Some Excursions into Gender and Value Production in Contemporary Capitalism

Marina Vishmidt, June 2006

Abstract

At Digitales I would like to talk about the labour of women and the production of knowledge and affect in an informational economy through some broad case studies articulating struggles for gender equality and the re-organisation of work from the early days of the Western feminist movement to today's 'cognitive capitalism'. I would like to consider the structures of 'free labour' in an informational economy, in the context of Tiziana Terranova's discussion of 'free labour' among coders and programmers and also in the context of unpaid domestic labour, and consider how 'free labour' is perenially optimised both to sustain paid labour and as a logic animating neoliberal restructuring of work and the erosion of traditional social guarantees. I would further like to locate the discussion in a comparison of ornamental and menial labour in a symbolic economy for women through a juxtaposition of two tasks that women's imputed manual dexterity and temperamental docility uniquely adapts them to perform: embroidery in the Victorian home and the assembly of microchips in today's info-sweatshops. This would highlight the problematic nature of women's material and symbolic integration into an informational economy structured by capitalist imperatives, harnessing existing gender inequities and instituting new ones in the drive for profit. I will finally take the Wages for Housework movement and current research about the ubiquity of international domestic labour performed largely by migrant women as an illustration of what happens when demands for valorisation of certain structurally and historically un-valorised activities in a feminist context are put forward without adequately confronting the mechanisms of exploitation and production of [surplus] value in capital.

'free labour' and 'affective labour': social production and surplus value in digital and domestic economies

In her influential 2003 paper, 'Free Labour: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy', sociologist and communications theorist Tiziana Terranova writes, **"**The expansion of the Internet has given ideological and material support to contemporary trends toward increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and the diffusion of practices such as "supplementing" (bringing supplementary work home from the conventional office)". Her analysis here is mainly predicated on drawing out the specific forms of value production that sustain the 'knowledge economy' but frequently elude traditional mechanisms of monetary recognition, activities such as participating in discussion forums, running and posting to mailing lists, collaborating in free software projects, maintaining community websites, etc. These are considered as activities that indirectly create wealth for some agents and self-valorisation for others, with no necessary convergence between the two tendencies. The sustaining of 'reputation economies' and peer networks through such 'free labour' is traced to the investment of sociality and affect by participants in creating culture which is sometimes self-consciously oppositional to market forces, but is of nonetheless intimately traversed by them, structurally and symbolically. This investment of sociality and affect can in turn be appropriated and capitalised by profit-making enterprises who often proprietise the voluntary labour of programmers and other technological hobbyists who don't perceive their activities as 'work'.

What seems salient in this account is the oft-cited propensity of capitalism to overcode (or 're-territorialise') existing social practices, such as 'gift economy', mutual support and social networks e.g. if it does not monetise them directly, it cannot subsist without this un-monetised remainder, and

neither can the inhabitants of a capitalist society. It is the un-monetised remainder, or unwaged labour, or slavery, that is integral to the success of this overcoding – both as 'surplus value' (the portion of labour performed that exceeds the necessary labour and which is not paid for, according to the Marxian formula) in terms of the exploitation, disciplining and division of workers; and as a means of keeping up an alibi for capital's permeation of social life by the maintenance of areas of production and relationships that seem to fall outside those systematic laws – the constitutive negation that proves the rule. As capitalism is not an object or a hermetic system, but a social relation that we are creating and sustaining perpetually, so other forms of relations are sustained and flourish; but they are overcoded by the capitalist relation, which sets the conditions for survival and visibility in social reality. Jason Read discusses the relation of capital in the social as 'axiomatic' eg as a structuring principle that is so embedded as to be invisible, the prevalence of which does not require belief or active promotion in order to persist (we can trace this to Marx's precept about bourgeois principles of liberty and equality deriving their conceptual genesis from the equality of commodities in the market). In *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described the process by which capital unsettles and resettles bodies and cultures as a movement of "decoding" ruled by "axiomatisation". Decoding is the process through which older cultural limits are displaced and removed as with older, local cultures during modernization; the flows of culture and capital unleashed by the decoding are then channeled into a process of axiomatization, an abstract moment of conversion into money and profit. Hence the co-existence of monetary and non-monetary formations of value production, circumscribed by the axiomatic of general exchange and the objectification of labour power, knowledge and affect in money.

Here we see that even as 'free labour' practices such as coding or cultural proiduction exceed economic rationalisation, they also support it, and are in their turn parasitic upon it: “Incorporation is not about capital descending on authentic culture but a more immanent process of channeling collective labor (even as cultural labor) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices”. (Terranova, 2003) Similarly, unpaid housework produces/reproduces labour power through all the emotional and physical support and maintenance services that it provides. Frequently considered 'unproductive' work, Marxist feminists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, Silvana Federici and Selma James have amply delineated that domestic work performed largely by women is directly productive – it produces and reproduces the labour power of the members of the household, who are then in fit condition to go outside the home and sell that labour power in the employment market. There is here a confluence between Terranova's analysis of digital economy workers and the above account of housework: when information becomes a principal commodity in the economy, free labour in the digital economy (construction and maintenance of websites, mailing lists, etc), reproduces the labour power that is knowledge and ability to mobilise it in social networks that may or may not eventually result in financial recognition.

It could also be cited that the exploitation of both eg housewives and coders is premised on the positing of a subjectivity that would produce what it produces naturally, divorced from considerations of systemic or social pressure: women are naturally inclined to do domestic labour and carework, geeks are naturally inclined to program. Since they derive personal fulfilment from these activities, why should they be compensated financially? Such simplistic and apolitical accounts are often indirectly affirmed by the subjects of 'free labour' themselves, who wish to preserve the rationale and motivation of their involvement in non-monetised activities from economic rationality and see a relationship to direct mechanisms of establishing and recognising value produced through money as a reduction of and an imposition on this sphere of work. In this light, it is suggestive to consider how value can be turned into non-value not just through severance from a formal wage relation but through ascription to naturalised processes: this is the co-efficient

of all unwaged labour; it is riven by ideology, frequently espoused by the very subjects of that labour, who can only envision their evasion of alienating waged work subjectively, individually or as a matter of necessity, rather than as a potent contradiction that can best be confronted socially and systematically. This is not to say that the awareness of the provisional and compromised character of producing outside the market on one hand, or gendered exploitation on the other, dopes not exist; in fact, it can be very distinct. But the current political and economic climate generally appears more conducive to pragmatism and resignation than to novel forms of social action. This is of course a schematic, if not downright polemical, statement.

In *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labour and Capital*, Leopoldina Fortunati writes, "The relation [housework and prostitution] is posited as the proletariat's 'private life' appearing as a relationship which, since it does not seem to have originated in capital, does not require any investigation as to whether women are exploited within it or not. For capital this whole sphere of reproduction is a 'natural' process, composed of 'natural' elements and 'natural' relations. But this is not the real character of reproduction; value is, and despite being hidden, value is the dominant characteristic". Here there is an interesting elision between housework, traditionally conceived as the domain of the virtuous woman who works for love, and prostitution, the redoubt of the wayward and discarded woman who is condemned to work for money. It fails to clarify the vital ideological (and ontological) gap that must be maintained between the two so that the fundamental similarities in the status of the wife and the whore do not emerge. This depiction can be also be disputed in the sense that everywhere and at all times in capitalist societies, prostitution was always seen as *the* emblematic form of capitalist work, certainly in the popular idiom. Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, another early 1970s Marxist feminist text, also gives patriarchy a specific historical content by elucidating how the oppression of women is rooted in the mystification of the reproductive sphere as natural and outside the relations of exchange, from which Dalla Costa deduces that the gendered division of labour, specifically women's unpaid work, is integral to the functioning of capitalist society.

In summary, the subjectivity of the 'housewife' and that of the 'free labourer' of the digital economy (as well as anyone who produces cultural/affective/informational value w/o monetary correlates) can be analysed in conjunction as sites of 'value-adding': the surplus value is in the existing tendency to produce anyway, with the mystification of the immanent necessity to do so. Terranova quotes management theorist Don Tapscott who writes, [the industrial] "worker tried to achieve fulfillment through leisure [and]... was alienated from the means of production which were owned and controlled by someone else," in the digital economy the worker achieves fulfillment through work and finds in her brain her own, unalienated means of production'.

This quotation is useful for its emphasis on the common ideological elision of technological determinism: that the nature of work can change in alignment with technological developments, rather than social or political formations; that capitalism can supersede itself as capitalism, redistributing wealth and enhancing self-determination with the widespread adoption of certain technologies. This has been the standard conservative-utopian line since at least the late 19th century, gaining impetus in the 1950s with cybernetics and with the numberless proselytisations for the digital and 'creative economy' of the 1990s and early 2000s. What these analyses characteristically decline is the insight that it is the organisation of production, not its tools, that mitigate for or against meaningful or creative work; although tools are not to be separated from organisation. It is the deployment of technologies according to situated political and economic imperatives that orient their ability to influence or re-structure work; in short, these accounts are propelled by an instrumental but idealistic logic that misses out the dimension of critical political economy indispensable for a useful assessment of the re-organisation of contemporary work.

Whether valorisation becomes self-valorisation or capitalist valorisation in any sphere of unpaid labour is tightly connected with the degree of antagonism and collective organisation in the social relations of producers; it will always be a battle of attrition between further enclosures and appropriations and ways of exceeding and deflecting these clampdowns. It is also important to recognise how the social naturalisation of certain types of labour as paid and unpaid feeds into the economic rationality of the dominant social organisation of production and into understandings of subjectivity and empowerment as related to creativity and work. While there has already been significant research undertaken into the indispensability of informal and unregulated economies to the sustaining of the 'official' economy (Yann Moulier Boutang's *Le esclavage du salariat* e.g. looks at the practices of slavery and indentured servitude as instrumental to the success of early capitalism, persisting into the present day, and there have also been a number of studies done of informal or precarious economies in cultural production), this element has yet to achieve thoroughgoing recognition in political thought, economic analysis, sociology or historiography. An analysis of the integrality of unpaid to paid labour would also be obliged to consider the integration of unpaid labour. In its qualities of excess, spontaneity, production of affect and management of contradictions, predominantly on view in low-paid and de-valued mostly female sectors such as carework and unskilled services, as prototypical – rather than atypical – to the transformation of work and value production as a whole.

Their Little Fingers: Ornamental and Menial Labour in Domestic and Digital Economies, or, the Infernal Machines of Femininity

I would like now to turn to the current and historic iterations of ornamental and menial labour. Here the terms will be referring to the ideological formation that dictates a particularly feminine adaptability to small and delicate work, eg the traditional feminine occupation of embroidery (and mending) and the contemporary assembly of electronic components in globalised factories by a largely female workforce as both material practices situated in a specific regime of the production of gender and value. Whereas the ornamental pasttime of embroidery was of course both a disciplinary device signalling female isolation in the home as her natural sphere, herself a decorative object if middle-class, and an alibi for the grueling labour of working-class seamstresses, it exemplifies the designation of specific forms of labour as uniquely feminine, and the pivotal role of this designation in class politics. We could look at craft labour as a suggestive point of junction between gender hierarchies in the workplace and the gender ideologies that establish a workplace and a domestic space and impute specific qualities and functions to them. Similarly, the mass phenomenon of micro-processor assembly lines staffed largely by women for their manual dexterity (already trained by needlework) and qualities as a pool of cheap, 'docile' labour dovetails nicely with the expanding movement of female programmers and data workers to infiltrate a staunchly male-dominated preserve at a the higher-valued software end of technological production.

(I would also like to keep in mind, between some brackets, the definition of ornamental labour (King, 2003) as the kind of cultural administration, policymaking and management that dissembles or mediates escalations of capitalist discipline in the West through processes such as regeneration, privatisation of public services and housing and 'cleansing' of the urban environment through displacement and invisibility. Some examples of this kind of labour would be the many variants of socially engaged art, public consultations, the creation of community policing programmes, and the limitless other instantiations of the logic of 'participation' in a social and political topography that seems to offer fewer and fewer avenues for real participation, or indeed, intervention in processes that are very purposeful but universally proclaimed as inevitable.)

Embroidery was the index of the Victorian women's separation from the world of waged labour the home, a practice intimately associated with the production of Victorian feminity as a destination for the refined consumption of more and more industrial goods. More specifically, it presented an ornamental hypostasis of the relentless mending and repair assigned to the menial female workforce, wageless or waged in the home or outside it. It was strictly feminine because superfluous – only poor women were condemned to be useful, bar the odd aristocratic ladies' delegation to visit an orphanage. Whereas once the idyllic image of the angel in the home, not sullying her dainty fingers with factory work was incentive enough for male workers to agitate for a better 'family wage', nowadays we can observe an interesting congruence between ideologies of female emancipation and neoliberal primitive accumulation, operative in the West for decades already – for many years now women have been invited to add a second workday to their domestic one. Of course, work outside the home does frequently serve to introduce and consolidate solidarity between women and women-as-workers, and lends them the confidence to re-assess the division of labour in the stubbornly patriarchal family as well. Of course, sometimes emancipation within the market turns out compound existing oppressive conditions – women 'liberated' to work outside the home, frequently to encounter lousy working conditions (as workers), and precisely as women workers (through the kinds of tasks assigned and the wages that accord with them) – but at least it provides women with a measure of financial independence, especially vital in societies where older community relations and social systems are being re-composed in the image of capital. This is especially salient nowadays in the global proletarianisation of women who in previous generations would have been agricultural labourers, subsistence farmers and usually housewives as well. The lightly regulated factories of the 'global South' and East where women assemble microscopic components of ubiquitous electronic consumer goods are enmeshed in a kind of techno-menialism that can trace a direct descent to the hyper-exploited seamstress of Victorian times, performing a stereotypically feminine task to gain access to means of subsistence for herself and her family. And all this when the first computer was built by a women – female programmers are struggling on a material but also overwhelmingly symbolic terrain (since the materiality of symbols is in fact their sphere of operation) to find employment and creative opportunities in the gender-blind but male-biased world of coding, interface design, collaborative free software projects, etc. No longer content to embroider their prisons by personalising their proprietary software, they are modifying the facts on the ground for organisation, participation and collaboration, particularly in the libertarian milieu of free software activism and production. The class analysis here cannot be mapped as continuously as in the prior analysis of female computer factory labour and 19th century seamstresses, united by their confinement to low-wage and low-skill work by class marginality and gender ideology. It might still be instructive to speculate on what proportion of working-class Mexican women are free software activists, and what proportion of *maquiladora* workers originate in the middle class.

The suggestive figure of the Victorian lady in that configuration obtains less on the situation of female programmers, with the exception of the iconic Ada Lovelace. But she does evoke how the subjugation of women can engender conditions of relative privilege (if relatively limiting in their actuality) but at the expense of women's unity *as a class* and the challenge such a unity can pose to constituted systems of domination, whatever their point of pressure/fracture. This follows on in the next section, which undertakes to deal with the legacy of the Wages for Housework movement as one such challenge.

Wages for Housework, The Basic Income and the Global Division of Labour

“WE DEMAND A GUARANTEED INCOME FOR WOMEN AND FOR MEN, WORKING OR

NOT WORKING, MARRIED OR NOT. If we raise kids, we have a right to a living wage. The ruling class has glorified motherhood only when there is a pay packet to support it. We work for the capitalist class. Let them pay us, or else we can go to the factories and offices and put our children in their fathers' laps. Let's see if they can make Ford cars and change nappies at the same time. WE DEMAND WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK. All housekeepers are entitled to wages (men too)." (Selma James, 'Women, the Unions and Work')

With the oft-observed re-structuration of capital along financialised and informationalised lines, and the attendant transformations of work, characterised variously as 'post-Fordism', 'post-industrial capitalism', 'cognitive capitalism' or 'knowledge capitalism', we encounter on the one hand, a commodification of the naturalised and surplus affect that was once rooted in family and social networks: the many variants of service labour that put a premium on, and actually enforce, the production of affect as an integral element of the service package, however scripted and regimented ('extra' is just that little difference between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'!); A production of affect without referent or belief is also linked to the post-structuralist explorations of the primacy of the symbolic and 'simulacral' as cornerstones of a social world where competing systems of meaning formation have been susbumed into the generality of abstract exchange, with universal homogenisation and commodification bringing up the rear (Baudrillard). However, for the purposes of this paper, the production, incitement and 'value-adding' dimension of affect is an expansive phenomenon: it is enacted right across the social field, again, as axiomatic – a presupposition that that does not require active perpetuation to hold sway. It is also an intensive phenomenon: the re-fashioning of every aspect of the self with an eye towards its market value, and the production of affect in reality programming and socially engaged art that provides a platform for expression and participation by foreclosing any real opportunities for change through antagonism or independence. The mobilisation of affect as 'value-adding' is enacted in a self-referential landscape where the adding of value is a teleology, however fragmented and incomplete, that overdetermines social life and political thought in general: the economy as last instance is no longer Marxian dogma but the ever less mystified precondition of the possible. The narrative of global states as 'competitors', social change only being conceivable in terms of broadening access to commodities and that social value creation as 'social capital' is the rightful province of business entrepreneurs and the think tanks and voluntary and faith-based organisations that legitimate and apply their principles would be a few of the salient examples.

For examples of alternative and antagonistic formulations of social value creation, the history of social movements is always instructive. In the early 1970s, the Wages for Housework campaign emerged as a Marxist and feminist interrogation of the gendered division of labour and the commodification of social life that it helped to sustain, but was for that reason in a position to disrupt. The programmatic demand of Wages for Housework was that reproductive labour inside the home contributes to society and the economy just as much as waged labour outside the home, so it should be valued and compensated in the same way. This, ostensibly, would serve as the lever for a much more fundamental challenge to the gendered division of labour that ensured the smooth functioning of capitalist value extraction as unpaid labour sustained the conditions of exploitation for both men and women, waged and unwaged. The demand to be paid for reproductive labour not only put into question the existing social division of labour, but the mediation of labour organisation such as unions that did not recognise or support women's work, in or out of the formal workforce, and acted to manage conflict between businesses and labour, stabilising unrest rather than propagating it in a transformative direction, or "getting us involved in planning our own exploitation and control. They call it 'participation'". (Selma James, 1972)

A1972 position paper entitled 'Women, the Unions and Work' by Wages for Housework activist

Selma James enacts a very lucid critique of how the institution of the wage colludes with existing gender oppression to intensify divisions in the working class, and how mainstream labour unions actively perpetuate the exclusion and downgrading of women both in political movements and in the workplace. It also incorporates an invaluable critique of capitalist work as such, arguing that the feminist movement specifically countermands the myth that there is any liberation for women in working outside the home. Not only does wage labour just double her working day, so long as the institution of the patriarchal family remains intact, but it doubles the oppression and social control she must negotiate, especially in unskilled labour – the dominant career track for women then as now:

> The challenge to the women's movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation. This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women's movement.

and

> Our struggle against the factory is not only to get out but never to go in. Our struggle against the family is to get out, but not so we are free for the factory.

There are several conclusions that the analysis and experience of the Wages for Housework movement can provide: on the one hand it could be seen as a radical intervention in both the marxist and feminist debates of the era, with its attention to the role of the unpaid labour of women in a systematic regime of exploitation and surplus value extraction, reproduced ideologically and affectively, in the home and in personal beliefs, as well as in the distribution of social power and wealth. It can also be seen as at minimum a progressive demand (even if this is something of a distortion, since the Wages for Housework frame of reference is hardly liberal/social democratic in spirit): housewives are also part of the working class and can unite and struggle for rights and recognition – yet the notion of struggling for rights and recognition would equivocate about whether the function of a demand for Wages for Housework would be for housewives to be better served by the extant economic rationality, or to undermine it.

However, as a radical, socially transformative (or 'revolutionary') demand addressed to the nation-state, it falls into a paradox of requesting recognition and subsidy, admittedly through direct action, from the very social actor it would hope to undermine with such a demand, a demand presupposing a high level of working-class self-organisation that may itself already be at a level to pose a drastic challenge to the state. Understood through the framework of then-proliferating social struggles around the redistribution of wealth, the 'social wage', the refusal of work and the right to an income, the Wages for Housework movement fit perfectly into that landscape – the claim for re-appropriation of socially produced wealth through concerted pressure on the state by social movements in an endemic feature of the upheaval of those times. The link between refusal of work and the right to an income was on the agenda for a wide cross-section of social movements at the time, making the Wages for Housework demand relatively conservative, with its demand for wages for services rendered, even if it pivoted on the immanent challenge to the performance of those services and capitalist work *in toto*.

So does the Wages for Housework demand provide leverage for an overturning of gendered division of labour, or simply reinforce it? A close examination of its principles, arguments and subsequent marginality to the mainstream feminist movement(s) would yield a temptation to answer in the affirmative to the first question. Nonetheless, an equally affirmative answer to the second is hinted at by the character of a radical demand addressed to a state which not only exceeds the economic

rationality prevalent in and administered by that state, but which ultimately rests on a recognition of unpaid domestic workers (housewives) as value-creating members of society who deserve to be more adequately represented in the welfare rolls – for a demand for wages addressed to the state can only result in additional layer of welfare if it results in anything. It is not destined be this and nothing more – as the preceding discussion demonstrated, the Wages for Housework analysis is politically sophisticated and would reject an opportunistic use of Wages for Housework as an additional tool of control through the benefits system. But it is hard-pressed to avoid such a reactionary state of affairs without a general social transformation that could extend the principles of Wages for Housework beyond the assimilation that awaits it at face value – all other variables remaining the same. The contention that the programme of Wages for Housework was to use women's unpaid domestic labour as a lever to crack the whole social organisation of labour is valid, but it underestimates the extent to which such a demand can be ignored or neutralised, depending on the balance of forces between social movements and government/enterprise at a given point.

It would seem that the Wages for Housework demand may provide leverage an escalation of struggle and self-organisation but is unsurprisingly not able to go far enough in this direction on its own. However, this 'not far enough' is still much too far for capital, which can never grant such a demand, as free labour is structurally indissociable from its normal functioning. Wages for housework has only ever been recognised in one country – Chavez' Venezuela – and even there it remains on the statute books, with its implementation a hazy prospect.

The implications of the Wages for Housework analysis suggests other directions as well. For one, it illuminates the current debates around the basic income as a viable demand for social movements. Second, it casts an interesting angle on the international prevalence of commodified domestic labour, undertaken mostly by migrant women in middle-class households. Is the overwhelming return of the servant class to the West (but also privileged classes in other parts of the world) an ironic fulfilment of Wages for Housework?

The aspect of Wages for Housework that seems to rely on a species of recognition by the dominant political and economic mechanisms invites reflection on 'recogntion' as a bridge to mainstream feminism that in every other way was antithetical to the politicised Wages for Housework stance. From there, it is possible to say that: 1/liberal feminism sought, and in many cases won, legally enshrined rights and representation in a fundamentally unchanged, in many cases worsening, political landscape in Europe and worldwide – while relinqushing the challenge to that landscape on anything but a representational level and 2/with the failure to challenge capitalist exploitation and its ramifications in the global division of labour, the dominant tendency in the West, especially in the US (where we of course see the return of many archaisms, not least among them those correlated with extreme inequality of wealth distribution) is the increasing integration of women at the highest levels (although still as minorities) of paid work and corporate hierarchy with an increasing reliance on hyper-exploited immigrant servants of uncertain residential status:

> Currently, the International Labour Organization estimates that twenty-two million Asians work outside of their home country. Statistics from the mid 1990s show that in every ten citizens of Sri Lanka works abroad, most of them women. 84 percent of Sri Lankan migrants to the Middle East are women. 70 percent of Filipino migrants in the US are women. Most of these women are doing 'social' work in some way - from domestics and care workers, to work in the catering industry, to sex workers. (from 'Gender, Migration and Domestic Labour'. prol-position newsletter no 5, 2006)

Wages for Housework, from its objective to mobilise the unpaid domestic labour of women as the faultline of the capitalist organisation of work, has morphed into the division and re-stratification of

women along class and ethnic lines correlated to recent epochal changes (and fundamental structural neo-imperialist continuities) in the global division of labour. Can the aggregate of unpaid domestic workers compose themselves as political dynamite when the incessant transfer of wealth upwards in many Western societies in recent decades now means for many it's more morally acceptable to sustain an immigrant family by hiring a maid than short-circuiting one's professional and earnings potential by staying at home – with feminist self-organisation as a challenge to capital a myth from remote antiquity? It is perhaps more instrumental to scrutinise self-organisation among the subjects of commodified domestic work, the informal and contract service staff themselves, for organisation and resistance to the status quo, as the Justice for Janitors, widespread cleaning staff strikes and unionising drives and the current visibility of immigrant civil rights campaigns in the United Sates would seem to suggest.

Perhaps obliquely, I would like to return the discussion to the theoretical and practical analogies between Wages for Housework and the negotiations around the 'basic income' or 'guaranteed social wage' currently taking hold across activist, progressive economist and mainstream national left-leaning political parties and policy think tanks across Europe. Depending on its political milieu, the basic income has been explicated as a moderate extension of available social benefits allocations in European nation-states or in a federated EU-wide level or a material reflection of the transformation in the conditions for value production in contemporary economy – where production does not just happen in the workjplace and is as likely to take place informally or through consumption – ensuring that a decent, above-subsistence livelihood in in place to guarantee social reproduction in line with these new models of production. Whether the emphasis is placed on economic rationality, social piece or workers' power, the locus of the argument inevitably implies an expansion of the welfare regime (whether locally, nationally, regionally or EU-administered) that depends on recognition and administration by some conjunction of private and state actors. In a time where much activist political discourse is focused on ways of moving beyond the state for re-imagining the organisation of production and social life, the basic income debate is paradoxical in seeking to contribute to those formulations by making a demand on the state – a demand which, not incidentally or co-incidentally, exceeds the capacities and premise of the nation state as currently constituted: as a junior partner in and regulator of capitalist accumulation.

In this aspect, the postulation of the basic income recalls Wages for Housework as an appeal to the state which, if fulfilled, would dissolve the state; it is a Trojan horse, calling for revolution in the guise of reform. Unlike Wages for Housework, many advocates of the basic income disavow such revolutionary implications or objectives in their proposals, earnestly referring to 'Negrian economics' (the erosion of the wage as the central measure of production as spelled out in Antonio Negri's recent writings) to account for the pragmatic character of a state-administered universal income that would eliminate the necessity to work for a living. Wages for Housework, of course, would frame their demand as a point of leverage to critique the system of wage labour as such, not to evade it – which is not to say that tactic proved successful, at least not yet. However, Wages for Housework and the basic income are both predicated on severing social reproduction from production; in other words, from de-coupling life/living labour from wage labour. Another point of confluence between the two campaigns lies in their contradictory appeal to constituted nation-state mechanisms such as social benefits agencies and government policy to grant recognition to, and the material conditions for, forms of life and sociality that would eventually render nation-states obsolete: communism by the back door (an area which a number of Italian autonomist Marxist theorists have already explored through identifying a 'communism of capital' in increasingly socialised working practices, or, the generalisation of production through social life as the 'social factory'). Such a move seems to indicate a measure of admission of weakness in the forces of composition of a movement, because it prioritises such an indirect tactic; yet, the success of the

tactic presupposes an incredibly powerful and broad-based movement. It could also be simply pointed out that the division and exploitation of labour is globalised, whereas the basic income would be nationally based and applied.

Further to such aporias, the utility and coherence of basic income proposals are contentious for these reasons. The system cannot be rejigged to recognise all forms of value production when it:

a/depends on the 'value-added' component of unpaid labour to survive
and
b/value is only meaningful as an instrument of analysis of domination and stratification in production relations– it doesn't exist as such and cannot be reified as a social good that can be measured in an enlightened capitalist system because this analysis first and foremost depends on the organisation of a movement within and against not just nation-states, but against the global enclosures of social reproduction managed through the manifold of international trade entities, non-governmental organisations, financial instruments, etc.

Thus, like Wages for Housework, its status as a transitional demand is counteracted by its unfeasibility within capitalism, and like Wages for Housework, its blind spot is the global division of labour. If Europeans were to somehow attain the social wage, it would still be meaningless, in Europe and elsewhere, because the social wage is administered state by paternal state while the division of labour is global and the structural principles of terror, environmental collapse and economic disintegration that propels global migration patterns will remain untouched by such a measure – if not exacerbated (think of the immigration paranoia attendant upon a 'social Europe' boasting a 'social wage' if there is so much whipped up around conditional access to the meagre social benefits that exist now!)

Interestingly, the problems of the debate around the basic income dovetails with the neoliberal policy drive (visible especially in the United States and Great Britain) to assess the value of the 'third sector' – when non-profit and voluntary organisations and institutions are in many cases projected as a cheaper and more 'communal' alternative to both the politically unpopular market and the ideologically taboo social welfare responsibilities of the State. This perspective clarifies much about the points of alliance between positions which contend that wage labour has been functionally eradicated by the drastically transformed nature of value in 'immaterial labour' and those that seek to shift a dwindling array of public resources onto 'independent' social actors that combine the virtues of social consciousness with the de-regulated gusto of entrepreneurship – again, an alibi for the massive and longstanding transfer of wealth upwards and public resource into private hands – via a discursive sleight-of-hand about 'new' sources of the production of value and 'social capital'. This twin light really puts the demand to realign systems of recognising value with the emergent systems of producing value (including social networking and consumption) in a new light – capitalism doesn't need to be stabilised by a 'social wage', it expects to be stabilised by more people working for free, precisely because value production has shifted!

Conclusion

The preceding tried to articulate a concept of women's labour as prototype for unpaid labour, itself a prototype of the re-organisation of the economy and the transformation of work with current proposals into the transformations in value production attendant on an informationalised and globalised economic situation – one that is far from new, yet appears to many as more pervasive than ever before. Another paper of course remains to be written that can give a corresponding genealogy of practices of resistance and recomposition of 'the working-class' defined here (as

always) as nothing more determinate than those who have no option but to sell their labour power to survive. These strategies, however, contest their ground and take shape in intimate co-habitation with what they refute, developing erratically and circuitously, breaking off and re-emerging in other forms, within and against the practices of exploitation and domination that traverse them and the power relations they refuse and reproduce. Such contradictions can be immensely powerful and also very demoralizing. It could be noted that marxian and libertarian discourse more generally in recent years has taken cognizance of the relational and limited character of the incubation of other froms of social life within and against present arrangements in far more creative, intensive and pragmatic directions than the reflex recapitulation of the Hegelian dialectic that has characterised many encounters between emancipatory politics and social actuality in the past.

On the one hand, class composition is arranged and structured by capital, applied by technologies or the labor organization within and outside the factory, and the composition of the workers to guarantee exploitation (technical composition). On the other hand it is the resistiveness of the workers, their willingness to fight, and their possibilities for fighting (political compositition). Immanent organisation of 'prefigurative' forms of life that if they become sufficiently widespread and powerful have potential to undermine stability of capitalist modes of production and reproduction. At bottom, it is also a question of what kinds of working practices and subjective orientations, singly or collectively, can multiply opportunities for '. . . the moment when everyday experience turns against the everyday, trying to attack it and change it, the moment when everyday experience becomes its own radical critique' (Guy Debord).