

00-04

Speculating with Value/Gambling with Difference: Spivak's Marx

By

Joseph Childers
Department of English
University of California, Riverside
and
Stephen Cullenberg
Department of Economics
University of California, Riverside

Speculating with Value/Gambling with Difference:
Spivak's Marx

July 1999

Joseph Childers
Department of English
University of California
Riverside, CA 92521

Stephen Cullenberg
Department of Economics
University of California
Riverside, CA 92521

We begin with two short, but we hope pithy, quotes: the first is from Gayatri Spivak, and serves as an epigram: "Marx left the slippery concept of use value untheorized." The second is decidedly more pedestrian--though perhaps equally compelling, and is taken from a radio advertisement playing in Southern California, hawking typical Southern California goods--cars, tires, fast food, banks in grocery stores or some such item or service. The voice in the ad is that of a famous and quite wealthy athlete, Troy Aikman, who tells the audience that when one purchases this particular product (perhaps they are Disneyland tickets), one receives value, and that value is quality plus price (culture and economics). Now it is certainly not unusual to get cultural or economics lessons, of a sort, on the radio or television; nor is it a novelty to have those lessons come from a television personality or an athlete. It is unusual, however, to have an equation offered to us so directly and unequivocally. Would that value, which seems such an easy concept to grasp, were so easily defined, so readily fixed, so effortlessly applied.

But of course it is not; indeed once we begin to push upon the concept of value that we find in *Capital* and elsewhere in Marx, and once we begin to use some of the tools bequeathed us by

post-structuralist incursions into Marxist theory, we discover that not only is the concept--indeed one might say *concepts*--of value vexed, but sometimes mulishly so. Linked as it is to understandings of commodity fetishism and labor that are often too quickly essentialised by those unwilling to challenge the boundaries of traditional Marxist inquiry, value becomes the marker, the sign, that which is to be seen in the speculations on Marxism that arise from within the academy.

Gayatri Spivak has been one of those who has taken up value in its function of difference, as a means of signifying yet also of always falling short of representing. Unwilling to sever completely value's connection to labor, Spivak instead asks us to think value as both more inclusive and as limited in its representational abilities. Value's textual function then is as catechresis--a rather grand "failure" to ever fully represent labor. Inasmuch as it is usually seen as the expression of social abstract labor, we would argue that it is always already essentialised, for abstract labor is itself an essence, not extant in the particular, only in the virtual.

Representationally, value is yet another step removed from concrete, individuated labor, since it is equated with labor in both its abstraction and its social or exchange function. At the realization of this dual signification of value and its

nearly simulacrum-like distance from labor, where value becomes simultaneously its own spectacle and delimiter, Spivak asks us to examine that which is not articulated and cannot be contained in conventional Marxist constructions of value. As first Saussure and later Derrida have taught us, to stand for something, to represent, especially in language but in other kinds of signification as well, is based upon difference. That which signifies something else can only represent the other because of difference, because it is NOT the other. Indeed our entire rhetoric of representation from mimesis to identification underscores that difference, remarking not so much on what something is but what it is not and how closely its substitute--its signifier--approximates it. And there is much that value excludes, that it cannot stand for. For instance, it does not consider the use value function of items, except as a prerequisite to exchange value, and thus commodification, or as part of the value form in which the value of one commodity is expressed as the use value of another commodity. Yet even in the value form, the emphasis is on exchange, equivalency based upon difference. The concept of value cannot stand for the labor that goes into the production of items for use value. As a result, labor that does not immediately enter into exchange, or does not produce exchange value, is outside the conventional

representational purview of value. Yet, as we know, a considerable amount of labor--what we might call "unremarked labor," goes into the production of a wide variety of important goods and services. For example, women's labor, much "third world labor," children's domestic labor, are supplements to value as we usually conceive it, traces of the value form as expressed in exchange.

But what can this portend for Marxist analysis? If value is a site of excess beyond its representational capabilities, where can we go in our own thinking about it? Here it may be salutary to turn to Spivak's own suggestions, such as they are, and consider whether she is really calling for a rethinking of the value-labor connection in a way that can have positive effect or if she is merely participating in a complex academic exercise. In her essay, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," she foregrounds the "textual chain" of value as construct, noting that in her "reading, it is use-value that puts the entire textual chain of value into question. Rather than consider Marx's theory of value in the "continuist" tradition which has come to describe it in terms of the transformation from labor to value to money to capital (or surplus value), where labor is superadequate to itself and is the essence of the value chain, she suggests that we should read

Marx's account of value as an analysis of the ability of capital to consume the use value of labor power" (McCabe xv). In focusing on use-value as the indeterminant moment in the chain of value-determinations, as Colin McCabe tells us, she breaks open that chain (xv), and thus allows us a glimpse of the possibility that even textualization, which is already an advance upon the control implicit in linguistic or semiotic reductionism, may be no more than a way of holding randomness at bay" (162). As provocative as her foregrounding of use value may be, this admission--at least at first blush--hardly seems to open the door to new possibilities or even oppositional strategies. For while in some instances the *jouissance* of the text may be the very goal of reading, in the matrix of economic and cultural forces that combine to create the exigencies with which she is concerned, Spivak hints at the need--though never the promise--of a teleology [Steve, I took out "messianic moment" - seemed redundant] that is not the product of randomness.

The textuality of value itself becomes a catachresis in Spivak's positioning, suggesting new understanding, yet also functioning as a delimiter to the free play of randomness. In its double edged role it engenders aporetic moments of its own, as she points out only a few paragraphs later:

This expansion of the textuality of value has often gone unrecognized by feminists as well as mainstream Marxists, when they are caught within hegemonic positivism or orthodox dialectics. They have sometimes tried to close off the expansion, by considering it as an opposition (between Marxism and feminism) or by way of inscribing, in a continuist spirit, the socializing or ideology forming function of the family as direct means of producing the worker and thus involved in the circuit of the production of surplus value for the capitalist. They have attempted to legitimize domestic labor within capital logic. Most of these positions arise from situational exigencies. . . . That these closing off gestures are situationally admirable is evident from the practical difficulty of offering alternatives to them. (163)

This " expansion of the textuality of value" that Spivak recognizes does not offer readily apparent solutions to the problems that arise in the contingencies of every day life and political decisions. Citing her own inability to attain " a critical distance" because of her involvement with those positions arising from the situational exigencies that she points to, Spivak leaves textuality more as a problematic than as an

opening to innovative solutions. Indeed, inasmuch as textuality expands not to articulate difference, but "to hold randomness at bay," it functions in very nearly the same way as the relationship of value to labor always has--as a virtual, homogenizing, totalizing condition that points to difference even as it writes in similitude.

Thus Spivak is able to assess the "closing off" gestures of various feminist and post-structuralist informed Marxists with a certain amount of admiration. However, we would argue, these gestures arise not so much from the inability to recognize the chain of the textuality of value as from a resistance to its homogenizing force. Within this essay, and in others in which she discusses value, such as "Marginality in the Teaching Machine" and "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak's own interventions seem increasingly more akin to a Foucauldian strategy of local situations, local solutions, than either offering a dramatic, all-encompassing theory of value as text or producing deconstructive readings that seem, in the final analysis, to place the subject in the *mise en abyme* of play without the possibility of action--or conversely the possibility of all actions. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Spivak does indeed retain some aspect of the metaphysical notion of value that echoes back to Troy Aikman's pitch about

" quality." And for her, this quality resides in certain ethical and moral imperatives to act. This is not to say that Spivak condones or ascribes to some universal ethos; yet neither does she present herself as a radical relativist--or a pragmatist in the Rortian sense of the term. For Spivak, there is a political agenda that is clear and defined, one that demands action AND theorizing and that informs her choices in these arenas.

This agenda becomes particularly interesting when she takes up the issue of identity politics in the "Marginality" essay. Beginning with the notion of cultural value coding she writes:

" Marginality," as it is becoming part of the disciplinary-cultural parlance, is in fact the name of a certain constantly changing set of representations that is the condition and effect of it. It is coded in the currency of the equivalencies of knowledge. That currency measures the magnitude of value in the sphere of knowledge (62)

She grants that in many ways this is unavoidable. The practicalities of the academy transform questions such as " what is worth studying teaching and talking about" into " what can best be parceled out into a fourteen-or-ten week format" ; or " How best can it be proved that this can be integrated into the

English curriculum without disturbing the distribution requirements?" (62). She goes on to say, that we cannot grasp value as "that currency of the equivalencies of knowledge," that is to say, in its form alone, without content. Rather we tend to position ourselves "as *identities* in terms of links in the chain of value-coding as if they [the links] were persons and things, and [we] go on to ground our practice on that positioning" (63). The result, she claims, is that "we become a part of the problem" in those practical ways she describes (63).

From this observation, Spivak moves back to her own now famous, often-muddled, stance on "strategic essentialism," once again taking up the demands of the exigencies of being in the world. Insisting on the arbitrary and unfixed relation between value and labor, it is a predictable move to loosen the claims that the value form itself has on our agency. In a nearly nominalist moment she asserts that, "the operation of the value-form makes every commitment negotiable, however urgent it might seem or be" (62). For Spivak, if indeed we have understood her argument, the very functioning of the value form as a means of expressing equivalencies in terms first of social relations and second of commodities in exchange (a definitional redundancy of which we are aware) is precisely the site of interest that this

conference has focused on, since it is the place where the cultural and the economic are inextricably imbricated and must be read through a lens that focuses on capitalist abilities to consume the use value of the cultural capital it has also helped to produce. Her own example, identity, then is rewritten and rethought in a sphere outside the usual *liberal* notions of tolerance or redress as such. As she points out, "For the long haul emancipatory social intervention is not primarily a question of redressing victimage by the assertion of (class-or gender- or ethnocultural) identity. It is a question of developing a vigilance for systemic appropriations of the unacknowledged social production of a differential that is one base of exchange into networks of the cultural politics of class- or gender *identification*." (63). In an apt description of her own position within the academy, she explains how such a strategy might work by arguing that, "the postcolonial teacher can help to develop this vigilance rather than continue pathetically to dramatize victimage or assert a spurious identity. She says 'no' to the "moral luck" of the culture of imperialism while recognizing that she must inhabit it, indeed invest it, to criticize it" (62).

Spivak calls this the deconstructive dilemma of the postcolonial, but it might well serve, if taken as a general

strategy, as the dilemma for any political activity. Her double move of rejecting the commodification of identity, especially in terms of victimage, while working to enable a new kind of sight, what she refers to as "vigilance" from within the culture of imperialism redirects the vectors of agency within discourses of power, allowing them to produce activity that is disruptive, reformulative, and potentially, she tacitly claims, "liberating." The invocation here, it seems to us, is less of the ghost of Marx than the specter of Foucault, especially when she claims that such a strategy allows us to understand that "no historically (or philosophically) adequate claims can be produced in any space for the guiding words of political, military, economic, ideological emancipation and oppression" (63). Her dilemma then gets written in Foucauldian as much as Derridian terms, in which the particular discourse of power, in this instance imperialism, constrains as well as produces its subjects, yet also always reabsorbs them into new configurations of power relations.

This short digression into identity-politics theories of resistance and opposition, may seem a long distance from the issue of value, but the ways in which Spivak moves in her "Marginality" essay to include value-form and its chain of coding in her discussion of postcolonial identity (and its

commodification) helps us to underscore our own observation about value, its function, and its analogous status with subjectivity--an observation taken from our reading of Spivak on value, but one which we believe needs a more direct articulation than she seems willing to offer. The most provocative theoretical undertakings today begin with a set of assumptions about the subject that separate subjectivity and agency and emphasize the multiply constituted formation of the subject. Chantal Mouffe, who as we say is by no means alone in holding these assumptions, offers a succinct expression of that position:

Within every society, each social agent is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations--not only social relations of production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationalism, vicinity. All these social relations determine positionalities or subject positions, and every social agent is therefore the locus of many subject positions and cannot be reduced to only one. Thus, someone inscribed in the relations of production as a worker is also a man or a woman, white or black, Catholic or Protestant, French or German, and so on. . . [T]he subjectivity of a given social agent is always precariously and provisionally

fixed or, to use the Lacanian term, sutured at the intersection of various discourses. (90)

This is not a new formulation to any one here, and most of us operate theoretically on a similar conception of subjectivity and agency. As we can see from even a cursory reading of this quote, the subject is the interstice where a number of different ideological and material forces intersect. But because the social, economic, and cultural activities that produce these possibilities are themselves dynamic and in multilateral engagement with one another, and because the subject is no longer tightly bound to an essence of self, or a metaphysical totality, that intersectional space is always shifting in its shape, its place, in the very possibility of combinations it can contain (or proscribe), and the social agent's subjectivity is materially, as well as ideologically, linked to any number of exigencies.

In a very real sense, then, the subject is a kind of text in which the possibilities of agency are written, and also always already being re-written. In insisting on the textual chain of value, Spivak offers us an analogous situation for the concept of value. And, if we are correct in our own reading of value as the space of intersection between culture--in all its possible manifestations--and economics (as science or discipline), then we should also consider value as an overdetermined site, not

reducible to a simple metric of value as the representation of labor. We must also consider the cultural constitutions of value--desire, perceived need, the privileging of one commodity over another, etc. Put perhaps too simply, if we can return to the value is price plus quality equation we whimsically began with, value partakes not only of the economic ("price" --whether in terms of labor or a universal equivalence such as money) but also of the cultural ("quality," in whatever way that might be expressed). Conceiving of value in such terms thus marks it as a site of multiple, overdetermined, possibilities that produce and disseminate meaning as well as create both limits and openings for political intervention.

This move, at the outset, may seem potentially devastating for Marxism as we have come to know it. But before that judgment is pronounced, let us consider at least one of the implications that obtain from this argument. First, let us point out that Spivak needs to retain a connection between value and labor, yet is unwilling to preserve a labor essentialism as the basis of value. The result is the problematization of abstract labor as the "essence" of value--an argument we have already briefly rehearsed. In order to retain the connection to labor, however, she privileges the use-value moment of value. As McCabe has pointed out, this strategy makes "labor endlessly variable."

It also continues the refusal of abstract labor as originary to value in such a way that surplus value also becomes variable, indeterminate, loosed from its chain of signifiers as does value form. The consequence of such a move is two-fold, at the very least. On the one hand it allows a consideration of certain kinds of labor that have traditionally been ignored, since they operate outside the sphere of circulation, and thus are not incorporated into the totality "abstract labor" and do not contribute directly to the constitution of exchange value and cannot be represented in value. This, the catechretic moment, is the opening Spivak is looking for in examining, especially, "the normative accounts of modes of production" that "have impeded third world struggles" (McCabe xv). But because surplus value is no longer tied to the totalizing conception of abstract labor--a totality that loses its force within this schema--the fundamental Marxist ethico-political critique of exploitation--tied as it is to surplus value--is undermined. The question that remains at such a juncture is whether a critique of exploitation, in all its forms whether in capitalist industries, patriarchal households, or third-orld sweatshops, can still obtain. We believe it can.

In order to make our point, we rely on G.A. Cohen's discussion of exploitation in his 1988 *History, Labor, and*

Freedom. With similar reservations about the connections of labor to value, Cohen begins his series of observations with an important difference. For him, the laborer is the person who creates the product or use value, that which *has* value. It is important to note that Cohen's formulation implies the accretion of value in the product, and does not rely on value as intrinsic to the product because of the labor invested in the commodity. Cohen, and we would argue Spivak too, takes an agnostic position regarding the creation of value. Value is not simply the metric of abstract labor, made comparable and also different in a typical Marxist move, allowing one to "see" surplus value and the victimage of unpaid labor performance. Nor, is value an overdetermined metric of abstract labor, always inflected by changing economic, political and cultural conditions of existence, as in the more poststructuralist gesture of Wolff, Roberts, and Callari (a gesture that is favorably remarked by Spivak in her "Speculations of Value" essay).

For us, and for Spivak too we surmise, value is the intersection of culture and economics. It is not merely the overdetermined magnitude of abstract labor, but is the site/sign of "labor" and "culture, of quality and price." Again, value functions much like the decentered and multiple subject positions of Mouffe mentioned above. Value becomes irreducible and

therefore not strictly comparable qua abstract labor. How then can we maintain a notion of exploitation? It is at this moment, we employ Cohen's argument that the value is overdetermined, defined by factors external to labor as well as connected to labor, and that value is not fully constituted as a magnitude of abstract labor. Pace Cohen, the sequence follows that the capitalist appropriates some of the value of the product; the laborer receives less value than the value of what she creates; the capitalist thus also appropriates some of the value of what the laborer creates, and the laborer is consequently exploited by the capitalist (See Cohen 229). It is important to note several theoretical implications of this analysis. First the attention is on the creation of the product's use value, not value per se. Second, the creation of value is not (completely) attributed to labor; it is overdetermined in "essence" and thus operating as a sign of both economic and cultural imperatives. Third, because the word "capitalist" could be replaced by feudal lord, slave owner, state, etc., this formulation is appropriate for explaining different forms of class exploitation in different sites, whether the household, the third world, or cyberspace. Finally, we see that the fundamental marxian critique of exploitation still obtains, although it is now formulated

differently and not in such a totalizing fashion as when linked to the abstract labor/value/surplus value nexus.

In many ways, we believe that this moves us a bit farther along in drafting a strategic outline of the possibilities of speculating with value and gambling with difference that Spivak sometimes tentatively suggests. It considers the consequence of the privileging of use value that McCabe identifies when he remarks that without a fixed relation between value and labor it is impossible to understand the appropriation of surplus outside a full understanding of the organization of value within a particular community. That is to say, the "social" is once again a complex, multiple set of possibilities that cannot be reduced simply to its function in exchange or in the value form. And while value itself may indeed be destabilized within the traditional Marxian metric, the openings such a destabilization offers allow us to consider exploitation and its concomitant results in relation to the formation of value in its many manifestations--from the surplus value that derives from capitalist appropriation of both the labor and the cultural accretion of value in a commodity to the use value of products that are produced by labor usually written out of theorizations of exploitation, because not part of the generally recognized sphere of exchange. At this point in our own deliberations on

such speculations, we have no general theory, no grand narrative to offer for political intervention. Indeed, even to assume that we might produce one would be to subvert the anti-essentialist, anti-totalizing theoretical impulses that underwrite many of our assumptions and arguments. On the other hand, we do think that by beginning to rethink value as non-derivative and as a function of both the economic and cultural spheres (a binary that functions only heuristically for us), that it may be possible to keep in mind the ever negotiable characteristics of our own commitments while still striving to reverse, displace and seize the very apparatus of value coding. Perhaps it will allow us to instigate change that we can commit to, however briefly.

References

- Cohen, G.A. 1988. *History, Labour and Freedom: Themes from Marx*.
Oxford: Clarendon
- Marx, Karl. *Capital, volume I*. London: Penguin Publishers.
- McCabe, Colin.
- Mouffe, Chantal.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In
_____. 1993. "Limits and Opening of Marx in Derrida." In
Outside in the Teaching Machine. London: Routledge: 97-119.
- _____. 1993. "Marginality in the Teaching Machine." In
Outside in the Teaching Machine. London: Routledge: 53-76.
- Wolff, Richard, Bruce Roberts and Antonio Callari.