

Table of Contents

Lods of Value, No Class 1

Loads of Value, No Class

By Melancholic Troglodytes

The Measure for Measure: A Workshop on Value from Below conference in London last week promised to take a critical look at the way value is created and measured in contemporary capitalism. Melancholic Troglodytes went along but found that the talks didn't quite measure up to the title

My business in this state

Made me a looker on here in Vienna.

– Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act V, Sc. I

The last time Melancholic Troglodytes compiled a conference report for *Mute* our judgment was severe. Employing neo-Vygotskian terminology we first contrasted a Zone of Proletarian Development (ZPD) with a Zone of Bourgeois Development (ZBD) and then denounced the Autonomist gathering at the University of Cambridge as a *botched* ZBD – more accurately a Zone of Bourgeois *Underdevelopment* since it failed to deliver even according to its own lacklustre bourgeois criteria.[1]

We are pleased to announce that Measure for Measure: A Workshop on Value from Below was an altogether more fruitful engagement. Although still consciously confined within a ZBD, at least in this case the limited aims of the workshop were carried through with a modicum of competence and modesty: individual academic papers were (mostly) coherent; a series of conceptual and theoretical connections were established; and a (semi)-dialogic interaction was initiated. The more informal atmosphere and the breaking of bread in the shape of sumptuous spinach appetisers courtesy of the organising team helped create a warmer surrounding than the Cambridge debacle.

The best prepared presentation came from the Leicester group. Academics who display a sense of humour are forever in danger of being undervalued by po-faced colleagues. A pity since, as the Leicester contingent ably demonstrated, possession of a sense of humour and intelligence are not incompatible. We particularly enjoyed Steve Brown's analysis of a 'Life Event Stress Scale'. Alfred Meyer, a social psychiatrist interested in the interplay between biological, psychological and social factors kept over 5,000 'life charts' which were later used by researchers to develop the Life Event Stress Scale. Today the Scale is used by the US Navy for recruitment purposes. As a critical psychologist Brown was keen to underscore how orthodox psychologists place an exchange value on human emotions. Following from Elaine Scarry's, *The Body in Pain* (1985) where it is argued that the main purpose of torture is torture itself, Brown suggests that the main purpose of the Scale is completing it. Simon Lilley (University of Leicester) provided a similarly ironic critique of value and the opaque process of academic auditing. He linked some of the problems associated with research funding to the restraining aspects of the narrative form in which proposal and audit are couched. Lilley asserts that, 'audit demands activity that is auditable, activity that brooks no irony or contradiction'. In such circumstances audit generates an inbuilt intolerance for open-ended research procedures. Stephen Dunne (University of Leicester) then demonstrated a particularly common mis-measurement of value within academia using the student feedback procedure and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) as examples. David Harvie (again from University of Leicester) talked about the mortgage crisis and the 'derivatives' market. He explained how derivatives 'lock the future into the present' by influencing the 'fundamentals' of the economy. This penchant for derivatives, Harvie believes, is replacing the 19th century gold standard as the preferred mode of managing risk in investment. Incidentally, Harvie was one of the very few speakers who framed his talk within the terms of 'class politics', which is a little odd in a workshop claiming to analyse 'value from below'! He was to our knowledge also the

only speaker with the courage to air a (mild) criticism of Negri, suggesting that the later Negri '[has gone] Steven Spielberg with his trilogy'.

On a related theme, Christian Marazzi (Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana – SUPSI) talked about 'value in finance'. Some of his speech seemed glaringly obvious: that finance cannot be talked about separately from the production sphere; that the Theory of Value cannot be discussed separately from the notion of crisis and so on. More interestingly he traced the history of 'financialisation' to the 1970s New York pension funds crisis and suggested that 'derivatives' are really about commodifying and regulating risk in the hope of minimising future capitalist crises.

Anahid Kassabian is a good natured academic from the University of Liverpool who studies the under-researched field of 'non-resistant forms of music', for example, ring-tones and background music as opposed to the more openly rebellious punk and rap genres. She discussed how this 'secondary and simultaneous listening activity' impacts our subjectivity as we go about our daily lives and how some wildly optimistic entrepreneurs are creating a profit bubble based on these 'non-resistant' forms of music.

Continuing the theme of value formation in cultural industries Nirmal Puwar (Goldsmiths) struck a discordant chord by first questioning whether academics are real proletarians and secondly suggesting that joint university-industry projects should be viewed as opportunities rather than sell-outs! Although Puwar's analysis of the cultural industry smacked of theoretical naivety, her actual work contained interesting elements. For instance, one project is about Urdu poets responding to the Coventry Cathedral ruined during WW II and the other a short film about first generation Indians buying a disused cinema in Coventry and transforming it into a social and political centre.

The last group of speakers analysed 'invisible value'. Anna Curcio (Edu-factory) listed some of the differences in domestic labour between now and the 1970s in Italy. Domestic labour deserves special attention, she believes, because it involves material and immaterial labour as well as low and high skill activities. It is also crucial in segmentalising the labour market. She mentioned how much this analysis owes to Alisa Del Re. Melancholic Troglodytes feel the translation of Del Re's work into English might be a useful way of reanimating debates around domestic labour that have been stagnant since Leopoldina Fortunati's contributions were absorbed.

The final three speakers who continued with the theme of 'invisible value' were all suffering from various degrees of stress, which made them ideal candidates for filling in the 'Life Event Stress Scale' mentioned earlier. Poor David Graeber (Goldsmiths) was reading from hurriedly prepared notes since his laptop had been stolen that very day! Uma Suthersanen (Queen Mary) expected a lynching for being a lawyer amongst radicals. She needn't have feared on that score. The few radicals in the workshop were keen to stay on her good side, as the immediate future will probably bring many brushes with the law. One can always do with a clever lawyer in one's corner instead of the hapless McKenzie Friend some poor comrades have been saddled with in recent court appearances! Suthersanen talked about the legal difficulties in pinpointing creativity and invention within intellectual property law. A few case studies were used to illustrate the complexities of copyright and patents. Finally Angela Mitropoulos (Queen Mary) presented a paper about borders whilst suffering from extreme jetlag. She explained that just because borders make certain precarious/migratory labour invisible, it does not follow that visibility is the correct strategy since the latter brings its own problems. When and how you are visible/invisible is a tactical question that the movement needs to discuss instead of automatically assuming visibility and the 'giving of voice to the voiceless' is the right thing to do! She finished by showing a You Tube clip [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1Du_Nx9DeU] entitled 'bush border' which is about refugees hopping the fence as President Bush is being interviewed about 'illegal Mexican aliens'! Doubts were

raised about the authenticity of this evidently hilarious clip by shrewd workshop participants!

A final judgment on the conference: So, when all is done and dusted was this a workshop on value *from below*? No, not by any stretch of the semantic imagination can the proceedings be described as emerging from below. It was after all an exclusive and hush-hush get together of academics enamoured of a certain discourse and not a genuine zone of proletarian development. However, that does not mean it was devoid of interest or significance. A reasonable amount of thought had gone into some of the presentations and one or two unusual juxtapositions gave Melancholic Troglodytes pause for reflection. The Measure for Measure workshop had aimed to show that value does not belong exclusively to the realm of political economy – that its meanderings should also be charted in cultural, psychological, anthropological and biological terms. Within this limited purview it could claim to have been (mostly) successful.

Melancholic Troglodytes is a proletarian collective. We bring out an occasional journal of the same name about the class struggle. You can contact us at meltrogs1 AT hotmail.com

FOOTNOTES

[1] We are referring to the Immaterial Labour, Multitudes and New Social Subjects: Class Composition in Cognitive Capitalism conference (29-30 April 2006, Kings College, Cambridge). See <http://www.metamute.org/?q=en/Archipelago-of-Immateriality>

Info

Measure for Measure: A Workshop on Value from Below, 20-21 September 2007, Goodenough College, University of London