

Book Symposium on George Henderson *Value in Marx: The Persistence of Value in a More-Than-Capitalist World*

Value in postcapitalist futures and more-than-capitalist pasts

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George Henderson's book *Value in Marx* is an object of beauty both inside and out. Its cover of differently coloured interwoven strands of a lattice exquisitely captures the multiple strands of thoughts on value contained in Marx's writings, that is, "value as noncoalescing theory" (137) as George refers to it. The lucidity of the prose; the arresting and often very playful address the author pitches us—emulating that 19th century habit, dear reader, that Marx used to such good effect; the sheer boldness to attempt a re-reading of well-thumbed texts to squeeze out more meaning, all adds up to a shining example of what close textual analysis and a creative spirit can achieve. *Value in Marx* is a beautiful object indeed, but also a daunting one.

For the past few years I have been working with Julie Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy to produce a popular book, written in an accessible and decidedly un-academic style. It's called *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities* and is also published by University of Minnesota Press in 2013. Since I've been enmeshed in the practicalities of rendering the economy take back-able and understandable to a general audience, the brains cells needed for complex entanglements with texts and competing theories are a bit out of practice. So with apprehensions abounding I began to read George's closely argued, decidedly academic book. Not for long did my worries reign. For George is interested in "value in a postcapitalist key" (xiv). His thoughts are presented as "touchstones for a social-political imaginary" (137), indeed, an imaginary of a "non-utopian postcapitalism" (141)—and this is something that is dear to the collective heart of JK Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective.

At the core of George's book is the idea of value as social labor time. In the Introduction he gives us a working definition of what he (and Marx) means by value. He writes:

...value can be thought of as the name for how productive, social activities get divided up within societies, activities—labor, in the very broadest sense—that yield the assemblages of humans and nonhumans that are necessary to sustain life, as well as spark new life (xii)

And he indicates that his book is concerned with the various ways that Marx worked on “the details of how the relations and processes that compose and recompose assemblages actually work themselves out”.

George leads us on a merry dance through Marx's writings as he pulls on these strands of thinking, discovering asides and footnotes, long digressions and arguments, revelations in letters and seemingly irrelevant observations, gleaning wherever he can valuable materials with which to work his own magic of meaning-making. He adopts an ecumenical pragmatism, writing “..let's just see if it makes sense to accept that different tropes and deployments of value strike different political points” (34).

Throughout the book there is a momentum given by George's and Marx's interest in the future. For the future is, for Marx, the key to the past (127). That is, “...only the unfolding of events makes clear what the past is as a force in the world” (129). And the future for Marx is bound up in the forms of “associated production” (otherwise known as communist production) that will emerge from capitalist relations. In this book George homes in on “the narrative ruptures where associated production sneaks onto the stage” (60).

In my research on diverse economies I have been similarly interested in excavating Marx's views on non-capitalist production. His interest in the cooperatives of his day is particularly intriguing. In a paper published in *Critical Sociology* on the status of worker owned cooperatives in left politics, I also noted, as does George in this book, that Marx saw “cooperative factories run by workers themselves” as evidence of the emergence of a new mode of production “within the old form” that was made possible by the historic

innovations (the factory system and credit system) associated with capitalist production (Marx 1981: 571 quoted in Gibson-Graham 2003: 132).

What is interesting to me is the contradictory and cancelling out interests Marx had in, on the one hand, the future of associated production that might become, and on the other, the unfolding of capitalism's tendencies toward expansion that he had 'scientifically' deduced. He was acutely aware that capitalism was not yet securely consolidated in a social and demographic sense. In response to the Lassallian-inspired social democratic call for "establishment of producer cooperative societies *with state aid under the democratic control of the toiling people*" (emphasis in original, 1972: 394), Marx rather scornfully notes: "In the first place, the majority of "toiling people" in Germany consists of peasants, and not of proletarians"(393). And, in another moment when rejecting the proposal that all classes other than the working class are "*only one reactionary mass*" (emphasis in original, 1972:389), he points to the potential for support from the "artisans, small manufacturers, etc., and peasants" (1972:389).

So there is an interesting disjuncture between Marx's empirical understanding of the limited reach of capitalist relations, indeed of the diversity and magnitude of non-capitalist economic relations in his day, and his writings on systemic capitalist dominance. For Marx, for whom the performativity of theory was as yet an un-thought possibility, the identity of the economy was in so many ways unquestionably 'becoming capitalist'.

And so, I think, all the more reason to see George's book as an important contribution to thinking Marx anew: As George notes, at the one and the same time "...for Marx history is open and does not come with guarantees. He and we need reasons to want one sort of future more than another. Value lives on in this way." (70)

Where Marx and Henderson on Value touches the Community Economy Collective's work on social labor time and bringing postcapitalist community economies into being, is with the "transhistorical necessity for surplus production" (80) and the relationship between necessity and freedom in forms of associated production (96).

George forcefully writes that:

...value in commodity society is fucked-up necessity. [But] via associated production, Marx suggests solving the problem of value, or should I say, *reviving it properly*, by bringing what he calls the realms of necessity and freedom to consciousness and into balance” (97)

Of course balance is an unattainable goal, that still must be sought after, in any continually moving social totality.

This is, for us, where the concerns of a community economy come in. In our work we identify interdependence with each other and nonhuman others at the core of life as potentiality, and thus at the core of an economy that supports life. But interdependence must be parsed (to use George’s terms) in terms of a key concerns (which are at the same time, ethical dilemmas that must be decided upon over and over):

- what’s necessary for humans and nonhumans to survive well?
- how is surplus to be distributed so that it supports wellbeing?
- how to consume sustainably?
- how to encounter distant and proximate others in our transactions with care for their wellbeing as well as ours?
- how to make, maintain, replenish and share the commons that supports us all?

So, what leads us to think that ethical modes of interdependence can be achieved?

Probably the same kinds of arresting examples of people learning to be affected by real sensual contact with the world (Henderson, 2013: 142), with each other, with objects, with nature, with collectivity, that Marx throws out willy nilly and that George Henderson gathers together in this book—the “strange tidings” (88) of possibility, and of danger.

Just as we do, Marx worried about what might go wrong in associated production (Henderson: 2013: 79): “In an alternative society, would workers simply reverse the terms established by capital and keep the fruits of their labor for themselves?” (100); would “associated producers engage in the same headlong, heedless rush to cut labor time” and not think about the consequences for unemployment? Or would they treat the “decrease of

labor inputs [as] a value in itself” (69)—reducing hours of work for all, sharing the benefits widely and increasing the freedom from necessity?

In marshalling examples of collective ethical actions for our *Take Back the Economy* book we came across many cases where cooperative workers cut back their wages to accrue surplus and reinvest in their factories or their communities. Practising Andre Gorz’s “freedom to choose restraint” (cited in Henderson 2013: 105) they put the needs of the collective enterprise first, or in some cases the need for the community to enjoy life. In Argentina, the ceramics business Fasinpat (or Factory Without Bosses) staged a free rock concert in the factory grounds for all community members—in a showy display of ebullient excess, within the continued struggle to maintain autonomy from capitalist ownership (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013: 53). Surely, we can’t lay aside a politics of value as social labor. Our interdependence through social labor must continually be negotiated, co-ordinated, phased, compromised.

Of course there are questions I have for Karl and George: where does non-commodified labour (of caring, volunteering, slaving) fit into this totality? Where do the gifts of nature, of biota, of minerals fit into this schema of potentiating life? There are questions that Marx wasn’t ready to answer, and that George need not have answered in this book, but that we as a collective must, I think, face up to if our species is to go onwards in a “different mode of humanity” (to quote Val Plumwood 2007:1), or towards an “alternative mode of existence” (to quote Marx and George) (120).

George leaves me with a glimmer of the kind of work that might be involved in this going onwards. In a wonderful quote on collaboration he encapsulates what I experienced with Julie, and what we foster in the Community Economies Collective, and what I felt reading this book and communing with George and Karl.

But what sense is there in denying the ample evidence that people have the capacity to experience extraordinary joy and pleasure in working with each other simply because they are working together: the giddy sensation that one is smaller than what one thought (a part of a whole) and larger than what one is (stripped of individual fetters), that one has become folded, along with others, into a new creature altogether. (103)

Thanks for this George.

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