

■■■ HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

---

# Re-imagining Value:

Insights  
from the  
Care Economy,  
Commons,  
Cyberspace  
and Nature

---

by David Bollier

A Deep Dive hosted by Commons Strategies Group  
in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation  
and David Graeber

*September 5-8, 2016*

# CONTENTS

|            |   |           |
|------------|---|-----------|
|            | <b>Introduction</b>   | <b>03</b> |
| <b>01.</b> | <b>THE VALUE QUESTION</b>   | <b>05</b> |
|            | A. Why “Value” Lies at the Heart of Politics                                      | 06        |
|            | B. Should We Even Use the Word “Value”?   | 11        |
| <b>02.</b> | <b>TOWARDS A RELATIONAL THEORY OF VALUE</b>                                       | <b>15</b> |
| <b>03.</b> | <b>KEY CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING A NEW THEORY OF VALUE</b>                         | <b>21</b> |
|            | A. Can Abstract Metrics Help Build a New Value Regime?                            | 22        |
|            | B. How Shall We Value “Nature”?   | 26        |
|            | C. Should We De-Monetize Everyday Life?   | 30        |
| <b>04.</b> | <b>COMMONS-BASED PEER PRODUCTION: A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN UNDERSTANDING VALUE?</b> | <b>34</b> |
|            | A. Practical Strategies for Building New Systems of Value                         | 38        |
|            | B. The Dangers of Co-optation and Wishful Thinking                                | 43        |
|            | C. But Peer Production Still Relies Upon (Unpaid) Care Work and Nature!           | 46        |
| <b>05.</b> | <b>NOTES TOWARD A COMMONS THEORY OF VALUE</b>                                     | <b>48</b> |
|            | <b>Conclusion</b>   | <b>51</b> |
|            | <b>Appendix A: Participants</b>   | <b>52</b> |
|            | <b>Appendix B: A Commons Theory of Value</b>                                      | <b>53</b> |
|            | <b>Appendix C: Readings for Value Deep Dive</b>                                   | <b>59</b> |

---

# Re-imagining Value

## Insights from the Care Economy, Commons, Cyberspace and Nature

*A Deep Dive hosted by Commons Strategies Group  
in cooperation with David Graeber and Heinrich Böll  
Foundation*

*September 5-8, 2016*

A key reason for the cultural power of the modern liberal states of the Global North and their market and scientific order, is their asserted notion of “value.” Value is regarded as a morally neutral attribute that arises from the natural workings of free and independent individual agents. Market champions celebrate “exchange value” that supposedly stems from rational and efficient consumer/seller transactions. Neoliberal states actively support this ideal while maintaining a self-conscious neutrality about ultimate values. Any notions of “the good life,” psychological or holistic well-being or ecological imperatives of life are generally regarded as “private” concerns or “market externalities.”

Until now, the main challenge to this liberal conception has come from Marx’s labor Theory of Value (LTov), developed during the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe. Since the nineteenth century, this theory has greatly influenced scholars, practitioners and activists on the Left. Local, national and international social movements have generally accepted the idea that the world we live in is produced by our daily efforts – and that capitalist ideology misrepresents this reality so as to allow ruling classes to abstract and extract a surplus profit from paid labor, which is to say, those workers who are the primary producers. In our time, neoliberal economists and policy makers depict value as synonymous with price – an economic category that is said to arise from the workings of “free” and “fair” markets. Anything else that people and societies care about is seen as a mere matter of *values* – private, personal and beyond the scope of the market-based polity.

But this vision was always flawed and, over the past generation, has been seriously challenged by feminists, ecologists, Indigenous peoples, digital communities and commoners, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. Across these groups, there is a growing recognition that there is no consensus theory of value, or at least no globally accepted theory that reflects the whole of life and not just its economic dimensions. The standard narrative

---

of neoclassical economics continues to hold sway, but its commitment to monetized value – *price* – as a realistic representation of value is increasingly seen as fanciful at best, if not a corrupt fiction. Yet alternative schemas of valuation remain largely underdeveloped or confined to intellectual or political ghettos, at least in the West; they are far more prevalent in nonmodern contexts. Many commons advocates believe there is great strategic value in developing a shared, alternative theory of value -- a theory that could challenge neoliberal fables about value while elevating the role of various nonmarket realms, such as the “care economy,” eco-stewardship, digital communities and diverse forms of “commoning.”

To explore this idea, the Commons Strategies Group, working in cooperation with the Berlin-based Heinrich Böll Foundation and anthropologist/activist David Graeber, convened a three-day “Deep Dive” workshop to bring together twenty key thinkers and activists from multiple nationalities, backgrounds and fields of activity. The group included political economists, philosophers, socially minded entrepreneurs, a geographer, a feminist theologian, an anthropologist, commons activists and others. (See Appendix A for a list of participants.) The workshop was held in Blankensee, Germany, from September 5 to 8, 2016, in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation. This report is an interpretive synthesis of the discussion and its salient themes.

Discussion focused on how to develop alternative approaches for understanding “value(s).” Can we incorporate the importance of care, social labor and the intrinsic value of nature (as opposed to exchange value) into our theories of value? Can we devise a coherent philosophical foundation for understanding how value(s) come into being? Or is the word “value” itself problematic? If not, how might a new theory of value fortify social movements now challenging neoliberalism, especially in political and policy arenas? Throughout, the philosophical and political dialogue was attentive to the actual practices of diverse communities – families, civic associations, commoners stewarding land, peer production communities, indigenous peoples, among many others.

# 01.

## THE "VALUE QUESTION"



## A. Why “Value” Lies at the Heart of Politics

David Graeber, an anthropologist and activist who teaches at the London School of Economics, opened the session with a presentation explaining why value has historically been important and why he has focused so much on it. For him, “it started as a question of social theory, and then I came to realize it is at the heart of politics.”

Graeber, author of the 2001 book, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, pointed out that the idea of value speaks to the human condition, and in this sense, it is a starting point for thinking about politics. “Marx recognized that value is an important part of human meaning-making,” said Graeber. “It is not just a mechanical reaction to a physical need, important as that is, but something beyond that.” It’s about how people’s identities, social behaviors and culture are created.

A landmark concept in contemporary thinking about value is Marx’s labor theory of value. Marx drew upon the ideas of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who argued that market price reflects the value of human labor needed to acquire or make something. But Marx emphasized that the number of man-hours needed to produce something, or its usefulness to a buyer, does not include the value of the means of production (tools, materials) nor the value of nature and social reproduction (child-rearing, education, socialization). Therefore, price does not reflect the value of the full range of necessary inputs for market exchange. The ruling class is able to use various mechanisms to appropriate the (uncounted) surplus value for themselves. “The amazing thing about capitalism as a social system is that you don’t even know this is happening,” said David Graeber.

Graeber argued that Marx is not a vulgar materialist; Marx did not suggest that machines and infrastructure drive human behavior and culture. Rather, Graeber said, Marx focused on commodities and money as a kind of “symbolic analysis in social theory. In essence, Marx was saying that, through a complicated trick we play on ourselves, money becomes an object of desire that we bring into being to provide a representation of the importance of our actions.....The importance of our actions are reflected back at us – through money, heirlooms and other objects – which then seem to be the source of the very things they represent.” This analysis lies at the heart of Marxist value theory, said Graeber, illuminating the social dynamics of human desire.

This analysis helps explain how we bifurcate our ideas about value into separate economic and moral realms. We regard *value* as an economic category embodied in price, and *values* as idiosyncratic social and moral opinions. This split in the meaning of “value” only makes sense, said Graeber, “because we divide the world into production and reproduction, and production and consumption.” Money always appears to be the same in all contexts (indeed, that is why it is considered valuable), whereas values – seen as personal and private – are the exact opposite.

An essay by Marx scholar John Holloway<sup>1</sup> points out that Marx starts his masterwork *Capital* by subtly contrasting “wealth” with “commodity.” The first sentence of that book reads:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an “immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity.

Holloway explains that a literal German translation of Marx’s use of the term “wealth” here might be “richness.” Marx’s definition of wealth from a previous book, the *Grundrisse*, suggests what he may have had in mind: “the universality of human needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange.” The point is that wealth “exists not only in but also against and beyond capitalist society,” writes Holloway. The immanent vitality of life always exceeds its commodified presentation as “wealth.”

In effect, Marx is underscoring that the question of value – how to define “wealth” – lies at the heart of political struggle. David Graeber noted that politics revolves around which of innumerable forms of value should prevail in society: “If politics is a struggle among values, presumably freedom would be about a community choosing which forms of value it will pursue. Politics would be about the mechanisms for deciding how resources will be equitably allocated in ways that people want.”

But of course, this is precisely the problem: As human beings, we supposedly have free will – and yet we *don’t* or *can’t* change how we enact value in the world. This raises a troubling question: If we theoretically have the freedom to “stop making capitalism” by altering our everyday actions and thinking in different ways, *why don’t we make another system of value?* “What’s thwarting our

---

1. John Holloway, “Read Capital: The First Sentence: Or, Capital Starts with Wealth, not with the Commodity,” *Historical Materialism* 23:3 (2015), pp. 3-26.

freedom?” asked Graeber. “That is the great problem. It’s what social theory is all about. Exploring value is one way of investigating this problem.”

In probing the labor theory of value, Graeber said he discovered a “terrible flaw” in it, at least as applied to advanced capitalism: “The value of labor is seen as producing things,” he said. “But when you stop to think about it, most labor is not about *producing* something. It’s about *maintaining* something to keep it the same – as in washing a cup. Or labor is about nurturing something or creating an environment in which something can grow, as in agriculture, rather than constructing something inside a factory.”

If labor is more about care and nurturance than “production” as such, Graeber wondered, then perhaps feminists and ecologists have some important insights in helping us come up with an alternative theory of value. After all, they, along with Indigenous peoples, have been living within alternative systems of value for a long time. Graeber found it significant that care workers stuck in low-paying jobs were among the most enthusiastic protesters in the Occupy movement – care workers in the vanguard of protests against finance capitalism. Graeber realized that “socially meaningful labor” that doesn’t produce commodities tends to be penalized by the market system, which has created millions of gratuitous “bullshit jobs.”<sup>2</sup> “What sort of value theory can speak to these concerns?” he asked.

Graeber has an intuition that any new value theory must speak to the human condition and our propensity for play. “Freedom manifests itself in the play principle,” he said. “One of the constituent principles of the universe is fun – playing around. The question for us is, What forms of mutual dependence enhance our freedom and fun?”

## Value Beyond Capital and Commodification

Workshop participants shared David Graeber’s general overview of the “value question.” The labor theory of value points to the deficiencies of modern conceptions of value in our political economy – yet we do not have an adequate alternative theory.

Nick Dyer-Witheford, Associate Professor at the University of Western Ontario and author of numerous books on interpreting digital technology from a Marxist perspective, regards the question of “value beyond capital”

2. David Graeber, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs,” *Strike!* April 17, 2013, at <http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs>.



© Pedro Jardim

as a kind of koan, a paradoxical riddle. The issue needs to be addressed because, however much we may wish to move beyond capital and commodity exchange as the ordering principle of society, “the question remains as to what alternative mechanisms or processes may exist to make social decisions.”

We also need to have a theory of moral and political justification for institutional power and for the allocation of resources. The absence of a credible theory of value is one reason that we have a legitimacy crisis today. There is no shared moral justification for the power of markets and civil institutions in our lives. Especially since the 2008 financial crisis, the idea of “rational” free markets as a fair system for allocating material wealth has become something of a joke in some quarters. Similarly, the idea of government serving as an honest broker dedicated to meeting people’s basic needs, assuring fairness, providing ecological stewardship and advancing the public interest, is also in tatters.

“We cannot do without a value regime,” said Michel Bauwens, founder of the Peer to Peer Foundation and cofounder of the Commons Strategies Group. “Today, we have a dictatorship of one kind of value as delivered by the market system, which determines for everyone how they can live.” Consider how the labor of a nurse is regarded under different value regimes, he said: A nurse working as a paid employee is considered value-creating – a contributor to Gross Domestic Product. But the same nurse doing the same duties as a government employee is seen as “an expense, not a value-creator,” said Bauwens. The same nurse working as a volunteer “produces no value at all” by the logic of the market system.

Bauwens said that his work in fostering peer production communities is an exploratory project in creating a new type of “value sovereignty” based on mutualism and caring. An important aspect of this work is protecting the respective community’s value sovereignty through defensive accommodations with the market system. “The peer production system lives a dichotomy,” explained Bauwens. “It is based on contributions for which we don’t get paid. We therefore have to interact with the market so that we can earn a living and get paid for what we have to do.” Maintaining a peer community within a hostile capitalist order requires that the community “create membranes to capture value from the dominant system, but then to filter it and use it in different ways” – i.e., through collective decisionmaking and social solidarity, not through the market logic of money-based, individual exchange.

Can we develop a post-capitalist, commons-friendly theory of value, one that has the same resonance in our time that the labor theory of value had in Marx’s time? This workshop sought to explore this question through the prism of value-regimes that already exist outside of market capitalism: care work, stewardship of nature, digital cooperation and sharing, and commons of all stripes. The discussions were not just about theory, but about the importance of practice in relation to theoretical thinking – because practice must always inform theory.

To talk about value is not to focus exclusively on human activities that have economic consequences. It is to talk about life itself. Value theory is about how a living natural world, human beings and societal institutions co-create satisfying ways of living. This is a necessary clarification because the idea of “the economy” has become so involuted and self-referential that human lives (aka “human resources”) are often seen merely as raw inputs into a Moloch economy, and not as its ultimate purpose. (*Moloch*, the Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice.)

## B. Should We Even Use the Word “Value”?

One participant, Ina Praetorius, a postpatriarchal thinker, author and theologian based in Switzerland, asked a provocative question: “Do we need to use the word ‘value’ at all?” She explained that as an ethicist she does not find the word useful. “Value is not part of my vocabulary since writing my 2005 book, *Acting Out of Abundance* [in German, *Handeln aus der Fülle*]. It’s perfectly possible to talk about the ‘good life’ without the notion of value.” Praetorius believes the word “value” is useful to merchants and economists in talking about money and markets. But it has little relevance when talking about ethical living or the human condition.

Praetorius is also suspicious of “value” as a word associated with the German philosophical tradition of idealism, which she regards as “an unreliable authority because of its strange methodological origins” – “Western bourgeois men of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, who created an invisible sphere of abstract concepts meant to denote certain qualities, as a means to forget their own belonging to nature and their own basic needs, especially towards women.”

So what words are more appropriate and relevant than “value”? As someone interested in the human condition and care, Praetorius believes that words like “dependency, food, desire, wonder, enough and birth” are important terms to hoist up. These and other words are explored in a German book, *The ABCs of the Good Life*, a collection of essays by nine post-patriarchal thinkers that is now being translated into English. Praetorius continued:

When we create or focus on new words, we move beyond the old epistemological constellations that are not so good for the future. There are so many beautiful words that can motivate people to do good – words like “quality,” “the good life,” “well-being” and “*buen vivir/sumak kawsay*,” and religious terms like “shalom” and “blessing.” These words motivate the satisfaction of certain needs, wisdom and the meaning of life. I would like to open up to this universe of words that point to what we desire.

A word that has special importance to Praetorius is the word *birth* or *natality*. “We have to think of ourselves as natal – born – which means we think of ourselves and humanity as ‘grown-up babies’, newcomers in the heart of nature. We come out of the body of another human being. This can change

our conception of the human. Let’s be poetic and creative, and honor the fullness of our religious traditions, instead of sticking to white, male, 19<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers,” she said.

Praetorius’ plea for a new vocabulary was persuasive to many participants, but it also instigated a debate about whether the word “value” can so easily be abandoned. Giorgos Kallis, an environmental scientist and ecological economist who teaches at Autonomous University of Barcelona, said, “You’ve convinced me. Perhaps ‘value’ is not so useful. The only hesitation I have is that many debates are couched in terms of ‘value’. Can we escape a dominant term, analytically speaking?”

Janis Loschmann, a philosophy student at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, in the UK, was also swayed by Praetorius’ argument, but worried that “it’s a dangerous concession to allow value to be talked about only in economic realms. Value and valuing is almost inherently human. The phenomena of value is still there even if we adopt other terms. We have to engage with the discourse on value because we are trying to move that discourse.”

Neera Singh, a geographer at the University of Toronto, Canada, who studies the affective dimensions of human/nonhuman relationships, among other things, declared, “I’m not willing to concede the word ‘value’ to economists. It’s too important a word. The struggle is not just about appropriating value, but defining what value is. This struggle is critical. Society uses the word ‘value’ all the time.” For Singh, value is virtually synonymous with the word “care,” because “you care for what you value.” As for rejecting all of the philosophy of “dead white dudes,” Singh argued that we cannot simply give credit (or blame) these white, patriarchal 19<sup>th</sup> Century men for the philosophy that they produced – since a whole society (and women who supported these men) was implicated in the philosophy that they produced.

Other participants agreed that the point is to try to “give the word new meanings,” said Havin Guneser, a journalist, translator of Abdullah Öcalan’s works, and activist for women’s rights and Kurdish freedom. Guneser noted that the Rojava model has quite self-consciously tried to “smash the center of what people had in capitalism, which has given rise to many words with changed meanings.” Many words associated with market exchange, for example, have lost their currency, while many new words describing dimensions of social solidarity and types of harvesting have arisen, each varying with the context. “We need to get out of standard ways of thinking about value and give the word new meanings,” said Guneser.

Guneser said that any new theory of value must incorporate the perspectives of “the oppressed, exploited and excluded, including the worker but not only, and especially the women. They must be at the heart of a re-definition of value. The new definition should be a means to flourish in a life that is democratic, ecological, and based on women’s freedom.”

Guneser added that new understandings of value are a fundamental, practical matter for Kurds, who are now “facing a crisis of understanding of what value is and how it is constructed and reconstructed. We are trying to understand what ‘the economy’ is. It should be about serving *needs*, in the original Greek sense,” she said, and not simply about advancing the commodification process under capitalism. “The reconstruction of value should serve care and empathy.”

datejie green, a strategic organizer, journalist and doctoral student at the University of Western Ontario, similarly noted that value is not the only word laden with an oppressive history that activists have sought to overturn. She noted that in her work with groups organizing for racial, sexual, gender, ability, worker and Indigenous justice, such critical examinations and reclamations of words that have historically been hateful or colonial in nature are core to re-humanizing those most affected.

Friederike Habermann, a German economist and historian, shared with Praetorius the analyses that the Enlightenment (which shaped the identity of “Western bourgeois men”) has been responsible for all sorts of gendered and colonial exclusions in spite of its alleged universalism of values. However, Habermann could not understand Praetorius’ acceptance of money, and by implication, its role in defining value in the economy: “How can you stick with the concept of ‘value,’ as in economics, since it is always necessarily linked to competition, i.e., structural hate? It goes along with a so-called individualism, as described by Adorno, Horkheimer and Foucault, that simply means ‘who’s the best?’ It’s a kind of ranking that has nothing to do with self-realization as an individual.”

On the other hand, Habermann agreed with Praetorius that we should not seek to formulate a “good” theory of value. While Habermann also agrees with Graeber, that any society will necessarily share values, she emphasized the other side of the coin: “As the Zapatistas say, if someone or a group of people decides to make the world better, they can only do it in the way he, she or the group think the world will be better. But this will only repeat history. It is essential that any person be able to live out their own definition of ‘dignity,’

as the Zapatistas say (or ‘values,’ if you want). Of course, human beings are not autonomous subjects; our values are and will always depend on how we are shaped by society. But it also has to be the other way round: the values of a society stem from anyone who is part of it.”

Ecophilosopher Aetzel Griffioen, based in The Netherlands, regards the word “value” as “a necessary abstraction that can be used in some places and not in others.” In his dealing with a labor union of domestic workers, for example, Griffioen considers the word too philosophical and abstract to use. However, “for commoners trying to tackle what so-called economists call ‘value-creation,’ it is a practical necessity to use the word in trying to create commons based on their own values.”

Again, the value/values dichotomy cropped up. Economics claims the word “value” for itself while everyone else, in their private and social lives, may have their own personal “values.” This rift in thinking and vocabulary is precisely what this workshop sought to overcome. Economists are eager to protect their ideas about “value” as money-based and make them normative. Commoners and others, by contrast, want to broaden the meaning of the term to apply to all of human experience. This conflict prompted Ina Praetorius to conclude, “Language is politics.” For herself, she has no desire to contest with economists over control of the term. Others, however, are determined to continue that very struggle.

# 02.

## TOWARDS A RELATIONAL THEORY OF VALUE



The conventional economic definition of “value” has a significant rhetorical advantage over other notions of value/s. It can be encapsulated in numbers, manipulated mathematically and ascribed to individuals, giving it a tidy precision. Value defined as price also has an operational simplicity even though it flattens the messy realities of actual human life and ecosystems. It purports to precisely quantify and calculate “value” into a single plane of commensurable, tradeable units, as mediated by price.

Through discussion, workshop participants set forth a rough alternative theory of value based on a radically different ontology (see Appendix B). This theory sees value *arising from relationships*. Value does not inhere in objects; it emerges through a process as living entities – whether human beings or the flora and fauna of ecosystems – interact with each other. In this sense, value is not fixed and static, but something that emerges naturally as living entities interact.

“In a commons, value is an event,” said Silke Helfrich of the Commons Strategies Group. “It is something that needs to be enacted again and again.” The difference between the standard economic theory of value and a commons-based one is that the latter is a *relational theory of value*, said Helfrich.

According to Nick Dyer-Witheford, this idea aligns with Marx’s thinking. While some observers say that a Marxist theory of value ascribes value to things, Dyer-Witheford disagreed, noting that “Marx condemned the idea of value inhering in objects as commodity fetishism. He believed in a relational theory of value – the relations between workers and owners – even if Marx may not have considered the *full range* of social relationships involved in the production of commodities.” So, Marx was fully aware that “wealth” is far more than “an immense accumulation of commodities.” Indeed, he believed that wealth is (in Dyer-Witheford’s words) “an incessant movement towards human self-development and the richness and human needs and gratifications.” Thus there is an implicit theory of emergence in Marx’s thinking about value – something that we should emulate and build upon.

Everyone agreed that a relational theory of value has great appeal and far-reaching implications. It means that the “labor” of nonhumans – the Earth, other creatures, plants – can be regarded as a source of value, and not definitionally excluded, said Neera Singh, the geographer. Indeed, this is a point made in John Holloway’s essay (in footnote 1) on Marx’s ideas about “wealth”: the nonhuman world produces such an excess of wealth that it overflows what capitalism can capture in the commodity form, said

Sian Sullivan, a co-investigator with the Leverhulme Centre for the Study of Value in the UK and Professor of Environment and Culture at Bath Spa University. “This of course leads to the paradox of capitalism trying to use commodity form, an engine of accumulation, to solve ecological crises that the commodity form created in the first place. It does not know how to protect intrinsic value.”

This is precisely why talking about value is essential in confronting economics – “Value is so fundamental to how we define ourselves,” said Neera Singh. “I cringe when I see value equated with price because I think of value as caring, life and relations, especially with the nonhuman world.” A relational theory of value can help us dispel Western notions of the individual as a prime subject and standalone actor, Singh continued. It helps us see that “subjectivity is shared and emergent,” and not the exclusive possession of any individual. This of course contrasts with the mainstream economic story that is based on the idea of individual rationality and methodological individualism.

But Giorgos Kallis, the ecological economist, objected: How is mainstream economy theory *not* relational? he asked. After all, supply-and-demand is the relationship between an object (supply) and subject (demand). Friederike Habermann did not disagree, but noted that Marx analyzed this as an alienated form of relationship. She also noted that neoclassical economics uses terms such as “preference” and “utility” while constructing a reality that allows for only one type of behavior, which it then declares to be “rational.” At the same time, by negating any structural constraints whenever something appears to be unjust, said Habermann, “these terms are used to explain and justify any human behaviors,” she said. We need to overcome these terms, she said, because if we can get beyond the “pure egoism” of the standard economic ontology, “we can open up other worlds.” Habermann cautioned against going too far in the other direction by asserting that “association matters more than the individual.” The very point, she stressed, is to “break out of this binary understanding of individualism/ community and egoism/altruism,” so that we can come to a richer understanding of actual relationships.

Janis Loschmann of the University of East Anglia, Norwich, agreed that the point of a relational theory of value is to “transcend the subject/object duality.” Speaking as a philosopher, he said we need to understand that “value is an event that takes place before the subjective and objective are separated. Value does not come from any property within an object nor as something that the subject sees as meaningful in it. Value comes from the experience of the relationship itself.” Loschmann said that our confusion about value stems

from trying to assign a location for it, as if it inheres in a static object. “We must try to see value as living within a dynamic process.”

Andreas Weber, a theoretical biologist and ecophilosopher, shifted the discussion to a much wider plane by noting that “value is not just a human thing; it’s about being alive.” This idea stems from Weber’s scholarship examining living organisms as subjects and hence the biosphere as a meaning-creating and poetic reality. “An economy inspired by nature should not be designed as a mechanistic optimization machine,” he said, “but rather as an ecosystem that transforms the mutual sharing of matter and energy into a deepened meaning” – a theme that he explores in his 2016 book *Biology of Wonder*. If we regard aliveness as the process of value-creation and meaning, said Weber, then we can see that value involves the nonhuman and aliveness, and not just individual, rational humans. Value includes other people and nature as well as one’s body. “As living organisms, we as biological creatures are already embedded in value-creation,” said Weber. “Bringing forth a body follows a primary goal – to exist. This puts a universal grid of good and bad over the perceived world. Being an organism means constantly producing existential value. So we need to recognize our bodies and emotional existence as sources of value prior to deliberating about which theory of value may be best.” Put another way, value has its foundations in biology and the nonhuman world; it is not simply an intellectual framework to describe economic activities.

datejje green, the strategic organizer and Canadian doctoral student, agreed that embodied needs and life itself must be put at the center of any theory



© Pedro Jardim

of value: “Rationalizing economics has alienated people from our own lives and feelings, and declared that it must be so. Through capitalist processes, our own embodied needs have become distorted, as seen, for example, in the prevalence of mental illness, addiction and trauma. When people don’t know their own bodily needs or social relationship needs, they become trapped in cycles that violate their own rights and collective and social lives.” She added that many people worldwide have become largely oblivious to our actual dependence on planetary ecosystems, a fundamental reality that Indigenous peoples have been bringing to greater global attention.

Aetzel Griffioen, the Dutch ecophilosopher, believes that we need to regard value as “an emergent property, which means that it comes from life. We are all emergent properties of the Earth.” Next to the neglect of issues of social reproduction that feminists like Silvia Federici criticize, another linked problem with standard economics and its notion of value, said Griffioen, is that it simply ignores the prior existence of ecosystems and their regenerative capacities. The “pre-production” of natural systems makes the conventional human economy possible in the first place.

Sian Sullivan told a moving story about her study of human relationships with plants and animals in west Namibia, in Africa, in the 1990s. Through the practice of *ts ē khom*, native peoples ask their ancestors and the spirits of the land for guidance. “Ancestors in west Namibia have an ontological reality in the present as agencies able to mediate in the agencies of human and beyond-human others, with visible outcomes in the present,” she said. “They are not simply people from the past who are now dead – just as other-than-human animals are also considered active rather than passive agents who co-create the present in conjunction with human activities and practices.”<sup>3</sup> At the time, Sullivan confessed that she did not know how to make sense of *tsēkhom* practices within her existing categories of thought. “But I learned how it is possible to exist in consciously reciprocal relation to the things we use and consume,” she said. For example, in this context, if you harvest honey, you always make sure there is enough left over for the bees. The values are oriented toward serving the context in which you’re dwelling – rather than expecting that these contexts will simply serve you, as the ‘ecosystem services’ discourse does.”

---

3. A fuller consideration of these aspects can be found in Sullivan, S. and Hannis, M. 2016 Relationality, reciprocity and flourishing in an African landscape: perspectives on agency amongst *||Khaa-a Dama, !Narenin and ||Ubun elders in west Namibia. Future Pasts Working Papers 2*, online at <http://www.futurepasts.net/fpwp2-sullivan-hannis-2016>.

Among the workshop participants, there was a general appreciation for these insights connecting value with biological life, feelings and aliveness. Several noted that meditation practices are a useful way for human beings living in modern cultures to experience value in a different way, beyond exchange value. Understanding this perspective may be especially difficult – and valuable – for people living in market-based cultures whose economic norms have alienated people from their own feelings and lives, noted datejie green of Western University in Ontario, Canada. Focusing on the realities of embodied life and personal histories may therefore be a good starting point for discussing value.

To help participants experience this truth, green led a session in which everyone told a personal story about “how I came to care about value.” The stories varied immensely, but often focused on the ethical tensions between the money economy and social well-being. Participants recalled childhood memories of encountering village elders defending their love of local forests threatened by bureaucratic control....wonderment at what really stands behind the value of money.....and concerns about high prices and meeting family needs. Other participants told of their experiences with corporate bureaucracies that manipulated budget numbers, showing contempt for value as something real..... and a game simulation for managing a fishery that resulted in the players, as boat owners, taking on debt and over-fishing the ocean. If there was a common denominator to the stories, it was the misalignment of the political economy and basic human, social and ecological needs – i.e., the divergence of economic value and ethical values that centers life and life-affirming relations of all forms.

# 03.

## KEY CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING A NEW THEORY OF VALUE



If there was general agreement that value should be understood as arising from relationships – our relations with each other, with various human and beyond-human communities, and with the Earth – several difficult challenges must be addressed. Workshop participants focused on three of them: the role of abstractions and metrics in representing value; ways to represent the value of natural systems; and the disruptive effects of money itself on authentic human relationships and freedom.

## **A. Can Abstract Metrics Help Build a New Value Regime?**

Based on his research, David Graeber said that value – which generically expresses “our conceptions of the desirable” – is typically represented by some token, whether it is money or a college degree, which then becomes valued in itself. This is a pattern that recurs.” This observation prompted a question, Is it appropriate to use abstractions and metrics to measure and represent value? Can we use abstract value metrics to help achieve a constructive shift in value regimes?

One of the advance readings for the workshop was an essay, “Mindful Markets, Value Revolution and the Green Economy,” by Canadian eco-development advocate Brian Milani.<sup>4</sup> Milani surveyed “an explosion of both traditional academic indicators and innovative new quality-of-life and sustainability measures” that purport to help bring a fairer, more ecologically responsible world into being. His paper explores an “expanding ‘family’ of alternative wealth measures,” such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), which attempts to rigorously measure externalized environmental costs; Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA) to measure the actual holistic costs of products; and LEED building certification and the Forest Stewardship Council’s wood and forest certification system.

The great appeal of such abstract measurement systems is their ability to make something visible, said Heike Löschmann of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. “Statistics can be powerful tools to make visible the hidden value of care work for example, or show the value of nature and its services in meeting human needs,” she said. “But numbers can be easily converted

---

4. Brian Milani, “Mindful Markets, Value Revolution and the Green Economy: EPR, Certification and the New Regulation” (undated), at <http://www.greeneconomics.net/ValueRevolution.htm>.

into prices to indicate exchange or payment value, which can then become a policy tool for marketizing a realm.” In this way, abstract systems can take on a life of their own as tools for monetizing nature, care work and other realms that ought to remain inalienable.

Sian Sullivan, co-investigator with the Leverhulme Centre for the Study of Value, has written extensively about this phenomenon in a series of papers.<sup>5</sup> “Abstraction frameworks and practices are used to make disparate things appear equivalent so that offset trades can be established,” said Sullivan. (This issue is discussed separately in Section B below.)

But can we realistically avoid the use of abstractions and metrics? Nick Dyer-Witheford said that “the problem is not too few abstractions, but the dominance of only one master metric, money, which falsely tries to compress everything into one social good.” He conceded that abstractions are a limited way of seeing, and that they can be malign and destructive. But he insisted that abstractions as such are necessary for governance and control. Many social movements depend upon statistics about health, industrial injuries and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to advance their goals, said Dyer-Witheford. More broadly, abstractions are necessary for contemporary modern life: “If life is enriched by complex interchange, then we need abstractions,” he said.

At the very least, the state finds abstractions useful, a theme explored from a critical point of view in James Scott’s book, *Seeing Like a State*. Scott describes how states devise abstract categories and measurement tools to decontextualize and simplify real-world phenomena, facilitating centralized governance and control of them. Currencies are another tool for superimposing abstract units of “value” on the real world. “Is it possible to organize flows of value with currencies *without* measuring or abstracting?” asked Heike Löschmann. Money itself is an abstraction.

Silke Helfrich believes that we “rely too much on measurement-based governance systems” to achieve goals even though there are often effective alternatives such as the use of social taboo and other social practices. In Pink Lake, Senegal, people who harvest salt prevent destructive over-harvesting

---

5. Sian Sullivan, “The Natural Capital Myth, or Will Accounting Save the World?” Leverhulme Centre for the Study of Value, Working Paper Series No. 3, March 2014, at <http://thestudyofvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WP3-Sullivan-2014-Natural-Capital-Myth.pdf>. See also Sarah Bracking et al., “Initial Research Design: ‘Human, Nonhuman and Environmental Value Systems: An Impossible Frontier,’” January 2014, at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265732537\\_Initial\\_Research\\_Design\\_'Human\\_non-human\\_and\\_environmental\\_value\\_systems\\_an\\_impossible\\_frontier'](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265732537_Initial_Research_Design_'Human_non-human_and_environmental_value_systems_an_impossible_frontier').

by simply banning the use of motorboats.<sup>6</sup> “Just banning certain types of technology can be way more efficient than ‘measuring emissions and trading CO<sub>2</sub> licenses,’” said Helfrich.

She continued: “How did people protect the forest before they knew about CO<sub>2</sub> or could measure it? Why talk about the need for 2,000 to 2,500 calories per day to feed oneself? Why not instead rely upon something directly linked to your own body, such as ‘five handfuls of raw fruit and vegetables every day’?”

Heike Löschmann noted how indigenous peoples have created their own lifeworlds and non-abstract, non-measured ways of managing their resources and communities. “You measure things for a certain purpose, or to put things into trade,” she said. This raises another objection to systems of abstract measurement: they move us away from “enlivened” relationships with each other, and foster the objectification or commodification of living phenomena. The basic problem with abstraction is not just that they oversimplify real-world phenomena, said Helfrich, but that they “wipe out entire knowledge systems. Abstraction becomes a thinking technique in which we not only make something visible, we make it normative.” In this way, we can dismiss the value systems used by indigenous or traditional communities as premodern, unscientific and unserious.



© Pedro Jardim

6. Papa Sow and Elinor Marmer, “Salt and Trade at the Pink Lake: Community Subsistence in Senegal,” in David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, editors, *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State* (2012), at <http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/salt-and-trade-pink-lake-community-subsistence-senegal>.

Helfrich suggested that, since the word *value* comes from the Latin root *valorare*, which means “estimate,” perhaps it would be worth thinking about “estimating value” rather than attempting to measure it in “objective,” equivalent units. One could invent a “value-estimation chain” [Wertschätzungskette, according to Uwe Lübbermann/ Premium Cola] similar to what already occurs in open value networks such as Sensorica (see pp. 22-23 below). Perhaps we should talk about “value-estimation chain” or a “value-honoring chain” in this sense.

Tiberius Brastaviceanu, cofounder of Sensorica, an “open value network” framework” for peer production, said that the people using Sensorica “do not use quantitative metrics to objectify value, but as mechanisms to reduce the space of negotiation between individuals.” For example, the specifications of a house – its square footage, age of its roof, etc. – helps create a zone for negotiating a suitable price. Brastaviceanu said, “In order to scale collaborative systems, we do need quantitative measurements. Subjective evaluation is acceptable in small and informal groups, but it is harder to do across groups.”

Much of the disagreement about abstractions seemed to pivot on how vulnerable or not they are to abuse. There are many examples of quantitative systems being used as tools to set prices and thereby establish equivalencies to facilitate market exchange. But several participants insisted that this is not an inevitable outcome. What matters most is *who* is doing the measurement, and for what purpose. It may also matter whether capital-driven systems of power can capture a given system of abstraction or measurement.

## B. How Shall We Value “Nature”?

The use of abstractions can be particularly problematic when applied to nature because so often that is a backdoor process for marketizing and exploiting natural systems. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), for example, is now “normalizing” a reframing of nature as “natural capital.” Once this discourse becomes the default way to conceptualize nature, it may legitimate the policy and social logic of treating land, water and other natural systems as fungible and exchangeable – in short, as commodities.

In a 2016 paper,<sup>7</sup> Sullivan discusses a European Commission report, “The Use of Market-Based Instruments for Biodiversity Protection,” which proposes a system of “habitat banking” whereby environmental harm in one location can be “offset” by protection of “equivalent” land elsewhere. Biodiversity is supposedly protected, but in effect conserved habitats are opened to increasingly marketized exchanges with the aim of generating ‘no net loss’ of biodiversity in the aggregate, even though a degradation of biodiversity has occurred. Sullivan explains that the “biodiversity offsetting metrics” such as those developed by the UK’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) can become tools “whose use, in application, act in the world so as to bring these commensurabilities [of different elements of nature] into existence. The empirical questions then become, To what extent are these commensurabilities real or illusory? And to what extent is an aggregated value of ‘no net loss’ or ‘net gain’ genuine or spurious?”

By creating “new forms of fictitious commodities” (e.g., quantitative units of biodiversity, nature’s services, etc.), the new measurement tools and contrived markets for trading offset rights alter social and ecological relationships. Hence the title of Sullivan’s paper: “Fabricating Nature.” Sullivan said that quantifying “nature’s services” and putting a pricetag on them may provide a rough order of valuation, but cannot reflect the full and unpredictably generative dimensions of nature’s value(s).

As Neera Singh noted, the “encounter value” of the landscape – the unique historical and cultural relations between a community of people and the local ecosystem – cannot be abstracted into fungible modules. They are

---

7. Sian Sullivan, “Noting Some Effects of Fabricating ‘Nature’ as ‘Natural Capital,’” Leverhulme Centre for the Study of Value, August 30, 2016, at <http://thestudyofvalue.org/2016/08/30/noting-some-effects-of-fabricating-nature-as-natural-capital>.

location-specific. For Heike Löschmann, this chasm between the two different ontologies of value suggests the deep tension between “being value” and “having value,” and thus the importance of bridging the two.

Yet strangely, monetary valuation of environmental damage is generally regarded as acceptable as a means of reparation or punishment, one participant noted. “Do we have a theory of why this is okay?” Sullivan replied: “Pricing environmental damage to provide for compensation or punishment doesn’t mean that *all* of the values that have been lost are captured in the prices.” A monetary penalty does not purport to be equivalent to the environmental harm that it is punishing.

Janis Loschmann wondered why systems that quantify nature are not more readily debunked: “Even if we accept the logic of environmental offsets, they don’t work at the aggregate [ecosystem] level,” he said. But this is precisely why these measurement systems are being embraced, replied Sian Sullivan: “They systematically do *not* challenge capitalist, neoliberal structures and processes. They are doing exactly what they are supposed to do.” The systems are not meant to have intellectual integrity, but to achieve certain political purposes – further market extractions from nature and the neutralization of opposition.

Many participants agreed that the most effective way to confront “offset logic” – the use of quantitative metrics and prices to place a value on “nature” to facilitate trading arrangements – is with a radical ontological response. The systemic flaws of objectifying and quantifying nature must be squarely confronted such that a different ethic and framework of human/nature relations can be asserted.

Subsistence societies are already doing this in many instances, noted Andreas Weber. They honor a first-person, emotional response and ignore the supposedly objective, scientific perspective. They do not distinguish between “nature” and “human culture.” But it is not so easy to present this sensibility in political arenas such as legislatures, courts and regulatory bodies, at least in Europe and North America. Several participants agreed that it is difficult to introduce new ontological approaches within existing policy and power structures.

One possible response, said Weber, is to “focus on the taking away of life right now” – not just the organic web of living beings, but the “struggle of all of them, including humans, to be real and whole. This is the center of

the struggle, after all – my possibility of being real and whole.” Elaborating on this idea, the geographer Neera Singh said that “we need to talk about how markets are transforming people/nature relationships, and link this to the problems of ‘surplus populations’ and ecosystem restoration. Engaging people in the critical task of ecological restoration has the potential not only to restore landscapes but to produce novel subjectivities.” Singh has written a great deal about the primacy of socio-ecological relationships, especially about the importance of “affective labor” and gift relationships in the stewardship of land.<sup>8</sup> Her pieces make the case for environmental care and embodied care as effective forms of stewardship that are also essential to mental health and well-being

An interesting inversion occurs in regimes based on gift logic, said Singh: “The giver becomes more powerful through giving than the receiver” – in contrast to market exchanges, in which the receiver/buyer commands greater power. An objection was raised, however: How does stewardship of nature through a gift economy map onto the feminist critique of reproductive labor? Isn’t this precisely what so many women are trying to escape – the coercive use of their “free” labor? Singh explained that she is not arguing for free appropriation of this caring labor, but rather that the logic underpinning transfer of resources should be driven by the logic of gift instead of that of the market.

Dare we cross that divide? Andreas Weber said that gift exchange blurs the boundaries between “market” and “nature,” helping us recognize that they cannot be treated separately: “*We are* the environment. That’s what I keep coming back to. We have to be willing to step across this metaphysical threshold.” Or as Janis Loschmann said, citing Immanuel Kant, “There is a distinction for certain things – dignity, our humanity, nature -- that ‘admits of no equivalent’ and is ‘raised above all price.’” This may be the only way that we can begin to truly incorporate the actual value of nonhuman life and matter into our belief system.

Ecophilosopher Aetzel Griffioen proposed a formal statement that might capture the sentiments discussed above. He called it “Tengo,” as in “I carry forth.” The first few lines capture its essence:

---

8. Neera M. Singh, “The Affective Labor of Growing Forests and the Becoming of Environmental Subjects: Rethinking Environmentality in Odisha, India,” *Geoforum* 47 (February 16, 2013), 189-198, at [https://www.academia.edu/3106203/The\\_affective\\_labor\\_of\\_growing\\_forests\\_and\\_the\\_becoming\\_of\\_environmental\\_subjects\\_Rethinking\\_environmentality\\_in\\_Odisha\\_India](https://www.academia.edu/3106203/The_affective_labor_of_growing_forests_and_the_becoming_of_environmental_subjects_Rethinking_environmentality_in_Odisha_India). See also Singh, “Rethinking Payments for Ecosystem Services using the Gift Paradigm: Shifting the Burden and Joy of Environmental Care,” *Ecological Economics* 117 (2015), pp. 53-61, at [http://www.academia.edu/11819963/Rethinking\\_Payments\\_for\\_Ecosystem\\_Services\\_Using\\_the\\_Gift\\_Paradigm\\_Sharing\\_the\\_Burden\\_and\\_Joy\\_of\\_Environmental\\_Care](http://www.academia.edu/11819963/Rethinking_Payments_for_Ecosystem_Services_Using_the_Gift_Paradigm_Sharing_the_Burden_and_Joy_of_Environmental_Care).

---

Today, a commons theory of value means that, following the Credo's structure as made at the First Council of Nicea (325) and the First Council of Constantinople (381),

We maintain the common on earth and in the universe, which is shared by all people, animals, plants and things and their relations;

And we uphold the powers of people everywhere to increase the commons by nursing the life-carrying capacities of the ecological cycles.

The full statement is included at the end of Appendix B below.



© Pedro Jardim

## C. Should We De-Monetize Everyday Life?

In the quest to imagine a new theory of value to supplant Marx's labor theory of value, participants explored the adverse role of money itself. Should we perhaps strive to de-monetize as much of everyday life as possible?

“There is no evidence of even a single society based on the exchange of equivalence before money came into place,” said Friederike Habermann, echoing David Graeber's idea that contests over value lie at the heart of politics. For Habermann, money itself is the problem because the money economy has always been able to capture surplus value and thereby introduce inequalities of power, wealth and social hierarchy. Our challenge is to figure out how to “undo the structures of capitalism,” she said.

A breakout group led by Habermann examined the question: “Can we be against value, as expressed in Marx's theory of value, without questioning money itself?” Marx showed that the owners of capital always reap a surplus value because wages never pay for the actual costs of labor, including its social reproduction. This is a standard operating procedure of capitalism – to seize “free” resources and act in imperialistic ways, as Rosa Luxemburg showed, said Habermann. Feminist theory confirms this perspective, too, in its “iceberg” image of the economy: Capitalism recognizes only the formal market sphere of value while ignoring vast sectors that are sources of uncounted value, such as care services, nature's immanent generativity, subsistence activities, (post) colonial exploitation, etc. What makes this structural invisibility of value-appropriation so pernicious is that market competition *requires* that firms exploit these “free” resources lest they fall behind or go bankrupt.

While Marx conceded that these problems might be solved in a non-capitalist society in which everyone was paid the same wage, he insisted that this still would not eliminate worker alienation, said Habermann. This is obvious only where an economically rationalized use of resources is very limited, such as in the case of care work. Moreover, money introduces the problems of exchange value – this for that, said Habermann. Introducing a “value equivalency” among people, money will necessarily devalue care work in comparison to productive labor, while still propelling a regime of competition, invidious comparisons, the need to out-compete others, and other forms of social alienation.

Money also imposes extrinsic motivations on people, crowding out intrinsic motivations as well as propensities to cooperate. “Without money and exchange value,” said Habermann, “you don’t have to compete.” David Harvie, a political economist at Leicester University in the UK, agreed: “The problem is the (artificial) equivalency among things because of money. Fundamentally incommensurable things are made commensurable via money.” Friederike noted that even alternative currencies do not solve the problem because the “value equivalency” dynamic remains.<sup>9</sup>

Summarizing the case for de-monetization, Habermann said that any system based on exchange value and money:

1. Tends to lead to the exploitation of labor and the private reaping of surplus value;
2. Can probably not avoid exploiting care work and nature;
3. Will automatically devalue care work since it is not possible to rationalize it in the same way as productive labor;
4. Will therefore always tend to re/construct social identities allegedly more suitable for care work;
5. Has no chance of overcoming alienation because the extrinsic motivation of money crowds out intrinsic motivation;
6. Forces us to live in a structural system of hate;
7. Forces us to delimit our abilities and talents to those who are able to out-compete others, and thereby leave undeveloped the skills we want to use to re-create the world.

The only alternative can be a system that accepts the principle, “To each according to her needs, from each according to her abilities,” said Habermann. The most feasible approach is “a commons-based and commons-creating society” (Silke Helfrich words), in which any strict reciprocity of giving and taking is de-coupled. An example under existing money constraints is a CSA farm whose farmers and members share the financial risks of the upcoming planting season – i.e. the risk of production – and then to share in the harvest, without a strict equivalency in the buying and receiving of x amount of vegetables.

---

9. Sian Sullivan adds that money is not the only medium for asserting false equivalencies: “There are numerical practices of calculation that are applied so as to make different things (places, habitats, forests, etc.) seemingly equivalent to each other, as in biodiversity or carbon offsetting. The equivalence and commensurability are created through such practices prior to any marketization of exchanges, although they may be conducted so as to make such marketized exchanges possible.”

Habermann stressed that while a commons theory of value may seem seductive, individual values will never coincide entirely with those of society as a whole. The proper focus should therefore be on a movement of the *democratie à venir*, in Jacques Derrida words, so that we stay aware that values are never static and must always stay in motion.

Such a shift away from money would be a radical departure, Andreas Weber pointed out, because it would require us to move beyond private property, too, and develop collective ownership and management systems. At the same time, such a system has great appeal because it would allow us to escape the relentless “life-grabbing” dynamics of capitalism, which is constantly “transforming life into debt,” as economic historian Karl Polanyi has pointed out.

Criticisms were raised about this analysis, however. Giorgos Kallis argued, “The problem is capitalism, not money per se,” because any tokens of value would elicit the same sorts of competition and invidious behaviors. Furthermore, as David Graeber had noted, the creation of tokens to represent value – which then become a motivational focus in their own right -- is a recurrent human practice. This raises a question about whether “value tokens” and money are more different than alike.

Janis Loschmann argued, “The problem is not money itself; the problem is that everyone depends upon a wage. We need to convert money into a purpose-driven means to serve human freedom. This means getting rid of the notion that one’s labor in markets is the primary source of one’s dignity and value.”

Michel Bauwens of the P2P Foundation thinks that the problem is not money itself, but the design of current forms of fiat money managed by the state. “Money is designed and created,” he said, “but in Marxism we don’t have this discussion.” Just as money can be designed to facilitate the extraction of value from nature or people, so it could be designed to measure and represent different types of value that are fairer and more equally distributed.

Tiberius Brastaviceanu of Sensorica strongly agreed with Bauwens, noting that Sensorica is all about creating a different regime of value-flows. “Arthur Brock of the MetaCurrency Project has described currency as “a symbolic system with a feedback mechanism that organizes flows”; the currency enables one to see the currents,” making it a “current-see.” Tickets organize people’s flows into the space of a stadium or theater; a currency can organize people’s

behaviors based on certain values. The “currency” of open value accounting is an attempt to reinvent the currency within organizations to honor different values and activities, said Brastaviceanu, based on Sensorica’s members’ *subjective* valuation of what they regard as desirable. (More in Part IV, Section B, below.)

While it may be possible to design money to serve different purposes, we should not lose sight of larger historical forces at play. Historically, money has been used as an instrument of capitalist power to colonize entire peoples and dehumanize them, noted datejie green, citing the work of African-American historian Orlando Patterson in studying the Atlantic slave trade and various ancient forms of slavery as “social death.” Attempts to imagine and design different flows of value and types of social relationships must therefore “prioritize history and ongoing historical processes of power,” she emphasized. They must also look to “other worldviews, especially non-European ones.”

Havin Guneser, the Kurdish activist and feminist, agreed that today a commons theory of value cannot confine itself to this alone. Instead, those who have been oppressed, exploited and excluded; including the worker but not only, and especially the women, must be at the heart of its re-definition. One way this can be done is through daily struggle against its operation and creation of life and meaning by them. But this definition should be a means to flourish, a life that is democratic, ecological, based on women’s freedom.



© Pedro Jardim

# 04.

## COMMONS-BASED PEER PRODUCTION: A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN UNDERSTANDING VALUE?



Fortunately, actual practice often races far ahead of theory. While there are indeed complications in formulating a new relational theory of value (see Appendix B), there are also many peer production projects unfolding in front of our eyes. These diverse projects, taking place on digital networks and in the subsistence economy, demonstrate that value-creation is indeed highly relational and does not conform to the standard economic narrative.

Michel Bauwens, Cofounder of the Peer to Peer Foundation and the Commons Strategies Group, considers this an epochal historical moment: “We’re living in the midst of a fundamental value shift,” he said. To put this in a wider historical perspective, Bauwens recommended a presentation by Zygmunt Bauman, “Living in Times of Interregnum,”<sup>10</sup> which describes our times as “a situation in which the old ways of doing things do not work any longer, but new ways of doing things have not yet been designed and put in place.”

Bauwens also cited two books that provide insightful historical context. *The First European Revolution c. 970 to 1215 (The Making of Europe)*, by R.I. Moore, describes important value shifts that have occurred at various moments of history, most notably the shifts “from a post-Roman plunder economy to the feudal regime to capitalism.” Bauwens also recommended *The Structure of World History*, a 2014 book by Kojin Karatani that systematically reinterprets Marx’s version of world history by focusing on the importance of modes of exchange – the pooling of resources in nomadic tribes, gift exchange systems in agricultural societies, commodity exchange under capitalism – rather than modes of production. Karatani’s book is important, said Bauwens, because it argues that the contemporary re-emergence of gift exchange made possible by electronic networks could realistically overcome the Capital-Nation-State alliance that characterizes modern societies.

This analysis is significant, said Bauwens, because “peer production communities constitute a challenge to Marx’s labor theory of value, which, after all, was intended to explain capitalism’s systemic creation of commodities.” A new value theory is needed today, he said, “to explain how commons-based peer production is sustainable as a different mode of value creation.”

---

10. Zygmunt Bauman, “Living in Times of Interregnum,” University of Trento, Italy, October 25, 2013, at [http://wpfdc.org/images/docs/Zygmunt\\_Bauman\\_Living\\_in\\_Times\\_of\\_Interregnum\\_Transcript\\_web\\_I.pdf](http://wpfdc.org/images/docs/Zygmunt_Bauman_Living_in_Times_of_Interregnum_Transcript_web_I.pdf). Video of an earlier version of Bauman’s talk: <https://vimeo.com/63399851>.

Bauwens proceeded to describe the scope of peer production in the world today. A 2010 study of the “fair use economy” – businesses that rely on fair use such as web hosting companies, private schools, search engines and many others – concluded that this sector of economic activity constituted one-sixth of US Gross Domestic Production in 2007 (the latest year for which statistics were then available), employing 17 million people and generating \$4.7 trillion in revenues.<sup>11</sup>

Bauwens also cited a study by Belgian commons scholar Tine De Moor, who documented a significant surge of self-organized civic and co-operative organizations in the Netherlands since 2005.<sup>12</sup> De Moor characterizes the growth of participatory local initiatives throughout southern and western Europe as a “silent revolution.” The proliferation of local groups has had enormous ripple effects, said Bauwens, because as Italian designer Ezio Manzini has already taught us, in the networked age there is no such thing as pure locality. There are what are known as “SLOC initiatives” -- Small and Local, but also Open and Connected.” Local groups and social movements use global networks to organize themselves, which means that local groups empower themselves and amplify their impacts through digital networks. A good example is the Transition Town movement. It would be helpful to have a more structured, empirical understanding of this diverse sector, said Bauwens.

The growth of new sorts of translocal, networked commons raises the intriguing possibility of establishing a parallel social economy within the belly of capitalism. The question immediately arises, however: Can such islands of commons-based peer production protect their value-propositions while operating within a hostile capitalist system? There is, after all, a deep contradiction in people sharing resources within capitalist structures designed to make commodities artificially scarce. Peer production points to a different social and moral logic than that of capitalism – the pooling of resources and knowledge – even though it must operate within the market/state.

For Bauwens, the answer lies in communities of sharing asserting their own “value sovereignty” and developing systems to protect it. In a 2015 essay,

---

11. Computer & Communications Industry Association, “Economic Contribution of Industries Relying on Fair Use, 2010,” at [http://www.wired.com/images\\_blogs/threatlevel/2010/04/fair-use-economy.pdf](http://www.wired.com/images_blogs/threatlevel/2010/04/fair-use-economy.pdf)

12. Tine De Moor, *Homo Cooperans: Institutions for Collective Action and the Compassionate Society* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities, 2013), at [http://www.collective-action.info/sites/default/files/webmaster/\\_PUB\\_Homo-cooperans\\_EN.pdf](http://www.collective-action.info/sites/default/files/webmaster/_PUB_Homo-cooperans_EN.pdf)

“The Contemporary Value Crisis and the Search for ‘Value Sovereignty,’” Bauwens and coauthor Vasilis Niaros describe the “value crisis” as our “increased capacity to create common value through commons-based peer production and other practices of the collaborative economy” – a powerful trend simultaneously undercut by commoners’ dependence on “proprietary platforms that do not re-invest sufficiently in the social reproduction of the commoners.”<sup>13</sup> Intensified capital accumulation is linked to worsening precarity.



© Pedro Jardim

---

13. Bauwens and Niaros paper. <http://www.p2plab.gr/en/archives/1203>. See also the 2013 book, *The Ethical Economy: Rebuilding Value After the Crisis*, by sociologist Adam Arvidsson and entrepreneur/scholar Nicolai Peitersen, and a summary of the book by David Bollier at <http://www.bollier.org/blog/what-do-we-mean-when-we-talk-about-“value”>.

## A. Practical Strategies for Building New Systems of Value

What might be done to overcome the “value crisis” that Bauwens and Niaros describe? They suggest several approaches: a strategy of “transvestment” to shift investment from capitalist enterprises to commons-based alternatives; the creation of “generative business models” such as “open value accounting” that co-create the commons and create livelihoods for contributors; and other innovations in the financing, ownership and governance of regenerative organizations.

**“Transvestment”** can be understood as “the transfer and use of value from one system of production to another.” It describes the techniques for achieving a net “exvestment” of resources from capitalist value-extraction enterprises and structures to autonomous (commons-based) ones.<sup>14</sup> The term was originally developed by software developer Dmytri Kleiner and media artist Baruch Gottlieb to describe a kind of “reverse co-optation,” in which capitalist enterprises become dependent upon commons value-generation.

As Bauwens describes it, transvestment vehicles allow commons-based forms to accept capital, but this capital can be used to advance collective purposes and is “disciplined by the new commons and market forms that we develop through peer production.” Two good examples are Sensorica<sup>15</sup> and Enspiral,<sup>16</sup> as described below. Transvestment “creates a flow of value from the system of capital to the system of the commons economy.... Instead of the co-optation of the commons economy by capital, in the form of the netarchical capitalist platforms which capture value from the commons, we co-opt capital inside the commons, and subject it to its rules,” writes Bauwens. This leads to people self-identifying as commoners rather than as labor, a market-oriented identity.

**Generative business models and open value accounting.** Several participants noted that another way to develop commons-based value is by creating business models that are regenerative [of the sources of value] rather than extractive. What does this mean in terms of ownership structures,

---

14. See the entry for “Transvestment” at the P2P Wiki., at <https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Transvestment>.

15. <http://www.sensorica.co>

16. <http://www.enspiral.com>

internal governance and organizational culture? Michel Bauwens believes that market exchange and commoning can be constructively conjoined. He cited the example of “moral markets” and “just pricing theory” in medieval markets as examples,<sup>17</sup> but cautioning that “you need to be able to protect against corporate appropriations of commonly created value.”

For some digital communities, this can be achieved through “open value accounting” software systems<sup>18</sup> that structure their internal governance and management of shared resources while building a new type of networked community. Open value networks, or OVN, are voluntary, consensus-driven systems for measuring and valuing the in kind/ energy and financial contributions even the smallest ones (to make them visible) of each of its participants. Such systems are a growing trend among digital communities, according to a 2016 P2P Value study, which found that 86 percent of the 300 digital communities it studied use open value accounting systems.<sup>19</sup> An “open value network” – a term first introduced by Verna Allee – describes “the connections between companies and the channels through which intangibles move between them.” An open value network is more distributed than conventional value chains, and not necessarily hierarchical.

Sensorica, one of the more advanced such communities, is devoted to hardware production, software, the Internet of Things, and services. Much of the group’s success stems from its novel ownership structure and “nondominion” property regime for sharing resources. Tiberius Brastaviceanu, cofounder of Sensorica, explained that under a nondominion agreement, community members share their equipment with the community while attaching conditions for its use such as repayment for the machine, money to cover maintenance costs, and a percentage to cover risk.<sup>20</sup> A legal custodian then assumes legal control over the physical resources and absorbs liability for their use. But the custodian does not own the resource because it

---

17. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just\\_price](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_price)

18. [http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Open\\_Value\\_Accounting](http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Open_Value_Accounting). See also Tiberius Brastaviceanu, “Sensorica,” [working paper on value-creation in open value networks], at [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F19rvACy80\\_0k3p32dI2NReuVkmzRvDJceaQCuf8y0/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F19rvACy80_0k3p32dI2NReuVkmzRvDJceaQCuf8y0/edit).

19. See Commons-Based Peer Production Directory on the P2P Value website, at <http://directory.p2pvalue.eu>.

20. See “Nondominion Agreement” entry at P2P Foundation wiki. <https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Nondominium>. “All property rights are transferred to the Custodian by the members of the Nondominium through the act of registering a resource or value added into the Nondominium. The Custodian in return grants the members the right to use, alter/improve (add value), and to receive “rents” (more generally reward in any form) based on the value the member has contributed to the Nondominium in proportion to other members.”

is forbidden from monetizing the assets, as a conventional owner could. So community use prevails even though the custodian is the legal guardian of the resource. This is the essence of the “nondominion” agreement. As Sensorica explains, it “is not a corporation, it is not a coop, it is not a nonprofit, it is not an LLP [limited liability partnership]. It is an open value network. From a legal perspective, it is a non-registered association. It is an open network of freelancers that coordinate and co-manage their work using some IT tools (the NRP-VAS) and some special governance.”<sup>21</sup>

But this description does not fully answer the question, How can networked systems interface with conventional, old-style ones? How can an enterprise or government contract with a loose network of individuals and feel confident that the job will get done properly and on time? After all, who is “in charge” of an open network?

Tiberius Brastaviceanu claims that Sensorica’s OVN structure “is able to sustain deterministic economic processes and accountability while preserving the open and fluid nature of networks and maximizing individual autonomy..... [I]nput from the crowd can be structured and channeled towards solving someone’s problem, through SENSORICA’s infrastructure, methodologies and governance.”

But Brastaviceanu noted that Sensorica is not a platform such as Taskrabbit or Uber, which is owned by a corporate intermediary whose business is creating new types of markets and managing transactions. Rather:

In the SENSORICA model, no one in particular really owns the platform. Affiliates of the network organize, they form groups to tackle complex problems for long periods of time....SENSORICA is really showing the signs of a new system of production that can operate at large scale. But as an R&D service provider, it can already be seen by classical institutions as R&D on demand, as an adjacent, very cohesive R&D operation open to the crowd, funneling in low cost and rapidly evolving open innovation. Practically the entire revenue generated is split among participants, with only 5 percent going to maintain and to develop the infrastructure, which is under the total control of participants.

At the third iteration, the service beneficiary gets a fast paced innovation at a quarter of the normal cost. Even more interestingly, the cost cuts

---

21. Brastaviceanu, “On redistribution of resources,” GoogleDoc, at [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F19rvACy80\\_0k3p32dI2NReuVkmzRvDJceaQCuf8y0/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F19rvACy80_0k3p32dI2NReuVkmzRvDJceaQCuf8y0/edit)

aren't transferred to those who provide the service. They are actual cost savings that result from a heavy use and rapid remix of open source, from the mutualization of resources within the network, from the collaborative nature of activities, from the elimination of bureaucracy, and other inefficiencies that come from lack of motivation. On the contrary, everyone is paid with the same measure, according to the Canadian labor market, no matter where the contributor lives. More precisely, within SENSORICA those who live in Pakistan aren't paid less.

And if that wasn't enough, on top of providing rapid innovation at a fraction of the cost to classical institutions, so that they can maintain jobs, at the same time sensoricans increase the value of the global commons, because everything they do is open source. All the data about the economic activity within SENSORICA is open to the public, we can't make this up!

This mutually beneficial economic relationship between classical institutions and SENSORICA, as an open innovation and peer production network, can be seen as a bridge between the classical capitalist economy and the p2p economy, as a channel for transfer of resources from the old economy to the new.”

***Organizational experiments in finance, ownership and governance.*** The Sensorica experience is a part of a larger trend of organizational innovation. A breakout group at the Deep Dive reported: “All over the world, projects such as Maker Labs, Coworking, hackerspaces, art spaces and ecovillages are popping up with more and more frequency. Many of these spaces do not start to be primarily profit-optimizing vehicles; on the contrary, in most cases the motivation is to explore new forms of work, living and coexistence with the planet.”

Pedro Jardim, the Berlin-based cofounder of Agora, Coliga, Apoio and steward of Neotribes, is deeply committed to this mission as a “business activator around collaborative lifestyles in online and offline fields.” He noted that in recent years projects such as Ouishare, Sensorica and Enspiral “have been experimenting with groundbreaking ways of mixing the idea of community while building technologies that combine new methods of governance and ownership, and allow participants to operate in much more collaborative ways. Because these projects are distributed and participatory, there is much more space for innovation.”

To make sense of this field, the Neo Tribe project is currently collecting best practices across such communities and attempting to develop the emerging paradigm, said Jardim. The challenge in coming years, he said, is to create “transnational types of organizations that can work within the traditional economy and hold assets in a centralized way while enabling distributed autonomous access in decentralized ways.” He cited some examples:

**Land financing:** The Edith Maryon Stiftung<sup>22</sup> owns more than 100 property titles across Europe, which it leases at below-market value to various projects while ensuring that those properties will not ever be sold again. Similar work is being done in France by Terre de Liens<sup>23</sup> and in Germany by Stiftung Trias.<sup>24</sup>

**Business financing.** “Purpose fund investment” is a way to help finance purpose-driven companies while structuring ownership in such a way as to ensure that only the people driving the companies – and not investors or those not being directly connected to the purpose of the company – will make company decisions. Meanwhile, profits are reinvested.

For example, with Coliga, Jardim is exploring “simple interfaces” that enable communities to trade their goods and services internally or among each other at below-market value, while creating special interfaces for trading with the traditional market economy. Other communities are attempting to start transnational federations so that their political voices can be heard, he said. The point of much of this experimentation is to lower the barrier to entry for starting and expanding collaborative communities, and then connecting them, so that new experiments in small-scale, sustainable lifestyles can be pursued.

Building these new types of organization pose special challenges, not just in legal ownership structures and financing, but in the temporal dimensions of growing them. “Organic time is needed,” said Jardim, “because path-dependencies require a protected space. They require insulation from the conventional market economy and ‘stock market time’ so that they can evolve.” Jardim sees alternative finance schemes such as the ones developed by the Edith Maryon Stiftung as an important way of making shared infrastructure and assets more accessible to ordinary people. Centrally owned buildings can be leased to members for a more affordable rate, for example, or participants

---

22. <http://www.maryon.ch/foundation/en/edith-maryon>

23. <https://www.terredeliens.org>

24. <http://www.stiftung-trias.de>

can mutualize asset ownership to lower the costs of housing, infrastructure and commercial work. Meanwhile, steps must be taken to prevent the re-appropriation or marketization of shared assets in the future.

## **B. The Dangers of Co-optation and Wishful Thinking**

Workshop participants were intrigued by the new forms of commons-based peer production, but some were skeptical that they could truly become autonomous. Below: some of the significant objections, followed by a response by Bauwens.

“If there is a monetization of peer-to-peer labor,” said the Marxist scholar Nick Dyer-Witheford, “then it resembles an ethical business or cooperative movement. It does not really exist outside of the labor theory of value. The big question is, Who is going to co-opt whom?”

He continued: “As admirable as P2P practices are, they rest on the entirety of the computing industry, which rely on extractive practices and are dominated by commodity labor relations, often of the most brutal sort. P2P experimentation is taking place on a very thin layer of a vast capitalist infrastructure. For that reason, we should pay more attention to strikes by Chinese or Verizon workers” as a source of transformation, he said. Dyer-Witheford also worries that Bauwens is more Marxist than classical Marxists in proposing a deeply teleological view of the stages of social organization, animated by a doctrinaire belief that ‘history is on our side.’”

David Harvie of Leicester University shared Dyer-Witheford’s concern that finance capital will always be stronger than commons, and thus more likely to co-opt commoners than vice-versa. Harvie cited the case of “social impact bonds” as a way to finance social services and infrastructure in the UK.<sup>25</sup> Touted as a mechanism to “do well by doing good,” social impact bonds enable investors to invest in socially beneficial projects that generate a good rate of return, sometimes employing volunteer or low-wage labor.

Social impact investing may simply be the latest financial scheme – following on the heels of micro-finance, development impact bonds and carbon trading bonds – to convert social needs into investment opportunities. “In a world of

---

25. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_impact\\_bond](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_impact_bond)

low investment returns, these approaches are simply investing capital in our projects,” said Harvie, “and we’re creating a return for them.”

Silke Helfrich noted that German energy coops seem to function as “commons on inside,” but in their operations within a market system, “they are capitalist on outside.” Helfrich is concerned that even projects that are “purpose driven” design their operations according to a market rationality, for instance, by promising to deliver 4 percent return to those who become members and invest.” What commons need is understanding how truly different modes of exchange can be established on the inside! – and how to devise not only a “protective membrane” for their interactions with capitalist markets, but a “protective shield.”

The recurrent dynamic in each case, said Aetzel Griffioen, is that capital extracts monetized value from social relations and ecosystems. The “Big Society” policies championed by Prime Minister Cameron in the UK amounted to little more than “debt pushdowns,” said Griffioen. “The policies entice collectives to start their own social companies, but to do that they have to buy assets at market prices and take on debt themselves.”

The same problems afflict the marketization of ecosystem protection: Once a price system is put in place establishing an equivalence of value, it simply opens the door for debt dependency, trade and speculation, in the usual extractive ways. Examples include the patenting of DNA and lifeforms; the creation of trading rights in biodiversity; and emission offsets used to marketize forest management (as promoted by the UN program on REDD+, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries).<sup>26</sup>

If capital is the prevailing arbiter of value, several participants noted, then part of our struggle is to extricate ourselves from a “negative theory of value.” That is in effect what the Labor Theory of Value is, noted Nick Dyer-Witthford and David Harvie. In some readings of Marx, labor is seen as a form of human activity imposed by the commodity form, rendering “labor” as something negative and undesirable. Does the same problem afflict a “commons theory of value”? asked Dyer-Witthford. Is it a negative theory of value based on social activity that has already been domesticated by capital? Social sharing on Facebook, for example, is a means by which capital extracts profit from a commons.

---

26. See <http://www.un-redd.org>.

David Bollier responded that the sharing and cooperation on corporate platforms such as Facebook or Twitter amounts to a *faux* commons because commoners are not in fact devising the rules of self-governance and exercising control. The struggle underway is to prevent freely directed, purposeful commoning from being captured and controlled by capital. The goal is to protect the integrity and independence of commoning. While many commons are indeed being appropriated by capital, a commons theory of value seeks to name the generative social value that arises from commons, and to protect it. It is an affirmative theory of value, not just a critique of capital.

Bauwens had a number of responses to the criticisms of commons-based peer production as a transformational regime of value-creation. He rejected the claim that his analysis is teleological, insisting that it is based on “an empirical study of communities.” As for the transformational power of factory workers versus peer production, Bauwens replied, “There is a big difference between resisting capitalist exploitation within the system [though, say, workers’ strikes] and working outside of that system [peer production]. Yes, peer production is still at the margin, but it is not simply seeking to earn more money to spend within the capitalist system.”



© Pedro Jardim

What is really needed is “a politics of the commons,” said Bauwens, as “the traditional left – Podemos in Spain, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Bernie Sanders in the US – is still very state-centric.” “We need a dialogue between commons communities and emancipatory politics,” he added.

## **C. But Peer Production Still Relies Upon (Unpaid) Care Work and Nature!**

Any consideration of peer production as a viable alternative system requires that we address the unpaid work that still needs to be done – the child-rearing and socialization, family life, household maintenance, and mundane, necessary tasks of everyday life. These concerns are often discussed under the rubric of “care work.” “There is a lot of work that *needs* to be done,” said Heike Löschmann of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. “The challenge is not just about creating the conditions to do the work that we *want* to do, but about how to create the conditions that allow us to choose how we will work.”

Or as Ina Praetorius put it tartly: “Who is cleaning the toilets in your building? Who produces the peer contributors in the first place?” Praetorius noted that a basic income is much talked about as a solution, but it does not in fact exist as a working option right now, and one nation, Switzerland, recently rejected it in a voter referendum. So what is the solution?

Just as the traditional political left and commons communities need to open a dialogue, Bauwens believes that commoners and care work thinkers and activists need to enter into a deeper dialogue. He conceded that commons communities are “struggling to sustain ourselves” as it is. “We are volunteering,” said Bauwens. “We are de-monetizing huge aspects of our lives. But creating enough [market exchange] value to support livelihoods is a huge challenge.”

Another concern: Most forms of peer production require relatively high levels of skill. “How many people can realistically contribute to such networks?” asked Janis Loschmann. He wondered if people could actually earn a reasonable (market) livelihood while contributing to such projects, especially since a basic income is unlikely to be a reality for a while.

Any commons-based peer communities may have considerable value simply as functional “spaces to unlearn capitalism and learn something else,” said

Friederike Habermann, the political economist and historian. She cited her own role in a German network called Noncommercial Life, which provides products and services to the general public without relying on any exchange logic. Having such “spaces of mutuality” is important in experimenting with other options and developing them, she said.

A standing challenge is how to mediate the relations between a commons and market. Should the commons devise a membrane or a shield to protect itself against standard market forces? asked Heike Löschmann. A shield can protect against market appropriation, but it also excludes potentially useful opportunities. A semi-permeable membrane may protect a commons and enable “reverse co-optation” of capital, but there are high risks that it will fail. Löschmann also urged that we consider the context in which such choices will be made. The realities in conflict-ridden, marginalized societies in the Global South, such as Kurdistan, for example, are quite different from those facing Europeans or Americans.

As for the impact of digital technologies on ecosystems, Bauwens noted that capitalist markets do not strive to make tech systems useful and durable, as open source communities strive to do. They simply want to create short-term profits, often through such stratagems as planned obsolescence, artificially created scarcity (copyright, patents), and over-extraction from nature. By contrast, P2P communities try to share physical resources, avoid waste and localize production. “Transport costs as a percentage of GDP exceed those of manufacturing by a three-to-one ratio,” said Bauwens, so a lot could be achieved by relocalizing agriculture via open source projects such as Farm Hack, Atelier Paysan, the Slow Tools Project and other open design and manufacturing initiatives.<sup>27</sup> “In agriculture, the P2P Lab estimates that we could achieve 80 percent of existing services with 20 percent of the energy consumption,” said Bauwens.

---

27. Alekos Pantazis, Christina Priavolou and Vasilis Kostakis, “Evaluating Open Hardware from an Ecological Economics Perspective,” P2P Foundation, at <http://www.p2plab.gr/en/archives/1171>.

# 05.

## NOTES TOWARD A COMMONS THEORY OF VALUE



The workshop progressed from identifying a relational theory of value to discussing the complications of such a theory and real-life examples of peer production and open value networks. How, then, might we formulate a commons theory of value? Nick Dyer-Witheford proposed that each participant complete the following proposition:

In the 19th Century, Marx's labor theory of value was a critical concept for the workers' movement of his age. It is said that, under capitalism, the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of wage labor that produced it. Today, a commons theory of value

---

It is impossible to synthesize or consolidate the diverse statements proposed, but together they represent some of the more promising lines of inquiry for devising a new theory of value. (Everyone's short statement is included in Appendix B below.) Participants identified a number of essential elements for a commons theory of value, such as the primacy of the human condition and basic human freedoms and capacities:

- the notion of Ubuntu, "I am because you are," and constant self-reproduction via caring and commoning (Silke Helfrich);
- self-realization through aliveness (Andreas Weber);
- the rights to life and dignity, and to travel freely (David Harvie);
- the freedom to create and the play principle (David Graeber);
- the nature of being (Janis Loschmann);
- the role of the nonhuman world (Sian Sullivan, Neera Singh);

Some participants focused on political factors and identities such as:

- the role of the oppressed, exploited and excluded, including the work and women, in redefining value (Guneser);
- opposition to extractive capitalist relationships and the "value sovereignty" of commoners (Michel Bauwens);
- the pathologies introduced by money and exchange value (Friederike Habermann);

Still other participants focused on new institutional forms that might protect basic value-creation or better represent value, such as:

- new social forms in which the labor of the commons can be liberated (Nick Dyer-Witheford);
- innovative forms of law, technology and social practice that support and protect commoning (David Bollier);
- Non-sellable ownership and reinvestment based on the principles of the circular economy (Pedro Jardim);
- regenerative economic systems that support living ecosystems (Aetzel Griffioen);
- new symbolic systems that draw upon real-time information and everyone's socio-economic activities (Tiberius Brastaviceanu);
- many beautiful words that do not use the abstract notion of value developed by white, male, bourgeois 19<sup>th</sup> century men (Ina Praetorius);

## Conclusion

The Deep Dive discussions helped elicit a richer set of concepts and vocabularies for reimagining value. They affirmed the importance of the quest to develop a new theory of value that might have the social significance that Marx's labor theory of value had in his time. The challenge today is in its own way more complicated, however, because any new theory must take explicit account of care work, social collaboration on digital platforms, ecological stewardship and relations with beyond-human realms, and the many varieties of commoning. In addition, any new theory of value must aspire to be a positive theory about freedom and emancipation, and not a "negative theory" in the manner of the labor theory of value, which focuses on capitalist capture of value.

Developing a modern-day, affirmative theory of value that speaks in a tone of common sense may seem like an insuperable challenge. But the group experienced certain deep connections and epiphanies in a storytelling session, in which everyone told a personal story about discovering important lessons about value. The telling of these stories brought to the surface pre-political concerns and feelings about the human condition – issues suffused with unique, situational meaning and in a sense beyond ideology. "Storytelling is where we become agents – because we abandon the search for single, unified meanings," said Ina Praetorius.

And yet, as the discussions showed, we also aspire to a shared grand narrative about "value." Or, if we are to avoid a word freighted with so much economic baggage, there is a clearly felt need to find a way to develop an alternative vocabulary, perhaps focused on "meaning," "grace," "beauty" or other words that point to human flourishing and fulfillment. Although a new theory of value may be elusive for now, we know that the idea of "value" speaks to the question of who we are and how we shall live, work and be in the world. Participants in the workshop were united in hoping that their dialogues could provide guidance in developing politically relevant, modern-day theories of value.

---

# Appendix A:

## Participants



© Pedro Jardim

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Joanna Barelkowska</b> (Germany)      | Heinrich Boell Foundation                    |
| <b>Michel Bauwens</b> (Belgium/Thailand) | P2P Foundation;<br>Commons Strategies Group  |
| <b>David Bollier</b> (US)                | Commons Strategies Group                     |
| <b>Tiberius Brastaviceanu</b> (Canada)   | Sensorica                                    |
| <b>Nick Dyer-Witheford</b> (Canada)      | University of Western Ontario                |
| <b>David Graeber</b> (US/UK)             | London School of Economics                   |
| <b>datejie green</b> (Canada)            | student, University of Western Ontario       |
| <b>Aetzel Griffioen</b> (Netherlands)    | independent philosopher                      |
| <b>Havin Guneser</b> (Kurdistan)         | translator, women's rights activist          |
| <b>Friederike Habermann</b> (Germany)    | economist, historian and political scientist |
| <b>David Harvie</b> (UK)                 | University of Leicester                      |
| <b>Silke Helfrich</b> (Germany)          | Commons Strategies Group                     |
| <b>Pedro Jardim</b> (Germany)            | social entrepreneur                          |
| <b>Giorgos Kallis</b> (Greece/Spain)     | Autonomous University of Barcelona           |
| <b>Heike Loeschmann</b> (Germany)        | Heinrich Boell Foundation                    |
| <b>Janis Loschmann</b> (UK/Germany)      | Ph.D. student, University of East Anglia     |
| <b>Ina Praetorius</b> (Switzerland)      | theologian                                   |
| <b>Neera Singh</b> (India/Canada)        | University of Toronto                        |
| <b>Sian Sullivan</b> (UK)                | Bath Spa University                          |
| <b>Andreas Weber</b> (Germany)           | biologist, ecophilosopher and author         |

---

# Appendix B:

## **A Commons theory of value**

In response to this prompt, participants suggested what their notion of a commons theory of value might look like:

In the 19th Century, Marx's labor theory of value was a critical concept for the workers' movement of his age. It is said that, under capitalism, the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of wage labor that produced it. Today, a commons theory of value..... [insert words]

### **Joanna Barelkowska**

Today, a commons theory of value is determined by all beings (human and nonhuman) and their respectful and care-ful relations.

### **Michel Bauwens**

Today, a commons theory of value must

- reward and drive resources to generative and care activities, and withdraw it from extractive and exploitative relationships (recognize social).
- recognize the value sovereignty of the commons and its value communities while refusing the dictatorship of capitalist value.
- recognize all scales, including translocal, transnational “virtual territories.”
- allow wise choices of allocation on modalities (commoning, reciprocal exchange, redistribution).

### **Tibi Brastaviceanu**

Today, a commons theory of value starts from understanding what pushes people into action, any kind of action, irrespective of its moral attribution. This helps us understand why people engage in economic activity, under different conditions. Redistribution of goods and other forms of rewards will not be regulated in major part by monetary currencies, but relies on a collection of symbolic systems that feed on real-time information about everyone's socio-economic activities.

---

### **David Bollier**

Today, a commons theory of value requires that we recognize the full range of human freedoms, rights and capacities as the starting point for constructing appropriate institutions for governance and provisioning. We are much more than citizens, consumers or homo economicus living in the Market/State. Fortunately, innovative forms of law, technology and social practice are generating new structural forms to support and protect commoning. This process, when supported by the formal polity, releases enormous capacities within communities for human and societal transformation.

### **Nick Dyer-Witheford**

Today, a commons theory of value arises from struggles not so much in productive labor as in the sphere of social reproduction – in the environmental and informational sectors of social existence, by people whose labor is often unwaged, precarious and racialized. Building on the previous thought of feminism, ecologists, critical race theory as well as the ever developing legacy of Marxist thought, the commons theory of value describes how capital is increasingly reliant on the enclosure of communal, ecological and informational processes, shows the dangerous consequences for species life as a value, and names the new social forms in which the labor of the commons can be liberated.

### **David Graeber**

Today, a commons theory of value would have to be based above all on a principle of freedom. It would unite human and nonhuman domains, down to the subatomic level, with the understanding that freedom in its most basic form of play (the exercise of freedom for its own sake) is one of the fundamental constituents of physical reality, one that manifests itself on more complex emergent levels of reality as life, intelligence and culture – as it becomes enfolded in more complex webs of mutual dependence, caring, commitment and understanding. The ultimate value, then, is the freedom to create and determine value itself, and to create and determine those forms of mutual support and entailment, caring, sustenance (and its intellectual component of understanding) required for its realization.

The degree that such capacities can or cannot be, should or shouldn't be, measured, quantified, ranked, compared, etc., is perhaps the greatest intellectual and ultimately political challenge we face.

---

### **datejie green**

Today, a commons theory of value must center neither around workers, nor around Europe and Eurocentric value culture (to which Marx had been limited to in his age). Instead, an avenue for full and equitable participation of non-European peoples to develop and contribute their perspectives needs to be created.

A commons theory of value needs to be simple, open nonexclusive and consider all spheres of life, life creation and sustenance, as its guiding basis. Current and historic processes of alienation, dispossession and subordination need to be dismantled and those who bore their impacts need to be rehabilitated in order to produce a common social relations of value.

A commons theory of value must prioritize the participation, knowledge and historic practices and principles of Indigenous and colonized peoples of all regions regarding: land and resource stewardship, animist-based or other respectful relationships with nonhuman life and spirit forms, and an overall centering of life-supporting values.

### **Aetzel Griffioen**

See the TENGO statement at end of Appendix B.

### **Havin Guneser**

Today, a commons theory of value cannot confine itself to this alone. Instead, those who have been oppressed, exploited and excluded, including the worker but not only, and especially the women, must be at the heart of its re-definition. One way this can be done is through daily struggle against its operation and creation of life and meaning by them. But this definition should be a means to flourish, a life that is democratic, ecological, based on women's freedom.

### **Friederike Habermann**

See p. 17-18 above.

### **David Harvie**

Today, a global commonwealth of commoners or a global commons and commoning-based modes of production and reproduction, would incorporate axioms which express the following values-in-common:

Every human has the right to life and dignity;

Every human as the right to travel freely.

Every human – both “resident” and “stranger” or “traveller” – to be offered hospitality, including food, shelter, clothing and medical care.

---

## **Silke Helfrich**

Today, a commons theory of value

...is relational.

...is based on the notion of Ubuntu: I am because you are.

...brings an Oicommony into being.

...is at the core of the constant [re-production] unfolding of caring and commoning.

...is informed by and honors a diversity of value and knowledge systems.

...is a critical concept for the global commons and care movement.

...does away with an isolated, sterile, qualified and meaningless idea of value imprisoned in the sphere of crematishki.

## **Pedro Jardim**

The value is determined by social, environmental and spiritual forces used bring anything into place. As it is not possible to quantify... If all individuals were covered with their basic needs. Ownership non-sellable, extractive, surplus reinvested and principles of circular economy and permaculture were followed. The value could be determined by the market.

## **Giorgos Kallis**

A commons theory of value recognizes that wage labour depends on, and is a function of, the nonhuman labour that goes into producing the commodity as well as the care labour that reproduces wage labour.

## **Heike Loeschmann**

Today, a commons theory of value does not yet exist, but it is surely emerging, capturing the variety of imaginations, identities and creativity that are represented in this room. ;0)

## **Janis Loschmann**

Today a commons theory of value does not yet exist. Its conceptualization begins with an enquiry into being. Value lives within –that is to say it resides in - interconnected relationships with the human and non human world which share reciprocity of potential from within which meaning emerges. No single entity is a locus of value. It is derived neither from the properties of an object nor from the meanings projected on them by subjects. Value is experiential, the moment we attribute it, we cease to experience it. Value is experiential; the moment we attribute it, we cease to experience it.

---

## **Sian Sullivan and Neera Singh**

A commons theory of value celebrates multiple socio-nature relations that includes human and more-than-human entities engaging in generative (and naturally sustaining) activities.

## **Ina Praetorius**

Today a theory of value does not make sense any more as we have stopped relying on the invisible abstract concepts created by white, male, bourgeois 19th Century men. There are so many beautiful words in the world – or we will create them – that will help and motivate us to give birth to the good life of about seven billion bearers of human dignity – and all other living beings now and in the future.

## **Andreas Weber**

Today, a commons theory of value needs to take into account that with his formulation, Marx in reality said that in capitalism the true input generating output (extracted for output) is the life of the wage worker. There is no valuation but life. Capitalism extracts this and transforms it into the dead building blocks of wages and prices. A commons theory of value would be about the degree (and the feeling) to which an individual's aliveness enhances us, the aliveness of the community and, vice-versa, the degree to which a community gives meaning to its participants. The degree of aliveness cannot be reliably analyzed in third-person terms, but must also be felt by participation. Felt aliveness, the bliss of aliveness, is the degree through which the self is realized through realizing the other, and the whole through making self more real.

## **Full Tengo Statement**

Offered by Aetzel Griffion

Today, a commons theory of value means that, following the Credo's structure as made at the First Council of Nicea (325) and the First Council of Constantinople (381),

We maintain the common on earth and in the universe, which is shared by all people, animals, plants and things and their relations; And we uphold the powers of people everywhere to increase the commons by nursing the life-carrying capacities of the ecological cycles.

By our relations with ourselves, with each other and with other beings to which we can give and with which we together can provide

---

for our shared needs of subsistence and which we can maintain and nurse to growth in by making our own local sets of rules, sanctions and arbitration;

By, with renewable energy, copying it, passing it on, combining it, scaling it up, cleaning it up, making it healthy again,

That which has been, or still is, expropriated from, walled off, enclosed, disowned from the commons of people and the ecosystems, Extracted, old, rented out for private gain, financial profit and rent, The ecological domains have been disturbed and we must ensure that they become once more life-carrying and life-giving. This goes for earth and will hold in possible new biotopes and geotopes outside of the earth in common futures to come.

That which is light, we can share globally. That which is heavy, we strive to produce locally.

We make laws and voluntary arrangements to strengthen our generative capacity as well as possible.

Also those who do not maintain the common, because they enrich themselves or strive to enrich themselves and a limited number of others, those who understand public government as the means to ensure private interests, they also make use of the common. The common, although inexhaustible, is vulnerable in her instantiations as commons and as resource for self-enrichment.

---

# Appendix C:

## Readings for Value Deep Dive

### 1. Michel Bauwens and Vasilis Niaros

“Tools for value sovereignty in an ecologically sustainable world.”

First draft of the introduction to a report on value practices in the new commons.

Weblink: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1O36-bNz9ErJX6IpXm9OLUkEgiqVRd5xGTyUSf8XG0ns/edit#>

### 2. David Graeber

Postscript, “It is Value that Brings Universes into Being,” from the book *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, excerpted in *Hau Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2013).

<http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau3.2.012/758>

### 3. Ina Praetorius

Chapter 3, “From Post-Dichotomous *Durcheinander* to a Different Paradigm,” from the essay,

“The Care Centered Economy: Rediscovering What Has Been Taken for Granted” (Heinrich Boell Foundation, Economic & Social Issues series of essays, Volume 16, 2015), pp. 44-53.

[http://us.boell.org/sites/default/files/the\\_care-centered\\_economy.pdf](http://us.boell.org/sites/default/files/the_care-centered_economy.pdf)

### 4. Neera Singh

“The Affective Labor of Growing Forests and the Becoming of Environmental Subjects: Rethinking Environmentality in Odisha, India,” *Geoforum* 47 (February 16, 2013), 189-198.

Weblink:

[https://www.academia.edu/3106203/The\\_affective\\_labor\\_of\\_growing\\_forests\\_and\\_the\\_becoming\\_of\\_environmental\\_subjects\\_Rethinking\\_environmentality\\_in\\_Odisha\\_India](https://www.academia.edu/3106203/The_affective_labor_of_growing_forests_and_the_becoming_of_environmental_subjects_Rethinking_environmentality_in_Odisha_India)

### 5. David Bollier

Summary of Adam Arvidsson’s book, *The Ethical Economy: Rebuilding Value After the Crisis*

<http://bollier.org/blog/what-do-we-mean-when-we-talk-about-%E2%80%9Cvalue%E2%80%9D>

---

## **6. Brian Mulani**

“Mindful Markets, Value Revolution and the Green Economy: EPR, Certification and the New Regulation.”

<http://greeneconomics.net/ValueRevolution.htm>

## **7. Sian Sullivan**

“The Natural Capital Myth,” Public Political Ecology Lab blog on carbon offsets and REDD+, +, June 2013 at <http://ppel.arizona.edu/?p=251>, developed as a longer paper called ‘The natural capital myth; or will accounting save the world? Preliminary thoughts on nature, finance and values’ at

<http://thestudyofvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WP3-Sullivan-2014-Natural-Capital-Myth.pdf>

## **Additional Readings of Interest**

### **Tiberius Brastaviceanu**

“Sensorica,” [working paper on value-creation in open value networks]

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F19rvACy80\\_0k3p32dI2NRvuVkmzRvDJceaQCuf8y0/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F19rvACy80_0k3p32dI2NRvuVkmzRvDJceaQCuf8y0/edit)

### **Tom Greaves and Rupert Read**

“Where Value Resides: Making Ecological Value Possible,” *Environmental Ethics* 37(3):321-340 (September 2015).

### **John Holloway**

‘Read Capital: The First Sentence Or, Capital Starts with Wealth, not with the Commodity’, *Historical Materialism*, 2015.

### **Brian Massumi**

*Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Duke University Press, Durham and London). See brief paragraph, “The Force to Own Time,” bottom of p. 71 through p. 73.

### **Jason W. Moore**

Chapter One of *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (Verso, 2015). <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53c91652e4b09f1cf07c75bc/t/57286b5f9f72666b6cec29d7/1462266731162Moore%3B+Capitalism+in+the+Web+of+Life+%5BIntroduction%5D%281%29.pdf>

---

### **Matteo Pasquinelli**

Chapter, “A Conceptual Bestiary of the Commons,” pp. 43-51 in Pasquinelli’s 2008 book

*A Conceptual Bestiary of the Commons* (Rotterdam, NL: NAI Publishers)

[https://www.academia.edu/1992023/Animal\\_Spirits\\_A\\_Bestiary\\_of\\_the\\_Commons](https://www.academia.edu/1992023/Animal_Spirits_A_Bestiary_of_the_Commons).

### **James Quilligan**

“Toward a Common Theory of Value,” a four-part series of essays

Part I, Common Being (Winter 2011): <http://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/toward-a-common-theory-of-value-part-one-common-being>

Part II, Common Trust (Spring/Summer 2012): <http://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/toward-a-common-theory-of-value-part-two-common-trust>

Part III, Common Knowing (Winter 2012): <http://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/toward-a-common-theory-of-value-part-three-common-knowing>

Part IV: Common Need (Spring/Summer 2013): <http://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/toward-a-common-theory-of-value-part-four-common-need>

### **Sian Sullivan**

“Should Nature Have to Prove Its Value,” Green Economy Coalition blog post, 2013.

<http://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/know-how/should-nature-have-prove-its-value>

### **Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt**

*The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015) Chapters 9 and 19.

Review: [https://radicalantipode.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/book-review\\_sneegas-on-ting.pdf](https://radicalantipode.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/book-review_sneegas-on-ting.pdf)

Weblink to pdf:  [Tsing MushroomEndWorld 2015 Ch9Ch19.pdf](#)

“Sorting out commodities: How capitalist value is made through gifts.” *Hau Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 3., No. 1 (2013). <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau3.1.003>

A Deep Dive hosted by Commons Strategies Group  
in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation  
and David Graeber

*September 5-8, 2016*

*By David Bollier*  
[www.bollier.org](http://www.bollier.org)



[www.commonstrategies.org](http://www.commonstrategies.org)

Cover image: Sayan Nath

Event Images: Pedro Jardim

Design and layout: Elena Martínez

Art Direction: Ann Marie Utratel & Stacco Troncoso

