



H. Cleaver on:
Domestic labor and value
in
Mariarosa Dalla Costa's
"Women and the Subversion of the Community" (1971)

A central point of Mariarosa's analysis in "Women and the Subversion of the Community" is to argue that housework, or domestic labor, or for that matter any and all labor that produces and reproduces labor power is socially productive, i.e., produces value and surplus value. "We have to make clear," she writes, "domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value." And a footnote adds: "What we meant precisely is that housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is *producing* surplus value." This is a claim which is asserted - in the section of the essay called "Surplus Value and the Social Factory" - but not really explored in her article. She demonstrates at length how housework produces a key element of capitalist society - labor power - but doesn't do so, for the most part, in terms of value. It is also a claim that was, and remains, highly controversial (and one which Poldo addressed in greater depth in her book - a treatment that I'm going to leave for future discussion).

The primary objection to this claim that housework produces value and surplus value derives, of course, from contrasting her assertion with Marx who treated the production of value and surplus value uniquely in the context of workers producing commodities for capital that are sold and on which a profit is realized. This objection, and the usual reading of Marx, however, usually doesn't critically examine a key issue: what it means to "produce" value. Neither, of course, does Mariarosa in this essay.

It seems to me, as I have argued elsewhere, that while the verb "to produce" is fairly unproblematic as a way to talk about the creation of commodities, it is much more troublesome as a way to talk about value (and surplus value). The fact that Marx inherited the term from the classical economists who also had a labor theory of value and who also talked freely about workers producing value (if not surplus value) doesn't make it any less troublesome, indeed any less misleading. The verb "to produce" is a transitive verb and therefore calls for a direct object. With respect to commodities (things or services or labor power that can be sold) "producing" something makes perfectly good sense and we can easily substitute other transitive synonyms such as "creating", "making" or "fabricating" without much worry. But what does it mean to "produce" or "create" value? Finding a satisfactory answer is not helped by the way Marx also uses other transitive verbs to talk about value. For example, he talks about labor "preserving" the value incorporated into raw materials, intermediary goods or machinery, or that same labor "transferring" value from those things to some final product.

Unfortunately, partly as a result of this use of language, interpretations of "value" have often been derived more from these ways of referring to it as being "produced", "preserved" or "transferred" rather than the meaning of "producing" (or "preserving" or "transferring") being derived from what we mean by value. As a result the meaning of "value" often remains mysterious, even metaphysical, something like "phlogiston", the alchemical essence of fire

- something gains value from the magical touch of the worker. Or, value is a category that denotes something intrinsic to humanness and transcends historical specificity. Thus, a great many interpreters of Marx think that he had a labor theory of value because he agreed with Engels that labor is central to the definition of what is human, humans must be understood as essentially tool-using beings who work, or *homo faber* - man who makes. We are all descendents of Hephaistos and Daedalos, inventors and makers of tools that we use to work.

Against such interpretations, I have proposed that Marx's labor theory of value is not a theory of the central value of labor in all human society, but a theory of the value of labor to capital. Marx doesn't define value as labor because he believes labor is fundamental to the definition of humanness but because labor is central to the capitalist organization of society, its fundamental means of social control. It organizes society by subordinating people's lives to commodity production. What is fundamental to humanness for Marx is the fact that for him humans have a conscious will; thus, as he says in chapter seven of *Capital* the worst of architects is better than the best of bees (*Apis faber*) because, unlike the bees who masterfully build honeycomb after honeycomb by instinct, the human architect thinks through his project before he begins to build. But ... humans exercise their conscious will in all kinds of ways, not just in "making" or "producing"; labor/work is only one particular kind of human endeavor - except in capitalism where every kind of human activity is progressively subordinated to work, indeed turned into work, either commodity producing work or the work of producing labor power.

So, what Marx calls the "substance" of "value" or "abstract labor" in chapter one of volume one of *Capital* is nothing more than the labor/work capital imposes as its means of social control, or, put differently value is that quality of the labor/work it imposes that consists of its means of social control - the fundamental role of labor in creating and maintaining the class relation. All concrete labors have this abstract quality to the degree that they can all be used by capital for the same purpose of social control. Of course, "value" also has measure (socially necessary labor time) and form (exchange value), thus only that work has the quality of "value" that produces commodities (on which a surplus value is realized via sale/exchange such that the work can be imposed again on a larger scale; NB: hence forth all references to commodities include this proviso).

From this point of view we can interpret Marx's references to labor "producing" value as denoting that labor which is imposed and which materially contributes to the production of commodities (and thus to the expanded reproduction of the class relation). Similarly, when he refers to labor "preserving" or "transferring" value, we can interpret that as labor having material effects such that previously expended labor (which produced raw materials or other means of production) indeed winds up having contributed to the final product. The opposite situation would obtain if means of production are lost (wasted, left to rust, buried and forgotten); in that case the labor that was previously expended producing them would be lost and its quality as value negated. Such negation of the value quality of expended labor occurs frequently, especially in periods of crisis/depression when factories shut down and existing inputs are left to rust/rot/decay. "Value" therefore is a quality of imposed labor as it functions within circuits of capital that actually succeed in reproducing themselves on an expanded scale. This means, of course, that "value" only exists when "surplus value" is realized; the failure to realize "surplus value" in any line of commodity production means that line gets shut

down and the labor that was part of it ceases and loses its quality as value.

But what is surplus value? In terms of substance, surplus value is surplus labor, or surplus "abstract labor" or surplus labor-as-social control. Surplus vis-à-vis what? Vis-à-vis the amount of labor capital must impose to produce the commodities necessary for the reproduction of labor power - or what Marx calls "necessary labor" vis-à-vis "surplus labor". In Marx's analysis of expanded reproduction surplus labor is all that concrete labor that produces the means of production (as opposed to the necessary labor that produces the means of subsistence).

In all of this what we see is how Marx's labor theory of value is a theory of capitalist accounting and therefore only "accounts for" the labor that capital imposes and oversees directly in commodity production, i.e., waged labor. As Mariarosa points out this accounting ignores the labor that produces and reproduces labor power directly. It includes the labor that produces food commodities; it does not include the labor of buying, storing, cooking and serving that food in the home and community. Capital doesn't have to keep track/account of domestic labor because it doesn't pay for it, at least not directly. So, when she says, as I quoted above, that domestic labor produces value and surplus value we have to ask ourselves whether, as her critics have argued, her claim is inconsistent with Marx's theory.

I argue that there is at least one interpretation of her claim that is not inconsistent. That interpretation looks at the relationship between unwaged domestic labor that produces labor power and the waged labor that produces the means of subsistence as commodities (the value of labor power) and sees how domestic labor keeps down the labor capital must impose to produce the means of subsistence and therefore keeps up the proportion of imposed labor that is a surplus. In other words, the more cooking, the less need for prepared food (that requires more processing labor for its production than raw foods). Another example: the more the labor involved in domestic agriculture the less food of any kind needs to be purchased as commodities, and thus the less of the labor that it imposes capital need allocate to such production. [According to those who have studied the reproduction of the South African labor force, it was only the vast amounts of labor in the "homelands" that made it possible for capitalists to pay such low wages in gold and diamond mining (and no doubt in many other circuits of production) and to reap such great profits. When Soviet capital collectivized agriculture it left peasants domestic plots to produce food for themselves so that the largest possible proportion of the crop (and thus the labor expended) on collective and state farms could take the form of surplus.] Thus we can say that Mariarosa's claim that domestic labor produces surplus value is quite consistent with Marx's theory as long as by that we mean that the existence of domestic labor keeps down necessary labor and by doing so allows capital to realize more of the labor that it imposes in the form of surplus labor/value. Unwaged domestic labor may not have the quality of "value" for capital in the same sense as does waged labor, but the more of it that capital can impose, the greater the surplus value it will be able to extract. The situation parallels the dynamic of relative surplus value in which the rate of surplus value is raised not by imposing more labor, but by reducing the proportion of imposed labor required to produce the commodities necessary for the reproduction of labor power, i.e., necessary labor.

The implications of this include: first, capital can achieve higher rates of surplus value if it can shift the burden of meeting the reproduction needs of the working class from commodity production to domestic work, second, any

reduction of domestic work will tend to undermine the reproduction of labor power unless it is compensated by increased commodity production. An example of the first case might be what occurred in the early 1970s when US capital engineered a dramatic increase in the price of food - tending to lower the real wage and reducing workers access to consumer goods, including store-bought food. Working class families compensated by increasing domestic production - so much so that there was a shortage of "bell jars", the kind used for canning. (Overall the attack on the real wage failed in the '70s because, on average, workers were able to raise nominal or money wages enough to offset inflation.) An example of the second case might be the rise in the demand for things like medical care, child care, and restaurant meals that accompanied the exodus of women from the home into waged work over the last several decades. Less domestic work had to be compensated by more necessary labor - which was met, at least in part, by the labor of those same women who moved from the home into the wage labor force where they often could only find "women's jobs" (nursing, teaching or waitressing) that replicated domestic work. Recognizing these kinds of relationships add to our understanding of the potential impact of struggles around housework, not just for the reproduction of labor power, but for the ability of capital to realize surplus value and achieve accumulation, or the expanded reproduction of the class relation as a whole.