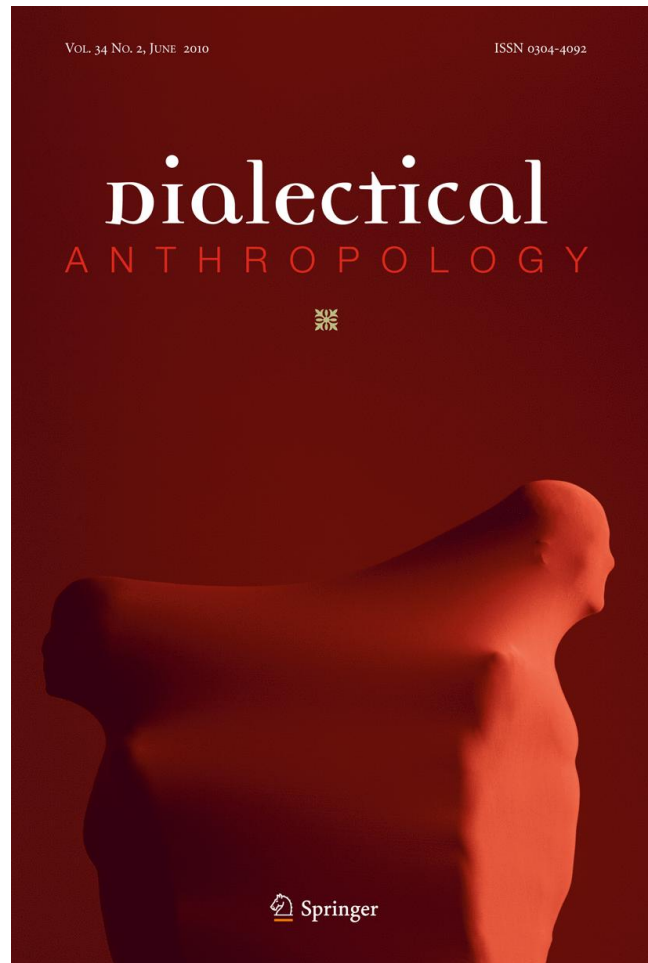


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Reply to Mishler, Harney, and Roediger Production, class, race ... and labor as subject

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In the hectic and pitifully anti-intellectual realm of institutionalized academic everyday life—which comprises so much of the material and practical reality of our particular (and peculiar) alienated labor as professionalized scholars—it is truly extraordinary to enjoy such considered and thoughtful engagement with one's work as I have received from these invited commentators. Their generosity and insights are a rare and precious gift, and I am gratified to discover that my work has provoked such reflection.

Paul Mishler calls attention to the way that my ethnographic material helps to demonstrate how the material and practical expropriation of surplus value from labor and the ideological elicitation and extraction of the consent of the laborers themselves are dialectically intertwined and inextricable. He suggests that this is “the real contribution” of the essay, especially inasmuch as it upholds “the idea that issues of hegemony and consent originate *within* the productive process itself.” Indeed, Mishler astutely discerns that this proposition is one that organizes the larger framework of the article as a whole. In lieu of a “response,” what I would hope to (re)emphasize, however, is that the particular forms in which we encounter these dynamics *within* capitalist social relations always refer us nonetheless to something *beyond* these historically specific capitalistic forms of appearance. (And by “beyond,” here, I am suggesting something that both *precedes* and also *exceeds* capitalism as an historically specific social formation). In other words, theoretically speaking, there is something genuinely ontological and effectively transhistorical at stake, and it is of significant consequence, politically.

When I open the essay with the contention that “the everyday work of hegemony is profoundly rooted in the everyday hegemony of work,” it is largely because of the redundancy and repetition entailed by the apparent “truths” of (estranged) labor as

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“*routinized practice*.” Under capitalism, this of course means that we may speak of what I have called “the practico-ideological role of labor itself as a *disciplinary process*” and the “tacit compulsion of laboring practice.” Yet, the broader questions of consciousness and how it is mediated precisely in and through *practice*, and thus also through social relations, are not confined to capitalist production or its particular labor processes. This is why I refer later in the essay to the drive to capitalize upon “human labor’s autonomous creative capacity and ingenuity—something that is inherently collective, cooperative, and socially configured.” Here, we must recuperate and sustain a sense of the human productive powers that always supply the *subjectivity* within any alienating machinery of “production” understood to be merely onerous drudgery. My efforts to refer us back to the theoretical centrality of the productive process, then, must not serve as a pretext for fetishizing (yet again) the reified power of capital or the centrality of the (capitalist) labor process (as the unified site of exploitation and domination), but rather are intended to re-direct our critical capacities into an appreciation for the incorrigible and unruly power of human labor’s elemental subjectivity. Without an abiding sense of this open-ended vitality, Marxian critique becomes merely one more dreary expression of the dismal science.

I take Stefano Harney’s comment to be an impassioned affirmation of this same sensibility. For, I am positing here a sense of *labor*—as subjectivity—that is in fact a kind of uncontainable and limitless way of theorizing human potentiality. The sheer potentiality of human creative capacities and productive powers defies what Harney refers to in terms of the containments of “class”—both as it is lived and experienced within capitalist social relations and as the categorical limit-relation implicated by analyses that uphold class as a defining and definitive conceptual category. Thus, in the ethnographic material that I have presented, working people struggle within and also against the confines of their subordination and subjection as labor-*for*-capital (what Harney depicts in terms of “class” as a domesticating and limiting mode of relation to the requirements of capital accumulation). In this respect, much as in the work of David Roediger, we may find workers mobilizing on an overt and more or less explicit class basis that tends to be profoundly self-defeating. “The whole point of class as something positive,” Harney contends, “is that it is only positive for capital, which is to say it can exist in the bourgeois sphere without politics, and without threat.” Alternately, when human beings mobilize as labor-*against*-capital, their desires and actions always-already tend to call into question their very existence as a class of mere workers, whose human vitality and subjective power have been effectively domesticated within capitals’ regime. A surplus of veritably counter-hegemonic energies becomes inseparable from the multifarious positivities through which human beings aspire to exceed and surpass the containments of their subjugation on the basis of class. Or, as Harney puts it quite succinctly, “people left to their own devices will try to make something positive out of their lives.” A class-for-itself, then, can only be the manifestation of human subjects actively and purposefully going about the emancipatory work of seeking to abolish their own intolerable mode of existence within and for capital. That is to say, the class-for-itself can only be one committed to eradicating itself as a class. It is instructive, in this regard, that Harney suggests that we appreciate the

politics of *difference* as a politics against limits—including, very notably, the limits imposed not only by class oppression but also by the sorts of class analysis that sociologize and reify labor and domesticate working people within the categorical presuppositions of their own class subordination.

David Roediger signals the vexations of how a regime of racial management abundantly affords particular (racialized) groups of workers the means by which they may actively if agonistically participate—precisely, as historical (laboring) *subjects*—in their own class formation, literally *making themselves* as a working class, as labor-for-capital. Furthermore, Roediger calls attention to the seeming paradox that this expressly *racial* politics of labor subordination coincides in my ethnographic material with a reform of the labor process aimed at an ever greater *abstraction* of labor among workers whose racialized specificity is what otherwise remained persistently at play. In his erudite and expansive reflection on the theoretical problem at stake here, Roediger emphasizes the argument that the apparently universalistic and homogenizing projects through which capital accumulation enforces the ever greater abstraction of labor (for the purposes of intensified productivity) are in fact always exquisitely sensitive to the requirement that labor be internally differentiated and antagonistically divided. The suggestion (following Michael Lebowitz) that capital relentlessly composes a “collective worker” as an objective social formation of class-in-itself while yet conscientiously cultivating the bases for its incapacitation as a class-for-itself, moreover, alludes to the persistent necessity for what I have depicted as “more or less deliberate and calibrated interventions aimed at the decomposition and recomposition of those intrinsically conflicted social relations” between capital and labor. Indeed, it may be useful here to insist that the relations of struggle between labor and capital are, from another vantage point, nothing less than the relations of struggle between living labor and capital as labor in its objectified, alienated, dead form, between living labor and its domination by its own products, in other words. Or alternately again, as relations of struggle between labor-against-capital and labor-for-capital, wherein laboring subjects become embroiled in a kind of “class war”—with themselves.

Here, with Roediger, we may turn more directly to the questions of race through which management, in the ethnographic case that I examine, routinely organized the everyday politics of labor subordination but also through which “Latino workers gave the employer’s ‘crude and overt strategy of racial management’ the twist that Black workers were ‘lazy’.” As Roediger notes, “militant class assertions, usually cast as the antidote to disunity” can sadly become “yet another alleged marker of race.” (In Harney’s idiom, we might note, these mobilizations of labor-against-capital might be better characterized as militant “anti-class” assertions). What is striking for me in Roediger’s reflections—drawing as they do upon a variety of Marxian perspectives regarding the contemporary conjuncture of so-called “globalization”—is that the question of race may be resituated within a more global analytical framework. In this manner, we may be better able to avoid the trap of juxtaposing too starkly the figures of race and “nation,” or even race and citizenship, which typically results from apprehending any particular, historically specific economy of racial distinctions and divisions according to the ideological commonsense of that same (“nationally” insular) racial order.

The dialectics of class and race, which are conventionally conceived in narrowly “national” terms, correspond in fact to a larger dialectics between *global* capital (crudely identified with the “economic”) and the diverse spatial—and indeed, corporeal—particularizations of the social relations of struggle (which may thus be properly called the “political”). The effectively global regime of capital accumulation produces a systemic separation between the “economic” and the “political,” whereby “economic” relations (above all, wage-labor) appear in general to be strictly voluntary, contractual, impersonal, and free of direct coercion, and the means of organized violence and repression (the “political”) are supposed to be reserved as a resource for the similarly impersonal Rule of Law. This separation entails a constitutive contradiction between a veritable world economy, predicated upon the universal abstraction of labor, and a global order of territorially defined “national” states through which the expressly political relations of labor subordination and social order are orchestrated, regimented, and enforced, and in a manner that is rigorously differentiated by the borders of sovereignty and citizenship and the boundaries of identity. In this respect, there is a deep consonance between race and nation as manifestations of the naturalization of social and political inequalities which correspond to the differentiation and division of the planet according to a proliferation of distinct fields of force, working out the variously localized and historically specific compromises of the *politics* of the otherwise global capital-labor relation. This indeed is where a universalistic and ostensibly homogenizing regime premised upon labor-in-the-abstract sustains and requires the production (and naturalization) of difference—racial, “cultural,” “national,” and so forth—as a basis for ever proliferating and exquisitely refined hierarchies of distinction and division in the material, practical, *lived* and indeed *embodied* experience of living labor, as labor-for-capital.

And yet, as Roediger notes, this politics of difference can be “explosively troublesome” for capital and continues to be a profound source, at least potentially, of what Harney has designated “revolutionary surplus.” Living labor, like the aligned theoretical category of concrete labor, is irreducibly affiliated with heterogeneity, particularity, and indeed, *quality*, and is therefore inseparable from subjectivity; it cannot but remain a kind of inimical alterity within the constraints of abstraction, homogenization, and objectification. Thus, while racial management thrives with and capitalizes upon difference-as-division, as Mishner and Roediger have each emphasized in different ways, there remains nonetheless this intractable way, as Harney insists, in which the specificities of human life flourish as a kind of limitless proliferation of difference that tends to disrupt the subordination of that same subjective power as human labor reduced to a mere abstraction of itself.

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