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Beyond the Fragment: postoperaismo, postcapitalism and Marx's 'Notes on machines', 45 years on

Frederick Harry Pitts 

Abstract

The year 2017 marks 45 years since the first English publication of Marx's 'Notes on machines' in *Economy and Society*. This paper critiques how Marx's 'Fragment' has subsequently been repurposed in postoperaist thought, and how this yields influence on contemporary left thinking via the work of Paul Mason. Changes in labour lead proponents to posit a 'crisis of measurability' and an incipient communism. I use the 'New Reading of Marx', which picks up where debates in *Economy and Society* in the 1970s left off, to dispute this. Based on an analysis of value as a social form undergirded in antagonistic social relations, I argue that the Fragment's reception runs contrary to Marx's critique of political economy as a critical theory of society, with implications for left praxis today.

Keywords: Marx; postoperaismo; postcapitalism; value; labour; capitalism.

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Introduction

Like other points through time, left politics today rests on the inheritance of a few slender pages from the oeuvre of Karl Marx – and this journal is central to the story of how it came to be. A short extract from Marx's *Grundrisse* (1973), the notebooks for what would later become *Capital* (1976), was given its first Anglophone airing in *Economy and Society* in 1972. Then titled 'Notes on machines' (Brewster, 1972), today it is known otherwise: as the 'Fragment on machines' (1973, pp. 704–706). The translator, Ben Brewster, introduced the 'Notes' by observing how the *Grundrisse* had by then 'acquired a fame out of all proportion to what one might think due to the draft of an essay on political economy' (1972, p. 236). Today fame accrues to one passage of the draft. Set to be as read and cited this century as the *Manifesto* was in the previous, its vision of capitalist breakdown currently reverberates through unlikely terrain: the broadsheet press, bestselling books and the centre-left policy circuit. Some 45 years after the conditions for this reception were established in these pages, this paper updates the debate sparked then (de Brunhoff, 1973; Pilling, 1972; Tribe, 1974) to contribute to the creation of a new debate. In so doing, it critiques the ideas that undergird the Fragment's surprising recuperation as part of the rhetorical arsenal of the twenty-first-century left via the resiliently influential *postoperaismo* of Antonio Negri (Hardt & Negri, 2001), and its contemporary reframing in the '*postcapitalism*' proposed by Paul Mason (2015a, 2015b).

In the Fragment, Marx presents a future scenario today evangelized as a statement of unfolding fact. The use of machines and knowledge in production expands. Production revolves more around knowledge than physical effort. Machines liberate humans from labour, and the role of direct labour-time in life shrinks to a minimum. Free time proliferates. The divorce of labour-time from exchange value sparks capitalist crisis. But this technological leap brings about the possibility of a social development on a massive scale. Freed from physical subordination to the means of production, workers grow intellectually and cooperatively. This freely generated 'general intellect' reinserts itself, uncoerced, into production as fixed capital. The worker is incorporated only at a distance, rather than as a constituent part of the capital relation. The potential for an incipient communism arises.

In building a political project around this prophecy, contemporary theorists of postcapitalism like Mason (2015b) pick up the thread of work commenced by postoperaists like Antonio Negri two decades ago. There has always been a turnover in the ideas and empirical shifts with which the Fragment's reading has been associated through time. To the Italian operaist milieu, the Fragment's interpretation, Thoburn (2003, p. 80) writes, has been 'akin to biblical exegesis'. This interpretation rests less on 'reification of authorial truth' than its 'iteration' in 'different sociohistorical contexts as part of the composition of varying political forms'. Its early apogee was Negri's 1978 Paris lectures on the *Grundrisse*, published as *Marx beyond Marx* (1992). In the 1990s, the Fragment inspired postoperaist analyses of the New Economy and 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato,

1996). It was not until Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2001) that its lasting sociohistorical iteration was set out, the New Economy drawing Negri to conclude that the conditions described in the Fragment were already present.

Popularized by the bestselling *Empire* (2001), it later wielded influence on early-2000s alterglobalization struggles. Its echoes carried through, post-crisis, to Occupy and its intellectuals. And, as the left moved towards a state-oriented politics of populism and electoralism in the mid-2010s, it reached a peak. Postcapitalism (Mason, 2015b), accelerationism (Williams & Srnicek, 2015), fully automated luxury communism (Bastani, 2015): all owe their roots to the Fragment. Garnering broadsheet inches in their name (Beckett, 2017; Mason, 2015a; Merchant, 2015), the Fragment has gained a foothold in the popular consciousness. And the midwife of these developments, Negri himself (2015), grants their output effusive praise in response.

The most unexpected turn has been its uptake in the party-political world (Pitts & Dinerstein, 2017). At the recent UK Labour Party conference, party leader Jeremy Corbyn extolled the 'new settlement between work and leisure' afforded by automation (Dickson, 2017). This position is the result of a process of policy development that has actively sought the advice of proponents of the postoperaist inheritance. In 2016, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell invited leading postcapitalists and accelerationists to address policy workshops that have fed into Labour's current thinking on the so-called 'fourth industrial revolution'. The *quid pro quo* is that intellectuals disseminating Fragment-thought are among Corbyn's leading supporters (see Mason, 2016). The World Transformed, a major festival on the fringe of the party conference proper, mainlines their assessments of automation and the end of work into the mainstream intellectual life of the party. This cross-fertilization marks high-water for the Fragment's reception. It is its route to prominence, via the work of Negri and the postoperaists up to its popularization in Mason's bestselling book *Postcapitalism*, that I chart in this paper.

The contribution of this paper is thus to our understanding of the true importance of Negri – specifically in his writings with Michael Hardt – as an influence on a generation of political radicals spanning the alterglobalization movements of the 2000s right up to the 'postcapitalists', 'accelerationists' and 'fully automated luxury communists' of the present, and the Corbynist political movement in which they now receive a hearing. The latter twist makes clear that the significance of the present-day reception of these ideas is their removal from any autonomist tradition of political thought and practice towards an essentially statist and social democratic rendering of what was formerly the preserve of radical social movements – an ironic turn for the Occupy-issue leftism Negri's work is typically taken to have spawned. The popularity of Fragment-thinking among these milieus is attributable to its convenience as an empowering starting point for the renewal of social democratic politics in crisis. This paper suggests that the search for new theoretical resources may be better aimed elsewhere.

The paper subjects this complex of ideas to critique on the basis of an alternative, critical Marxism inspired by the New Reading of Marx. Bringing the latter to bear in novel ways on popular contemporary left thinking adds to the existing literature critical of Negri by highlighting that the theoretical blind spots inherent in the postoperaist reception of the Fragment have only become stronger and more debilitating in the work of Negri's modern-day followers. Marx's suggestion (1973, p. 105) that one read the ape from the vantage point of man holds here as a means of reading the Fragment in light of its postoperaist reception, and that postoperaist reception in light of its own subsequent reception in the new postcapitalist literature. The earlier stage of development can be best understood from the standpoint of the latest. In unpicking the new resonances Negri's work has gained through time, I focus in particular on the work of Mason as the principal contemporary conveyor of the reading of Marx's Fragment found in *Empire* and elsewhere. By far the most influential adherent of the postoperaist reception of the Fragment, his book *Postcapitalism* is at once a popularization that attains high-water mark status in the repertoire of postoperaismo, and a sustained vision of the unfolding of a post-work future serious enough a contribution to be worthy of stand-alone scrutiny. Exploring how the work of Hardt and Negri has fed into the presentation of the Fragment in *Postcapitalism*, what follows uncovers the route a radical idea has travelled to a wide readership. It asks what has been left behind and carried over as the Fragment has been recoded for new social, economic and political times.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, I identify three aspects central to the contemporary reception of the Fragment, initially in Negri and now in Mason. First, the belief that the conditions described in the Fragment are found in the here and now and not the far-flung future. Second, that a traditional labour theory of value is used to understand how and why these conditions compromise the capacity of capital to bring measure to the labour performed in new forms of 'immaterial production'. Third, that this results in a crisis of the law of value already in process, bringing about capitalist collapse. In the third section, I explore further the particular theoretical implications of these ideas with reference to the alternative reading of the relationship between value and labour offered in the 'New Reading of Marx', a revisionist strand of Marx-interpretation that revisits debates about value, money and labour that ensued in this journal in the early 1970s. The New Reading of Marx highlights how the Fragment sits ill with the development of Marx's value theory in *Capital* and elsewhere, and why the kind of crisis it foretells logically falls on the understanding of how labour and value relate in his subsequent work. The theoretical errors this brings to bear are examined, in the fourth section of the paper, for their debilitating political consequences. In this section I explore why the Fragment captures the imagination of the contemporary left by drawing out the implications for the understanding and implementation of projects of social change present in the work of Negri, Mason and other exemplars of 'postcapitalist' thinking such as Srnicek and Williams. Ultimately, I conclude, more circumspect and critical ways of theorizing and

resisting capitalist development are necessary to complete the renewal of left politics that adherents of the Fragment seek to effect.

Key features of Fragment-thinking

Three central features link the reception of the Fragment in contemporary post-capitalist thinking with its postoperaist forerunner. The first is the claim that the scenario depicted in the Fragment has already been realized by changes in the workplace. The second is the specific reading of Marx's value theory used. This is employed to extrapolate from the character of modern labour a third feature: the ascription of a crisis of measurability to contemporary capitalism such as that foretold in the Fragment. In this section I will deal with each in turn as they appear in the work of Negri and his followers and, today, that of Mason.

In the Fragment, Marx describes how the increase in machinery in the labour-process displaces human labour. This weakens the role of labour-time as the measure of human productive activity. The quantitative connection between labour-time and exchange value breaks down. For postoperaists, this 'crisis of measurability' or 'crisis of the law of value' afflicts capitalism today (Pitts, 2016a). Postoperaist and postcapitalist receptions of the Fragment each in their own way seize upon contemporary transformations in work (Noys, 2012, pp. 113–114) to posit an already-existing crisis of measurability resting upon the advent of 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato, 1996; see also van Eekelen, 2015, n. 35, p. 474). This puts to work elements formerly, we are told, extraneous to the production process: cognitive, affective and cooperative capacities; free time. What the Fragment foretells becomes reality.

In the telling of this tale that currently captivates the most public interest and political uptake, Mason begins from the observation that contemporary capitalism struggles to contain the implications of the information boom. It 'corrod[es] market mechanisms, erod[es] property rights and destr[oys] the old relationship between wages, work and profit' (Mason, 2015b, p. 112). Information goods tend towards endless replicability at zero marginal cost. Their abundance contravenes the scarcity upon which pricing proceeds. Open-source and peer-to-peer production create value outside waged labour for non-monetary exchange (2015b, p. 131). Info-capitalism thus unleashes productive forces uncontainable within its social relations. Free goods and free time elude quantification and capture by capital. For Mason, this scenario is Marx's Fragment made flesh.

In this interpretation of the Fragment, Mason differs little from how it was recoded at another historical juncture in which an ill-fated New Economy seemed afoot. The rise of the post-Fordist service economy was the setting for the postoperaist reading of the Fragment as a parable of what Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) coined 'immaterial labour'. Hardt and Negri contend that this form of production transcends 'the expropriation of value measured by individual or collective labor time' (2004, p. 113). This is because labour is no longer subject to capitalist control, but is a self-organized function of the 'multitude'.

For Hardt and Negri, the multitude marks a radical shift in the proletariat and the labour movement from the paradigmatic white, male manual worker to a multifarious, mobile body of so-called ‘singularities’ (2001, p. 53). The multitude’s immeasurable productivity is enacted through communicative and affective networks. In this way, labour holds the potential of ‘valorizing itself’ through its own activity. ‘[H]uman faculties, competences and knowledge’ are ‘directly productive of value’, rather than requiring the superintendence of capital (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 132–133). This, Virno notes (1996, pp. 22–23), is the current form assumed by what Marx referred to in the Fragment as ‘general intellect’.

Its autonomous activities, Lazzarato writes, are located in the ‘immaterial basin’ of ‘society at large’. This labour, then, is ‘not obviously apparent to the eye’, undefined by the four walls of a factory. It thus ‘becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time. In a sense, life becomes inseparable from work’ (1996, pp. 137–138). And, postoperaists suggest, this potentiates the crisis of value *qua* labour-time described in the Fragment. Mason’s contribution to the renewal of radical social democracy at a time of its crisis is no more or less than a retelling of this same story, rebranded for a new ‘new economy’.

This brings us to the second key aspect. This tradition of thought self-consciously poses itself against the productivism inherent in the orthodox labour theory of value, dismissing the latter as historically outdated. In a recent iteration, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2013, pp. 75, 87) exemplifies the conventional theorization of value and labour that the postoperaist reading of the reality of the Fragment rests on. ‘When you want to establish the average time that is needed to produce a material object’, he writes, ‘you just have to do a simple calculation: how much physical labor time is needed to turn matter into that good’. It is impossible to ‘decide how much time it takes to produce an idea’, or ‘a project, a style, an innovation’. In their production, ‘the relationship between labor-time and value suddenly evaporates, dissolves into thin air’. This is because ‘the productivity of the general intellect’ is ‘virtually unlimited’ (Berardi, 2013, p. 75). It ‘cannot be quantified [or] standardized’, and, ultimately, its value cannot be measured in terms of time, leading to a collapse in the law as a whole.

In this way, postoperaist claims of the Fragment’s realization rest on a disavowed orthodoxy. Despite their professed anti-productivism, they advocate a conventional labour theory of value (LTOV) as a means by which it can be dismissed as historically redundant. Mason brings to this literature open acknowledgement of the residual dependence on a disavowed labour theory of value that all Fragment-thinking implies. For Mason, ‘[o]ne hour of labour always adds one hour’s worth of value to the products made’ (2015b, p. 158). The ‘ultimate source of profit is work’ (2015b, p. 52). As in the work of Hardt and Negri (2001) and Marazzi (2008), for instance, as for Mason, it is precisely this LTOV that facilitates the claim that the law of value is threatened by a crisis of measure sparked by changes in labour and production. But the virtue of

Mason is to tear this affinity from its concealment in an outward commitment to revisionism, making the productivism on which it rests clear for all to see. Reading the postoperaist reception of the Fragment through its latest incarnation, we can see more clearly the contested claims around value and labour on which it silently rests, and how many of the problems of this whole web of ideas stem from a central misapprehension of the nature of value.

This brings us to the third key feature, which is the ascription of a crisis to the law of value attendant on the conditions described in the Fragment. Mason follows earlier exponents in reading the Fragment to suggest that, as ‘knowledge-based production’ and the expansion of free time reduce necessary labour to a minimum, the conditions are created for a crisis in the law of value, as labour-time becomes both beyond and outside measure. On the terms of a traditionalist LTOV, the replacement of labour with machines throws the law of value into crisis. Free machines like information ‘eradicate[] the need for labour on an incalculable scale’ (Mason, 2015b, p. 165). They impute fewer ‘labour hours’ to the value of commodities (Mason, 2015b, p. 167). In line with the Fragment, free machines ‘blow [...] sky high’ the law of value (Marx, 1973, p. 706). Stillborn info-capitalism, he explains, struggles for existence against this dissolution of value. Monopolies, new forms of copyright, ‘garbled’ accounting and ‘valuation guesswork’: all contend with the crisis of measurability information sparks (Mason, 2015b, p. 171). ‘Knowledge-based production’, the expansion of free time, the reduction of necessary labour and the ‘general intellect’ embodied in machines combine to ‘destroy[] the old mechanisms for creating prices and profits’ (Mason, 2015b, pp. 137–138) and with them capitalism itself.

In the next section we will interrogate this vision of crisis further. We will use the insights of the New Reading of Marx as to the development of Marx’s value theory to understand how, in posing a simple resemblance between labour-time and value, postoperaists and ‘postcapitalists’ alike elide the abstract mediation of concrete labour in the value-form. Indeed, this is a central plank on which any ascription of crisis to the conditions described in the Fragment lives or dies. These claims are shown to rest on a fundamental misreading of Marx’s theorization of the law of value. As we will see, properly contextualized within Marx’s work as a whole, the salience of the Fragment scenario is shown to conflict radically with where his value theory eventually ended up in *Capital*. Indeed, it may well be the latter that radicals today should be reading.

Theoretical implications of Fragment-thinking

Seldom brought to bear against the more fashionable postoperaismo of Negri, a rival but no less revisionist strand of Marx re-interpretation fixates less on the *Grundrisse* and more on *Capital*. This is the Frankfurt School-inspired, mainly German-based New Reading of Marx (Bellofiore & Riva, 2015, henceforth NRM), broadly defined as ‘the critique of political economy as a critical

theory of society' (Bonefeld, 2014). Themes of this 'new reading' were also given early Anglophone exposure in *Economy and Society* by scholars like Geoffrey Pilling (1972) and Suzanne de Brunhoff (1973). Pilling, perhaps cognizant of the greater level of sophistication German scholars were bringing to the law of value, wrote that 'fundamental errors have been committed particularly by English writers, many claiming to write as Marxists, in their treatment of this law' (1972, p. 281). The NRM follows this in dispensing with the LTOV and restoring focus to Marx as a theorist of the social relations of production (Pilling, 1972, p. 287).

The NRM picks up threads present in these pages back then. An early dissenter in *Economy and Society* against the pervading fever for the *Grundrisse*, Keith Tribe labelled the latter 'an incoherent, transitional work', with 'its ambiguities an index of the presence of a number of theoretical obstacles' (1974, p. 180). The enthusiasm for the *Grundrisse*'s prophecy of capitalist breakdown, chiefly represented in the 'Notes on machines', Tribe attributed to 'a lamentable ignorance' of Marx's definitive work in *Capital*, where many of the ideas expressed in his notebooks were revised or discarded (Tribe, 1974, p. 181).

This is the cornerstone of the critique presented in this paper, concerned now as then with Marx's value theory as his foremost contribution. Pilling, writing in the same issue of *Economy and Society* in which the 'Notes on machines' was published, suggests that 'the problem of value [...] finds a much fuller treatment in *Capital* than it does in Marx's late-1850s output (Pilling, 1972, p. 301). As Brewster contends, Marx starts *Capital* with value 'because he thinks it is the necessary first step in the analysis of the object'. But the *Grundrisse* proceeds differently, he notes, and this indicates a different theory of that object itself: the capitalist mode of production (Brewster, 1972, p. 239). This has implications for how we interpret the Fragment within Marx's wider theoretical endeavour. Following on from forerunners like Pilling, the 'New Reading of Marx' helps shed light on this relationship and how it has been misinterpreted by contemporary Fragment-thinkers.

Value, for the NRM, does not consist in the amount of labour-time expended in production by any one labouring individual, but the amount of time 'socially required for its production' (Marx, 1976, p. 301), or its socially necessary labour-time. This is subject to a validation made after the concrete expenditure of labour. As de Brunhoff suggests, 'it is in *circulation* that the labour time which is "socially necessary" to produce one commodity imposes itself on the labour time expended by all the producers', and this is achieved by means of the validation of expended labour as socially necessary through the exchange of commodities (1973, p. 425). It is only through this validation that labour can be said to produce any value at all (Bonefeld, 2010, pp. 266–267).

The NRM thus chimes with how, in *Capital*, Marx counsels against situating value in the sheer amount of labour expended in a commodity's production. Marx notes that if this were the case then the commodity with the most value would be that produced by the most 'unskillful and lazy' worker. The labour-time that determines value is instead that *socially necessary* (Marx, 1976,

p. 129). Value exists, according to Marx, only as ‘definite masses of crystallised labour time’ (Marx, 1976, p. 184). The emphasis here is upon the crystallization by which this can be said to be so – and not upon any amount of actual concrete labour in time. Hence, value relates to abstract labour and not its concrete expenditure (Bonfeld, 2010, p. 262).

On this basis, the NRM approach suggests that the acclaim granted the Fragment by other Marxists is vastly out of proportion to its status, coherence and meaningfulness within Marx’s work as a whole. As a leading light of the NRM, Michael Heinrich (2013), asserts, the Fragment’s temporary formulation fails against the standards set in the subsequent development of Marx’s own published work. Its fragmentary status owes to this. The Fragment was one part of Marx’s working discarded as his theory developed in sophistication. The most complete statement of this theory is that which we find in the still-unfinished iteration given in *Capital*, and it is this that the NRM lays most stress on.

Read against *Capital*, the Fragment runs counter to the whole endeavour of Marx’s critique of political economy. As Pilling (1972, p. 284) notes, the appearance of value cannot but express its underlying law, and as such any concern with value’s quantitative measure or the ‘proving’ of its veracity Marx met with ‘scorn’. The long shadow the Fragment casts over postoperaist and contemporary ‘postcapitalist’ approaches to value suggest little thought has been given to its coherence within the whole body of Marx’s work. Fragment-thinking tends towards a conventional understanding of the relationship between labour and value. Ironically, this productivist standpoint belies the avowed post-workerism of its proponents. Their conceptualization of a crisis of measurability depends upon it. Value must relate directly to expended concrete labour for the latter’s reduction to pose a threat. But value relates instead to abstract labour. Against de Brunhoff, who characterizes it as ‘an expenditure of human labour’ (1973, p. 424), abstract labour ‘cannot appear empirically within the capitalist system’ (Pilling, 1972, p. 288). As such, the Fragment sits uneasily in the development of Marx’s value theory. This accounts for its fragmentary, unpublished nature. Its crisis scenario implies a simplistic LTOV that Marx later outgrew. The Fragment can be considered only a partial viewpoint on value from a Marxian perspective. For this reason it should not be extrapolated to a theory of the crisis of measure and the law of value made to fit the conditions before us today.

Any putative crisis of measure based upon the latter is thus shown to be mistaken through the lens of the NRM. And this extends to the scenario Marx himself paints in the Fragment, and the postoperaists and postcapitalists who have parroted it back. Visions of capitalism’s overcoming presupposed on a crisis of the measurement of direct labour-time incorrectly emphasize labour’s concrete expenditure over its abstraction in exchange. By conceiving it contrary to its reality, postoperaists can then challenge the continuing role of the rule of value. As Caffentzis notes, in the assertions postoperaists make about the obsolescence of the law of value, they miss how Marx was ‘the original immaterialist’. ‘[A]s far as capitalism is concerned’, Caffentzis (2013, p. 97)

argues, Marx saw capitalists as ‘not interested in things, but [...] their quantitative value’ which is ‘hardly a material stuff!’ As Mason’s open advocacy makes clear, postoperaists render obsolete the law of value only by holding to its most productivist interpretation, rather than the properly ‘immaterialist’ Marx.

In this sense postoperaist interpretations of the Fragment’s realization in immaterial labour are seldom immaterial enough, principally for the lack of a grasp of *form*. Like the most conventional value theory, they emphasize labour’s concrete expenditure over its abstraction. They extrapolate systemic change from the immediate form labour takes, ignoring its mediation. Changes in the workplace are elevated to changes in capitalism as a whole, at the expense of a recognition of how the particular commodified forms assumed by the results of production carry over. Postoperaists and postcapitalists like Mason would have us believe value relates not to abstract social forms, but quantities of inputs and outputs. Indeed, their politics of the future depends upon it. In this, their work bears out a disavowed productivist temptation towards the factory. As Heinrich suggests, against their protestations to have surpassed the proletarian condition, Hardt and Negri ‘equat[e] value-constituting “abstract labor” with temporal, measurable factory labor’. But, as Heinrich (2007) states, ‘Marx’s concept of ‘abstract labor’ is not at all identical with a particular type of labor expenditure’, but is rather ‘a category of social mediation’. This applies ‘regardless of whether th[e] commodity is a steel tube or care giving labor in a nursing home’. If Marx’s theory of value relates not to quantification but to the analysis of form, there is little difference between material and immaterial labours. The value-form relates not to labour but to its commensuration in commodity exchange.

We can extrapolate this to the positing of a crisis of measurability in the Fragment. In a recent critique, Moishe Postone (2012, p. 247) assays Hardt’s suggestion that ‘the question of measurability is a function of the nature of that which is measured – material or immaterial’. Rather, ‘the question of measurability is, basically, one of commensurability’. This relates not to specific objects or practices, but ‘the social context within which they exist’. The grounds for ‘mutual exchangeability’ are ‘historically specific and social’. For instance, how two distinct items are rendered commensurable will change through time. Today, this is value, what Postone calls ‘a historically specific form of social mediation’. This ‘crystallisation’ occurs in spite of any change in the material or immaterial basis of that which it mediates. The novel conditions of immaterial labour, then, need not unlock the conditions described in the Fragment.

Read through a form analysis, measure continues the same as always. The optimistic picture the Fragment foretells cannot be the case. Caffentzis points to the everyday persistence of measure in all kinds of work. Far from crisis, it continues to function, just as necessary for capital as ever before. At the most basic level, ‘the process of creating propositions, objects, ideas and forms and other so-called “immaterial products” [...] is a process in time that can be (and is) measured’ (2013, p. 111). This may differ from, say, the ‘material’ factory labour of Marx’s own time. But it occupies time and is subject to

measure on this basis all the same. Caffentzis captures this well when he writes that the crisis of measurability ‘does not seem to refer to what billions of people across the planet do every day under the surveillance of bosses vitally concerned about how much time the workers are at their job and how well they do it again and again’ (2005, p. 97). The coercive social relations are still there, synonymous with measure, and sublated within it, contradictory and denied.

Contra the postoperaists, Caffentzis contends, measure has always endured the uncertainty ascribed in the Fragment scenario. No commodity has ever had its value seamlessly read off from the amount of direct labour-time that went into its production. As Caffentzis (2013, p. 112) contends, this is as true for material commodities as it is for the immaterial goods and services emphasized by the postoperaists. This is because the labour represented in the value of a commodity is abstract labour. This is measured on the basis of socially necessary labour-time (Pilling, 1972, p. 288). This is determined by, as Marx (1976, p. 129) writes, ‘the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society’. In other words, it is arbitrated not by direct, concrete labour-time, but through social validation in monetary exchange. Value, on this account, always faces the conditions of crisis described by those foretelling its downfall. But that cannot be fatal in the way that the Fragment implies.

Thus, postoperaist claims as to the realization of the Fragment’s conditions in the present are possible only by virtue of a misunderstanding of the value-form that exposes the treatment of immaterial labour as nowhere near immaterial enough. But, on the other hand, Fragment-thinking is nowhere near materialist enough, eliding the persistence of the social relations concealed and implied in changes in the immediate content of work. These social relations centre on the compulsion to sell one’s labour-power as a condition of living, and the forceful and continued separation from independent individual and collective means with which to reproduce ourselves otherwise. The exchange abstraction that synthesizes capitalist society is thus a real abstraction. It is a conceptuality with a material, practical existence in antagonistic social relations (Bonefeld, 2014, p. 64). Pilling understands this all too well when he writes that, where ‘the value relation (a social relation) appear[s] as a relation between *things*’, so that ‘[i]n exchanging commodities men [. . .] in fact exchange[e] their labour’, no ‘illusion’ pertains, but rather only the ‘necessary appearances’ assumed by social relations in capitalist society (1972, p. 283).

Critiquing ‘surface’ economic categories, then, reveals the materiality of concepts and the conceptuality of the material world. Thus, the coin in one’s pocket ‘carries the bond with society’, a bond that concerns ‘the struggle for access to the means of subsistence’ (Bonefeld, 2016, p. 240; see also Marx, 1973, pp. 156–157). The coin expresses and is concerned with this bond. But it also expresses a concept – value – inseparable from its constitution in the actual relations of life. The struggle for subsistence is as conceptual as it is material. Reality, in this way, is socially constituted through human practice. As Horkheimer (quoted in Bonefeld, 2016, p. 60) writes, ‘[h]uman beings produce, through their own

labour, a reality that increasingly enslaves them'. This, as we will see, confounds Hardt and Negri's ascription of a revolutionary creativity to their 'multitude'. By critiquing economic forms, we also critique the kinds of human lived practice and experience they express and mediate, rather than uncritically celebrating that which is.

The critique of political economy, therefore, is, as Bonefeld (2014) puts it, not an economic theory but fully a critical theory of society as a whole. It refuses to accept at face value certain objective appearances taken by congealed social relations in capitalist society. It does not reflect the world back at itself with the same objectified economic and social forms that dominate us. In what follows, I suggest that postoperaist receptions of the Fragment do precisely that. And, as I will go on to suggest, this complicity with the present state of things may account for the Fragment's popularity with policymakers and media movers-and-shakers today. In the next sections I will consider these political implications, and suggest that they stem from the particular way value and labour are understood in contemporary receptions of the Fragment.

Political implications of Fragment-thinking

The crisis in the law of value of which the postoperaist interpretation of Marx permits an understanding presents itself to its adherents as a chance to create a new world within the shell of the old. The Fragment captivates contemporary audiences on the left and centre-left, I would suggest, precisely because of the empowering and optimistic portrayal of capitalist collapse it offers. Where Negri read off from the development of the 1990s and 2000s 'New Economy' the conditions for the Fragment's realization, Mason's contribution has been to update this prognosis for new times, reading off from a number of newer developments an apparently even more plausible story of the Fragment's unfolding. In this section I will explore how, in these visions of a future no longer far but near, the arcaea of value theory gain real political purchase.

Writing in this journal, Fran Tonkiss identifies in the various strands of 'postcapitalist' thinking a tendency to believe 'not merely that another world is possible, but that another world is already actual' (2008, p. 306). Contemporary 'postcapitalist' readings of Marx that place the Fragment front-and-centre are similarly misplaced, promoting a prospectus that breaks radically with what we know of Marx's theory of value. A contrasting interpretation suggests that we might be better off seeing the Fragment as a depiction of conditions possible under a future communism, but not a current capitalism (Smith, 2013). This, it claims, would account for the divergence.

Problematically, modern popularizations of the Fragment run counter to this periodization. As Caffentzis notes, what Marx posits at some point in the future, Negri sees holding in the here and now (2005, p. 89). This was not always the case. In *Marx beyond Marx*, for instance, Negri suggests that communism is defined in the transition towards it (1992, p. 115), with no implication this

transition is complete. It is underway, perhaps, but in no meaningful sense realized. Here, Negri suggests that only communism's realization fulfils the conditions the Fragment describes. It brings an end to the law of value, through 'the negation of all measure, the affirmation of the most exasperated plurality – creativity' (1992, p. 33). But Negri makes no intimation that this point has been reached.

But, by *Empire*, this 'exasperated plurality' reappears as the basis for a shift in stress from Marx to Spinoza. Drawing on the latter, Negri conceives creative desire immanently driving capitalist development towards Fragment-conditions. Empirical changes in the world of work express what we can call, following Beverungen *et al.* (2013), a 'communism of capital'. Immaterial labour – creative, communicative, cognitive – 'seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 294).

Earlier, in his *Grundrisse* lectures, Negri describes the Fragment as 'the highest example of the use of an antagonistic and constituting dialectic' in Marx's work (1992, p. 139). But in the switch to Spinoza, the antagonism and the dialectic disappear. The difference relates to how Negri periodizes historical transition. In *Marx beyond Marx*, he characterizes the Fragment as prophesizing a 'communism' reached through the constituting power of working-class subjectivity. '*Communism has the form of subjectivity*', he writes, '*communism is a constituting praxis*'. This is a movement in opposition to the present: 'There is no part of capital that is not destroyed by the impetuous development of the new subject' (Negri, 1992, p. 163, emphasis in original). But, by *Empire*, the struggle seeps away. The new subjectivity – that of the multitude – is in compliance, not conflict, with the present. This is because, by virtue of its immanent creative power, the present is in its own image. As such, the communism foretold in the Fragment is no longer subject to a struggle through which to attain it. It is, rather, a current with which one conforms.

This shows how close postoperaismo remains to the productivist, teleological Marxist orthodoxy with which it auspiciously claims to break. In delineating a 'communism of capital', Negri pays lip service to the worker-led struggle of Mario Tronti's Copernican reversal (Cleaver, 1992). Mason does so too in a panoramic chapter about how unruly workers have provoked employer investment in new technology (2015b, Ch. 7). But the account of change and crisis in *Empire* ultimately writes history without class struggle at all. Multitude and Empire move in syncopation – and, vice versa. Whatever happens in the world is a result of the unfolding of the multitude's 'creativity of desire' (Hardt & Negri, 2001, pp. 51–52). It is little wonder, then, that, as Thomas Osborne asserted in the days of the 'New economy', 'Hardt and Negri often sound uncannily like today's proponents of creative management speak' (2003, p. 511). The same might be said today of postcapitalist visionaries like Mason and the tech-utopians of Silicon Valley.

In these resonances the 'affirmationism' that Noys (2012) skewers is clear. It illuminates the contemporary import of Negri's interpretation of the Fragment's

present-day realization. Take the ‘accelerationist’ current, with which Negri himself engages (2015). Here Fragment-thinking endows a nihilist optimism whereby whatever happens, however bad, is for the good. What accelerates subsumption and crises of measure represents a liberation. Srnicek and Williams (2015), for instance, herald a time where newscasters report firm closures and job losses not as tragedies, but victories. When the immanent driving force of multitude stands behind every twist and turn in capitalist misery, it is easy to see a silver lining to the fraying thread that links life ever less with labour.

Srnicek and Williams, to their credit, have caveated their earlier enthusiasm (see 2016) to state that if there is no organized struggle to shape the unfolding development of new technology, no utopia will attend it. But the point remains that struggle here is taken to act upon a process already in play. Similarly, Mason suggests that the Fragment weaves a tale of class struggle, in so far as in its pages workers fight for ‘freedom from work’ and the ‘struggle to be human and educated during one’s free time’ (2015b, pp. 137–138). Mason locates the source of these ‘new social relations inside the old’ (2015b, p. 114) in a new class subject. This is the educated, networked individual, the ‘bearer of the postcapitalist society that could now emerge’ (2015b, p. 144). The diversity and boundlessness of this new class entity brings it squarely within the sphere of the multitude outlined by Hardt and Negri, but with an extra element of old-fashioned workerist class struggle. But the position of the ‘networked individual’ as the ‘bearer’ of postcapitalism gives the game away: there is a teleology active here which suggests that social actors rise to prominence because of the forces of production and can only reshape the relations in so far as the forces permit.

This unwittingly reproduces the stale communism and social democracy that *operaismo* sought to escape. The orthodoxy stood sure in the knowledge that history unfolds precisely to plan: an inevitable collapse of capitalism propelled by outdated irrationality and technological change. Workers were expected to move with the current, rather than against it. But, as Benjamin wrote of the social democracy of his time, its conformism to *what is* ‘attaches not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well [...]. Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving’ (Benjamin, quoted in Noys, 2012, p. 115). It seems that the renewal of social democracy today may produce the same false sense of surety.

As Noys suggests, a ‘key symptom’ of this conformism was the celebration of labour (2012, p. 115). This reappears again, today, in the affirmationist Fragment-thinking of postoperaists like Negri. Contrary to the impression cast of an anti-productivist centring of spaces other than the workplace, it betrays a reverse productivism whereby all change in capitalism hangs on the workplace writ large, expanded to breaking point so as to incorporate nearly everything. To the Marxist inheritance of the liberation *of* labour the postoperaist reception of the Fragment and its contemporary postcapitalist descendants add the advocacy

of the liberation *from* labour. The two accomplished together by foregoing technological trends, an end to work is considered, incorrectly, key in turn to the end of capitalism. Herein a certain kind of work, with a certain kind of worker in tow, is taken to portend a new world of work and its escape. In this case, it is the ‘immaterial labourer’. This displays a traditionalist productivism inherited, as Caffentzis astutely notes, from Marxist-Leninism. Here, ‘the revolutionary subject in any era is synthesized from the most “productive” elements of the class’ (2013, p. 79). Whereas once this was the Stakhanovite tradesman, today it is the freelance website designer or computer programmer – Mason’s ‘networked individual’.

Just as postoperaismo expands the workplace to include everywhere, its workforce expands to include everyone. In postoperaismo, the earlier Marxist celebration of productive subjects is augmented by a ‘Spinozist metaphysic’ that ‘affirms the productive force of humankind’ as a whole, as Ryan puts it (1992, p. 218). Everyone is the most productive element of the class, which is now ‘multitude’. This grows partly from the same theory of the ‘social factory’ to which Mason subscribes, whereby the location of production and struggle becomes society itself. Society resembles a factory, and work itself becomes more intensely social. Mason (2015a) follows Lazzarato’s delineation of the ‘immaterial basin’ by suggesting that knowledge-based production sees value created by dispersed, decentralized ‘communicative networks’, and it is the transformation of productive activity in collective ways apparently irreconcilable with capitalist production that impends postcapitalism upon the present. Similarly, in Negri’s hands, the reading of the social factory through a Spinozist monism which suggests everything is as one grants a convenient alibi. Unremitting positivity greets a world wherein whatever happens results from multitudinous and boundless ‘creativity of desire’. And the hypothesis that this is so is by its nature indisputable. Its only proof is what is. ‘History’ becomes synonymous with ‘multitude’, and just as elusive. The political message echoes through bided time: sit back, and let teleology do the rest. Whatever you are doing is good enough.

Depicting the realization of the Fragment now and not in the future, these analytical propositions present the multitude’s actions as always wielding an ‘affirmative’ dimension (Noys, 2012). This is a claim with real political performativity in the hands of those who herald it. This says that capital is subject to the drives of social agents, a ‘counterpower’ which is the immanent motor of all change. Mason (2016), for instance, ascribes this to the movement behind Corbyn. This immanent role is as real when capitalism is working well as when it is not. On one hand, globalization responds to the border-hopping boundlessness of the nomadic multitude. The New Economy arises from the autonomous and cooperative creativity of that multitude. On the other hand, crisis springs from the multitude’s challenge to capital’s limits. As Noys notes, the crisis of measurability springs from an excess of life made ‘directly and immeasurably productive’ (2012, pp. 113–114). So the multitude both compels capitalist development, and its crisis. As Anne Barron writes in a

recent edition of this journal, ‘If [...] capitalism *requires* the very practices that are supposed to manifest’ Hardt and Negri’s ‘spontaneous and elementary communism’, then ‘how is it possible to distinguish evidence of co-optation from evidence of contestation – or a resurgent capitalism from an emergent communism?’ (Barron, 2013, p. 609). This is a political question the new postcapitalists are yet to reckon with.

This confusion is clear where Hardt and Negri celebrate the immanent force of the multitude within capital. ‘If Empire is always an absolute positivity [...] and an absolutely immanent apparatus’, they write, it is exposed to crisis never transcendently but always immanently – in that its limits present ‘constructive’ possibilities for the constitution of alternatives within and not beyond itself (2001, pp. 373–374). The crisis of measure, then, is in no way forced by the *negation* of the unfolding of capitalist social relations. Rather, it confronts capitalism with an *excess* of things already present within it *positively*. These elements are a positive part of its functioning – free time, productivity, value, creativity, desire, labour and non-labour – and of life, which under capital is nothing other than labour-power and its reproduction. In *exceeding* them, the multitude *affirms* (Noys, 2012, pp. 113–114) what exceeds limits and the limits themselves. And, by extension, it affirms the relations and things that usually proceed with reasonable bounds of those same limits. Which is to say, value, labour, capital and so on.

In a critique of Negri, Bonefeld (1994) restates how the perverted forms taken by the products of human practice dominate and cajole us. In Negri, only the provenance of that which pushes against the limits of valorization is explained. The origin of those limits themselves is lacking. And it lies in perverted forms of human practice assuming an ‘alien, coercive power’ (Pilling, 1972, p. 288) above and beyond us. A dialectical standpoint can grasp this. It comprehends the contradictory unity of, on the one hand, the conceptuality of abstract social forms, and, on the other, the non-conceptuality of the struggle to subsist. But Negri’s Spinozist immanentism sees only one, uncomplicated monad. It lacks the dialectical sensitivity to contradiction and mediation capable of accessing the nature of the limits it claims the multitude transcends.

Like Mason with his networked individuals creating immeasurable value in the free time afforded by new technology, Negri positively associates the multitude with the breaking of capital’s quantitative boundaries. But in embracing that which challenges its limits, both lose critical focus on the nature of those limits themselves. This disregards how the perverted forms resulting from human practice continue imposing themselves anew. The activities that ebb at the limits of capital are one and the same as those that constitute those limits to begin with. Human practice takes the form of abstract labour in a society mediated by the exchange relation of value. This relates not only to an analysis of social processes at their most abstract. Rather, those processes express the essence contained, denied, within their appearance. Which is to say, concrete social relations, of antagonism, coercion and separation from subsistence outside selling one’s labour-power.

Their elision in postoperaist and postcapitalist accounts of the Fragment's unfolding is curious. At first glance, the conceptualization of the crisis of the law of value is historicist in its presentation. The conditions that make it possible are embedded in a changing set of concrete realities. The crisis of measure attends changes in the relations of production. And these are, for Negri as for Mason, synonymous with the forces of production. Workers set the rules under which they labour. The Italian situation in the 1960s and 1970s is central to this prognosis, as highlighted in the aforementioned chapter of Mason's *Postcapitalism* (2015b, Ch. 7). A constituent power grab led to the breakdown of the Keynesian accord on wages and productivity. Operaists watched closely as wage demands rocketed and work refusal proliferated. Workers abandoned agreements submitting their productivity to capitalist command (Cleaver, 2000, p. 68). This eventually resulted in a new kind of economy, immaterial and factoryless. For the postoperaists, the revolt of these forces was also a revolution in the relations of production. This is not a dialectical, antagonistic relationship, but a singularity shared in by its two sides. Negri's embrace of Spinozist immanence makes this clear. It gives a philosophical basis to render two as one. Where multitude leads, Empire not only follows, but moves in step. The same can be said of the networked individual *vis-à-vis* so-called 'info-capitalism'.

It is hard not to find the immediate historical evidence for a whole world moving as one. Such a succession of changes in the immediate content of work are taken as the basis to propose the Fragment's realization. But this apparent historicity leaves postoperaismo no more capable of capturing capitalism's overwhelming continuities. It emphasizes only change. The parsing of a succession of epochal paradigms from one another – Empire, postcapitalism, info-capitalism and so on – is easy when one sees all change issuing from the workplace. As noted in *Aufheben* (2007), these paradigms are defined along productivist lines. They pass by in accordance with superficial transformations in the content of labour. But, to see the Fragment within the context of Marx's work, focus must fall on the social form mediating the immediacy of labour. Hardt and Negri base their analyses around. What characterizes capitalism is not the specific kind of productive activity that takes place. Rather, it is characterized by the forms taken by its results: value, money, capital. This is the specificity of the social formation in which we find ourselves (Pilling, 1972, p. 283).

Bypassing this specificity, postoperaists conceive a capitalism they cannot grasp undergoing a crisis it cannot suffer. All strategy is outsourced to its favourable unfolding. The same theoretical imprecision blights the new politics of postcapitalism. Misunderstanding what capitalism is produces misunderstandings over the possibilities of its replacement. These arcane debates over value and labour are not merely exercises in a Marxist theology or metaphysics, but rather bear practical implications that in the long run could prove materially and politically disastrous. We must, therefore, beware the siren calls of those who seek to tear the Fragment from its context within the unfolding of a fuller theory of capitalism in Marx and the new readings of his work. Its

misguided application to the present yields real political efficacy. Its popularity may relate to the reassurance it offers to two diverse audiences. To those interested in capitalism's continuation, a soothing requiem to its immeasurable productivity and peaceful passage of progress. To those seeking otherwise, the promise of its imminent transformation. From a critical Marxist perspective, both thrive off false hope.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have contested the postoperaist positing of the existing realization of the Fragment and how it has circulated in contemporary left political discourse. On the basis of the insights generated by the New Reading of Marx advocated here, postoperaists elide the persistence of the real abstraction of value and the social relations of production it expresses and proceeds through. I have challenged the assertion that the crisis and redundancy of value associated with the Fragment is already realized. Where postoperaists and postcapitalists see a 'communism of capital' existent or incipient in the present, we still live, work, starve and suffer under capital's rule.

The features of Fragment-thinking as they appear today carry a theoretical lineage in postoperaismo with a surprising political longevity. It was Marx who suggested that one could best ascertain the ape from the vantage point of the man it came to be – or that, more generally, '*the most developed is the key for the knowledge of the less developed*' (Bellofiore, 2009, p. 179), and the same can be said of the light shed by Mason's output on the postoperaist oeuvre that inspired it. Here, postoperaismo's popularization exposes its underlying productivity orthodoxy. Mason, like Negri, pivots his whole presentation of the Fragment scenario on the presumption that it is direct, concrete labour that contributes to value and that any reduction in the time in which it takes place poses an existential threat to the rule of value *tout court*. This understanding of value is at the root of a series of weaknesses that, filtered through a postoperaist way of approaching a changing world, today afflict the thinking of the left.

The question central to the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society is 'why does this content take this form?' (Bonefeld, 2001, p. 5). The critique of political economy, therefore, is all about understanding the *form* productive activity assumes. Changes in immediate labour and its direct measure cannot create in themselves a crisis of value, in so far as the latter centres on a succession of abstract forms. It is comforting to contend an incipient communism is around the corner owing to such changes. But placing the Fragment in the context of Marx's work as a whole gives little cause for comfort. Capitalism is characterized by categories of social mediation and antagonistic social relations of production. They persist regardless of whether a worker uses a keyboard or a hammer, ideas or nuts and bolts. This gives pause for thought to those projecting Fragment-inspired pipedreams. The epochal crisis they posit is no crisis at all. Capital always struggles to measure, and what is measured always struggles back.

This is not a novelty of Empire, or ‘info-capitalism’. It is as true for the industrial factory, where sabotage and subordination were rife, as it is for the so-called ‘social factory’. This is where a micro-focus on the immediate forms taken by concrete labour at any given time fails. The forms of social mediation persist, and the antagonisms they imply. And with them lasting contradictions Fragment-thinkers optimistically see as a sudden and liberatory crisis.

As problematic as these theoretical oversights are, they would not be nearly so problematic were it not for the forms of political praxis they invite. Today, partly with respect to the intellectual support offered them by adherents of the Fragment, policymakers plan for a technological future that may or may not come. Via its media propagandists, Fragment-thinking wields real influence. Social democracy sits under its spell, with the possible next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Jeremy Corbyn, imbibing the utopian aspirations of automated worklessness bubbling up from the youthful radicals that form his base.

Wrong ideas about the world can produce wrong forms of human practice in response. As Caffentzis notes, in common with other treatments of the purported ‘end of work’, postoperaismo generates a stultifying politics that suggests ‘capitalism has already ended at the high-tech end of the system’ and all there is to do is ‘wake up to it’ (2013, p. 81). Today, the movement around Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn exhibits a similar conviction. Popular analyses celebrate empirical trends in work and economic life in expectation of change. But no substantial critical effort is made to understand capitalism’s continuing negativity. A crisis, attended by incipient communism, can be conceived only in spite of this.

This ‘wishful thinking’ (Thompson, 2005, p. 89) leads to a strategic impasse for a left too enchanted with the world that is. They assume too much is right, and not enough wrong; ‘optimism of the will, optimism of the intellect’, as Tonkiss (2008, p. 307) puts it. Spellbound modes of praxis result that rub with the grain rather than against it. Positivity is praised, negativity goes un-negated. Policymakers seize upon the false promise of change the Fragment heralds. Meanwhile, hardy forms of social domination rest unquestioned.

A few pages of Marx, published 45 years ago in this journal, helped get the left here. But more pages still can help them get back out. Pilling’s (1972, pp. 283–284) words from the same issue ring true today. The ‘necessary appearances’ of capitalist social relations can ‘only be destroyed by overthrowing the economic categories which sustain them’. In other words: *‘only a reorganisation of society can abolish fetishism’*.

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