

Anthropology of Work Review

Between Work and Labor: Valuing Action in South Asia

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As possibilities for and routines of work change—whether as parts of the economy expand, contract and relocate; as public-private partnerships and the gig economy grow; as welfare provision is strengthened in some places and shrinks in others; or as skill sets adapt or become obsolete—how are these changes experienced by workers? First, however, who is a worker? In the U.S. academic setting, one we all share, this question has been crucial for determining the possibilities for unionization among graduate students and adjunct faculty. In the contemporary moment, as the world grapples with Covid-19, the categorization of some work as “essential” highlights how certain kinds of work and workers are valorized for their centrality in reproducing everyday life, but it also exposes those who engage in such work, especially working-class communities of color, to elevated levels of risk and harm. The practices and politics of categorizing work anchor the five papers that make up this issue. They ask: What changing valuations of work, and of the larger economies they are part of, do distinctions among work activities reveal? What has changed in the promise of agricultural work to make “farmer” an undesirable category? What histories of caste and economic precarity do disavowals of labor among construction workers subtend? How does donor funding affect the value of salaried government work such that officials describe the devaluation of their work as a reduction to labor? How do public-private partnerships make room for new cadres of workers (e.g. experts) by devaluing previously existing workers, activities, and social relations? How does environmental jurisprudence, in labeling the work practices of scrap metal recycling as hazardous, impact workers’ experience of their craft?

Categorization of Work: Practices and Politics

The essays are located in the spaces between work and labor that our research interlocutors open up for us. Rather than beginning with predefined categories of laborers and workers, or predetermined notions of value and devaluation, or idealized

labor-capital relationships, each of the essays comprising this special issue takes as its starting point local idioms of work and its valuations. Our interlocutors’ comparisons and distinctions critique assessments of the value and recognized worth of particular kinds of work. Building with and on these critiques, this special issue shows how emic categories can inform and enrich academic categories. These categories are also epistemological claims. Our differently located interlocutors know, register, and respond to changing work surrounds through the adoption of some and disavowal of other categories. By ethnographically examining the spaces between work and labor, instead of firming up category boundaries for worker, laborer, bureaucrat, farmer, et cetera, we are able to appreciate the metrics underpinning the differentiations, and the mutability of these categories.

In focusing on the practices through which our interlocutors differentiate between and categorize acts of labor, we contribute to an old theme in studies of work that has theorized the productive tensions between the universal predicament that humans must create their lives through effortful engagements with the world, and the vast and shifting diversity of those engagements. For Marx, this tension is reflected in the difference between concrete labor, which produces use-values and is therefore necessary in all human societies, and abstract labor, which is specific to the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, the very division between concrete and abstract forms of labor is one of the defining features of capitalist production. Building on one of Engels’ footnotes to *Capital* (Marx, 1976: 138n16), Marxist scholars have distinguished between the heterogeneously structured forms of securing livelihood as work, while reserving labor for the historically specific form that work assumes in capitalism (Fuchs and Seignani 2013, Frayssé 2014). This attention to the form of action recalls Hannah Arendt’s (1998) distinction between labor, which encompassed actions that met bodily needs for reproducing life, and work, which encompassed the creation of a durable world of objects and infrastructures.

Building on this literature, anthropological writing on work and labor has tended to use “work” to refer to actions directed at securing livelihoods that are not, or not completely, regimented by capitalist logics of accumulation and surplus value extraction (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Narotzky 2018; Taussig 1980: 114; Wallman 1980). For example, Elizabeth Dunn (2004) has shown how Polish understandings of motherhood and care inflect newly capitalist factory work; Sarah Besky (2014) has highlighted how models of kinship and intergenerational care organize relations between workers, supervisors, and plants on Darjeeling tea plantations; and Attiya Ahmad (2017) has demonstrated how South Asian female domestic workers in Kuwait navigate the double burden of reproducing both the households they work in and their households of origin. In such accounts, the analytical distinction between a heterogeneous world of work and an abstracted one of labor draws attention to the crucial yet subtle ways in which particular histories of gender, caste, race, place, religion and cultural experience come to animate what could be glossed as purely economic actions (Besky 2014; Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018; Jegathesan 2018; Kelly 1992).

At stake here are not only practices of livelihood but also the very categories of persons and economy. This is especially well demonstrated in scholarship from South Asia that has long questioned universalist categories such as working class and subaltern and has demonstrated the elisions and erasures that categories like labor and laborer have relied on (Chakrabarty 1989, 2000; Gidwani 2008; Joshi 2005; Prakash 2003). It should thus be kept in mind that the categorization of work as “informal” was done at a historical moment when contractual waged labor seemed to be on the wane and other means for securing livelihoods and accumulation were growing across Africa, Asia, and Latin America (see Hart 2006). The category of “informal” was connected to efforts to offer recognition and protection to those who labored under diverse work and exchange relations, while concurrently estimating, measuring, and incorporating the potential impact of these economies into national ones.

Yet the category of “informal” has been far from settled among scholars of South Asia. Jan Breman initially critiqued the inadequacy of the in/formal binary as delineating two fundamentally different types of labor and labor relations, positing instead a four-fold classification of the urban labor force (1976). Similarly, Barbara Harriss-White (2003) has demonstrated that so-called informal economic practices in India are actually highly structured, their forms shaped by dynamics of caste, gender, class and place. More recently, Sanyal and Bhattacharyya (2009) have argued for going beyond the characterization of labor as wage-labor in developing economies, directing

attention to labor not as source of surplus but as possessor/occupier of resources that must be freed up for capitalist circuits (2009: 42). Elsewhere, Gidwani and Miranganti have conceptualized “infrastructural labor” in informal urban economies to understand that which repairs and maintains capitalist accumulation (2016: 113). This informalization of work and economies is structurally entangled with neoliberal transformations in the region, where the ascendance of the middle class has entailed renewed configurations of work and subjectivities, such as the endurance of social inequalities (e.g. language and caste) in class-based politics, the self-fashioning of entrepreneurial citizens, and the strivings of unemployed and underemployed young men (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Gooptu 2013; Jeffrey 2010). Far from smoothly distributing a homogeneous commodity, labor, economies are made and remade around the historical specificities of shifting activities of livelihood. These literatures serve to break up the apparent homogeneity of laboring practices and commensurability of forms of labor, revealing the variegated ways in which particular and repeated acts of work shape lives, bodies, communities, and economies.

Of central concern to us, then, are the contested, ongoing, and multi-scalar processes of categorization and their effects on worlds of work. When skilled construction workers refuse to be called “laborers” or landowners reject the label of “farmer,” they locate themselves and their actions in particular ways within wider fields of recognition. These fields of recognition articulate regimes of valuation across different scales: managerial experts come to have a stake in the work of waste disposal following urban governance reform; irrigation bureaucrats must navigate their own declining role both in the national order of things and in transnational development projects; and scrap metal workers are potentially delegitimized in the shadow of national policies for environmental jurisprudence.

Knowledge and the Valuing of Action

These struggles over categorization highlight how actions at particular historical and ethnographic moments come to be valued. We argue that this process of valuation turns on epistemological questions of how actions come to be known. For example, Marx’s critique of the labor theory of value was an intertwined one of the science of political economy and the exploitation of labor under capitalism. The former line of critique was directed at reconstructing those forms of knowledge utilized to establish and thus legitimize the value of labor in the monetary form of price and cost; the latter examined how social relations of production were organized on collective scales to generate wealth through accumulation while simultaneously reproducing those

same social relations (Turner 2008; Graeber 2001; Collins 2017). Informed by such critique, we ask, how are ways of knowing (e.g. determining wages, worker habits, measuring exchanges, or environmental risk) formulated and materialized, thereby shaping and organizing how actions come to be valued? Relatedly, what sort of politics open up if we foreground ways of knowing in the valuing of action and persons?

Value has a representational quality, especially when considering the transformation of labor in its abstract form through exchange value (specifically, commodities, money, and time) (see Elson 1979; Spivak 1985; Pedersen 2013). We turn our attention to the role of knowledge in these transformations as a constitutive element of the valuing of actions and persons. The capitalist division of labor between physical laborer and mental worker and the specialization of their respective activities are premised on the relationship that different kinds of work(ers) and labor(ers) have to knowledge (Boyer 2005). Knowledge also remains crucial in contemporary discussions about shifts in global capitalism, whether that be in the “affective” labor producing “immaterial” goods and services or the communicative or digital labor necessitated by “cognitive” or “informational” capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000; cf. Yanagisako 2012; Castells 1996; Moulrier-Boutang 2011). The capacity of some, rather than others, to utilize different ways of knowing—thoughtful reflection, creative innovation, or interventionist expertise—in their work and labor builds upon historical inequalities, whether those of race, class, language, gender, sexuality, religion, or caste.

Knowledge as a constitutive component of work or labor—one *learns* to labor, or knowledge is a *skill* one has or *service* one offers—must be understood in relation to its role in the valorizing of different actions and persons within a wider field of recognition. Learning a *trade* on the construction sites of Delhi, as Sargent argues in his essay, creates an intimate knowledge of particular substances, a knowledge which is inextricable from claims to be a skilled worker rather than a lowly laborer. By contrast, Kantor’s essay demonstrates how owners of land in rural Bihar carefully renounce intimate knowledge of agricultural work as they navigate the devalued category of the farmer. Learning to work is always also learning not to do other kinds of work as one navigates shifting valuations of actions and persons. Yet these dynamics do not stop with the person of the worker, as many have reminded us (e.g., Haraway 1988). Knowledge is a relational and partial endeavor. It requires the collaboration of “others” because the knowledge being produced, more often than not, bears upon the lifeworlds of those

“others” in some way. The World Bank survey into water theft discussed in Hayat’s essay is illustrative in this regard: Not only was the work of data collection performed by *patwari* themselves, but also, when the results of the paper (water theft had increased) were read aloud to them, one *patwari* made clear that this was already known by them, emphasizing that he could have also “given them this in writing.” In the case of the scrap dealers that Saraf discusses in her essay, there is a similarly unwitting collaboration in which the skilled and careful actions of scrap metal recyclers become evidence of environmental hazard. In the public-private partnership discussed by Butt, the managers brought in to improve solid waste management for the city strive to create knowledge about solid waste from a distance, yet in the process, they become ever more closely entangled in the actions of waste workers and their supervisors. The production of knowledge, whether about water theft, environmental harm, or solid waste management, depends upon the cooperation and collaboration of laboring subjects who, if not the object of knowledge themselves, are at least implicated in the object under scrutiny.

Each of the articles in this special issue pays close attention to how different kinds of action—breaking apart a vehicle, management of irrigation water, skilled construction, agricultural cultivation, and managerial supervision—and the persons who perform them come to be valued, often jointly, in historically and ethnographically specific ways. We inject epistemological questions into our ethnographic concerns with work and labor to understand how actions and persons are being valued in the contemporary moment. The places of work our papers consider are not necessarily those sites where humans and nonhumans labor to produce for and reproduce capitalism, nor necessarily those where persons potentially refuse the dialectic of capital and labor (Tsing 2015; Gibson-Graham 2006; Besky and Blanchette 2019; Gidwani 2008). Rather, our accounts acknowledge that “[u]ndergirding and articulating forms of and relations between value and politics are ways of knowing” (Sunder Rajan 2017: 8). Such accounts require a greater attentiveness to the ways of knowing that organize, rationalize, and standardize relations of work and labor, while concurrently legitimating and justifying the relative worth of actions and persons (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Çalışkan and Callon 2009; Lamont 2012). In recent times, as the subject of labor has undergone profound transformations, it has become quite clear that a politics of work must contend with the ways in which actions and persons come to be known and valued. We offer these essays as a provocation not only to rethink what we mean by work

or labor as categories of action but also to imagine other political possibilities for what worlds of work could become.

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