, not of a given commodity. As a consequence, the non-separation between production and consumption becomes total. There is no longer separation between working and consuming acts. The Worker and the Consumers, once differentiated although embodied in the same person, are today melted in the vital acts of individuals. Once again, what appears to be an everyday act motivated by self-preservation (as the act of consuming) is valorized through the biocapitalist process of accumulation (Fumagalli, 2007).

A reflection about the modalities through which value is generated from *biolabour* must assume these differences. Subsequently, it is necessary to subdivide the analysis in three phases: value generated by the diffusion of knowledge, namely linguistic-cognitive labour (*knowledge theory of value*); value generated by affective and reproductive labour (*affect theory of value*); value generated by symbolic and imaginary labour, especially in the process of branding (*image theory of value*).

In the context of the present essay we exclusively focus on the question concerning *affective value*.

## **Towards an affect theory of value: Caring labour, emotional labour**

In order to undertake an analysis of the role of affect as value-producer, we propose the concept of *emotional labour*. It has never been part of the official language of political economy, although it is known by women and sometimes used in scientific publications, especially in the Atlantic area. Within the category of emotional labour we find different working performances, mainly linked to services, education and assistance. More specifically, it encompasses the whole area of *caring labour* that, not by chance, is nowadays regarded as *domestic production*. It refers to a wide and significant sector which entails both the ‘management’ of familial activities and the practice of *care*, conceived of as the amount of affect utilized in the deployment of this

role (whose source is a *natural predisposition* of human beings towards surrounding persons).

In this context, the concept of feminization of labour<sup>6</sup> can be further explored and enlarged, exactly by noting that affect has been inscribed in the dimension of waged exchange on the market. We believe that *the public space as a whole is progressively feminizing itself*, since it incorporates more and more visibly some of the most traditional and stereotypical elements of the feminine (maternity, care, seduction). These elements are transformed – through a forced, decontextualized and deformed interpretation – in central aspects of contemporary governance. To a certain extent, the concept of *projective identification*, introduced by Melanie Klein in 1946 to explain the relationship between the mother and the child<sup>7</sup>, seems to us particularly useful to understand the kind of relationship that is currently expected from the working subjects. The area of emotional, non-verbal communication becomes a part of the relation between capital and labour, within a dimension that not only maintains, but even deepens its hierarchy. Moreover, we witness an increase in the demand of caring or domestic labour. This expanding process is closely linked to the dynamic of feminization of labour, on the one hand, and to the progressive dissolution of the welfare state on the other. We define emotional labour as ‘labour involved in persons’ feelings, labour whose central element is the regulation of emotions’ (James, 1989: 15). Emotional labour becomes ‘social labour’ essentially through the result: emotions are transformed by/through the productive process. James refers to proper, true ‘emotional workers’ whose productive outcome is defined as ‘emotional product’ (James, 1989: 19). The object of caring labour is also the ‘valorization of the human person’, namely (at least partially) its ‘maintenance’ (Coordinamento donne Fp CGIL, 1999).

The notion of care-giver represents another possible definition for this kind of labour, which includes a series of activities, historically hidden in the interstices of family relationships, related to the world of affects and nowadays become economically interesting for biocapitalism.

However, following the analytical lines so far briefly discussed, we also note that teachers, advertisers, union executives, coaches, tabloid journalists, call-center workers and nurses might be defined as ‘producers of emotional labour’. Therefore, emotional labour refers to innumerable sectors, all those whose objective is not the production of material goods, but rather the production of wellbeing (in so doing, these sectors consume their proper finality).

Let us consider, for example, the relational ability of a call-center operator who is concretely evaluated as an infinitesimal fraction by the *customer lifetime value* (CLV) (Reichheld, 1996) of the person who contacted her looking for information. According

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6 In recent years, this concept has been primarily proposed to underline a relevant quantitative increase with regard to the feminine presence on the job market. Moreover, it has been noted that the uninterested and precarious form with which women have been historically used to work is now a widespread model for men as well. See Morini (2007; 2010).

7 This relationship designates a process in which the role of the beneficiary (the one who receives the projections) is significantly important. See Klein (1946) and Grotstein (1981).

to managerial engineering, the CLV can be considered as the most important indicator and, as such, should occupy a fundamental position in a possible hierarchy of measure-criteria. Moreover, in monetary terms a customer is valorized not only according to how much she purchases today, but also according to her purchasing potential in the course of time. The CLV is generally defined as ‘the total net revenue that a company can expect from a customer during a certain period of time’ (Rosset, 2003). For example, the call-center operator, connected through a phone to the customer, attempts to establish a relationship of loyalty by means of a response that is as appropriate as possible. In doing so, she activates in her working performance not only what she learnt during her professional education, but also her relational intelligence – developed since her childhood – her innate relational attitudes, her faculty of language, her interests and social contacts. To this list we must add ‘physical’ components, such as a persuasive tone of the voice and a positive attitude during the phone call. This amount of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘affectivity’ is clearly present in the relation with the customer, but is not represented in the operator’s wage.

This example gives us the possibility to outline the *skills* that are necessary to perform this kind of working activity. We report the most common (Goleman, 1998): acute and objective perception, awareness of the situation, sensitivity and intuitive knowledge. Other expressions, used in past years to describe caring labour, seem to be less objective, although suggestive and evocative. For example, Jessie Bernard referred to ‘warm heart’ as the most important quality in the services sector (1981). Instead, Luce Irigaray proposed the ‘fecundity of the caress’ (1985).

Moreover, the ability to ‘self-engage’ is often quoted as important. In fact, there are endless levels of empathy and infinite forms of application with regard to the necessities mobilized by contemporary labour. It must be noted the difference between the past – observation, perception and intuition were obviously relevant qualities, but the separation/distance (even physical) from the object of one’s labour remained implicitly unquestioned – and the present that, on the contrary, makes the *participation* to the productive process specifically performing. In particular, feelings, fantasies and imaginations are not removed or constrained, but rather solicited within the framework of affect-production. Even more radically, those are its grounding sites.

By means of formulations such as ‘emotional labour’ and ‘caring labour’, many scholars attempted to re-read the Marxian category of ‘reproductive labour’, underlining its transformation into *labour of domestic production*, through the fundamental passage of salarization. However, we must recall its salient feature, namely that the ancient contents of this labour constitute the *value* for the current configuration of capitalism (the affect of human resources). Every working performance is named according to its more significant, more effective and more difficult task. Nowadays the ability to understand and interpret others’ needs (relational skills, active listening skills, positive attitude to problem solving) has become an explicitly required feature of contemporary labour. Capitalism demands *emotional labour* – and evaluates its qualities –, showing an extraordinary pervasive capacity and a great plasticity in ceaselessly creating new territories to profitably colonize.

This process is closely connected to the globalization of the job market and to the feminization of immigration which functions through the incorporation of alterities, interacting with race, class and gender hierarchies. Thus, it is necessary a lexical/semantic update which is able to account for the fluid mutation of meaning due to social and productive transformations. Nowadays, as a matter of fact, poets, teachers or journalists are labelled as *intellectuals*, whereas nurses, cleaners and policewomen are tendentially collocated in the realm of *manual labour*. Nonetheless, exactly because of the fall of the dichotomous model, the categories at our disposal are too simple, inadequate to express the complexity of the contemporary class composition.

Caring *emotional* labour is also defined as *relational labour*. Thus, emotional language swarms over the productive field, even when unrecognized or removed. Particularly, caring labour, relying largely on emotional components (which are fundamental to meet expected results, the 'goals'), cannot be restrained to the narrow and artificial borders of categories such as 'manual' or 'intellectual' labour. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly concrete labour. The historical separations between public and private, mind and body, hands and brain, culture and nature (as well as the polarization of positive and negative attributed to the spheres of production and reproduction – on which our symbolic order has been established) show all their limits and express today their paradoxes, their tensions and their contradictions.

In the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx writes

No matter how variously working tasks or productive activities can be considered useful, it is a physiological truth that they are functions of the human organism, and that all these functions, their content and their shape are essentially expenditures of brain, nerves, muscles, human organs (Marx, 1964: 68)

Those energies manifest themselves as immediate perception in every moment of life: they are constantly present. However, in performing a given task we 'lend' these perceptions, whose usage ('objectification') occurs during the working process. Caring and emotional labour satisfies all the conditions that define 'usefulness': its energy, its willful expenditure, its time, its goal. It is simultaneously useful labour (sometimes even a matter of life and death) and social labour, since it is necessary for others and valid in every society. Even more radically, to analyze caring and/or emotional labour also means, today more than ever, putting into question the ancient distinction between 'labour' and 'non-labour' (namely, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour), whose reflection is another dichotomy, the one between 'paid life' and 'unpaid life'.

The border is arbitrary, ever-changing and subject to political decision. The specific productive cooperation to which labour-power participates is always wider and richer than the one mobilized by the mere working process. Labour-power valorizes capital solely because it never loses its characteristics of non-labour, which is to say its link with a productive cooperation richer than the one implied in a strict conception of the working process (Virno, 2001: 73)

Caring labour is above all, historically, a huge amount of unpaid (although indispensable) labour. It is based on an affective dimension (love relations) and on a

hierarchical aspect (sexual division of labour). Thus, it is the human sentimental element contained in reproductive labour that becomes essential in contemporary production (however, we do not forget power relations and cultural and traditional legacies). This element casts new light on the 'border-less' attitude of caring workers, for whom this dynamic is more explicit than for others. This tendency not to establish 'limits' is actually prototypical of contemporary production. The constant presence of auxiliary caring workers for elderly people, as well as the 'asymmetry' that marks the relationship between families and caregivers, makes the establishment of rigid demarcations with regard to the working performance a very difficult operation. Moreover, this process is reinforced by the nature of a task whose required contents are deeply cognitive, experiential and emotional. In fact, the 'matter' of labour is such that it is impossible to separate it from the subject that produces it. Life emerges in this context as the object of the productive process, due to the subjectification of production typical of biocapitalism. The highest point of contemporary capitalist profit is consequential to a proliferation of differences that are the base of the affective economy. At stake is 'how to incorporate the maternal feminine in order to better metabolize its effects, since it has become a valuable commodity, to be spent on the market' (Braidotti, 2008: 71).

Therefore, in the current context, it is necessary to conceptualize and define labour as *production of affectivity*. What do we mean when we refer to emotional labour and production of affects, or domestic production? Its focus on the productivity of the corporeal and the somatic is an extremely important element for the contemporary networks of bioeconomic production. However, it is equally necessary to avoid the risk of a too pure, abstract and quasi-idealized conceptual framework. Instead, we must insist on the concrete potential of exploitation involved in bioeconomic production.

From this standpoint, the expansion of the cooperative dimension incorporated in reproductive labour finds a significant confirmation. In fact, domestic labour has always produced sociability and use value, so much that it can be regarded as the fundamental driving force of productive labour. Perfectly conforming to a general and functional requirement which cannot be merely 'mechanical' and measured along the straight line 'time-for-wage', caring labour (emotional and affective: it deals with needs, attentions, social relations, bodily and spiritual wellbeing) represents in our opinion the best example of how *life must work for production and production must work for life*. The more the analysis digs in depth, the more we discover communicating assemblages of interactive and performing relations, integrated in a system which is entirely based on the living (obviously with different degrees of intensity).

Adrienne Rich has noted that these 'scarcely paid' jobs are in large majority performed by women involved in 'sentimentalized roles, with the concrete presence of living individuals, children, sick, old' (Rich in Leghorn and Parker, 1981).

### **Brief Case Studies**

Although the definition of a proper conceptual framework is fundamental, it cannot substitute an empirical analysis of the validity of the *affect theory of value*. Our goal is

to advance a new hypothesis about the measurement of value with regard to affectivity. We make primary reference to the Italian situation.

The Italian National Health Care System is able to provide domiciliary assistance to 1% of elderly people, compared to 8% in France and in the United Kingdom. The absence of services concerning both old and new problematics of Italian households ends up being solved by feminine caring labour. As a consequence, women often cannot search for an employment on the external job market. Increasingly, the alternative to this 'home-made welfare' is represented by other 'human resources': immigrant caring assistants who are paid to perform these tasks, showing a form of privatization of assistance.

Recently updated data suggest that, in Italy, the total number of immigrant family assistants is between 1.000.000 and 1.600.000 (Il Sole-24 Ore, 2007).<sup>8</sup> A study conducted in 2005 at a European level – *Gender Analyses and Long Term Care Assistance* (GALCA) – attempted to estimate the value of welfare produced by caregivers (Fondazione Brodolini, 2004). In particular, the study was conducted with homogeneous criteria on locally representative samples of around 300 caregivers in Denmark (Roskilde), Ireland (Dublin) and Italy (Modena). This study allows us not only to delineate the socio-economic profile of caring labour and the socio-sanitary characteristics of the assisted, but also to quantify the single components of the caring service, such as the time of caring labour or the composition and duration of sanitary integrative services. The research is so detailed that it is possible to reconstruct the overall social cost of domiciliary assistance in the three situations and to compare it with the traditional alternative of hospitalization.

Calculations take into account different purchasing powers and degrees of disability of elderly people and include both the monetary costs (for families and the public service) and the value of unpaid caring time performed by family members (cost-opportunity). Many factors influence this calculation of cost-differentials, but two of them are particularly important: the combination of technology and *domotics*<sup>9</sup> in Denmark and the employment of caregivers in Italy.

In Italy and in Denmark more than 90 percent of assisted elderly are assisted either at home or in especially equipped apartments, whereas in Ireland we note that more than 20 percent are assisted in 'institutions' - hospices or sanitary residences. However, in Ireland and Italy when assistance is domiciliary it is almost exclusively a (female)

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8 The range (1-1.6 million) is due to the irregular component (asylum seekers), particularly incisive in this form of employment, that makes these statistics quite aleatory. Between 2000 and 2003, *ISTAT* [Italian National Institute of Statistics] counted 400,000 caregivers. The study to which we refer added an estimated 250,000 and 900,000 irregular domestic workers to the 745,000 registered with *INPS* [National Institute of Social Services]. The sum total of these two components (regular and irregular workers) goes from the minimum of 1 million to a maximum of 1.6 million workers. Bocconi University instead estimated between 713,000 and 1,134,000 caregivers in Italy (CERGAS).

9 Wikipedia defines domotics (also called home automation) as 'the automation of the home, housework or household activity', in order to better life conditions, especially for elders and disabled people. It's in this sense that the term is used in this article.

family member who takes care of elderly people, whereas in Denmark this is a task performed by the public service.

According to the results of this research, often (not always) taking care of the elderly at home is less expensive (for the collectivity) than hospitalization. In Italy, for example, the cost of hospitalization in a sanitary residence is more than 40 percent higher than the average social cost of domiciliary caregiving. Moreover, established as 100 the average cost per domiciliary assisted elderly in Italy, the cost in Denmark is 10 percent higher and 20 percent higher in Ireland.

The Italian variation on the familistic model, which is to say the ‘family-solution’ plus a caregiver, is the less expensive: €424 per week. Caregivers in Italy, according to this study, allow savings (in terms of social costs) for €100 per week/elderly if compared with Denmark and for almost €500 if compared with Ireland. This is due to their low wage. In fact, the study estimates the salary of a domiciliary caregiver at around €3.00 per hour and, for those who do not live with the assisted, €5.00 per hour. A domiciliary assistant employed by the public service costs around €19.80 per hour. Here is where the ‘shadow welfare of caregivers’ is precisely situated. Moreover, it should be added that whereas the elderly population of Modena – the sample city for the research – is quantitatively similar to the country’s average, its pro-capita income, feminine employment and public assistance are above the average. In Modena, about 27% of families which assist an elderly declared to turn to a paid external aid, more than 50% in a domiciliary situation (Bettio e Solinas, 2008).

In Italy, caregivers attenuate the conflict between labour and care. For example, in Modena, the appeal to extra-familial aid rises to 35 percent when the person in charge for caring is employed. This explains why the percentage of people forced to leave the job market or to reduce working hours is so low: 9 percent for men and 5 percent for women.

The ‘Italian model’ that emerges from this study symbolizes a mode of organization based on families rather than on social services, on domestic assistance rather than on hospitalization. The Italian model is less expensive and it is not yet collapsed because those €424 do not represent a necessary renunciation to waged-labour for the second generations and because the salary of caregivers (‘the second generations’ helpers’) is very low.

### **Preliminary conclusions: A new research agenda**

As always, the capitalist process of valorization is still based on exploitation of labour. Nonetheless, currently we face a ‘labour’ which is no longer possible to singularly decline, which does not describe a homogeneous, univocal condition. Above all, it is a ‘labour’ which tends to be irreducible to a ‘material’ and quantitative measurement. This point does not deny the always material (and fatiguing) nature of labour. Rather, we argue that, in the last 30 years, what has been modified is the ‘form’ of production and of the commodity which generates the process of accumulation and valorization. In fact, the role of immaterial production is more central, as well as the quota of added

value that is dependent on supply, circulation and diffusion of immaterial commodities (by definition impossible to be numerically measured).

In the context of industrial-Fordist capitalism, the link between the physical performance of labour (which is an eminently corporeal activity) and the materiality of commodities was almost immediate. In general, workers' bodies produced material commodities through the use of machinery. In contemporary capitalism, this link evaporates and often loses any importance. Increasingly, working performances are characterized by the pre-eminence of affective and cognitive elements. Not by chance, this process coincides with the growth of immaterial production. When labour is no longer primarily physical (muscular expenditure) but, rather, involves more mental faculties, then it tends to differentiate itself: it 'subjectifies' itself. In fact, subjectivity – namely individuals' life – constitutes the potential and real base of the process of valorization. This is why we propose the term 'biocapitalism'.

In the current heterodox debate, there are many adjectives that can be used beside the term 'labour': cognitive, affective or caring. Those words are still subject, even in the field of Marxist analyses, to some misunderstandings that reduce them to the traditional dichotomies between productive and unproductive labour or between manual and intellectual labour. Both the ongoing debate and its possible ambiguities are partially due to the necessity of investigating more precisely and rigorously the consequences of mutated working conditions on the labour theory of value. Although the latter remains an inescapable theoretical reference to measure the economic value of biocapitalism, it nonetheless must be newly analyzed in accordance to the structural and irreversible transformations due to the emergence of bioeconomical accumulation.

In industrial-Fordist capitalism, the unity of measurement of value was based on time. It was, so to speak, a temporal unity of measurement. More specifically, it was the temporal unit of a day, as proposed by Marx in *Das Kapital*, marked by a clear distinction between working-time and non-working-time. A second condition was the measurement of the value of the output – intended as the result of the working process combined with other productive factors. In this context, the value of production was necessarily measurable by means of prices and quantity.<sup>10</sup> In fact, even by capitalists the determination of prices is regarded as an indicator of the dynamic relation between capital and labour. Quantities, on the other hand, are objectively measurable in numeric terms.

In biocapitalism, this schema collapses. As a consequence, we face two kinds of problems. The first concerns the difficulty (often impossibility) to determine a clear distinction between working-time and non-working-time. Moreover, immaterial production rejects a quantitative measure, which is to say that it is not immediately measurable in numeric terms. Notwithstanding various attempts to create new indirect

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10 The question concerning the transformation of value into prices will not be discussed here in this essay.

unities of measurement,<sup>11</sup> immaterial production is by definition a synonym of ‘dis-measure’. Consequently, the value of immaterial production is not determinable through objective units of measurement, even when conventional.

Faced with these problematics, the labour theory of value must be rethought and newly modulated. It can no longer be considered as the ‘objective’ measure of value. The temporal unit of measurement tends to become the life of human beings generally intended. Secondly, the value produced and then measured through prices is generated by social conflicts that, in turn, emerge from the behavior of working subjectivities involved in the process. With regard to this point, it is necessary to take into account that also the monetary unit of measure (through which prices are defined) lost its ‘objective’ reference. In fact, until 1971 the American dollar (to which all other currencies were fixedly related through the pegged rate) represented the objective ‘unit of measurement’ of money<sup>12</sup>. The end of the system of fixed exchange rates inaugurates the era of money as ‘pure money-sign. Consequently, its value, as well as the value of immaterial production (impossible to quantify in numerical terms), is more and more dependent on subjective and conflicting dynamics involved in the continual redefinition of social and international hierarchies.<sup>13</sup>

These unprecedented theoretical dimensions show the necessity of a new research agenda. At the moment, we advance the hypothesis that, in biocapitalism, the labour theory of value tends to transform into a life theory of value. We believe that the issue of affective labour (still in its embryonic form) is paradigmatic of this tendency. In fact, the concept of affective labour includes all those problematic elements that mark the crisis of the labour theory of value.

The example we discussed confirms that an effort that goes beyond working-time, physical expenditure and cognitive/affective abilities is impossible to measure. Otherwise put, our data demonstrate both ‘the wage as a miserable base for measurement’ and ‘the growth of command at the expense of exchange’ (Harney, 2009). The 3 euros earned by a caregiver immediately show a subtraction, an uncounted element. If compared to the previous wage-based relation, whose function was to clearly separate the interests of different parts (labour versus private life, with no full involvement of workers in their tasks), the current situation has radically changed. Nowadays, we witness the ‘total mobilization’ of labour, which is to say the putting to work of life itself, starting from the production of oneself. From this perspective, caring labour and the value generated by affectivity seem paradigmatic. The classical category of exploitation as extortion of surplus value is no longer applicable to a productive process that has made traditional units of measurement obsolete (Gorz, 2003). Self-exploitation, in this context, becomes a fundamental element of the process of

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11 For example, in the sector of knowledge-production we witness the use of extravagant units of measurement such as ‘man-hours’, where the object of quantitative measurement is not the product but the person who produces it.

12 1 ounce of gold = 35\$.

13 On financialization and its instability after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, see Fumagalli and Mezzadra (2009).

valorization. It is directly proportional to the new centrality of subjectivity within the productive process.

Moreover, global diaspora has huge implications for a monetary economy whose integration is due to a thick network of transnational fluxes of capital and workforce. Such a system is profoundly marked by internal processes of migration that implies mobility, flexibility and precariousness of labour conditions.

Our case study allows us to believe that if measuring the value attached to emotional and caring labour is possible, then it can be configured just through negation: *it is deduced from the welfare savings allowed by these forms of labour*. Social equilibrium increasingly depends on working figures whose fundamental function (nothing less than the continuity of the species) is inscribed in a context of progressive social disengagement (the collapse of welfare territorial services). As a consequence, the characteristics of the Italian social-familial organism (South European family welfare) are exalted by biocapitalism through a process of total privatization of primary social needs. The sustainability of life is externalized to migrant workers and this process allows the State to save money. Moreover, it canalizes resources toward new job markets. To a certain extent, exactly as finance becomes a form of private social insurance, the labour of a caregiver (paid by families) seems to canalize income toward new markets and, in so doing, valorizes existence.

As a first step, knowing the cost of this expense (as well as its consequences in terms of consuming structures and of job markets both internal and external to enterprises) is necessary to analyze the social costs of the ongoing restructuring. This restructuring produces value for capital because it is extrapolated from a mechanism of collective insurance and because it is inscribed in a market-relation. However, the central and powerful issue we face at the end of our discussion is the *always identical character* of the use-value produced – be it wheat, a bolt, a painting, a book, a ‘fertile caress’. In fact, the notion of use-value (as the material side of commodities, common to all epochs) recalls an analysis which, in a primary instance, seems to transcend political economy. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that political economy did not take into account *emotional labour* until recently. This analysis involves political economy as soon as use-value is modified by modern *relations of production* and, in turn, modifies them through its incorporation. The commodification of use-value is due to these determined relations: they transform use-value into *exchange-value*. Evidently, the contradiction is the following: as modern techniques of cultivation, manuring and selection *used* by capital *can* change taste, natural properties and quality of wheat, so the seal of commodities on the intellect or the affect subsumed under capital *can* transform and even invert their material content and social meaning. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that, along with the product, *living labour* also exists and capital is forced to include it within the objective conditions of production. This is the *processual contradiction* of a relation of capital that precedes the result. Capital – subordinating to its self-valorization *every labour* – attempts (successfully) to annihilate the autonomy of living labour through its counterposition to capitalist objective conditions (conditions that are *alienated* as dead labour – machines). This process is immanent to the contemporary valorization of capital. Thus, the mobilization of empathy and affect, the production of information, the commodification of culture and bodies are nothing more

than the results of the deployment of the contradiction intrinsic to the *totality* of the contemporary, biocapitalist mode of production.

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