

Anthropologies of Value

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The Value of Everything and the Price of Nothingness

Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández

Romantic poets and socialist revolutionaries were abundant in nineteenth-century Europe. They had different ways to undertake social critique, needless to say, and generally pursued different political horizons. Yet in some respects their kinds were in spiritual communion, united by strong if invisible ties. The creative forces of those poets and revolutionaries had been moulded in times of unrest and social dislocation, and they all were dissatisfied with the society they had to live in. Indeed, both groups longed for a different world: romantic poets for one already gone, socialist revolutionaries for one still to come. In the meantime, they rebelled against societies that they denounced as fatuous and (more so the socialists than the romantics) as unjust. Many of those poets and revolutionaries could have subscribed one of Oscar Wilde's epigrams as an apt diagnostic of their epoch: more and more people were living as if they knew 'the price of everything and the value of nothing'.

Today, romantic poets are rare and *démodé*, and socialist revolutionaries scarce. If you ask, for instance, a cynic, a pessimist or a neoliberal pundit, why such people have vanished, they will most likely present the fact as a demonstration that there is no possible return to paradises lost, nor any plausible directionality in human affairs other than an evolution towards more perfected and free-of-obstacles market societies. From that point of view, it is only logical that those poets and revolutionaries have been in retreat: no one in her senses would pursue utopias that are unrealisable and, furthermore, go against the inclinations contained in human nature. However, if you ask a believer, an optimist or an anthropologist, you may hear a different tune. Not that neoliberal inclinations are non-existent among these latter types, of course. Yet, regardless of political preferences, these are people who live their lives with the latent certitude that the script of human affairs is never closed, for better or worse. Even though they might readily acknowledge that our times are unpropitious for revolutionaries and poets, they would never present this situation as resulting from

a natural law – not even those who might privately celebrate, whether for political or for aesthetic reasons, the dwindled presence of socialists and romantics in the social scene.¹ Because for believers, optimists, and for some anthropologists, things are as they are, but they can always be substantially different. And for the anthropologists in particular that is precisely *the* law that can be considered to rest in nature: if there is something they understand by human nature it is precisely the potential for social and cultural creation, and that is always connected with potential for political transformation – as it can be with political conservatism.

If you share this outlook, you are more likely to enjoy this volume than if you do not. This discussion brings together the efforts of a bunch of anthropologists – we will leave it to you to judge if optimists and believers are among us too. So when going through our essays you might hear this common underlying whisper: ‘the script of human affairs is never closed, and human potentials have been and continue to be diversely deployed, shaped and made meaningful in social aggregates across an ever changing world’. Even if you take these whisperings with a pinch of salt, you might find these essays worth a thorough read. The contributions to this volume provide grounding and ideas to discuss both anthropological knowledge and big issues about the state of affairs across the world. How do they do such a thing? By situating the concept of value at the centre of analyses of human sociality in different permutations within, against and (potentially) beyond capitalism. As you will see, while this is not an uncomplicated task, it is a most fruitful one: interrogating capitalism and human sociality through such concept makes both suspects sing out quite a lot.

Poets and Revolutionaries – Apropos of Value

Given the central credit that we are granting to the concept of value, some initial clarifications about it are due. I hope that you do not mind the company of poets and revolutionaries for a bit longer, for the clarifying effort will start with a few comments on Oscar Wilde and Karl Marx.

I already made reference to an epigram authored by Wilde, specifically one extracted from his play *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (published in 1892). In the play, a central character (Lord Darlington, one of those quintessentially Wildean dandies) throws it out as the definition of a cynic. However, I recovered that epigram for the way in which, under a different light, it can be read as capturing something central about the social transformations taking place in nineteenth-century Europe. In a period in which, as the

authors of the 1848 Communist Manifesto had it, all that had been solid was melting into air, Wilde's epigram could probably have been subscribed to by many as an inspired representation of the *Zeitgeist* of the epoch. Money was apparently becoming the primary drive and the ultimate measure of everything, while in parallel, in the terms that the epigram posed it, people seemed to be forgetting the real 'value' of things – closing down forms of appreciation not subjected to market logics. Wilde, a literary man with a genial mastery of language, captured in one sentence so much about the tendencies of his society (and made his point brilliantly salient, in a literary way) by counterpoising two ambiguously related terms: 'price' and 'value'. Price, conventionally taken as a quantitative expression of value when not directly as synonymous with it, was thus presented as something absolutely detachable from that latter term. Wilde's character suggested that people in his time (or at least cynics) were, in practice, confusing such terms.

Perhaps only coincidentally, a few years before Wilde wrote that remark, Marx, another creative figure with a brilliant mastery of language, had made that very point. In fact, Marx situated those same terms ('value' and 'price') at the core of his most ambitious work, which would eventually be known as *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.² In that work he not only captured, but also explained quite a lot about the logics and drives of that social system that, in the nineteenth century, was consolidating before everyone's eyes – though he remarked that people could be perfectly blind to its inner logics. However, unlike the poet, always keen to creatively squeeze to the maximum the polysemic character of certain words, Marx, a scientist, embarked on a systematic disambiguation of the key terms he used for his critique. He actually dedicated a few hundred pages to that task, aiming to turn 'value' and 'price' into scientific concepts with demarcated meanings. Marx presented the distinction between those concepts as essential for studying the 'laws of motion' of that systemic force he denominated capital and which traversed the society he was living in. Moreover, he considered that an abstracted theory of value was the necessary starting point for such scrutiny of social life: instead of commencing with a positivist approach to experience, Marx thought that, since such an approach could never be unmediated by preconceptions, it was indispensable to create a theoretical platform from which reality could be coherently interrogated. That theory was to become the (Marxian) labour theory of value,³ and it contended that, in order to understand those laws of motion of capitalism, it was crucial to unveil that in the generation of wealth in general, and in the production of commodities in

particular, there were two independent sources: Nature and Labour. In the particular type of society Marx wanted to discuss (capitalist), commodities are those unit forms of wealth that do not only have a value resting on their usefulness to people (that is, a use-value), but also an exchange-value as a constitutive characteristic – they are produced and conceived to be exchanged. Marx sought to identify what was the substance common to any commodity in order to understand what takes place in market exchanges – in principle. Identifying labour as such common substance permitted him to theoretically explain and compare the relative values of commodities,⁴ and therefore to shed light on basic mechanisms of market exchange. The proportion in which people exchange their commodities would *in principle* relate to the proportions of (socially necessary) labour invested in them. Leaving other considerations aside, and notwithstanding the complementary discussion of commodity fetishism, this proposition firmly rooted the configuration of exchange-values within a sphere of social factors – rather than, say, of psychological ones.

That emphasis on social factors was crucial, for Marx's theoretical approach was not ultimately intended to explain concrete mechanisms of price fixing and exchange: it sought to demarcate the grounds for the discussion of broader and deeper questions about so-called modern society. What are the processes that constitute the structures giving shape to this society? How do those structures condition social relations? What are the causes and the effects of the transformation of labour power (that is, people's capacity to work) into a commodity? Who can have property rights and what can be owned in societies in which most people have lost independent means of subsistence? What is being paid for when one receives a wage? Why can some people accumulate wealth whereas some other people work basically to reproduce their labour power? And so forth.

From this perspective, the fact that Marx's theory of value does not work, for instance, to explain the determination of commodity prices in a capitalist market (which has repeatedly been presented by critics, from the impetuous emergence of marginalism in economics onwards, as a demonstration that the theory was flawed, or at least that it was useless) is no reason to discard it. Marx, following in this respect a Socratic and Galilean method, aimed to establish the parameters within which one could scrutinise reality after knowing with precision what one wants to ask of it (Fernández Liria and Alegre Zahonero 2011). He thus delimited an object of study and inaugurated political economy as a modern critical science, recasting and overcoming the classical paradigm nowadays mostly

identified with Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (2012).⁵ That theoretical grounding made it possible to critically contrast the way in which a capitalist society works overall (subjected to certain 'laws of motion' and 'silent compulsions') with the way in which, as it were, it pretends to work (allegedly resting on natural and universal human economic impulses, and on the political project of the Enlightenment). In other words: by scrutinising society with the newly created analytical tools, one could not only discuss basic mechanisms of capitalist markets, but also reconsider the relation between capital and those concepts of citizenship and law that the Enlightenment had tried to advance and which, allegedly, were the pillars of liberal society. In the light of Marx's analysis, that relation appeared to be quite strained, to say the least: under the forces of capital, citizenship and law, at least as they had been envisaged originally by the Enlightenment tradition, seemed to have vanished in face of farcical replacements.

At this point we can bring Wilde and Marx back together and resume the introduction of this volume's aims. In their own ways, both the poet and the scientist were aware that 'value' and 'price' played crucial roles in the definition of capitalism, and also that those terms could not be taken as synonymous. Yet for Marx it was crucial to explicitly disambiguate them, turn them into concepts, and explore the relation that, in principle, connected them, whereas for Wilde it was enough to bring such words into close proximity so that they could silently project their contrasting meanings – no matter if they did so indeterminately. In this volume we owe more to Marx's efforts, which provided still irreplaceable tools for understanding what a commodity is; the utility of conceptualising value precisely in relation to commodities and the creation of wealth; and why that coupling can contribute to analysing the functioning of capital and to discussing its politics. In fact, the title of this introductory chapter, despite its Wildean flavour, draws from the diverse traditions springing from Marx's scientific efforts. Although Wilde's epigram stimulated my initial comments about the logics of nineteenth-century capitalism, it has aged poorly, and only by breathing some Marxian air into it could one aspire to rejuvenate it. By what nowadays one sees around, Wilde's epigram does not work so well when it comes to capturing the logics of twenty-first-century capitalism, for in these times, unlike a century ago, more and more people live as if they knew *the value of everything and the price of nothingness*. It is around this suggestion that I want to situate this volume as a whole. Let me explain.

At present, commodification processes, the establishment of new forms of property and the search for new avenues for the creation and appropriation of value are global– if culturally mediated – phenomena. The social creations of people across the world seem to be conditioned by the realisation that exchange-value can (potentially) be found in everything and everywhere. It is just a matter of finding the ways to uncover that potential – no longer a matter of producing value with the intervention of labour. The apparent omnipresent immanence of (exchange-)value has become as central a drive of capitalism as spatial/territorial expansion has since its inception.⁶ But of course there is more, because the ‘everything’ in our entitling epigram is all embracing: in a sleight of hand, it can include its total opposite – nothingness.

After the last financial crisis, some tradable products were said to have been sustained by thin air, and many commentators pitched this as a surprise. But should one really be surprised, when the ‘laws of motion’ of modern society have been inviting the most expert minds to search the way to put a price on nothingness? If people in general, everywhere, can be said to have learnt that there is (exchange-)value in everything, experts everywhere have also known for a long time that nothingness must have it too. Unveil it, objectify it, propertise it; and put a price on it. There might be business in it, and some people will call that benefit obtained out of nothingness ‘value’.

Yet while all over the world and in virtually every social aggregate people seem to be aware of these drives, not everyone gives in to them with equal enthusiasm. Exploring differences in their reception and interpretation becomes a source of inspiration when discussing the politics of value and, more generally, contemporary politics. As a whole, the chapters in this book can be read against that background.

We aim to shed light on the intersections of two interrelated social currents: one underpins the ways in which (exchange-)value is continuously being projected onto things and incorporated as a factor into realms that previously lay outside capital (as a social production relation); the other underlines the way in which human groups in different parts of the planet promote, contest or try to reorient that systemic force. Both currents appear as culturally encoded because, while indeed constituting a global process and a common world system, they do so revealing the existence of distinct shared practices and ideas among people in different social aggregates (and classes of people within such aggregates).

For instance, Cook Islands women are currently moving towards a systematic commodification of *tivaivai*, a type of quilt previously circulated only as a gift. But in doing so they try to reproduce traditional notions of personhood, family and ceremonial obligation for whose shaping the *tivaivai*-as-gift was and remains pivotal (see chapter 1 by Jane Horan). In Cuba, the partial liberalisation of a housing market has recently opened new opportunities for small business and self-employment, but the viability of such businesses is strongly dependent on pre-existing non-marketised relations pervaded by the cultural ethos of the socialist revolution. Those relations become a source of indispensable practical support for the new entrepreneurs, who often rely on family favours, friendly suppliers or contacts in government bureaucracies for a successful development of their business. But at the same time, those relations and the ethos that pervades them become counterbalancing forces against the potential of free-of-social-obligations economic behaviour among people embarking on new economic ventures (see chapter 6 by Marina Gold). In turn, contestation of the systemic force that stimulates or imposes the commodification of things can be found in the 'free university' projects emerging in places like Brisbane (Australia), New York (USA) or Halifax (Canada). These projects, always culturally encoded, explicitly seek to reverse the marketisation of university education and the so-called 'enclosure of knowledge', and in doing so participants try to recover basic forms of their sociality that they find endangered by the dynamics they associate with all-pervading marketisation: meeting personally, conversing face to face.

Marxian contributions to the conceptualisation of terms such as commodity, use- and exchange-value or surplus remain indispensable to the examination of the aforementioned interrelated currents on which we aim to shed light.⁷ So, apropos of value and the approach that we propose in this volume for the understanding of human sociality in the contemporary world, the scientist deserves more credit than the poet. His contributions, and the avenues they opened to facilitate potential engagements with those big issues about the state of affairs across the world that we set as one of the volume's goals, fertilise the common ground out of which this volume grows – taken as sources of positive or antagonistic inspiration in our essays.

Let me further clarify what is distinctive in this volume's approach to the vast and shape-shifting domain of anthropological takes on theories of value.

Apropos of Value, Anthropologists

We do not present these essays as foundations for a theory of value. The possibility of such a theory as an epistemologically distinct object is in fact quite problematic, and particularly so when it becomes (tacitly or explicitly) pitched as a transhistorical theory of self-regulating human aggregates. Whether such aggregates end up being denominated ‘cultures’, ‘societies’ or anything else, as soon as they start to be theorised or analytically treated as clearly demarcated, insular units of meaning-creation (or values-creation, for that matter) they become misleading units for the analysis of social life. In contrast to such approach, the essays in this volume have been brought together because, converging upon the common grounds outlined in the previous section, as a whole they provide new insights for the discussion of important contemporary issues: the continuing expansion of capitalism, how cultural forms and political reactions emerge in order to adapt to, facilitate or potentially oppose it, and the prospects of non-capitalist forms of social organisation.

We do not pursue an anthropological theory of value as an end in itself – one that could only demonstrate the existence of self-regulating bounded sets of social aggregates. We rather seek to critically approach Marxian and other contributions to understanding capitalism (through direct and indirect engagements with the former’s theory of value), and anthropological theory in general, as a means of exploring and explaining aspects of what Eric Wolf (1990 [1982]) denominated ‘the world of humankind’ – a whole whose parts are inextricably interrelated and engaged in continuing processes of change and mutual (re)constitution. The aim is to reopen avenues to understand the bases of the interconnections, continuities and transformations of social aggregates within a world partly organised by a globalised capitalism.

One does not have to dig too deeply in the already long track of anthropological work around ‘value’ to realise that this concept is not used by everyone to refer to the same type of substance or phenomena. In fact, the diversity of approaches to conceptualising this term is the tonic chord within the field (Eiss and Pedersen 2002). These varied approaches do not always facilitate an understanding of humankind as an interconnected whole in which social aggregates mutually shape each other (albeit aggregates unequal in terms of power). And, moreover, these anthropological works have sought to answer quite different questions about what being human is about and why human beings do what they do, which complicates

to the extreme any attempt at treating them as part of a common scholarly (or political) enterprise.⁸ There are however certain epistemological currents within these works that enable one to follow what happened to the concept of value within anthropology – for instance, by following the flourishing of such debates from the 1970s to the early 1990s among a number of anthropologists who, in most cases, had an ethnographic focus on Melanesia and Polynesia.

In what could nowadays be characterised, perhaps with some utility, as a pre-postmodern form of posing anthropological questions and debating, those authors initially engaged each other upon (common) grounds partly fertilised by the contributions of labour theories of value. Seeking to understand and provide explanations for different aspects of social organisation and cultural forms, the potential and limitations of labour theories of value for such enterprise were critically discussed and differently regarded. Yet those theories nonetheless shaped key questions framing the discussions: What is exchange-value? To what extent can one speak about commensurability of substance in exchanged objects when one consults the ethnographic record, and not only the political economy manual? What is that substance, when commensurability can actually be said to exist? Could Ricardian and Marxian theories of value contribute to explaining what takes place in forms of exchange, often non-monetised, within and between non-capitalist societies? Are those forms of exchange, and the forms of production that precede them, articulating power inequalities in the social arena, whether along the lines of class, gender, age group or any other lines? The answers to these and other questions were often diverging and in some cases antagonistic (cf., for example, Sahlins 1972: 277–314 with Modjeska 1985), but the analysis of social life was generally driven by a search for causalities and explanation.

In hindsight, one could say that those anthropologists sparred in an epistemological ring whose cords, initially firm, would gradually be cut loose. This was perhaps influenced by the fact that the fight kept on going for too long with no clear scholarly victor, and rivals tired of such contests. But also, in hindsight, it is tempting to suggest that it must also have been facilitated by the fact that the production of academic knowledge could not remain timelessly impermeable to a political context in which grand narratives about the functioning of society gradually disappeared (or narrowed down to varieties of a neoliberal creed).

At any rate, durable works of that current tended to reinforce substantivist understandings of exchange in general (from barter to market

exchange to gifting) as embedded in the reproduction of culturally mapped social relationships, including inter-group relationships, that nonetheless could include different types of hierarchy, inequality and exploitation (for example Gregory 1982; cf. Josephides 1985). But in parallel to these debates there gradually emerged an identifiable move towards shedding light on how models of personhood, agency and sociality are construed and brought into being by such transactions (Munn 1986; Strathern 1988; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). Concerns with value as that substance associated with material processes of production (in its classical political-economic definition) were gradually displaced as a potential pivot for understanding and explaining diversities and similarities across social aggregates. To date, that drift characterises and conditions central currents of anthropological approaches to value.

Efforts aiming to renew and refocus these debates abound, but without substantial reorientation. Though it is impossible to pinpoint a single influence within them, it is evident that echoes of Kluckhohn's (1951) definition of (social) values as conceptions of the desirable are far more sonorous than Marx's contributions. This, of course, has implications for the type of questions that anthropologists can answer with the conceptions of value they articulate: let us recall that Kluckhohn aimed to contribute to a theory of action in a field in which functionalist theorisations of society predominated, whereas Marx theorised for the understanding of capitalist societies in a light that unveiled them as driven by conflict, not organic cohesion. Needless to say, with the tools of Kluckhohn and those of different types of functionalism, one cannot aim to answer the questions that Marx considered fundamental to understand the functioning of modern society – questions that continue to emerge when one looks at the state of affairs across the world.

In the context of renewed debates, some anthropologists have been pursuing the generation of distinctively anthropological theories of value (Graeber 2001; Pedersen 2008; Otto and Willerslev 2013). Others have resorted to theory on 'social' and 'economic' value to facilitate the generation of an anthropology of economy (Gudeman 2001), and yet others have set as a driving motivation the anthropological theorisation of social reproduction within capitalism – nonetheless reproducing a conceptualisation of value as a bounded social terrain for the definition of worth (Narotzky and Besnier 2014).⁹ This varied production certainly demonstrates the salience that the concept of value has gained in the discipline, but it also becomes an illustration of the meagre overall results.