

# MARXISM, FEMINISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LABOUR/NATURE THEORY OF VALUE

## 1. Introduction

In the below essay I intend to take my discussion on the construction of a labour/nature theory of value forward, by focusing on the question of the value of labour power, and on the role of Nature in the reproduction of labour power. In *Capital I*, Marx put forward the view that the *value of labour power* should be defined as the quantity of labour required for the production of the labourers' capacity to work. At first sight it would appear that Marx had in mind women's domestic toil, i.e, cooking, cleaning, child care etc. – tasks which indeed are crucial towards the production and reproduction of workers' labouring strength. However, a closer reading of Marx's texts on the value of labour power – as I have pointed out elsewhere – brings out, that Marx followed his classical precursors in presuming that the reproduction of workers' strength simply depended on the purchasing of commodities, more particularly the buying of daily necessities such as bread and clothes. In the context of the feminist debate on household labour, in the seventies of the previous century, Marx's view on the value of labour power was criticized, since it hides women's essential contribution towards the restoration of workers' capacity to toil, and indirectly towards the production of capitalist commodities (1).

How to evaluate Marx's views from the vantage point of capitalism's relation to Nature? From an environmentalist perspective, Marx's discussion on the value of labour power was more farsighted than is generally realized. For although Marx ignored women's contribution as domestic workers to the workers' capacity to work, - he did not overlook Nature's contribution. While it is often thought that Marx entirely overlooked Nature's role in creating the conditions for capitalist production, - in the context of his discussion on the value of labour power Marx did strikingly refer to the differential impact of varying natural conditions on the costs of producing the workers' labouring strength. Thus, in *Capital I*, Marx stated: 'the greater the natural fertility of the soil and the favourableness of the climate, so much less is the labour time necessary for the maintenance and the reproduction of the producer' (2). Whereas this comment of Marx indicates he was not entirely unaware of the impact of natural conditions on value formation, and realized that less time would be required for the production of the workers' food and other necessary means, wherever the soil's fertility was high, - it is nevertheless true that Marx's discussion on the contribution of Nature to capitalist production was narrowly circumscribed.

In this essay, I will seek to extend Marx's theory of value, and further incorporate Nature's contribution, by drawing on an analogy with the feminist critique of Marx's theory.

## 2. The Feminist Critique of Marx's View on the Formation of Value

In my theoretical book on women's labour in Asian countries, I had underlined the importance of the feminist critique of Marx's value theory, by quoting Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish Marxist revolutionary theoretician, who participated in the German workers' movement at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, Luxemburg restated Marx's critique of the classical economist Adam Smith. Like Marx, Smith had put forward a labour theory of

value, arguing that the value of commodities is determined by the quantity of labour required to produce the given commodities. However, Smith had only considered two value parts of commodities, i.e. the variable and the surplus part,  $v$  and  $s$ , reflecting the part that is paid out to workers in the form of wages, and the part that is appropriated by the owners-entrepreneurs in the form of profits. In fact, Marx, argued, all commodities are composed of *three* value parts, i.e. not only the variable and the surplus part, but also the constant value part  $c$ . The latter part being the value of the means of production – raw materials, fuel elements, a portion of the value of machinery, etc - which during the manufacturing phase are incorporated in the new commodity. Hence, Marx's crucial formula  $c + v + s$ .

Now, Rosa Luxemburg not only quoted Marx approvingly in her own *magnum opus*, but also described a concrete example which well illustrated the significance of Marx's discovery. Smith had overlooked the fact that value from the means of production is transferred to the new commodities, as is evidenced by the case of the baking of bread by the baker. The value of the bread is larger than the total amount of paid and unpaid labour hours spent by the baker in producing it, for the bread also incorporates the value of the flour, - of the flour which in an earlier phase was the product of the miller's labour, and before that, as grain, had been the outcome, the fruit, of the farmer's toil. 'Since all work on materials (material labour) presupposes means of production of some sort which themselves result from preceding labour, - the value of this past labour is of necessity transferred to the new product.'<sup>(3)</sup> Means of production – flour, and previously grain - being the embodiment of *past* labour performed by human beings, the overlooking of the value part  $c$  therefore amounted to overlooking a part of human labour that is embodied in new commodities.

Analogous to Marx and Luxemburg's critique of Adam Smith, it was possible for me to highlight the feminist critique of Marx's own theory of value. First, the value part  $v$  in the value of new commodities – on deeper analysis – not only contains the paid labour of the worker, the baker, who baked the bread, but also the unpaid labour of his wife who alongside him slaves at home to maintain his working strength. Again, the value part  $s$ , surplus value, not just contains the unpaid labour of the baker, but the unpaid labour of his toiling wife as well. And again the value part  $c$  - which Adam Smith had ignored and which Karl Marx had added to construct his formula on value creation – not only contains the past labour of the miller and of the farmer, who had produced the flour and the grain respectively, but also contains the unpaid labour of the miller's wife and the farmer's wife, who like the baker's wife perform household chores and thus help towards the reproduction of the labouring strength of the miller and the farmer. Hence, a feminist extension of Marx's labour theory of value and of his formula  $c + v + s$  on value formation is required in order to do justice to women (4).

### **3. An Environmentalist Critique of Marx's View on Value Formation**

Having restated my own critique of Marx's formula on value formation - a critique inspired by the feminist debate -, it is not difficult to formulate an environmentalist critique of Marx's formula on value formation either. First, Marx – as indicated in the introduction to this essay - was not unaware of the fact that Nature contributes to the formation of the value of commodities. However, he admits Nature's contribution only indirectly, by stating that the value of labour power is influenced by natural conditions, - conditions which make it either easier or more difficult to produce the food required for the sustenance of capitalist workers. Thus, natural conditions do impact on the value of  $v$ , on the amount of capital which the

entrepreneurs need to spend on the workers' wages. Where-ever the fertility of the soil is high, a smaller amount of human energy is required for the cultivation of the soil, for the production of grains. Stated in other words – the necessary labour time  $v$  required for the reproduction of the workers' strength is either smaller or larger depending on the natural conditions which the producers of food face.

However, Nature also impacts on  $c$ , on the value of constant capital, which comprises all the means of production that an entrepreneur requires for the manufacturing of new commodities. These means being the fruit of past labour, embody the necessary and the surplus labour which workers had performed in enterprises that had supplied the given entrepreneur with his raw materials, fuel elements, equipments, etc. Since the value of past necessary labour - just like the value of present necessary labour - according to Marx's theory depended partly on soil fertility and on other natural conditions, the value of constant capital in the end also is influenced by natural conditions. However, Nature's contribution to  $c$  does not end here, for all means of production contain substances which have been drawn, extracted from Nature. Whether these be metals or minerals to be worked on, whether they be coal or other fuel elements used to produce energy, or machinery bought from another entrepreneur – each and every means of production embodies substances which have previously been appropriated from Nature. Hence, Nature has contributed towards the value of  $c$  in a double sense, i.e. both via its impact on the value of past labour power, and in the form of the substances embodied in all means of production.

However, not only does Nature contribute to the value of  $s$  and of  $c$ , if only indirectly, it also contributes to  $s$ , both indirectly and *directly*. From Marx's own point of view, Nature contributes to the enlargement of  $s$ , wherever the size of  $v$  is reduced due to favourable natural circumstances. This, as stated, Marx put forward himself in *Capital I*. However, Nature also contributes *directly* to  $s$ , at least in the case of the extractive industries. For here, in these industries located in Department I (a), the commodities which are the outcome of the capital circuit of the mining companies do not embody substances which were bought at the beginning of the industrial process, but instead are substances newly drawn from Nature in the course of the capital circuit itself. Hence, there is a need to recognize that Nature *directly* contributes to the value of the commodities flowing from the extractive industries. In the case of these industries, Nature *indirectly* contributes both to the value of  $v$  and to the value of  $c$ , and also and quite *directly* to the value of  $s$ . And although the observation that Nature contributes to  $c$ ,  $v$ , and  $s$  only applies to one subdivision of one Department of Production, i.e. to I (a), -this circumstances nevertheless impacts on the whole world capitalist system of production (5).

#### 4. Conclusion

Above I have argued the need for an extension of the Marxian theory of value, drawing on an analogy between the feminist critique of Marx's theory and my own conceptualisation of a labour/nature theory of value. Marx's theory was, as well known, based on the view that the value of commodities is determined by the quantity of labour embodied in them. His theory was centred around *labour time*, as the sole factor determining commodity value. As such, his theory helped to explain the various forms of exploitation which capitalist entrepreneurs engage in in order to enlarge their profits. Thus, Marx distinguished between absolute surplus value and relative surplus value. Where entrepreneurs rely on the appropriation of added *absolute* surplus value, they extend the labour day – even up to and beyond the physical limits of their workers' capacity to toil. Where entrepreneurs rely on

*relative* surplus value, they seek to extend the labour time in which surplus value is produced at the expense of the labour time required for the reproduction of the workers' labouring strength. As is evident from Marx's discussion in *Capital I*, - Marx believed that it is possible to build a theory of value overwhelmingly on the basis calculations regarding the labour time required for subsistence, towards payment of workers' wages on the one hand, - and labour time available for production of surplus value, which value is entirely appropriated by the capitalist enterprises buying the workers' labouring strength on the other (5).

The feminist critique of Marx's theory had stated that his theory does not do justice to all those women toiling at home to sustain waged workers' labouring capacity. According to this critique, Marx was right in pinpointing the fact that a part of the waged work of male and female labourers remains unpaid and is appropriated by factory owners. However the amount of unpaid labour required for the manufacturing of commodities is in fact larger than is indicated by Marx's value theory. Both towards the reproduction of workers' labouring strength, i.e. towards  $v$ , unpaid domestic work is required; further towards  $s$ , the unpaid part of the labourers daily toil, women at home contribute unpaid domestic work; and towards  $c$ , the constant value part of commodities, which embodies the paid and unpaid waged work of industrial labourers in the past, women have also contributed unpaid, domestic work. And although the quantification of this work may not be as simple as it at first sight might appear, - a quantification of women's domestic toil nevertheless is needed, and should be possible within the framework of Marx's own quantitative theory of labour value. It should be possible without questioning the fundamentals of Marx's theory (7).

An environmentalist extension of Marx's value theory, to an extent, may be constructed by reflecting on Marx's formula for value creation,  $c + v + s$ , in analogous terms, i.e. analogous to the feminist critique of Marx's theory. However, the incorporation of Nature's contribution is complicated in several ways. First - whereas the negative effect on Nature - which in this essay I have ignored - exists in the case of all capitalist production sectors, - Nature's specific contribution to value creation is most clearly evident in the case of the extractive industries, where  $s$ , being the result of the application of  $c$  and  $v$  in the course of ... **P** ... (the second phase of the capital circuit), does contain substances which have entered only during the given phase of the circuit. The factor which most complicates an incorporation of Nature's contribution into the Marxian value theory, however, is the fact that its *quantification* appears to be a truly a daunting task. Whereas labour's contribution - even the contribution of domestic labourers - can well be visualized in terms of 'miniature' time-calculations, Nature's contribution on the whole demands a more long-term time-perspective, therefore appears to be more qualitative in kind. Nevertheless, if we are to do justice to Nature and oppose the free appropriation of Nature by capitalism which Marx so eloquently decried, there appears to be no alternative to a fuller incorporation of Nature's contribution into Marxian value theory. Nature's qualitative contribution to commodity value in I (a) need to be posed alongside the contribution of labour.

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#### *References:*

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- (2) Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1977), p.480;

- (3) Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (Monthly Review Press, New York, USA, 1964), p.41;
- (4) Peter Custers( 1997), p.cit., p.88/89;
- (5) see Peter Custers, 'Marxism and Environmental Science. The Extractive Industries and the Analysis of Social Reproduction' (October 6, 2005);
- (6) Karl Marx (1977), op.cit., Part III, Part IV and Part V.
- (7) Peter Custers (1997), op.cit., p.91.