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## **Labor, Humanism, and the Play of Mediation: A Rejoinder**

Samuel Mercer's Review of *A World Beyond Work? Labour, Money and the Capitalist State Between Crisis and Utopia*, by Ana C. Dinerstein and Frederick H. Pitts, United Kingdom, Emerald, 2021.

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### **Abstract**

This rejoinder focuses on two issues discussed in Samuel Mercer's review of our book *A World Beyond Work? Labour, Money and the Capitalist State Between Crisis and Utopia*.

The first concerns our alleged defence of concrete labour against abstract labour, the second concerns the accusation of humanism. Firstly, the rejoinder clarifies our understanding of concrete and abstract labour as dialectically intertwined, and the implications of this for class struggle in and against the 'play of mediation' between the two. Secondly, the rejoinder pleads guilty to the charge of humanism in how we approach work and alienation. We argue that the criticism is based in the idea of an 'epistemological break' in Marx's work. We situate our work in a countervailing reading of Marx that sees a humanist core and continuity characterising both the 'early' conceptualisation of alienation and estrangement and the later conceptualisation of real abstraction in the critique of political economy.

**Key Words** abstract labour, concrete labour, humanism, Marx, post-work

### **Text**

We are grateful to Samuel Mercer for his sophisticated review of *A World Beyond Work?*, and specifically its engagement with the theoretical fundamentals of the book. We share with Mercer's scholarship a critique of the current wave of post-work thinking and its relationship with claims about so-called 'post-capitalism', albeit with different reasons and to different ends. We thank the editors for giving us the opportunity to expand on some of the interesting issues Mercer raises. In particular, our rejoinder focuses on two issues raised in the review.

The first concerns our alleged defence of concrete labour against abstract labour. For us, it is important to understand that concrete and abstract are inseparable because abstract labour is the form of existence of labour specific to capitalist society. This is why we argue that the end

of concrete labour some desire will not lead to the post-capitalist society they describe. Capitalist society is not defined solely by its dependence on putting people to work in concrete labour itself. Rather, its specificity relates to the maintenance of underpinning conditions of dispossession and commodification, and the mediation of human productive activity in social, legal, economic forms that regulate and reproduce the existence of concrete labour as waged labour, and thus in turn as abstract labour. As Mercer notes, we stress the need to foreground these social relations and social forms in our critique of the post work prospectus. In his critique, Mercer suggests that we betray these theoretical underpinnings with our political recommendations, defending concrete labour as a separate pole of human ‘doing’ against its mediation as abstract labour in a manner reminiscent of a Marxist humanism. Mercer suggests here that we are unduly swayed by the young Marx’s discussion of alienation, eliding the insights of Marx’s later critique of political economy:

Whilst Dinerstein and Pitts (2021, p.115) insist that work cannot be separated from the social relations and social forms in which it is valorised, their political recommendations appear to rest on a humanist interpretation of concrete labour that does exactly this, existing primarily in co-operation between human beings, as ‘products of human thought and practice,’ autonomous of capitalist social relations.

Firstly, we are not defending ‘concrete labour’ against abstract labour in the way Mercer describes. Rather we insist in their inseparability. Just as workers cannot emancipate themselves from alienation through the refusal or ‘end’ of work alone, they similarly cannot emancipate themselves from alienation through detachment from the market or from money alone. With the example of the Argentinean *Piquetero* movement of unemployed workers, we demonstrate that struggle is waged within these processes of mediation and abstraction,

navigating the contradictions presented in the forms the dual character of labour assumes in capitalist society. The struggles of the movement of unemployed workers show precisely that life without work may free workers from the ‘doing’ of concrete labour but the modes of existence it assumes in abstract social forms like value and money. These latter and the social relations they conceal represent a deeper form of subordination in capital, rooted in dispossession. Unemployment, as the lack of concrete labour, does not escape the movement of mediation specific to a society that appears in the form of its abstract twin. This has consequences for how struggles are conceived, those of the unemployed being not autonomous from other forms of class struggle in, against and beyond capitalist social relations, but rather part and parcel of them.

The second and related point we wish to pick up on regards humanism and the question of ‘life’. The author observes that we provide a humanistic definition of work, seeing it as ‘what makes us human and what makes us social’. We happily plead guilty to the charge of humanism. Work, as the capacity of the ‘insurgent architect’ to plan and imagine the future, is only human. But this capacity, in capitalism, exists as Richard Gunn puts it, in the ‘mode of being denied’. This means it exists as concrete labour and is only recognised in its form of mediation as abstract labour. Our political recommendations do not rest on a retreat into work as concrete labour, which cannot be rescued from abstract labour because it is already contaminated by it. Rather, the book projects a process of class struggle waged within the contradictions that characterise what Gunn calls the ‘play of mediation’ between concrete and abstract. This ‘play’ goes on everyday as humans negotiate the estrangement and abstraction of their subjective activity in forms of social and economic objectivity that take on a life of their own. These forms mediate class struggle, with class struggle a struggle over the terms of these mediations – a struggle not only over labour but the welfare state, the law, income

distribution and the economy. This will not result in a definitive escape from intractable processes of objectification intrinsic to human existence. The play of mediation will go on, producing better and worse objectifications of human subjective activity in new and different social forms.

This understanding of alienation and real abstraction sheds light on a central point of difference underpinning our disagreements with Mercer. The review suggests that we remain stuck in an understanding of alienation and estrangement abandoned in Marx's mature work like *Capital*. But we do not see such an Althusserian divide between the concepts deployed by the young and old Marx, nor that one betters the other. Rather, we follow a long lineage of critical theory including the Frankfurt School and Henri Lefebvre in perceiving a continuity, grounded in the subject-object dialectic, between the concepts of alienation and estrangement in Marx's early work and what later appears in the critique of political economy as fetish or real abstraction. Humanism, on this reading, was not cast off with the 'epistemological break' Althusser dreamt up, but rather remained a constant presence in Marx's critique of political economy as a critique of the forms of social and economic objectivity into which the subject disappears in capitalist society. If 'humanism' is the attempt to understand the subject's struggle in and against the inhumane reproduction of human life in and through forms of social domination then – yes – we are humanists, like Marx himself.

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## Bios

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