

different from the one ordained by the capitalist present, and undertaking this expansion of the concept is a worthwhile project. Yet, as Gulli well knows, this cannot happen in a vacuum. The very word *labor* had become overlade with meanings; the concept has been essentialized, naturalized, modernized, historicized and deconstructed, and a comprehensive list of relevant thinkers would have to stretch at least from Plato to Baudrillard. Indeed—and this is the source of the work’s greatest difficulties—Gulli is too keenly aware of this with the result that he takes on the expansion of the concept in multiple registers to enriching but also confusing effect.

The problem becomes clear immediately in the introduction as the author produces one label after another for the new category: “labor in itself,” “labor’s concept”, “neutral labor,” “living labor,” “ontological labor.” The richness and the confusion spring from the fact that each one comes with all the baggage of its own philosophical tradition. Is this a Hegelian in-itself? Or could the author have in mind a Platonic concept? Is early 20th century life philosophy at work in the thought of living labor or could this be a reference to Husserl’s life world?

How is a reader to make her way through this exciting morass? One solution, and perhaps the most charitable one, is to approach the volume as a set of loosely related essays (as distinct from a single sustained argument) on the question of how to understand labor in a way that opens up its emancipatory possibilities. Given that, the fact that the book has four chapters should not mislead us into thinking that this is a set of four essays. The first chapter alone is divided into 12 sections, several of which work together as a reading of Marx’s

“ontological labor” and the related term “neutral labor.” “Labor,” he writes, is to social and political ontology as “being” is to pure ontology. It is a pithy riddle that invites critical reflection; surely if the reader can solve it she will have grasped something key to the work as a whole.

Ontology is that sub-field of philosophy that deals with the nature of being. Or is it? Perhaps it is inaccurate to claim that being can have a nature at all since it must precede all particularity of character or nature. So, beginning again, ontology is the sub-field of philosophy that deals with questions of being. Yet can it be a sub-field, if being is the *sine qua non*, that without which there is nothing? Perhaps the medieval philosophers were right and I must begin a third time, acknowledging ontology as *first* philosophy. Gulli is helpfully specific here. What he terms *pure ontology* is the work of 9th century philosopher Duns Scotus, and the neutral concept of being is Scotus’ thought of the concept of being as included in the more specific concepts of finite being and infinite being (for example), while they are not included in it. Crucially, the concept can be formally neutral with respect to finitude or infinity, but any real being must *be* either finite or infinite. So, taking the quotation marks around “being” in his riddle to indicate that we need to attend to the word as a word, “being” is the word whose meanings run beyond any given instance of being and the subject matter of pure ontology is the full range of the word’s possible meanings.

Transposing this onto the relation between “labor” (again, we must attend to the word as a word) and political and social ontology, we find that the many meanings of “labor” extend beyond the meaning of “slave labor” or “productive or unproductive labor” or any particular use of the word, and the subject matter of political

forebearers. Gulli resists any temptation to leave the matter at the level of received wisdom, however, and argues instead that the utopian strand that emerges here i

Understanding it in this way removes the ancient distinction between making (poiesis) and action (praxis) which in turn allows the author to undo the distinction between creation and mere making. Creative labor must fall within the greater category of labor, and the fact that art, under capitalism, is capable of producing works that are at odds with social reality is no more than testimony to the capacity of labor to set itself against the world as it is as the first step in the creation of a new world. The old ontological confusion does occasionally appear again, as in the too-quick identification of aesthetics with ontology and thus with “a practical and poetic disposition” (150), but the essays in this final chapter generate real and interesting possibilities. I would like to hear more about the moment when Heidegger and Holderlin approach Vico’s thought that poets are the true founders of social being, and about the approach that brings Adorno and Heidegger together—despite all the bitterness and jargon that divides them—on the distinction between the sensuous and the non-sensuous.

Hannah Arendt often described the real work of intellectuals as the work of keeping thought in motion. If thought is allowed to come to rest it quickly calcifies into dogma or becomes the received, common-sensical account of how things are. This has been the deepest danger in the triumph of capitalism (such as it is) since it complacency and resistance in the way of any attempt to even imagine a different world. The value of this work is in its unrelenting insistence that there are other worlds for us to bring into being, specifically, that there is a world where labor is free and creative and unconstrained by the demands of productivity. It is for others—for us—to discover how change can happen but the first step is always made by thinkers like Gulli who remind us, at the moment when despair looms, that capitalism does not capture and exhaust all that it is to be a laboring human being.

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NOTES

¹ Marx and Engels. 1978. *Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978, 160.

² See Harry Braverman. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 410-423. My thanks to GM for this reference.

³ Baudrillard, Jean. 1975. *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster. St. Louis: Telos Press.

⁴ This is a thought I develop in “Symbol, exchange and birth: towards a theory of labor and relation” (*Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30:3, 2004, 355-373).