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Work

Mercedes Bunz

Critique is work – working with a given situation to **transform** it. It is work that is productive. But what makes critique work? Where does the productivity of this work, or of work in general, come from? And how can “work” at present be critical? In order to find out, this entry seeks inspiration from Karl Marx’s text “Estranged Labour” (1844) to transform today’s destructive conditions of flexible and precarious work into something more productive.

Working with Marx, one quickly notices the following: Despite the fact that in the twenty-first century work has started to follow us home on our smartphones to stay annoyingly around on the weekend like an uninvited guest, the concept of work has not significantly changed since 1844. Back then, when Marx was writing about “Estranged Labour,” he made an observation still relevant today. The following activities are still part of many actual weekend plans: “eating, drinking, procreating,” “dwelling, and ... dressing-up” (Marx 1844, 275). Back then as much as today, we feel ourselves more freely active in our “animal functions” (275) than at work. Back then as much as today, work is productive and leaves us estranged. Work appears “only as a *means to life*” instead of being “a conscious life activity” (276). Yet work has also changed. As Hannah Arendt (1958) has pointed out, in the Western world “labor” has been replaced with “work,”

246 and this means that instead of our bodies acting out physical labor, today only our hands are moving (always typing). Labor is taking place in our minds. We are gathering, penetrating, summarizing, and re-packing information. We are creating connections where there was nothing before. Communication has become hard work, and concentration is immaterial labor. It is exhausting. What did we expect? Most certainly, living kills us. But death has always been a good reason to dance, and Marx wrote texts that are excellent to swing around – when criticizing work, changing **perspective** is necessary.

These days we often find ourselves in work situations which keep us – because they are so fulfilling – precariously overworked or underemployed. Work fulfillment has been turned against us. Helpful when analyzing this ambiguous fulfillment is Marx's manuscript "Estranged Labour," a work unfinished to this day. The text ends right in the middle of an argument that looks into the social conditions exploiting the workers and leaving them estranged. Marx blames unjust property distribution as a reason for this estranged labor. In twenty-first century capitalism, this uneven distribution is still widespread and growing. So, to still ensure and even maximize our identification with work, the "New Spirit of Capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) tricked us with work autonomy and employee-initiative. The Marxian "estrangement" is gone, with the effect that today we work fulfilled while still being exploited. Thus, it "falls to us now to go on thinking," as Virginia Woolf (2006, 62) once put it.

What if back in Marx's time it was not just the unjust distribution that created the workers' estrangement? What if "estrangement" is overall elementary for work? Or, even further, could it allow for a different take, as some theorists ponder? Inspired by a discussion in *Homo Sacer*, in which Agamben explores the concept of an "empty form of relation" (1998, 38), Eva Geulen (2012) has addressed estrangement as a "non-relation," thereby refuting the understanding of estrangement as a deficient term, that hinders an identification with the world. Taking up her line of thought,

“estrangement” could be turned into a productive concept. Consigned to itself and non-relational, estrangement becomes nothing but an empty form thereby opening a zone between work and life that can be inhabited in a different way. This zone proves helpful when working with both, today’s concept of work, and its critique. An interesting observation Marx makes earlier in his text also points in this direction. In “Estranged Labour,” he describes a particularly human capacity that could be read as a capacity for “estrangement.” Humans, he points out, are the only species able of creating an object not merely according to their own standards but according to the standards of others:

An animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. (1844, 277)

Applying the inherent standard of a species, a situation, or an object is working with an estranged perspective. With this, Marx discusses “estrangement” as a productive part of labor, work, and human life. Being more than just a negative effect of the conditions of labor, estrangement here is a capacity to show empathy and to relate to something other – an animal, another human, or a situation. Read in a non-self-relational way, it appears to become far more than a concept that denotes a failing to identify with oneself. Pushing this line of thought even further, Adorno’s famous remark that “there is no right life in the wrong one” (1985, 3) comes to mind. Today we can say: the ability to do our work “estranged” – i.e., living a beautiful, “right” life after our work to pay the rent is done in the “wrong” life – does not seem to be an option anymore. In the era of work autonomy and employee-initiative, work has taken over our lives. There seems to be no outside to capitalism. Resistance, however, is inevitable, and the same applies to critique, which finds in its critical toolbox two new appliances: non-relation and estrangement. With these

248 new tools, it enters the workplace again, this time by sneaking in through the backdoor.

As is well known, Marx's philosophical notion of labor gains its political force from the understanding that there are aspects at work simultaneous to when we are working. For Marx and in his time, the following two were the most important: labor as a process that produces a valuable product, and labor as a process that gives one a place as a "species-being" (1844, 275) – for when humans create objects, they also are "posited by objects" (1844b, 336). What applied in Marx's time still applies today. Capitalism has successfully turned us, the human workers, into our own enterprises. We compete with other professionals on the job market for which we become fit by getting an education. For this, we have forced job seekers to become attractive "offers" and we address students as the university's "clients" – a situation that needs to be abused, and it easily can be: we can fall back on a non-relation, we don't need to relate to this.

Worried by the current work-terror, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten bring up such a strategy in their discussion of the American University as a workplace, pointing out that "competition" and "negligence" (Harney and Moten 2013, 30-31) do not need to be at the heart of professionalization. Work can be different: Work, wherever and whatever it may be, paid or unpaid, has always already enabled different situations. Situations that can be further affirmed. History provides us with examples, with the imaginative praxis of the Paris Commune 1871, for example, when people were "... trying to carve out spaces and ways to live on the edges of various informal economies, testing the possibilities and limitations of living differently now," as described by Kirsten Ross (2015, 12). Living differently and working differently today then means kitchens and freelance hubs can become refugee camps from which a new solidarity seizes the workplace; collective team breakthroughs can be kidnapped thereby giving birth to a community; the pain of working set-backs gets comforted with a solidarity that knows about the vulnerability of all

humans. If we become alert and claim these and other moments, we will find a multiplicity of **processes** open for us to become someone else, or something other than the (mere) capitalist worker. After all, work necessarily involves estrangement. And as such work has a transformative potential as it always also leads “somewhere else.” So, dare to follow.

Today as much as in Marx’s time, work offers both an irritating and enlivening potential that awaits to be uncovered and strengthened. If – as Marx once said – “nature appears [to the worker] as his work and his reality” (1844, 277), then to work – wherever and whatever this work is – can make a difference. For, as it always was, our realities are and will remain out of control. Today, in as much as in 1844, work is an effective tool within this world. And since this world is your work, may we ask what kind of world you are currently working on?

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