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Rethinking the concept of labour

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Is labour a useful concept for anthropology today? This essay attempts to respond theoretically to the challenge that the contributions to this special issue empirically pose. The essay rethinks the concept of labour by addressing three questions that deal with the relation of human work effort and capital accumulation: the first refers to alienation; the second to the difference between abstract and concrete labour; and the third to ambiguity. Over the years, these issues have addressed particular aspects of social reproduction, helping define labour as a concept, albeit a heterogeneous one, that is relationally linked to capital. Dislocation, together with the parallel concepts of dispossession, disorganization, disconnection, and differentiation, emerges prominently in the analyses of contemporary labour transformations and specificities. Finally, the essay engages with seemingly disappearing labour futures and what this means for the concept of labour. What is the value of work for capital and, conversely, the value of labouring for people today?

Introduction: a problem of method

This special issue on labour raises important questions that we will probably not be able to resolve but which should not be hastily dismissed. First, there is the epistemological question of the value of concepts cross-culturally and cross-historically, in this case the value of the concept of 'labour'. Anthropologists (but also historians) have been struggling with this thorny issue from the outset. How useful is an extraneous concept to understand the processes, conflicts, settlements, tensions, and harmonies that take place in a historically and culturally different environment where our present-day Western categorizations may not exist, or may be embedded in a very different reality? As many have argued, the nature/culture divide or the self-contained individual may not be significant, whereas other unknown forms of categorization may be present that we cannot fathom or imagine. In sum, this epistemological question determines our method and the internal tension that makes its value. If we abandon the quest for universally applicable concepts, we are at pains to justify the worth of our discipline for we cannot compare, and the terrifying 'so what?' dilemma emerges as we become cornered into being mere consumers of native theory. If we do not acknowledge the concreteness of living experience and its eventual incommensurability, on the

other hand, we may fail the quest for ethnographic understanding. Understanding the world and its diverse inhabitants in their own terms, their specific connections and disconnections, dissolves distance. Yet modernist epistemology requires a separation between subject and object and the creation of some fictional building blocks (concepts) which are thinking tools: that is, they do not *describe* reality; they attempt to *explain* it by producing abstract paths, logics, articulations (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980 on the Western building metaphor of scientific arguments). Hence, do we need a concept at all if every cultural understanding of life-sustaining practices is not only different but also part of a way of being in the world and becoming a concrete and unique entity? Can a concept such as labour bridge the gap between the inescapable concreteness of lived experience and the diverse abstractions used to make sense of it? Can it be useful as a tool for explaining what goes on in different parts of the world regarding the forms in which energy is expended, co-ordinated, and organized in order to sustain life and make it worth living? If we think of the world as connected, it makes methodological sense; if we think of the world as an aggregate of multiple worlds, it may make little sense.

So there is a preliminary decision that refers to method. Anthropologists have been stressing the connection between the world's inhabitants (human and nonhuman) in the era of colonial expansion and later globalization. Therefore, movements and logics are also historically connected, dependent phenomena rather than independent materializations (manifestations). Moreover, capitalism, or the 'self-expansion of the money form of value' (Elson 1979: 165), has been deployed in most places, although with its particular forms of embeddedness, translation, and interpretation which are tied to historically uneven and combined developments, and sociocultural imperatives (Allinson & Anievas 2009; Rosenberg 2006). As feminist economists, anthropologists, and critical social scientists in general have pointed out frequently, this form of value and the relations it entails do not saturate the social space. What is probably even more significant, they are not separated from other forms of value and relationships, nor do they function in another realm. In fact, it would seem that the way in which these other relations and values appear is central to how capitalist relations develop and enable the 'self-expansion of the money form of value' to take hold. Capitalist relations are always parasitical on ongoing relational connections that guide worthy life sustaining practices.

Harvey and Krohn-Hansen in the introduction to this issue define their aim as exploring the tension between the ways that global capitalism might *connect the* experience of labour on the assembly lines of the Chinese factory to the experiences of those engaged in the mining of coltan or working in the container shipping industry- while at the same time *not connecting them at all*, not simply fragmenting but also necessarily responding to hugely varied histories and fields of expectation (emphasis added)

At the same time, the issue attempts to investigate 'dislocation in which places and persons are reconfigured by movements of capital' (p. ???). It remains to be seen if the connected-disconnected-dislocation triad the authors of this issue are exploring rests on labour *as a concept* rather than labour as a description of local experiences in a world dominated by global capitalism. The introduction, in a clear support of labour's conceptual strength, points out that 'a focus on labour, in this second decade of the twenty-first century, configures a field of ethnographic concern that conjures both the systemic force of capital, and the historical specificity of how these ever-shifting capital relations play out in practice across the world' (p. ???). Theoretically exploring this assertion is the objective of this essay.

Historicizing labour

The history of the concept of labour in Western thought shows how its development was tied to productive tasks (in particular agriculture) and drudgery. In late medieval times, an idea of a 'common good' objective in the motivation of work transforms the originally servile substance of the concept into a vocational one which refers to the divinely preordained tasks of one of the three orders of society (*oratores, bellatores, laboratores*). It describes status adscription rather than a property of the individual (Duby 1980; Le Goff 1980). In its development as a concept, three processes become salient: (1) the shift of productive effort from a derogatory to a positive status in the late Middle Ages; (2) the idea that it expresses the participation in a collective (social) process aiming at the common good; and finally (3), with the coming of modernity, the individualization of the human productive relation to nature (Castel2013; Locke 1986 [1689]). These three aspects – productivist, social, and individual-become entangled in the concept that political economists inherit and that in turn Marx will develop as the cornerstone of his theoretical construct. As a consequence, the dominant concept of labour rests on an idea of society or a collective good, an idea of individually self-contained creative energy, and an idea of the objectification of energy in material production. These elements are present in the labour theory of value and in the triad of aspects that support it, namely the concrete, social, and abstract forms of labour.

In addition, as a social science concept, labour is generally paired with capital and referred to historical contexts where work is somehow connected with the process of capital accumulation. Beyond the understanding of labour as a wage relationship with the owners of the means of production that enables workers to make a living, many forms of relations have been explored that connect unwaged work (communal, unpaid, volunteer, affective, unregulated tasks) and even non-work (unemployment, leisure, idleness) with capitalist accumulation processes. This extension of the concept of labour still preserves as its core meaning the multiple forms of its relation to capital.

In the last fifty years at least, the concept has suffered extremely pertinent and creative critiques, mostly by feminist scholars who have introduced reproductive work into the conceptual realm of labour, pointing to the centrality of its particularities (e.g. emotional and relational value) for the social reproduction of a labour force (Dalla Costa & James 1972; Hochschild 2003 [1983]; Lawson 2007; Nelson 2006). Anthropologists as well have provided important critical perspectives that show the cultural and historical embeddedness of life-sustaining practices and question the universal applicability of the Western concept of labour to make sense of the diversity of human livelihood practices (Escobar 2008; Gudeman & Rivera 1990; Malinowski 1978 [1935] Strathern 1988).

So where does this leave us? We are confronted with a need to rethink the concept of labour or else abandon it, not least because the actual practices that supported the original development of the Western concept have been transformed while the connectivity of life-sustaining practices has expanded globally. This is the task that this special issue provocatively proposes. Is a concept of labour useful? How is it useful? And what concept should that be?

Work and labour

English-speaking scholars have often been using a distinction between 'work' and 'labour', where labour is defined as human effort which pertains to capitalist relations of production, and work describes the rest of human energy expenditure in relation to non-capitalist realms, whether these be reproductive tasks (which eventually became

(generally but not solely productive) in the margins and interstices of the capitalist market system or in non-capitalist historical or present-day societies. However, this distinction cannot be drawn in other languages (e.g. Spanish or French) where there is a common word for work and labour, and, conversely, other languages have various significant categories to describe creative effort (Frayssé 2014). While this might be taken as a hindrance to the development of a clear concept of labour, it also points at what anthropologists confront in the field: scientific conceptual distinctions cannot rest on a nominalist basis, although naming the world is a form of engaging with it that has practical consequences and hence must be acknowledged by those seeking to explain it.

The main problem with the work/labour conceptual distinction, in my opinion, is that it makes two presuppositions: first, that there is something inherently different between one form of effort expenditure and the other, namely the kind of value that is created; and, second, that they cannot be simultaneously present in the human experience of energy expenditure. This brings up three questions that need to be addressed in order to rethink the concept of labour: the first refers to alienation; the second to the difference between abstract and concrete labour; and the third to ambiguity.

Alienation: the objectification and exploitation of labour

The idea of alienation as defined in Marxist literature describes, on the one hand, the separation of the product of labour from the person who has produced it (this is the process of objectification) and, on the other hand, the appropriation of a person's labour and hence its product by someone not involved in its production (exploitation) (Axelos 1976; Marx 1959 [1844]). Moreover, alienation has also been understood as the separation of labour in capitalism from its concrete conditions of reproduction (what makes a life worth living), a process that Karl Polanyi (1957; 1971 [1944]) described as the disembedding of social relations and the production of labour as a fictitious commodity. Yet it is because productive activity is understood as the concrete self-realization of the individual worker that its estrangement through the double form of alienation becomes the critical aspect of capitalist relations.

Objectification of concrete labour has often been accepted as a universal phenomenon inasmuch as the framework of individuation and material autonomy of the product are taken for granted. Exploitation, on the other hand, has been strongly circumscribed to particular historical periods and often limited to capitalist relations, where wage-labour and commoditization of social reproduction prevail. This neat conceptual separation is difficult to sustain with the ethnographic record, not only for non-capitalist-dominated realms of social interaction and non-Western cultural environments, but even for commodity chains in contemporary capitalist production. Indeed, the conceptual attachment of creative energy to the human individual as a power producing life and providing rights through its expenditure is itself an ideological creation of particular historical interactions which are not restricted to the liberal enlightenment, as Aron Gurevich (1985) shows for medieval Iceland. Creative energy can be understood as distributed in networks that bring together human and non human entities-as Actor Network Theory proposes in present-day Western scholarship- or the individual can be but a volatile form of social interaction (Strathern 1988), and objectification may occur partially, if at all (as with artisan artistic branding of oeuvres: Cant, this volume). The more general critique is that even in a context dominated

by capitalist relations, human labour is never fully disembedded. In fact, by following supply commodity chains, we can observe that the alienable aspect of labour, what makes it exploitable in a particular way, always depends on its inalienable ties to the social environment. Hence when we observe the concrete life projects of people as they unfold in different parts of the world, and how they are woven into particular forms of surplus extraction or appropriation, we immediately realize how important relations such as kinship obligations and claims are to the setting of localized forms of capitalism. I would argue, nevertheless, that there is a logic to the way surplus extraction operates at different scales, and it is not merely contingent on emergent and unpredictable forms. Two complementary processes are always at work in capitalist accumulation: rent extraction (through land rent, financial fees, patent rights, etc.) and surplus value extraction (through exchange relations, contractual agreements, or predatory domination). The first rests on privileged rights of access, the second on reduction of the cost of labour by competitive means, crude domination or otherwise. And both rely on the entanglement of values pertaining to different realms of moral obligation (personal, intimate, social, market, contract, etc.) and on the tensions and overlaps between the concrete and abstract value of labour.

Concrete and abstract labour: a reassessment

Much of the anthropological unease with the Marxian labour theory of value stems from its development of a dual aspect of labour, namely the distinction between the concrete and abstract labour embodied in the commodity. Concrete labour has been defined as the energy, embodied skills, cultural beliefs, and forms of co-operation expended to create a specific product (or service). Abstract labour has been usually understood as related to the existence of a developed market exchange system that would theoretically

pool all socially necessary labour (i.e. the labour needed to reproduce a society) and hence enable the evaluation of the proportional quantity of social labour embodied in a particular item. Following this, concrete labour could become a universally applicable concept, whereas abstract labour was circumscribed to societies (and sectors of production) where capitalism was hegemonic. This questioned the core of the labour theory of value and became one of the major challenges among Marxist feminists when trying to think about the value of domestic labour and its possible exploitation in relation to systemic capital accumulation processes. The same problem assailed anthropologists studying small family production and subsistence work in agriculture all over the world, and sociologists looking at self-provisioning practices (Pahl 1985). Those studying societies (or activities) hypothetically isolated from capitalist forms of market exchange had no direct use for the theoretical duality in Marxian value theory. However, Diane Elson (1979: 144, also 148), in a clarification of Marx's 'value theory of labour', proposes that the four aspects (concrete/abstract and private/social) of labour are present in all societies, and, according to Marx, what differs is the social form in which they appear: 'What is specific to a particular kind of society is the relation of these aspects to one another and the way they are represented in the precipitate forms' (1979: 149). In particular, abstract labour is not limited to societies where market exchange prevails in social reproduction. The abstraction refers to a quantitative proportion of the human energy and time necessary to reproduce the social totality as a meaningful whole, and this whole encompasses any collective effort in whatever form it is co-ordinated (i.e. not necessarily through market co-ordination). Elson adds that 'the objectification of the concrete aspect of labour is universal [in the concrete object or service], but

the objectification of the abstract aspect of labour [in money] is not: it is specific to capitalist social relations' (1979: 150). What is elusive in non-capitalist societies is the representation of this abstraction in a particular physical form (i.e. a unique universal equivalent, money) (1979: 164-5). That is, in the labour concept, the aspect of abstract labour exists in all historical societies but its objectification, its materialization in an object, does not. This, then, would be the main specificity of societies where capitalism is dominant: the fact that in the value of commodities the objectified abstract aspect of labour (money) reflects value which 'produces the illusory appearance that value in its money form *is* an independent entity' (1979: 165, original emphasis). Abstract labour in its objectified form, then, subsumes (but does not obliterate) the other aspects of labour and becomes the hegemonic driver of production. Making money instead of making useful objects.

This reading of Marx's theory renders his multidimensional concept of labour more useful to anthropologists because, on the one hand, it opens the field of possible forms of objectification of the abstract value of labour to whatever is the dominant universal value equivalent present in a particular society (e.g. kinship, prestige, etc.). The concept can also be extended to include the entanglement of dominant and non-dominant value realms of society, and of activities that are sustained by ambiguous claims to labour, as when unwaged kin working in a family farm produce food within a global commodity chain (Martin, this volume; Melhuus, this volume; Narotzky 2016). On the other hand, it refocuses the Marxist question on labour instead of value. Indeed, the 'value theory of labour' is not the 'labour theory of value'. Labour—that is, human life expenditure in order to reproduce life—is at the centre of Marx's theory, a preoccupation that began as an inquiry placing 'real life' and 'practice' as the starting-point (Marx 1969 [1845]). From this perspective, labour and life are two sides of the same coin and their entanglement is universal (see Collins 2016 for a reassessment of the labour theory of value taking these issues into account). Of course, some conceptual problems remain, in particular the individualization of human energy and its creative power, although it is always presented as attached to the collective and relational objective of social reproduction, which constitutes, in fact, the argument for the existence of abstract labour.

Hence, the concrete and abstract aspects of labour cannot be separated. They are intimately co-dependent and transform each other simultaneously. In addition both, even in Marx's original theory, are social and relational processes whose form is contingent on historical and spatial unfolding. In sum, we should ask ourselves what *kinds of labour* are mobilized to reproduce a society and, in a context of dominance of the capitalist form of value expansion, what aspects of concrete historical and sociocultural contexts are encroached upon, co-opted, or transformed by capitalist relations in the process of global accumulation. This volume's contributions present enlightening cases of how these developments can occur.

Ambiguities of labour and capital

The essays in this volume underline the different ways in which labour is connected with capital. Very central to this is the stress on the concrete aspect of labour with the embodied experience that it supposes and the placeness of the relationships in which this experience can occur. In each place, difference becomes the paramount value that capital puts to work. Yet we must beware of considering capital as a homogeneous and a-temporal force that impacts or transforms some traditional labour relations. Conceptually, capital and labour are forces co-emergent at different scales,

2 simultaneously local and global and constrained by other forces and their agents, such as
3 those making the state or driving the actions of various power-holders. As the concrete
4 aspect of labour gives form to the manner in which abstract labour is configured, the
5 reverse also holds: there is a concrete aspect of capital, of the way in which concrete
6 agents create capital as a particular relation with labour in one or multiple locations
7 (Bourdieu's social, symbolic, and cultural capitals, attempt to capture this diversity for
8 the French context). Perhaps Sylvia Yanagisako's essay in this volume is an extremely
9 clear example of this, but it is present in all the pieces, because labour and capital, as
10 concepts, exist only as a relationship, which is concrete and place-bound (i.e. different)
11 while it simultaneously is abstract and hence distributed across the globe in its objective
12 of expanding the money form of value (i.e. equivalent). As a result, the relational forms
13 of these historical precipitates of concrete and abstract aspects are dynamic, even if,
14 conceptually, what defines that relationship is the self-expansion of the money form of
15 value and the subsumption of other forms of value to this objective.

16 As anthropologists, we are driven to the concrete expressions of the labour/capital
17 relation out of necessity, as this is the experience that the ethnographic method provides
18 us with and becomes the basis on which theory is developed. Indeed, when we observe
19 labour forms, we tend to set off from their embedded character: the way that kinship,
20 cultural understandings, and historical factors are central to the way people engage
21 productively with local and global forms of capital. Keir Martin, in this volume,
22 illustrates this embeddedness in an apparently paradoxical manner when he points
23 at how the local use of the labour category (here defined as wage-labour) defines a
24 particular relationship to land and labour that is not tied to 'custom' (*'kastom'*). Instead
25 it attempts to assert private property over land, turning it into a small commodity
26 production factor in the wider context of agricultural contract farming (see also Li 2014
27 and Moberg 2014 for similar examples). What seems to emerge in this ethnographic
28 account is the scope for interpretation that kin-related persons' work on a piece of land
29 may hold. We are presented with the struggles around the attempt by different actors
30 to circumscribe the work's worth and the value realm to which it pertains either in
31 capitalist exchange or in custom. Conflicting processes of distinction and of blurring of
32 the categories describing activities as wage-work, or help, or respect become instruments
33 for defining land ownership and access rights. Beyond the instrumental use that various
34 categories enable, ambiguity emerges in these conceptual struggles as an expression of
35 the fact that people try to negotiate ambivalent value domains in everyday practice (also
36 Harvey, this volume; Hoem, this volume). The tensions between concrete and abstract
37 aspects of labour are always present together with the simultaneous experiencing of
38 different domains of social interaction where worth and value are not the same or even
39 congruent. Particular forms of agency, of exploitation, of governmentality, of resistance,
40 of struggle, result from the way in which local value realms overlap in the space of global
41 capitalism. As a result, sites of labour/capital conflict shift, are blurred, and become
42 dislocated in global capitalism.

43 **Dislocation: place and time**

44 In the present volume, the idea of dislocation emerges as key to the understanding of a
45 renewed concept of labour. Dislocation refers to the spatial unevenness of capitalism's
46 global unfolding as well as to recent upheavals in the livelihood experience of people
47 in places. It relates to structures of feeling that are both temporally and spatially
48 volatile, inconsistent, or violently transformed. One may argue that dislocation is not
49

new in the process of capitalist expansion, nor in past historical forms of predatory conquest (Gill & Kasmir 2016). At various moments in various places, life (human, nonhuman, environmental, and symbolic aspects of it) has appeared as dislocated by the forceful expansion of the money form of value in the case of capitalism, in a process of commodification akin to that described by Polanyi (1971[1944]) for 'fictitious commodities' (see also Burawoy 2010). Indeed, this aspect should be included in the concept of labour for it is a core defining dimension of the experience of the emergent relation between capital and labour. Dislocation, however, complements two other key aspects of the process of uneven development of capitalism as it affects labour, namely dispossession (Harvey 2003; Kasmir & Carbonella 2008; Palmer 2014) and political disorganization of labour (Kasmir & Carbonella 2008:12). These three aspects together point to the relational unfolding of social relations in global capitalism: culturally embedded forms of organization are disorganized; place-bound paths of dispossession are continuously generated; and waged and unwaged forms of making a living change repeatedly and pull people apart or together at different conjunctures through space and time. All contribute to the historical dynamics of remaking differences that reconfigure labour/capital power geometries.

David Harvey (1990) theorized the process of time/space compression that linked technologies with the acceleration of the circulation of capital and, hence, accumulation (this is particularly salient in financial capitalism). In parallel, the injunction of productivity has accelerated work rhythms while compressing leisure, rest, and work time in many new forms of labour. Christian Krohn-Hansen, in this volume, presents the opposite dislocation of temporal work rhythms as the national brokerage networks, deficient infrastructures, and global competition provide an erratic base for the deployment of productive labour in the Dominican Republic. Elsewhere, the distinction between labour and personal time or productive and reproductive time (and spaces) disappears for an increasing sector of the world's population as income-generating labour invades home and leisure spaces and timeframes. The way the dislocation of time emerges is linked to local conditions of opportunity and to how people attempt to make a living in places. Displacement may appear as forced mobility, as when local populations are displaced by the opening of a mine that destroys their town but where they might have preferential job opportunities. It is often a simultaneous process of dispossession of land, of sacred sites, of ways of living. Conversely, mobility may become the only remaining form of autonomy, as when hope for the future gets tied to migration projects (Cale 2014; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2009; Pine 2014). Yet movement always tends to disorganize some institutional frameworks while it opens the way to new forms of organization by reconfiguring meaningful connections between people.

The processes of dislocation in capitalism interweave individual, household, and social networks of working lives with past histories of labour/capital relations as they have unfolded both locally and globally, at once limiting, opening, and defining the available opportunities to make a living and the kinds of social recognition they entail. James Ferguson has pointed our attention towards the relevance of 'structures and processes of disconnection' (2009: 316) that produce

abjected, 'redlined' spaces of decline and disinvestment in the contemporary global economy [which] are as much a part of the geography of capitalism as the booming zones of enterprise and prosperity ... They refer to processes through which global capitalism constitutes its categories of social and geographical membership and privilege by constructing and maintaining a category of absolute non-membership (2009:317).

2 Indeed, geographical membership and the privileges attached to it seem to be emerging
3 as crucial sites of conflict among labour as they express the reorganization of spaces of
capital and its spatial fixes and the dislocation of the livelihood systems attached to
them.

5 Place is formed and transformed by the articulated forces of capital, labour, and the
6 state in the *longue durée*, as Huw Beynon, Ray Hudson, and David Sadler (1994) pointed
7 out over twenty years ago, but also by the forces of local responsibilities, meanings,
8 and expectations that are part of the historical entanglements of the place (see Escobar
9 2008; Harvey, this volume). Place is the domain of concrete existing people while space
10 often appears as an abstraction. But space, in an analogy with the abstract aspect of
11 labour, stresses the relational value of places for social reproduction, and appears as an
12 inseparable aspect of the concrete place. Space, on the one hand, engages with capital
13 as an emergent abstraction of relationally located, connected, and disconnected social
14 relations, while capital can only be realized in places, through places and their concrete
15 social differentiations. Space expresses the power of the state (and capital) as an *abstract*
16 relation of domination, although this power can only be realized in places through the
17 concrete production and (often violent) enforcement of difference or, on the contrary,
18 through the enforcement of homogenizing norms. Place, on the other hand, grows
19 from the meaningful relationships that people build with each other in the long
20 term and from their engagement and creative production of institutions in particular
21 locations. Place is multidimensional and the primary referent of people's lives, of the
22 everyday practice of located sociability. Often described as a local affair, however,
23 place is also multiscalar, as social, economic, and power relationships that produce
24 place occur at various scales (local, regional, national, global) and simultaneously
25 transform the operational scale of political-economic processes in space (Peck 2002;
26 see in particular the essays by Cant, Campbell, Hoem, and Schober in this volume).
27 Concrete agents' understandings inform practices occurring at multiple scales that
28 take into consideration the values (or value) most dear to each actor and use them
29 to make differences. Hence differences are created as a resource to take advantage
30 of, resist, exploit, or capitalize. Some people (within households, regions, firms, or
31 institutions) will have a great capacity to define, impose, and benefit from particular
32 differences between and within places (and people) while others will have a limited
33 one. Geometries of power result from the capacity of some agents to define, enforce,
34 and take advantage of difference both within and between places (and people) in their
35 interest. Making difference between places is also often making difference between the
36 past of these places and an alleged better (or worse) present or future there or elsewhere.

37 Much in both the concrete and abstract aspects of labour depends on the historical
38 processes of making differences and on how they combine with each other globally
39 at particular junctures. Spatial differentiation, then, produces topographies of value
40 where life and work are not worth the same; it materializes and induces a process of
41 dislocation through movement that complements other dislocations linked to the life
42 rhythms and time/effort ratios for earning a livelihood.

44 **A labour concept for 'no labour' futures?**

45 Recently, anthropologists (Ferguson 2013; Li 2009; Smith 2011) have been pointing to
46 a reality that was already debated in the 1960s and 1970s by Latin American scholars
47 (Nun 1969; Quijano Obregón 1974 and the surplus population debate). The capitalist
48 system seems to have no use for an increasing number of people, either as labour,
49 consumers, or rent providers. This has been publicly acknowledged by policy makers,

2 mainstream economists, and the media admitting that 'full employment' is impossible
3 and that structural unemployment rates will grow as a consequence of technological
4 innovation, robotization, and globalization.

5 Does this mark the end of a concept of labour? A look into the former debate
6 surrounding development policies and the place of the so-called 'informal sector' in
7 them brings some useful insights. In the 1970s and 1980s, the distinction between
8 stable, contractual, protected, waged labour relations and insecure, precarious,
9 often personalized work relations or self-employment ventures became the basis
10 for describing the economy as a dichotomous structure of mutually excluding and
11 hierarchically ordered arenas of production: the formal and the informal sectors (a
12 distinction that development agencies such as the International Labor Organization
13 supported and extended, see Peattie 1987). Additional observation of the endless
14 variations of possible relations of production/reproduction that exist in global
15 capitalism, including at its margins and in its interstices, led to an early critique of
16 this dichotomous opposition, while the connection between formal and informal 'ways
17 of doing' and making a living was stressed (Mingione 1991; Peattie 1980; 1987; Portes &
18 Sassen-Koob 1987). John Weeks (1971) pointed out that 'unemployment' rarely describes
19 a permanent out-of-work situation and is often premised on a particular administrative
20 definition of employment as contractual wage-work in the formal sector. Jan Breman's
21 classical critique of the formal/informal sector duality in the 'third world' (1976a; 1976b;
22 1976c) observed that the dichotomy lost 'sight of the unity and totality of the productive
23 system' and he emphasized instead 'the fragmented nature of the entire labour market'
24 (1976a: 1871). In this view, the labour market is fragmented but continuous, and the
25 social relations that constitute it in everyday practice are multiple, entangled, and result
26 from their historical interaction.

27 Anthropologists, in particular, paid attention to household resources, micro-power
28 relations, mobilities, and temporalities that structured differential access and reciprocal
29 relations within and between households (Melhus, this volume). This perspective
30 highlighted the diversity of jobs that household members undertook and the fluidity
31 between stable, protected, waged work (formal), self-employment, peasant farming
32 or small workshop ownership (partially regulated), casual jobs and unregulated self-
33 employment (informal), and unemployment. The ingenuity of poor households to
34 pool and distribute all kinds of resources to 'make ends meet' was acknowledged by
35 the 'livelihood means' and the 'resources of poverty' development literature, where
36 this diversity was rebranded as an asset for household reproduction (Scoones 1998).
37 Mercedes González de la Rocha (2001), however, has pointed out that, following
38 structural adjustment policies in Mexico that eroded labour market opportunities,
39 households were at pains to survive because waged and non-waged income resources
40 were complementary rather than a substitute for each other. 'A new type of labor market
41 segmentation seems to be emerging, not along formal/informal lines but between a very
42 privileged group of workers and the vast majority who struggle to survive with very
43 limited resources' (González de la Rocha 2001: 90).

44 One of the findings of this initial assessment of the complexities of labour relations in
45 'third world' regions may prove particularly useful to present-day analysis of precarity in
46 'post-industrial' economies. This is the observation that scarcity of income-generating
47 opportunities often results in 'the necessity to fence off one's own domain', looking
48 for 'protection along vertical lines, the contracting of obligations in patronage and
49 brokerage relationships with privileged kin or social superiors' (Breman 1976c: 1942;

also 1976b: 1908). However, when (and if) the situation of generalized precariousness becomes extreme, even vertical loyalties and particularistic obligations disintegrate and personalized claims are interpreted as predatory (Bremans 1976c: 1942). Thus, extreme labour market fragmentation is also a process of dispossession that generates particularistic forms of protection, even as it disorganizes collective ones (see also Kasmir & Carbonella 2008:14-15). The loss of wage-labour is experienced as an end to life, the ultimate dispossession, as when the Korean Metal Workers' Union leader says in 2013: 'There is no future!', or when a representative during a South Korean parliamentary hearing in 2011 argues that the Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction shipyard's chairman had 'murdered his employees with massive lay-offs' (Schober, this volume, pp. ??? and ???). Death is both a metaphor of an industrial past where labour was relevant for social reproduction and an embodied materiality in increased morbidity and suicide.

In the post-industrial era of 'mature' capitalist regions such as Europe or North America, the demise of waged work dominance recalls forms of labour differentiation, insecurity, and precariousness that were imagined as more suitable to other times or other countries. Working lives are pushed outside of the relatively secure income-generating environments of stable wage employment, which appear as a short-lived historical exception. They now resemble the fragmented experiences that have been ubiquitous in the so-called 'third world/global South' for a long time and recall the thwarted 'expectations of modernity' of development ideologies (Bremans & van der Linden 2014; Ferguson 1999). On the one hand, supply-side models of the economy have guided policy towards the degradation of waged labour protection, resulting in an expansion in temporary and part-time jobs and in flexible work. On the other hand, self-employment and petty entrepreneurialism as recourses against the failing of secure wage employment opportunities have been actively promoted as a way to enhance individual autonomy and escape the shame of depending on state benefits. The expansion of precarious labour (including self-employment and petty entrepreneurship) has political consequences for the forms of vertical or horizontal solidarity that are more likely to develop and for what the objectives of a labour struggle would be. It revisits the issue of whether different experiences of work invalidate the commonality of labour (both as a concept *and* as a position in practice) in its relation to capital, as Guy Standing's (2014) concept of the 'precariat' would have it (for a critique, see Bremans 2013; Palmer 2014).

If labour has been understood in the social sciences as directly or indirectly involved in capital accumulation, then what happens to labour as a conceptual tool when increasing numbers of people are described as functionally unnecessary, absolute surplus labour: that is, useless in any form to capital? The question is whether their disconnection from capital is absolute and permanent or rather a concrete expression of labour's relational aspect to the dynamics of capital accumulation in time and space as a response to the spatial, technological, product and financial 'fixes' that define the strategies of capital in its engagement with labour (Silver 2003; 2014). If, indeed, people's diverse strategies to survive, to earn a livelihood by pooling or, on the contrary, by excluding others from encroaching on scarce resources, are entirely disconnected from the social reproduction of a capitalist system, then how are these toils to be conceptually addressed?

Michael Burawoy (2010) has proposed a renewed Polanyian perspective that attempts to bridge conceptual fragmentation by tying labour to money and nature. Here, what become relevant are the situated processes of (re-/de-)commodification of labour in its articulation with these other fictitious commodities. A move from emphasizing

labour/capital relations in production to stressing the commodity aspect would enable people to forge linkages beyond labour but within capitalist relations. Burawoy's model 'centers on the commodification of labor, money and nature and their inter-relations. The argument is premised on commodification being the key experience in our world today, and that exploitation, while essential to any *analysis* of capitalism, is not *experienced* as such' (2010: 307, original emphasis). Commodification, then, would bring together the myriad experiences of dispossession and could eventually produce commonality.

Conclusion

For most people in the world, what we witness is the entanglement of many forms of work, multiple kinds of social relations, institutional involvement in regulation and deregulation, the mobilization of vertical and horizontal solidarities to access resources, and the encroachment of commodification in everyday life. There is nothing inevitable about these circumstances, which are the result of political economic decisions. Indeed, after a period of extreme free-trade policy models (with their obvious caveats of monopoly protection in practice), we may be witnessing the dawn of a protectionist trend that will transform global markets. The predatory nature of unbridled neoliberal capitalism has also generated a return to forms of stewardship or integration with nature that are curtailing extractive capitalism and supporting alternative subsistence practices (Edelman 2005; Escobar 2008). These processes are complex, and often conservation policies can have negative consequences for local people, depriving them of their access to protected resources they relied on for subsistence (Campbell, this volume; Fairhead, Leach & Scoones 2012; West 2005). Ethnographies, in any case, point to the end of secure gainful labour as an expectation of a developed economy, and to the anxieties and strategies that this unforeseen reality produces. In a world with a shrinking labour market, work takes on a meaning increasingly removed from a material productivist aspect and linked instead to the self-realization and recognition value aspects (Fraser 2001). For many people living in a state of permanent or cyclical unemployment, the value of work is very centrally its social aspect: being someone is tied to doing something that is recognized in some way as part of what society values (Joshi 2009; Narotzky & Besnier 2014). Many 'Activation Works' organized by the state, such as that described by Jan Grill in this volume, or volunteer work framed by religious, union, or community associations, such as what Andrea Muehlebach (2012) describes for Northern Italy, become work substitutes that provide a form of worth that remains tied to labour identities.

In this conjuncture of alleged surplus population (i.e. surplus in relation to the ability or willingness of capital to put it to use in the valorization process), how should we reconceptualize labour? Robert Castel (2013) argues that in France non-labour (*hors-travail*) situations remain inscribed in identities that refer to labour, to the paradigm of Fordist, stable, gainful, and socially dignifying experience. Even when absent, labour would maintain the position of core signifier of social value, marking individual self-reliance, productivism, the moral critique of idleness, and free co-operation as the ideological backbone of society. But is this true everywhere? Experiments with alternative forms of provisioning and new value frameworks are transforming the field of possibilities open to populations (including youth in Western Europe, indigenous groups, outcasts, etc.) pushed to the zones of abandonment by the relation between capital and the state. Depending on the remaining connections between these practices

2 and the process of self-expansion of the money form of value, I would argue, some of
3 these activities may still provide for the reproduction of labour and hence be related to
4 capital, even when fully embedded in anti- or non-capitalist value domains.

5 Is a concept of labour useful or even possible as an analytical tool for anthropologists?
6 While capitalism remains hegemonic, I suggest that we do not abandon the concept of
7 labour, as it addresses the connection of people and places in a process that overpowers
8 their will to make a life worth living and abducts them into the aim of the expansion of
9 money value. Even when unpaid and hidden forms of labour may be on the rise, such as
10 neo-bondage, contract farming, or self-employment, these unwaged workers are crucial
11 to capitalist social reproduction. Moreover, the ways in which they become valuable for
12 capital accumulation include their configuration as consumers of commodities, rent,
13 and interest providers.

14 What minimal content, then, should an anthropologically useful concept of labour
15 propose? First, I suggest that labour as a concept should be restricted to work effort
16 (human energy expenditure) in its relation to capital, taking into account, however, that
17 this relation has many forms, including many non-commodified and unwaged forms
18 which can be dominant in certain historical conjunctures (Narotzky 2016). Second,
19 the concrete/abstract distinction should be maintained as the key to understanding
20 what makes difference valuable as an asset for the valorization of life and of capital.
21 Third, within the concrete aspect of labour (and capital), ambiguity needs to be present.
22 And finally, dislocation, the process of permanently disrupting and reorganizing the
23 spatial-temporal dimensions of everyday life, is a crucial element in the determination
24 of power geometries between labour and capital. Anthropologists have the capacity
25 to interrogate the concept of labour from their immediate ethnographic experience, a
26 situation which opens the way to innumerable theoretical breakthroughs and practical
27 avenues for transforming society. But this must be realized through the tension between
28 concrete experience and theoretical abstraction.

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