

Introduction - Issue 10: Spring/Summer 2005

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Introduction

In this issue of *The Commoner* we are beginning to clear a path (or maybe several paths) out of the dust emerging from the front line, and try to make sense of what is the reason for the smoke and sparks. We see a strange phenomenon occurring: what we practice is often not what we value and what we value is often not what we practice (and in saying this let us not forget that “practice” means many diverse things: work, shopping, eating, filling forms, writing, taking the train, watching the telly, harvesting a crop, reading, struggling, changing nappies ... and each and one of these involve direct or indirect relations to the “other”).

Yet, anthropologists tell us, value is what guides our practices and the latter are in turn constituted by values. Could it be then that struggles are clashes among values and correspondent practices (value practices) and that what constitutes our daily existence is the front line, the battlefield? If this is the case, to be a “journal for other values” as *The Commoner* proclaims is to attempt to recast politics in terms of values, that is a politics grounded in the aspiration emerging from struggles everywhere to reclaim social wealth as commons so as to live in dignity by practicing what we value. A politics of value is also what is behind David Graeber’s contribution who starts us up into our journey with an extract from his 2001 book (*Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*) in which he argues the anthropological case for understanding value as the importance people attribute to action. He also writes an introductory essay on “the political metaphysics of stupidity,” in which he offers some reflections on how value theory (of the anthropological type, not of the political economic type) can shed light on such a phenomenon as Bush’s re-election.

The fact that struggles are clashes of value practices is not easily recognised by Marxist economists, who as soon the word “value” is pronounced, they talk to us about the correspondent “law” (of value) often accompanied by pages and pages of econometric regressions to “prove” its continuing relevance (as if the rat race we are compelled to take part in needs to be proved). On the other hand, many also think it is more appropriate to confine this “law” of capitalism to the bin of history, as irrelevant to explain contemporary capitalism and its post-modern multitudes. In the following four quite diverse contributions we indulge a little on this “law of value” and seek to reinterpret it so as to both grounding it in (and making relevant to) our many struggles and defend its relevance as a framework for the understanding of contemporary capitalism.

De Angelis here follows those who depart from this tradition that sees only capital and portrays us purely as victims. He sees the law of value in terms of ongoing struggles among value practices, struggles that are not only “out there”, but also traversing the subjects. He distances himself from both those writers who fetishise the labour theory of value by separating it from struggles, and those who dismiss the contemporary relevance of its measure imposed over the social body. For capital value cannot be beyond measure, he argues, because commodities’ value are constituted through a continuous process of measurement of people’s activity that keep us on our toes, whether we are “material” or “immaterial” workers, waged or unwaged. It is in this way that we reproduce scarcity while we could celebrate abundance. Similarly, in an older contribution published in 1989, Harry Cleaver confronts the argument of Clauss Offe and Toni Negri according to which Marx’s theory of value is made obsolete by the historical evolution of capitalist accumulation. For Cleaver, while Offe is shortsighted in believing that in current capitalism work has been displaced from its central

role of organising society, Negri's position on the obsolescence of the labour theory of value is predicated on the artificial separation between a concept of labour as producer of wealth and as means of domination, associating only the former with value. Also George Caffentzis intervenes on the question of the measure of value in contemporary capitalism with an essay on the legacy of Marx. He shows how modern capitalism still rely on "quantity" and "measure" and categories such as formal and real subsumption of labour have quantitative aspects in Marx's work that would make it impossible to use the notion while neglecting these aspects. David Harvie instead tackles another related subject, that of what labour is productive of value for capital. He argues that all labour, waged or unwaged, "material" or "immaterial", is both productive and unproductive, because all labour become the realm of capitalist drive and hence is a terrain of struggle.

Conflicting value practices around land are underpinning the following article by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, originally appeared in 1994, which discusses the expropriation of land and the putting a price on it as still two fundamental strategies to make a profit out of the Third World today as they were in the origin of capitalism in Europe. These enclosures which are predicated on valuing land in monetary terms, are challenged by struggle of reappropriation which are "pregnant with a multitude of meanings." Land in fact does not only refer to means of subsistence, although this is "excellent reason" for a movement of re-appropriation. It means and is also valued for a plurality of other reasons. Reflecting on eco-feminist practices "linking nature, women, production and consumption in a single approach" she criticises male scholars who dismiss these as "romantic". "One might wonder ... what value to these scholars attribute to the right to survival of those communities ... whose subsistence and life system are guaranteed by these practices with nature, while the 'development proposal' almost always presupposes the sacrifice of the vast majority of the individuals that constitute these communities." We have also another, more recent article, that Dalla Costa wrote together with Dario De Bortoli surveying and reflecting on a variety of struggles on land, food and agriculture, this time in a country of the North, Italy. This recent movement is distinct from classical unionism, which fixed working conditions but remained indifferent to what was produced and how, and is centred on a plurality of value problematics, such as "the question of the ends and the sense of peasant labour, a fundamental rethinking of the farmer's activity ... plus of course the ... defence of plant and animal biodiversity and therefore of the raw material of a diversified agriculture. This is a movement that reflects the "collective will of farmers, stockbreeders and citizens (not only as consumers), who have organized to refuse an agriculture and a stockbreeding system that increasingly spreads illness and danger of death."

Silvia Federici continues this line of argument as she surveys a myriad of contemporary land struggles made by women from the South not only to reappropriate land, but also to boost subsistence farming. It is thanks to these efforts that, she argues billions of people are able to survive. Not only, but in these struggles women show they "valorize" the labour of their children and family members as opposed to the de-valorisation they are subject to within the sexual and international division of labour which make capital accumulation thriving. Ultimately, these struggles point in the direction of the changes needed to regain control of the means of production and a new society, "where reproducing ourselves does not come at the expense of other people, nor is a threat to the continuation of life on the planet."