
Value-Form Theory and Labour Process Analysis

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Résumé

A Marxist approach to the labour process requires the consideration of micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis (Vidal and Hauptmeier, 2014). This paper considers these different levels through the labour theory of value (LTV) as a methodological tool for the qualitative study of work. Most contemporary labour process theory (LPT) is methodologically based on a rejection of Marxism in favour of materialism, critical realism, global value chains, or a combination thereof (Edwards, 1986; Newsome et al., 2015; Thompson and Vincent, 2010). This paper argues that labour process theory should return to a Marxist approach that systematically analyses capitalist accumulation by accounting for the exploitation of workers in terms of abstract labour time. The argument hinges on a critique of "core" labour process theory, which offers important insights into the dynamics of production, organisation, and experiences of workers, yet would benefit from reconnecting with Marxist political economy. Other scholars have provided critiques of the "core" theory, based on the political consequences of abandoning the Marxist theory, but do not focus specifically on the LTV and exploitation (Cohen, 1987; Spencer, 2000). The paper contributes to this literature by further developing these critiques.

The paper begins by tracing the origins of the "materialist" turn back to Edwards' concept of exploitation, which is based on a neo-Ricardian theory rather than the labour theory of value (Cohen, 1979). Based on a refutation of Edwards' conception of exploitation and a critique of subsequent attempts to connect LPT to other theories of value, the paper bolsters the case for a Marxist approach to the labour process. Furthermore, the paper draws on Elson (1979) to emphasize the political implications and unifying functions of value-form theory for social research. The LTV demonstrates causal links between workers' economic experiences of exploitation in production and broader dynamics of the valorisation process at a different level of abstraction. Marx's totalising approach thus offers a more robust ontological and epistemological grounding for LPT than recent attempts to broaden the "core" by attaching it to global value chains or critical realism.

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Mots-Clés: Marx, Value Theory, Labour Process Theory, Work and Employment