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## **Immaterial labour and alternative valorisation processes in Italian feminist debates: (re)exploring the ‘commons’ of re-production**

**Donatella Alessandrini\***

### **Abstract:**

This article takes its cue from Desai’s critique of the new communists of the commons, particularly her claim that their project is built upon a series of misunderstandings about the dynamics of capital accumulation, the production of value in post-Fordism and the concept of the ‘commons’ itself. Focusing on earlier explorations by Italian feminists of the dynamic interaction between labour and value, the contribution this article makes to the commons debate is three-fold: first, it argues that the most interesting insights emerging from immaterial/cognitive/affective labour theories on which Italian post-workerists rely to put forward a renewed understanding of the commons derive from this feminist body of work. Secondly it shows how, despite being relied upon, the radical potential of this work has been limited by positing a qualitative shift to post-Fordist production that pays little attention to the important connections between labour and value that make up our common world. Finally, the article focuses exactly on this potential, that is, the challenge to capitalist value through the instantiation of other processes of valorisation, in light of the current attack on social reproduction.

### **Introduction**

This article takes its cue from Desai’s critique of the new communism of the commons as articulated by Badiou, Zizek and Hardt and Negri.<sup>1</sup> She compares the ‘new communism’ to 19<sup>th</sup> century Proudhonism arguing that common to both is a ‘failure to comprehend the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and a general antipathy to any general organisation of labour in society, and thus to any serious politics...’ (2011:204). She makes two central points in relation to the ‘new communists’: the first is about their misunderstanding,

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<sup>1</sup> The article originates as a response to a paper presented by Radhika Desai at a workshop on ‘Diminishing Returns? Feminists Engagements with the Return to the Commons’ in March 2011 which has now been published on *International Critical Thought*. See Desai (2011), reproduced in this issue of *feminists@law* with kind permission.

disingenuous or not, of Marx's labour theory of value. The second is about their misconception of the commons and refusal to engage with the state.

In this article I reflect on both arguments by way of a third point, that is, that we cannot fully appreciate the significance of the theories of the commons these authors articulate, and this is particularly the case with Negri's work, without an understanding of their use of the concept of immaterial labour, a concept which has played a crucial role at least since the 1970s in Italian feminist debates. By referring to these debates I do not claim that Italian feminists were the first to think about immaterial labour. I focus on their work however for two main reasons: firstly because several authors who have now become known as the theorists of immaterial labour, such as Negri, Vercellone, Lazzarato, and Fumagalli draw exactly, although problematically, on the work of these feminists. Secondly because the contribution the latter have made to our understanding of the relationship between labour and value has important implications for the ways in which we might think of responding to the current attack on social reproduction.

The importance of this body of work consists of having brought to light the arbitrary ways in which capitalist processes of valorisation produce particular oppositions, especially that between material and immaterial, manual and mental and ultimately productive and unproductive labour. The claim I intend to make is that, by selectively relying on this work while positing a radical rupture in the 1970s - this is the argument that immaterial labour has become paradigmatic of the post-Fordist mode of production - the 'new communists' end up reinforcing the existence of such oppositions, thereby undermining this work. Emphasising the problematic nature of such an engagement not only allows me to respond to Desai's critique of Hart and Negri's (mis)use of Marxian concepts, particularly in relation to the so-called law of value. It also gives me the opportunity to reflect on the crucial contribution this feminist work has made in exploring alternative processes of valorisation. This is, I think, the challenge we are confronted with when thinking of our engagements with the 'commons' and their potential for disrupting capitalist processes of production and reproduction today.

The article is organised as follows: in the first section I explore the link between the 'commons' and immaterial labour, focusing particularly on Hardt and Negri's reflections on the incommensurability of value in post-Fordist production. In order to appreciate their

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argument it is important to briefly refer to the crucial position that the relationship between labour, time and value has occupied within political economy. Classical political economists such as Ricardo have seen labour as the source of all value. Marx later introduced the important distinction between concrete labour, the activity which creates particular products, and abstract labour, the ‘socially mediating activity’ (Postone, 1996:166) that homogenises all concrete labours. It is abstract labour that gives value its capitalist measure, that is socially necessary labour time, and it is this measure that allows for the commensurability of disparate commodities on the market (Marx, 1976). Abstract labour therefore emerges as a specific capitalist form of labour: it is ‘a social phenomenon connected with a determined social form of production’ (Rubin, 1972:135). Although Hardt and Negri acknowledge the contingent nature of the form labour takes under capitalism, the thrust of their argument is that post-Fordism has radically altered the relationship between labour, time and value: as immaterial labour becomes qualitatively more prominent and increasing labour flexibility makes the line between labour and leisure time (i.e. the time for production and reproduction) more difficult to draw, socially necessary labour time ceases to provide the measure of value thereby making apparent value’s incommensurability.

In the second section I engage with the most interesting aspects emerging from this analysis and show how the insights about the contingent nature of value production and measurement derive from the feminist work on immaterial labour and value. In this respect I intend to show how, despite being relied upon, the radical potential of this body of work has been cut short. Italian feminists such as Fortunati (1977; 1981) have meticulously shown how socially necessary labour time has always been an arbitrary, although fully operative, measure of value; how this social phenomenon has generated the problematic distinction between production and reproduction time as well as that between material and immaterial labour; and how reproductive labour has the potential to create alternative processes of valorisation. The analytical and political import of their analysis therefore consisted of carefully tracing the (always) shifting connections between labour, time and value which instantiate capitalist value, so to be able to challenge it. This careful tracing is what gets interrupted with Hardt and Negri’s historic argument that posits the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism in terms of a rupture: the significance of this move, I argue, is that these very intricate and shifting connections are left undisturbed.

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In the third section I therefore conclude by reflecting on the significance of the feminist challenges to capitalist value, particularly in the age of ‘sound science’ and austerity. One important division capitalist value has kept reinstating, despite the shifting connections that have characterised it, is that between the sphere of production within which cooperation is encouraged and that of reproduction where atomisation is supported through the house and the family (Federici, 2004). Thinking about ways of recombining the two spheres represents an important challenge to this social division of labour and the capitalist value that underpins it. It also allows us to see the ‘commons’ as the terrain on which the production and reproduction of human and non-human life takes place: although never free of power and institutional arrangements, as Desai points out, this is the terrain on which to promote, and struggle for, different processes of valorisation. The task of bringing together these two spheres acquires particular relevance today given the attack on social reproduction taking place in Europe as elsewhere. In this respect the issue of labour and its organisation comes to the fore and brings back the vexed question of the possibility of a feminist politics that engages with the state. As a way of (re)starting this important discussion, I consider the potential of the recent call from feminist economists for the state to become a permanent guarantor of jobs.

### **Labour, Value and the Commons**

In *Commonwealth* Hardt and Negri argue that the commons include not only the common wealth of the material world, such as water, air, soil, forests and all nature’s bounty which classical European political texts refer to as the common inheritance of humankind. They also, and more importantly, include ‘those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects and so on’ (2009:viii). Their argument is that with the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism, ‘production has become first and foremost production of knowledge and subjectivity’, in other words biopolitical production (Ibid:131). If, they argue, what produces value today is above all ‘human faculties, competences and knowledges’ (Ibid:132), then this means that capital operates outside directly productive processes and has become entirely parasitic; hence the possibility for the multitude of overcoming it through a common decision

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(Ibid:137). This is not an automatic process of course for biopolitical production implies ‘new mechanisms of exploitation and capitalist control [...However it also] grants labour increasing autonomy and provides the tools or weapons that could be wielded in a project of liberation’ (Ibid:136-37). The commons therefore becomes a project that ‘opens a new space for politics’ where to pursue the construction of a common world through creativity and cooperation (Ibid:ix).

This is a political project that Negri in particular has pursued for some time within the Operaist, or as referred to in the Anglo-Saxon world Workerist, movement. Now known as post-workerists, militants within this tradition have since the 1960s sought to engage with, and find alternatives to, what they saw as the two major forms of modern oppression, namely the state and wage labour. One important concern of the movement has been the relationship between capitalist productivity and workers’ struggles. Whereas Tronti (1966:89-95) for instance has argued that the latter compel capitalists to constantly devise ways of increasing labour productivity in order to extract surplus value, so that capital always reacts to labour’s inventiveness, others such as Panzieri (1994:73-92) have seen this causality operating in the opposite direction, so that it is the capitalist reorganization of production processes that most often than not is capable of originating new struggles. This debate on the historical tendency of capitalist development and, within it, the relevance of Marx’s labour theory of value has been central to the workerist debate and can be seen informing Hardt and, particularly, Negri’s project. For them, the continuous pressure that workers’ struggles have put on capital since the 1960s has led not only to changes in the composition of the labour force, which has become more flexible and precarious and registered the ascendancy of the immaterial worker. It has at the same time generated changes in the composition of capital, with the proportion of value produced by (immaterial) labour increasingly higher than that produced by constant capital (Hardt and Negri, 2009:132). Thus, they claim, the tendency towards the hegemony of biopolitical production requires that we deal with ‘the new conditions of the production of surplus value’ - as value production invests all realms of life exceeding the confines of formal work time (Ibid:137) - so as to be able to identify the new (post-Fordist) forms of exploitation. This is the premise for the project of liberation from capital they see the multitude capable of.

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Now this refers directly to Desai's two main arguments. The first is that Hardt and Negri's misunderstanding of Marx's labour theory of value, particularly the value of knowledge, makes their argument about the importance of cognitive and biopolitical labour and production, redundant.<sup>2</sup> As she points out relying on Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value

[a]ll labour processes involve knowledge, and in this the so-called information commodities are no different except in degree. All such knowledge is social and is embodied in the collective worker and this, while making the working class as a whole more productive, in part by embodying more knowledge in some parts of it than others, by no means turns it into fixed capital. Knowledge does not create [exchange] value. Though it might generate ever greater heaps of use values and make labour more productive, it is not itself an intermediate good. The value of any intermediate good is only transferred to the product in being destroyed in the intermediate form and knowledge which is embodied in the collective worker is never destroyed but can be used repeatedly and for many different purposes. (Desai, 2011:217)

According to Desai therefore, Hardt and Negri confuse use value (which speaks of the usefulness of a thing) and exchange value (which refers to the commensurability of things on the market) and take the sphere of circulation (of prices) for that of production (of value). Furthermore by denying the possibility of 'a general organisation of labour in society' (Ibid:220) they refuse to intervene in the latter sphere, thereby refusing to make any difference. This is connected to her second point about the 'commons never being "everybody's property"'. Rather, [she points out], the commons were [always] defined by complex institutional arrangements which provided rights to some sets of users and explicitly excluded others' (Ibid:215).

I will get back to this second point and the issue she raises about institutional arrangements in the final section of the paper. For the time being I want to point out that Hardt and Negri's understanding of Marx's labour theory of value is much more nuanced, although ambivalent, than what it is presented here, not only in *Commonwealth* but also in *Empire* (2001) and *Multitude* (2004). They know very well that the object of Marx's labour theory 'is not to look for an explanation of why prices are what they are and find in it labour' (Elson, 1979:123). Put differently, the object of Marx's enquiry was never to theorise prices or account for 'the

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<sup>2</sup> Marx's labour theory of value posits that a commodity's value is determined by the socially necessary labour-time required for its production (Marx, 1976: chapter 1).

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origin or cause of anything' (Ibid:121), hence the weakness of arguments according to which the category of value is inadequate to account for actual prices in the market (Ibid:116). Rather as Elson, whom they cite, argued the object was to understand why 'labour takes the forms it does and what the political consequences [of labour taking these forms] are' (Ibid: 123).

Thus, it is clear to them that this is an issue of labour and its organisation: in their 1995 *Labour of Dionysus*, they point to the fact that Marx conceived of the labour theory of value from two perspectives. From one, which corresponds to the tradition of the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo, value is the socially necessary labour time embodied in the commodity and the law of value explains the deployment of labour power among different sectors of social production; in other words the law of value tries to explain how equilibrium is achieved when there is no centralisation or coordination of production in the chaotic world of capitalist producers. But they also acknowledge, and this is a much more fruitful line of enquiry, that in Marx the labour theory of value is presented differently from classical political economy. Here labour is an antagonistic feature and its relationship to value is not unidirectional. From this perspective,

the unity of value is primarily identified in its relation to 'necessary labour', which is not a fixed quantity but a dynamic element of the system. Necessary labour is historically determined by the struggles of the working class against waged labour in the effort of transforming labour itself. This means that although in the first theory value was fixed in the structures of capital, in the second theory labour and value are both variable elements. It is not sufficient to pose the economic structure of labour as the source of a cultural superstructure of value; this notion of base and superstructure must be overturned. If labour is the basis of value, then value is equally the basis of labour. What counts as labour, or value creating practices, always depends on the existing values of a given social and historic context; in other words ... [t]he definition of what practises comprise labour ... is not given or fixed, but rather historically and socially determined, and thus the definition itself constitutes a mobile site of social contestation. (Hardt and Negri, 1995:9)

What emerges from this second perspective is their acknowledgment that for Marx the law of value is not a transhistoric concept: it is rather a category meant to analyse the form of exploitation specific to capitalist production. Hence its contingency is brought to full light. My point therefore is that Hardt and Negri know very well that the creation of value is a collective undertaking that has to do with the organisation of labour and production, and ultimately with the way we organise our social provisioning (Picchio, 1992, 2009). They also

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know that it never made sense, except in capitalist terms, to conceive of things as commodities whose value was simply the product of factory work that could be measured on the basis of the time spent to produce them. Thus, they are not really saying anything new when they point to the growing importance of ‘externalities’ to show how value always exceeds measure. In *Commonwealth* for instance, they refer to real estate values as an example of the impossibility of measuring value according to labour time or any other ‘intrinsic’ factor, pointing to the fact that values in this sphere are determined by both negative externalities such as pollution, criminality, and traffic congestion; and positive externalities, such as presence of amenities, rich cultural life, intellectual channels of exchange and lively social interaction (Hardt and Negri, 2009:154-56).

Yet, when they say that the production of value of a commodity is *no longer* limited to the factory but is dispersed across society as a whole and that value has *become* un-measurable, they are positing this as a radical break which is highly problematic for two interconnected reasons. First because, contradicting the insight deriving from the second perspective on the law of value, they reassert the unidirectional (causal and transhistoric) link between labour and value even as, and exactly because, they state this relationship has now been broken. How, then, to account for the difference between the second more nuanced conception of value in the *Labour of Dionysus* and the more ambivalent one in their later work? At one level, this can be explained through the fascination post-workerists have had for some time with the section in the *Grundrisse* where Marx points to a stage in which the increasingly ‘scientific’ nature of production processes will pave the way to a communist future where labour time will no longer provide the measure of value and exchange value will therefore collapse:

...to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and on the amount of labor employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labor time, whose ‘powerful effectiveness’ is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labor time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production. ... As soon as labor in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labor time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The *surplus labor of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labor of the few*, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that,

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production based on exchange value breaks down and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis. (Marx, 1973:704-6)

It is by relying on this passage that Hardt and Negri see the historical tendency of capitalism to replace low-tech work with immaterial and cognitive labour leading to the crisis of value measurement. Whether this tendency has led or is leading to the collapse of exchange value, the value that allows commodities to be commensurable on the market, is however highly questionable: thirty years ago Caffentzis pointed to the parallel growth of ‘labour intensive’ and ‘knowledge intensive’ sectors, showing how ‘an enormous amount of work must be produced and extracted from the Low sectors in order to be transformed to capital available for the High sector’ (1992:249). Thus, tracing the connections between the two sectors led him to argue that ‘in order to finance the new capitalist “utopia” of “high-tech”, venture-capital demanding industries in the energy, computer and genetic engineering areas, another capitalist “utopia” must be created: a world of “labor intensive”, low waged, distracted and diffracted production’ (Ibid).

The fact that low-tech and high-tech sectors have grown in tandem casts doubts over whether or not this passage in the *Grundrisse* can be relied upon to describe the current stage of capitalism. Marx’s *Grundrisse* might provide the theoretical fuel to the project of liberation Hardt and Negri want the multitude to embark on. However, positing this radical break with Fordist value production refuses to attend to the important connections, including the continuities between Fordist and post-Fordist value, that make up our global economy. Certainly, it cannot explain how the coexistence of low-tech and high-tech sectors is implicated in the production of value at the global level. Similarly when post-workerists claim that, in addition to the loss of labour time as the determinate measure of value, post-Fordism has seen financial markets becoming the place where value is determined (Fumagalli and Mezzadra, 2009:211), they are again privileging a rupture, as opposed to the careful tracing of shifting continuities with Fordist value production, that does little to explain how these markets are affecting the relationship between labour, time and value. Indeed their argument about the increasingly important role of financial markets finds its antecedent in Weeks’s engagement with Marx’s law of value (1982). Weeks insisted on the latter’s historical specificity; at the same time he described it as a logic, process or a series of

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‘abstract operative rules’ which comports the gradual monetisation of the inputs into production. The thrust of his argument is that this logic confronts producers with more monetary imperatives to meet, requiring them to minimise labour time as they compete with one another. Although Weeks does not focus on capital and share markets, the process he describes can be seen intensifying on financial markets because of the constant and instantaneous commensuration of value they allow (Alessandrini, 2011). In other words, financial markets seem to point to a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of the law of value (as well as of the role of labour time) which requires much more careful exploration of the ways in which this process is made possible, including the institutional arrangements that continuously support it.

The point is that the positioning of such a radical break with Fordist value not only leaves these (and other) connections undertheorised but also makes the more challenging analysis of the relationship between labour and value (as articulated in *Labour of Dionysus*) devoid of theoretical and political import, that is the challenge to capitalist value through the instantiation of other processes of valorisation. This speaks directly to the second reason why I think the positioning of such a break is problematic and this is the fact that it undermines the important feminist work on value on which it relies.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the most interesting insights regarding the relationship between labour and value derive from the feminist work Hardt and Negri mention in passing. They acknowledge that certain lines of feminist enquiry and practice have brought into focus the different forms of ‘affective labour, caring labour and kin work that have been traditionally defined as women’s work’ so that ‘these studies have demonstrated the ways in which such forms of activity produce social networks and produce society itself’ (Hardt and Negri, 1995:9). However, with the exception of Elson’s work which they explicitly refer to, they hardly explore the significance and implications of these studies. It is exactly this body of work that I want to focus on to show how, despite being relied upon,

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<sup>3</sup> I focus on this aspect of Hardt and Negri’s work because it speaks directly to the claims that ‘new communists’ make about immaterial labour and the commons and brings to full light the centrality of the category of value. This work has been the object of subsequent feminist critique, particularly in relation to the reduction of the vast spectrum of human and non human activities to the category of labour. However what makes their contribution important is their attempt to re-think the categories of classical political economy so as to challenge the unidirectional reading of the relationship between labour and value (the former always forming the basis of, and therefore determining, the latter).

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its radical potential has been cut short by posing a moment of rupture between the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Immaterial Labour in Italian Feminist Debates**

In the early 1970s Dalla Costa, Federici and Fortunati started to assess the capacity of Marxist concepts to explain women's position within the capitalist system, focusing in particular on the distinction between productive and unproductive labour and that between material and immaterial production (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Dalla Costa and Fortunati, 1977; Federici, 1980; Fortunati, 1981).<sup>4</sup> While Marx saw the domestic sphere as unproductive (that is, from the point of view of commodity production), they instead claimed that the production of goods and services, including prostitution, was a crucial stage in the production of surplus value: reproductive labour produced and reproduced the commodity most precious for capital, that is, labour power (Fortunati, 2007:145). Fortunati's work in particular focused on the inadequacy of socially necessary labour time to provide the measure of value of a commodity. This was because socially necessary labour time does not take into account the time necessary for reproducing labour power which is not, in contrast to factory time, 'easily' calculable (1981:40, 81-84). Thus, the separation of the process of production of commodities from that of reproduction, even though the two are indissolubly connected in producing value, is what allows capital to make huge money savings (Ibid:82).

The theoretical import of this work consisted of showing not only how reproductive labour produced 'externalities', to go back to Hardt and Negri's argument about value becoming *un-*

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<sup>4</sup> At issue was Marx's treatment of reproduction. For Marx workers were productive, that is productive of surplus value and therefore capital, when they produced material wealth. The consequence of this was that those who produced immaterial wealth, such as reproductive workers, were considered unproductive. From this perspective reproductive work was reduced to the consumption of commodities the wage could afford and the work that went into their production so that no difference was made between commodity production and the production of the labour force (Federici, 2010:1-20). Federici has advanced several reasons why Marx did not investigate further the role of reproductive work in the determination of value. For instance she points to the fact that until the 1870s, 'consistently with a policy tending to the "unlimited extension of the working day" and the utmost compression of the cost of labor-power production, reproductive work was reduced to a minimum'. Another reason might have been the difficulty that including it in productive labour would have posed to its measurement since it was not subject to monetary valuation (Ibid:3).

*measurable* (1995:154-55), but also why this labour took the form it did so as to reflect on the political consequences deriving from this (Elson, 1979:123). The point was neither that of measuring these ‘externalities’ so to make sure that the (exchange) value of commodities reflected more accurately the (use) value of reproductive labour, for instance through more accurate accounting processes.<sup>5</sup> Nor was it the socialisation of domestic labour through the development of social services and a more equal sharing of its burden as this would not have eliminated exploitation (i.e. the process through which surplus value is extracted): it would just have re-distributed it (Fortunati, 1981:34). Rather the point was to destroy these forms of labour as capitalist labour by creating the possibility for other processes of (non capitalist) valorisation to emerge, self-valorisation in the tradition of Feminist Autonomists. As Fortunati puts it ‘[I]arge areas of domestic labor cannot be socialized or eliminated through the development of technology. They can and must be destroyed as capitalist labor and liberated to become a wealth of creativity... The reference here is to immaterial labor (such as affection, love, consolation and above all sex) which among other things constitutes an increasing part of domestic labor’ (1981:10).

Now, the question of how to instil other processes of valorisation remains an open one and one which, as I will argue in the concluding section of this article, still confronts us today. However, already in the 1970s feminists had pointed to the fact that value is a collective undertaking that can be conceived of and measured in terms other than factory labour time. This is the first important insight deriving from this work. The second, which emerged by looking more closely at the many manifestations of immaterial labour, consisted of showing the problematic nature of sorting labour in either material or immaterial terms depending on whether it produced material or immaterial things:

Whilst it may be simple to make a theoretical distinction between immaterial and material labor, it is not so easy in everyday life. In practice, the two are actually closely intertwined. Immaterial labor, as we have seen, often needs supports (tools, technologies) as a vehicle, well-grounded in the material. It needs to be performed in concrete contexts. But, above all, immaterial labor very often sets material labor in motion. Showing one’s

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<sup>5</sup> Other feminist political economists have since shown how accounting for the vast, albeit hidden, wealth produced by reproductive labour is important so as to show the latter’s ‘depletion’. For instance see Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas’ work (2010).

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affection for a person means possibly setting off on a journey, buying a present or preparing a dinner, it means following an immaterial expression with concrete acts. (Lorente, 2004 in Fortunati, 2007:140)

The fact that material and immaterial labour are distributed along a continuum of interaction whose boundaries cannot be easily demarcated led them to enquire further into the political work such boundaries were doing. Indeed, rather than aiming at a more clear demarcation between the two spheres, they showed how such distinction naturalised an arbitrary division of labour between what ended up being considered productive and what did not. Hence we come to the problematic nature of the current use by post-workerists of the concept of immaterial labour: by arguing that the old dichotomy between material and immaterial labour fails to grasp the *new* nature of (post-Fordist) productive activity, they imply that the distinction existed earlier and the work of feminists, which as early as the 1970s had shown how these categories have always been arbitrary, is undermined.

This is not just a matter of acknowledging someone else's labour: these oppositions are transcended while, at the same time, being re-instated. This is clear in the distinction made by Negri between the primary source of immaterial labour, the intellect, which he says in *Kairos, Alma Venus and Multitudo*, has acceded to 'the status of sole producer of value' (2003:227), and, as he and Hardt put it in *Empire*, the other face of immaterial labour which is the 'affective labour of human contact and interaction' (2000:290-92).<sup>6</sup> Hardt and Negri point to the fact that an understanding of 'affective' labour must begin from women's work. However as Fortunati has argued, it is not at all clear how they conceptualise 'affects' and in what kind of social relationships they see 'affects' being produced and consumed, with the consequence that women risk being reduced to the body once again (2007:147). Similarly Federici argues that the way in which 'affective labour' appears in their work risks stripping the feminist analysis of its demystifying power. It suggests that reproducing people is a matter of 'emotions' or 'feelings' while the import of the feminist work on the social division of labour, the role of gender hierarchies, and the way in which the wage has been employed to mobilise women's reproductive work under capitalism gets lost 'under the label of

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<sup>6</sup> This is something Virno, another post-workerist, re-affirms with the primacy of language and the intellect as the generic faculties of the species (2004).

“affective labor”. That this feminist analysis is ignored in the work of Negri and Hardt confirms my suspicions that this theory expresses the interests of a select group of workers, even though it presumes to speak to all workers, all merged in the great caldron of the Multitude’ (Federici, 2008:5).

Indeed for Hardt and Negri the immaterial worker *par excellence* tends to be the cognitive labourer working in fashion, design, cybernetics, marketing, and research and development, while flight attendants expected to smile at customers are considered emblematic of ‘affective’ labourers. Aside from the position of the ‘affective’ worker within the ‘cognitive’ workforce, their argument about the hegemonic role of the immaterial worker does not take into account the implications deriving from the contemporaneous existence of ‘labour intensive’ and ‘knowledge intensive sectors’, within and across countries (Caffentzis, 1992). Thus, by positing the immaterial worker as paradigmatic of the shift to post-Fordism, the arrangements that constantly impose a separation between material and immaterial production are not called into question. Fortunati (2003) has shown how these arrangements attempt to impose an imperial division of labour between the mind of the service economy, supposed to lead from the North because of its being rich in capital, particularly human capital, technology and know-how, and the body of the manufacturing economy supposed to develop in the South because of its being ‘naturally’ endowed with raw materials and labour. The same logic can be seen underlying current European arrangements that aim to separate the mind of finance, which needs to be supported because productive and competitive, from the body of a labouring population that can be left to bleed through cuts because corrupt and/or unproductive.

And this is exactly the point: by asserting a moment of radical change that has brought about the hegemony of the immaterial worker, these categories are in the end retained and what feminists have started in the 1970s, the process of questioning how they are produced and the kind of power effects they generate, gets interrupted. The consequence is that the many complex and ever changing connections between labour and value that make up our global economy are not attended to and their power effects remain unchallenged. Recognising the importance of these connections does not mean that nothing has changed since the 1970s of course. Haraway in the 1980s was observing the way in which various technologies were allowing forms of domestic labour to permeate society at large (1985:65-108) while

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Hochschild (1983) used the category of ‘emotional labour’ to look at the strategic management of emotions for social effect as an increasingly everyday labour practice. However my point is that tracing these connections and the conditions for their possibility is a much more difficult and laborious process than positing a rupture and the advent of something radically new. Put simply, it is much more fruitful, although less glamorous, to ask how these categories are constantly produced, what kind of arrangements sustain them and which ones might help in undoing them.

This questioning is for instance part of the feminist debate on precarity that is currently going on Italy. In a 2007 special issue of *Feminist Review*, a self defined younger generation of feminists started to reflect on the limits and potential of the concept of precarity or precariousness so as to make sense of and deal with, among other things, the phenomenon often described as the ‘feminisation of labour’. This is the tendency of ‘the current organizational model of work – insecure, adaptable, spasmodic, nomadic’ to model itself on the historical modality of female work (Morini, 2007:48). Now precariousness is seen by some feminists as problematic because inflexible but it is also viewed as the direct result of feminists’ demands for freedom from the house, family and work. ‘Inflexible flexibility’ as Morini puts it, can be seen as the response of capital to the general demands by workers based on the ‘refusal to work’ so as to regain control over time. As she puts it ‘[p]ost-Fordist production functioned as social and cultural criticism of the Fordist model of the 1970s... Today, [however], the reality with which we are faced... is not configured as a form of true flexibility but presents itself rather as a form of a growing link between existence and intelligence at work (Ibid:48).

While the inflexibility of today’s precariousness is condemned, its potential for liberating women from wage labour is celebrated: Morini, for instance, points to the fact that in the few empirical studies that have been conducted, women do not seem to be concerned with the lack of permanent employment or open ended contracts but mainly with income. The issue for her becomes one of achieving more freedom with less insecurity (Ibid:52-56). Fantone, however, reflects on the fact that the new subjectivity of the ‘precari’, which Morini sees as made of ‘existence and intelligence at work’, is contained within specific historic boundaries that need to be interrogated. For instance she notes how the movement originated from

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mainly urban areas in the north of Italy where there is comparatively a low percentage of unemployment and a higher middle-class population. However, precarity has been a constant characteristic of life ‘in southern Italy for many generations of women, taking the form of submerged labour with no contract, black market and illegal economies (where there is no safety and rights), family self-exploitation, characterised by no clear division between work and house chores, and informal hiring practices through familial connections that have no long term guarantee’ (2007:10).

She also notes how the majority of today’s domestic workers in Italy are ‘poorly paid women coming from previously colonised areas such as the Philippines and Somalia and more recently Poland and Romania’ (Ibid). This, she argues, does not prevent the possibility of a feminist politics in relation to precarity but requires a shift ‘to a more complex political analysis that can address gender and reproduction, citizenship and social welfare, immigration and de-industrialisation at the same time’ (Ibid:9-10). Fantone’s contribution brings us back to the argument made by earlier feminist work, that is the need to be more attentive to the connections between labour and value, especially when at issue is the kind of arrangements we are advocating: when we talk of the feminisation of the economy, referring mainly to the service economies of Western Europe,<sup>7</sup> what forms of labour are we valorising and which ones are we devalorising, both within and between countries? And what happens when this ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ comes at the expense of some other women and men’s ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’? When ‘flexicurity’, a word which is now part of the lexicon of the EU, is argued for because it gives us freedom from the house and the family, who is caring for reproduction?

These are some of the limits of a feminist politics that does not aim to trace the various connections between labour and value and such limitation is what the work I have been referring to brings to light as it attempts to instantiate alternative processes of valorisation. This is why this work has argued that it makes sense to talk about social reproduction, including care, as a terrain of struggle, a struggle over those arrangements that might be able

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<sup>7</sup> This of course is not limited to Europe. See for instance the special issue of the Canadian Journal of Women and the Law on the regulation of domestic workers, ‘Regulating Decent Work for Domestic Workers’ 23:1 (2011) CJWL.

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to inject different meanings to our living together. As Picchio argues this is not a matter of keeping the economic system, and our conceptions of it, as it is, demanding that it only takes into account social issues, starting with the 'woman issue'. It is rather a question of (re)placing at the heart of political economy the concepts of bodies, minds and desires (2009:29). The task is therefore that of showing the theoretical and political contribution the feminist work on value has made and continues to make to our understanding of political economy. The next section takes up this task, which acquires renewed significance in the age of 'sound science' and austerity, by reflecting on the importance of the feminist challenges to capitalist value in the context of the commons debate. This brings back the issue of labour and its organisation as well as the vexed question of the possibility of a feminist engagement with the state. Aiming to open up this question to more debate, I conclude by considering the potential of the recent call from feminist economists for the state to become a permanent guarantor of jobs.

### **Alternative Valorisations**

The feminist debate on value has made an important contribution in conceiving of non-capitalist processes of valorisation. I want to suggest that one way of engaging with the commons consists exactly of carrying on with this debate and thinking about what kinds of processes might bring together what the social division of labour in capitalism has kept separate. This separation has taken place, as Federici puts it, by promoting cooperation at the point of production and separation and atomisation at the point of reproduction through the house and the family (2004:24-25). The recombining she talks about is the process of making a common world, a process of becoming. It is certainly the case that the commons have never been free of power and institutional arrangements, as Desai points out (2011:215), although Federici shows how arrangements under serfdom were by no means more intrusive than those regulating 'free' women under capitalism (2004:25). However if the commons is conceived of as the terrain on which the production and reproduction of human and non-human life takes place, which is never free of power and its arrangements, it also becomes the terrain on which to promote, and struggle for, different processes of valorisation.

Latour and Lepinay (2010:69) have recently put to us that the problem with current understandings of political economy is the belief in an economic order governed by natural laws that exist ‘out there’ and that society must discover and implement (for instance, the law of demand and offer, the law of equilibrium, and more recently the law of sound finance on which the imperative of deficit reduction is based). For them, recuperating political economy as the nexus between economy and society, two realms which we have kept separate until now, requires that we see the economy as that which is constantly constructed without any divine hand, whether the invisible hand of the Market or the visible one of the State. This means getting more immersed in, and taking full charge of, the economy rather than distancing ourselves and looking for foundations in the economic order (Ibid:72-74).

This is exactly the contribution that feminist autonomists have made in the 1970s by showing, through their work on reproductive labour, how ‘the law of value’ has never been natural. This was not to say that it does not exist or does not produce real effects: its constant re-enactment makes it a powerful logic (see also Rubin, 1972; Weeks, 1982). It was rather to point to the modality through which value is actively made and measured under capitalism so as to pose anew the problem of its construction. In other words recognising that the way in which capitalist value is produced and determined is a process rather than an imperative or irrefutable logic meant confronting its contingency and contestability, and therefore beginning to explore the possibility of alternative processes of valorisation. To this end they re-worked the category of self valorisation: whereas for Marx it denoted all that which is involved in the expanded reproduction of capital, they used it to indicate those labour activities which do not simply react to capital but are able to exceed it through creativity and invention (Dalla Costa, 1972). In their quest for the kinds of arrangements that might enable these processes of valorisation to emerge, they engaged with Gabriel Tarde (1902) whose work on value had argued that classical political economy ‘was at fault for the omission of affections, and especially of desire, in analyses of valorization’ (Fortunati, 2007:142).

Picchio’s work in particular showed how, with and especially after Smith, the vast spectrum of desires, passions and interests that animate human (and non-human) interaction has been reduced to only one, that is the maximisation of material wealth. Once this had been posited as the principal means and objective of our economic system, a specific division of labour between production and reproduction was established to serve this purpose (1992, 2009).

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Now it might be, as Adkins (2009) has recently put, that the sexual division of labour on which the capitalist system has functioned in the past is becoming increasingly irrelevant, although the effects on women of the current trend towards the re-privatisation of the reproductive sphere complicates this assumption.<sup>8</sup> However, even as the sexual division of labour cannot be presumed and the various gender articulations that make up the social reproductive sphere need to be carefully analysed, this does not mean that the separation between production and reproduction under capitalism has become redundant.

Indeed, the task of recombining or bringing together the two acquires particular relevance today given the ferocious attack on social reproduction taking place in Europe as elsewhere. The cuts to social spending are, certainly among other things, a feminist issue. This is not only because, as it has happened in the past (McIntosh, 1978; Barrett, 1980) and is likely to happen now, they intervene in very intrusive ways on women's lives, attempting to define their 'identity' once again.<sup>9</sup> They are a feminist issue because they remove us further from the process of bringing together production and reproduction, economy and society. Now, the question of how we think of alternative processes of valorisation in this context, and the kind of arrangements that might sustain them, brings us back to the point Desai makes at the end of her article when she talks about the difference between reforms and reformism: 'The latter may or may not be part of fundamental critiques of capitalism (or patriarchy, racism or

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, it is quite interesting to see how the family tends to remain gendered even as it goes global. See Safri and Graham (2010).

<sup>9</sup>The work of the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) has shown how the likely outcome is going to be the restoration of the male breadwinner model as the cuts to public services and the welfare budget will disproportionately affect women's income, jobs and the public services they use. With regard to their income, they point to the fact that Child Benefit is paid almost 100% to women; also 53% of Housing Benefit claimants are single women. Both benefits have been cut significantly in real terms and eligibility has been tightened. As for women's jobs the cuts will lead to hundreds of thousands of women losing their job. 53% of the jobs in the public sector services that have not been protected from the cuts are held by women and the pay and conditions of employment of all public sectors workers, 65% of whom are women, are likely to deteriorate; Finally taking into account cuts to public services, the groups that that 'will suffer the greatest reduction in their standard of living are lone parents and single pensioners, the majority of whom are women'; in particular lone parents will lose services worth 18.5% and female singles pensioners services worth 12% of their respective incomes; and overall single women will lose services worth 60% more than single men will lose as proportions of their respective incomes, and nearly three times those lost by couples (WBG, 2010:2). See also the more recent findings in the 2011 Report (WBG, 2011).

imperialism) but that would not, and historically has not, prevented a wide range of political perspectives and forces from cooperating in them' (2011:221). More importantly, she argues, what makes a demand a reform or revolutionary depends on the historical conjuncture: 'a modest demand for, say, cheap bread, might turn out to be revolutionary if the ruling order was unable or unwilling to fulfil it, and the political energy and organization existed behind it to inspire people to believe that if it is not going to be fulfilled it was time for people to remove the ruling order and fulfil it for themselves, and enable them to do so' (Ibid).

The question this raises and with which I want to end, but only as a way of opening it up to more debate, is whether the state can be considered an arena, although certainly not the only one, of feminist political change. In the 1970s, feminist autonomists refused to place reformist demands on the state, particularly in relation to the socialisation of domestic labour through the development of social services that would have allowed women to work outside the house. They saw the Welfare State as the protector and guarantor of the capitalist division of labour and while they strategically supported the wages for housework initiative as well as social protection and benefits, the focus was on the collectivisation of social reproduction through the creation of self-managed and alternative social services in the areas of health, birth control, abortion and the prevention of domestic violence (see Dalla Costa, 2002; Fortunati, 2007:146; Federici, 2008:9).

The reason for such scepticism has to do with the tension between acknowledging on the one hand that the state is not a monolithic entity but an assemblage of social powers and, as Brown has put it, recognising on the other that these powers remain masculinist through and through (Brown, 1995).<sup>10</sup> Brown is critical of positions that maintain the radical potential inherent in women's involvement with the state because these presuppose a transcendental subject who simply moves from isolated to collectivised conditions as opposed to a subject who is produced by these respective conditions: '[t]his is because the state does not simply

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<sup>10</sup> Brown traces these powers, which she conceives of broadly as the power to describe and run the world and the power of access to women, in four dimensions of the state: the liberal or constitutional, the capitalist, the prerogative and the bureaucratic dimensions.

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address private needs or issues but also configures, administers and actively produces them ...[so that] what is liberated from the private sphere may be then colonised and administered by one or more dimensions of masculinist state power' (Ibid:195).

However, she also acknowledges that these powers have different rationalities, produce different effects and at times are in conflict with one another so one might assume that, by understanding how these powers operate, it might be possible to intervene in them. Let us take for instance the capitalist dimension of masculinist power she examines. This is rooted in the distinction between productive and unproductive labour which, Brown argues, entails women's subordination on two levels: 'first women supply unremunerated reproductive labour and because it is unremunerated and sequestered from wage work, most women are dependent upon men or the state for survival when they are engaged in it. Second women serve as a reserve army of low wage labour and easily retained as such because of the reproductive work that interrupts their prospects for a more competitive status in the labour force' (Ibid:185). The state perpetuates these conditions in many different ways, including private property rights, regulation of marriage, sexuality, contraception and abortion and last but not least through gendered welfare, unemployment benefits and the absence of quality public care (Ibid:186).

Now, linking this to the previous discussion about the arrangements that might enable other processes of valorisation to emerge, what would a meaningful or strategic intervention at this level look like? I am asking this question as feminist political economists are exploring the possibility of joining the call of post-Keynesians for the state to become a *permanent* guarantor of jobs for a socially established wage and benefits (Jennings, 1992; Todorova, 2009). This is a different proposal from the post-war policies which aimed to guarantee full employment, particularly at times of crisis, by promoting government spending 'on something or other - no matter what' (Robinson, 1972:6). As Joan Robinson aptly noted in 1972 this interpretation of Keynesian theory reduced employment to the act of digging and filling holes at best – but most often than not it meant expanding and strengthening the military establishment - while the question of what employment, and our investment in the economy, should be for was hardly ever asked. The Employer of Last Resort (ELR) would

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instead be a permanent program according to which the state invests in sectors where private companies do not because it is *unprofitable* and this applies to vast segments of the market, so to speak, which are currently left out as pecuniary considerations are the determining factor in investment decisions. Among these, Kaboub mentions care for elderly members of society, public school classroom assistants, low-income housing restoration engineers, environmental safety monitors, day care assistants for ELR workers, community and cultural historians, artists and musicians, and these are only examples with which to start (2007).

There are different ways in which such a project appeals to feminist economists: it aims to permanently eliminate the reserve army of labour; it provides an effective floor for benefits and wages; and importantly it instils values other than the profit motive in investment decisions (i.e. what makes an investment profitable). So it might go a long way to address economic and social uncertainty and to challenge socially created scarcity. The latter is particularly important at a time when not only has unemployment reached a 17-year high in the UK (ONS, 2011) but the ‘law’ of sound science on which the imperatives of deficit reduction and austerity are predicated remains uncontested throughout Europe, with the only visible alternatives being represented by either a strengthened neo-liberal project or a return of economic nationalisms. In this respect, the ELR challenges the very premise on which austerity measures are being imposed. In addition to this, the appeal of the program consists of the fact that it offers an opportunity to gradually redefine the meaning of work as well as that of production, therefore bringing to the fore Robinson’s important question of what employment should be for.

Participating in the job design of the program might indeed offer the opportunity to start discussing what kind of activities and sectors we consider ‘worth’ investing in. For instance, by making apparent that care work is an integral part of the sphere of production, the program can affect the gender norms that are at the basis of the distinction between work and leisure and public (market) and private (non market) economic activities. These are norms that contribute to much occupational segregation and discrimination in terms of pay and benefits (Jennings 1992; Todorova, 2009:14). Besides encouraging the participation of men in care activities, the design of the program can also contribute to making a whole range of valuable non-performed, underperformed or unremunerated activities emerge as remunerated ‘jobs’. Thus, it goes beyond incorporating caring labour within the creation of new jobs: this aspect

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is certainly important in challenging the distinction between productive (paid) and unproductive (unpaid) care labour and therefore the distinction between production and reproduction. However at issue is the whole spectrum of activities encompassing the broad terrain on which the re-production of life is made possible, from child care to health care, from care for the elderly to environmental care, from restoration to engineering, from transport to housing, from manufacture to finance and so on. Thus, intervening in the job design of the program has the potential of gradually eroding the boundaries between production and reproduction as well as injecting different systems of (non-pecuniary) valuation in investment decisions, thereby generating other processes of valorisation.

### **Conclusions**

It is clear this program remains an institution of wage labour: it is indeed, in the eyes of post-Keynesians, the only way for capitalism to survive by proposing a new deal with labour. This would be enough perhaps to guard us against engaging with such kind of intervention. Yet, is this the full story? Is the effect of an engagement at this level only the production of more disciplined and docile workers? I wonder whether this position does not assume the same transcendental subject Brown identifies in uncritical discourses supportive of women's engagement with the state. In other words, unless we assume we exist outside the capitalist relations that make us, then we need to take into account the complexity of a process which, although initially based on wage labour also presents the opportunity to affect the concept of 'work' and productive activity.

The consideration of such complexity is what distinguishes the ELR program from the post-workerists' call, including Hardt and Negri's, for the establishment a citizenship income decoupled from wage labour. The citizenship income movement draws on the work of scholars such as Gorz who have posited the need to move away from an already defunct wage society living off the 'phantom' of work (1999:58). Articulating social relations at the level of impersonal objective necessity,<sup>11</sup> this is a society which has made people dependent on

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<sup>11</sup> As Postone puts it 'A characteristic of capitalism is that its essential social relations are social in a peculiar manner. They exist not as overt interpersonal relationships but as quasi-independent set of structures that are

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wages for their survival and social appreciation (the ideology of work as value) while simultaneously denying access to work. For Gorz it makes no sense to sustain a system that ‘ensures there is less and less work and wages for everyone as the essential source of autonomy, identity and fulfilment for all’ (Ibid:46). This, he argues, becomes apparent when one considers that ‘Post-fordist industry is the spearhead of a thoroughgoing transformation which is abolishing work, abolishing the wage relation and tending to reduce the proportion of the working population who carry out the whole of material production to 2 percent’ (Ibid:46).

Besides the question of how such a figure is arrived at, the point is that this argument risks reintroducing the problematic distinction between material and immaterial production, as well as obfuscating the connections that make up our world economy, both problems which this article has identified in relation to the historical rupture posited by post-workerists and which the feminist work on value has challenged. This does not mean the concerns expressed by this body of work, particularly in relation to the abstraction and insecurity wage-based societies perpetuate, are not important. And the argument Gorz makes, that is that efforts should concentrate on ‘distributing all the socially necessary work and socially produced wealth’ so that ‘people will be able to divide their lives between a wide range of activities which will have neither payment nor profitability as their necessary condition or goal’ (Ibid:73), has much in common with the feminist project of generating alternative processes of valorisation as envisaged by the social provisioning approach to economics. Gorz is aware of the need for a ‘political break’: however, it remains unclear how this is to be achieved besides the claim that strategies should not involve the creation of more ‘work’.

The ELR instead retains the institution of wage labour but demands that the state immediately becomes a permanent guarantor of jobs for a socially desirable income: by doing so, it begins to challenge socially created scarcity and reduces uncertainty, both things on which the wage society bases its ideological grip and power. At the same time, by intervening on the job design of the program, it has also the potential of gradually changing the meaning of ‘work’

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opposed to individuals, a sphere of impersonal “objective” necessity and “objective dependence” (1996:121). This is a system within which nobody consumes what they produce; however, one’s labour (through the wage) is used as a means to obtain the products of others.

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as well as that of productive activity. Thus, while it starts by retaining ‘work’, it offers in the process the opportunity to transform its meaning and delink production from the current system of (pecuniary) valuation that regulates investment decisions. These are important decisions about how we organise our social provisioning, our collective living together, and ultimately our commons.

Certainly much more work is needed to explore further the potential as well as the limitations of such a program. This is indeed a complex process: it is based on two of the most pernicious forms of modern oppression, that is the state and wage labour; yet it offers the opportunity to confront, while affecting, their power. The feminist work on labour and value explored in this article opens up to considering exactly such complexity, such ‘stateness’, rather than closing it down with the dualism of either engaging or rejecting any engagement with the state. The point is therefore not to consider such engagements in opposition but in a process of constant interaction with the diverse practices of self-valorisation feminist autonomists have been promoting since the 1970s, mindful of the fact that at stake for both is the generation of alternative processes of valorisation. It might seem contradictory to conceive of a ‘counter-hegemonic’ strategy that aims at instantiating a single project such as the ELR program on a par with ‘anti-hegemonic’ strategies of self-valorisation that reject unity and promote more fragmented challenges to the prevailing system of values. This however does not need to be the case: indeed ‘while counter-hegemonic projects encourage the transformation of structures on the basis of an aspirational future, anti-hegemony reminds us that such a future can only remain a strategic narrative’ (Cooper, 1995:141). The question is whether, and how, we can simultaneously support ‘the establishment of a new commonsense and its contestation’ (Ibid).

**Acknowledgements:**

Many thanks to Stacy Douglas for organising the workshop on ‘Diminishing Returns? Feminist Engagements with the Return to the Commons’ held at the Kent Centre for Law, Gender and Sexuality in March 2011. I have greatly benefited from the stimulating discussions with Radhika Desai and the other workshop participants. I am grateful to Kate Bedford for her generous engagement with the paper and her thought provoking comments and questions, particularly in relation to the state. I also wish to thank Emily Grabham, Rosemary Hunter

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and the two anonymous referees of feminists@law for the very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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