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“Unpaid work”: On the pitfalls of metaphorical redescription

Comment on Jason W. Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Verso 2015)

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zksp-2017-0015>

Abstract: I am commenting on Moore's book from the perspective of philosophy of science, i.e. I concentrate on his conceptual framework and its formal features. There are two such features which will immediately attract the attention of any philosopher: first, the use of quotation marks, which I take to indicate that the author does not really wish (or dare, perhaps) to say what he actually says and, second, claims of necessity or counterfactual conditionals, which demand especially robust argumentation. These two features are directly related to each other: (1) Moore places the category of unpaid work, at least occasionally, in quotation marks; this concept is fundamental to his approach and he uses it in a much broader sense than is commonly done; and (2) he claims that capitalism depends necessarily on inputs of unpaid work. In my comment, I will discuss a number of conceptual problems linked to Moore's extension of the notion of unpaid work and will analyze the extent to which these problems affect his claim that capitalism is necessarily dependent on unpaid work.

Keywords: unpaid work, metaphors, counterfactuals, imperialism, feminist economics

At the theoretical heart of Moore's account of capitalism and the way it has developed over the last five hundred years is the concept of “ecological surplus”. He explains that ecological surplus can be understood as the ratio of “unpaid work” to capital invested. The value of this approach, he claims, is to lay bare the historical dynamics behind the development of capitalism. Moore's argument runs thus: in the course of investing a certain amount of capital into the economy, capitalists simultaneously mobilize “cheap nature” as an additional input. The “four cheaps” – labor power, food, energy, and raw materials – have fueled the

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impressive development of capitalism, which now appears as a major “free ride” when viewed through the lens of ecological surplus. “Ecological surplus” thus is one way to describe ongoing primitive accumulation. When the “four cheaps” are exhausted in a given location, capitalism moves on to other locations, pushing its “commodity frontiers” across the whole planet. This may demand considerable amounts of investment. But as long as capitalism succeeds in appropriating sufficient amounts of unpaid work, these inputs counterbalance the investment and restore profits. This is how capitalism has so far managed to overcome its crises. Indeed, it becomes clear that, as long as there is sufficient space left for further expansion, crises do not pose a threat to capitalism; rather, they have constituted the proper medium of its propagation through time and space over the last five centuries.

Moore's approach is a generalization of both Wallerstein's and Marx's work. In the case of Wallerstein, the latter's “world systems” theory is given an added ecological dimension – hence the notion of capitalism as a “world ecology”. Meanwhile, Moore's notion of the ratio of ecological surplus is clearly an extension of Marx's definition of surplus value as that part of value which capitalists appropriate within relations of regular, paid work. Moore extends this notion beyond paid work with a view to making visible capitalism's place in, and use of, the “web of life”. The category of unpaid work, the nominator in the fraction of ecological surplus, reveals who really pays the bill: slaves, the colonies, women, and nature.

There are a number of issues here which, from the perspective of philosophy of science, I consider to be controversial and would like to highlight in this comment. To begin with, according to Moore capitalism's relation to the realm of unpaid work is not a contingent one. Capitalism is not a harmless delinquent who, although he exploits the opportunities presented to him, could just as well do without them. No, according to Moore, capitalism *depends essentially* on unpaid work and the uninterrupted flow of the “four cheaps”: he speaks of “the diversity of human and extra-human activity *necessary* to capitalist development but not directly reproduced (‘paid’) through the money economy” (Moore 2015, p. 191, emphasis added). Moore's approach (like Wallerstein's) thus exemplifies a type of theory the most prominent (and perhaps also the first instance) of which is perhaps Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital. A Contribution to an Economic Explanation of Imperialism*, published in 1913. In this book Luxemburg states clearly that capitalism depends essentially on “non-capitalist milieus”:

Yet, as we have seen, capitalism in its full maturity also depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and social organizations existing side by side with it. [...] Since the accumulation of capital becomes impossible in all points without non-capitalist surroundings, we cannot gain a true picture of it by assuming the exclusive and absolute domination of the capitalist mode of production. (Luxemburg 1951, p. 365)

From a formal point of view, this claim is a law-like proposition, or a counterfactual conditional. It states as a matter of fact not only that capitalism has existed and continues to exist in a certain relationship to non-capitalist milieus but also that it does so *necessarily*, i.e.: capitalism *could not* exist (would collapse) if it did not exist in this relationship to its non-capitalist surroundings.

This type of claim has had many proponents, but there is as yet no consensus on the precise function performed by “non-capitalist milieus”. Moore regards them as sources of the “four cheap”. For Luxembourg, by contrast, their function is to absorb capitalism’s over-production. The flow of goods thus would also be directed from capitalist to non-capitalist milieus and not just the other way around. In addition to Luxembourg’s, there are several other readings of the general thesis of a “dependency” of capitalism on non-capitalist milieus. Samuel Bowles, for example, mentions the “parasitic liberalism thesis”, according to which the proper working of markets depends on social norms stemming from traditional institutions such as families or religions and which are endangered by the forces set free by the market (Bowles 2011). Bowles identifies many proponents of this thesis across the whole political spectrum, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Jürgen Habermas. It does have a narrower scope than Luxembourg’s or Moore’s, to be sure. Nevertheless, it instantiates the same type of claim, namely, that there is a *necessary* relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist milieus. I insist on this point because it follows from this that we should pay close attention to the terms we use to describe non-capitalist milieus. Ultimately, it is on the basis of these descriptions of the two milieus that the thesis of a necessary relation can be defended or disputed.

The term Moore proposes to describe the non-capitalist domain in question is “unpaid work”. “Unpaid work” is intended to cover all manner of unpaid flows of value into capitalism, both from the social and the natural realm, i.e. the work of slaves and women as well as the services provided by ecosystems (regenerative and non-regenerative resources, fertile soils formed over the millennia, etc.). Moore does not discuss the problems behind this concept in his book, but he does signal to the reader that there *may* be such problems. At least there are a handful of occasions where Moore places the term in quotation marks (Moore 2015, p. 85, p. 134, p. 225, and p. 299). For a philosophical reader, it is puzzling (and a clear sign of potential problems) when an author both relies heavily on a term and at the same time dissociates himself from it by placing it in quotation marks. Let us take a closer look at this term, then.

The notion of unpaid work stems from feminist economics, and Moore extends it to refer to nature. However, even its original use is controversial. Let us consider these origins first before turning to the extension proposed by Moore. I assume that the purpose of introducing the notion of unpaid work was both a

normative and an analytical one. On the one hand, it was intended to highlight – and value – the fact that women have traditionally played a major role in the reproduction of society. On the other hand, the aim was also to better understand the actual workings of the hybrid economy in which we live, consisting in a capitalist *and* a non-capitalist part. In our endeavor to analyze this heterogeneous system, “unpaid work” was coined to complement the category of “paid work” used to describe the dynamics of the purely capitalist component, i.e. the integration of workers into the economy through wage relations.

The first step thus was to insist on unpaid work being *work*, i.e. its *productive* nature. This is something Susan Himmelweit and Simon Mohun, among others, did in 1977:

Under capitalism, not all labour is wage-labour. Quite apart from vestigial remains of previous modes of production, there is a whole sector of production central to, but existing entirely outside, capitalist relations of production. This sector is domestic labour, the work of millions of housewives engaged in *private* production within individual families. (Himmelweit and Mohun 1977, p. 15)

This conceptual move is necessary for the purpose of extending key economic questions to the whole of production and reproduction: is there a net flow of value from private households into the labor market? Are women exploited and, if they are, by whom, by the capitalist or by the husband? (Folbre 1982)¹ In 1995, however, Himmelweit questioned the validity of extending the notion of work to domestic activity. Himmelweit reminds us that “work” is not a neutral category but is modeled on wage labor (Himmelweit 1995). This brings with it problems on both a political and a theoretical level. At the political level, she asks, would applying the category of work to household activities not amount to recognizing paid work (and the market in general) as the measure of all things, whereas the original aim was actually to prompt a recognition of what goes on beyond the market? Himmelweit stresses that, at a theoretical level, there are several characteristics which paid and unpaid work do not (necessarily) share. In housework, or “reproductive work”, there is no division of labor (or only to a small degree); housework is (generally) not standardized; also, domestic work and especially care work cannot easily be detached from the person working (there is no “perfect substitutability”, Folbre and Nelson 2000). Others have continued to defend the use of the category of work (e.g. Agustín 2012), and this can, of course, be done provided we strip all aspects specific to wage labor from it and reduce the notion

¹ Claude Meillassoux similarly analyzed the hybrid economies of developing countries in his famous 1975 study *Maidens, Meal, and Money*, see Meillassoux 1981.

of work to its core elements, namely: work is subject to the logic of means and ends; it requires expending time and energy (“opportunity costs”); and, finally, it is done out of exogenous necessity.

The notion of unpaid work has thus been shown to be problematic even within its discipline of origin. Moore now suggests extending it to the realm of nature. Here, of course, similar questions can be – and indeed are currently being – discussed. In order to extend “work” to nature, nature's activity has to be understood in a similar way as it is in ecological economics with the concept of “ecosystem services”. There is clearly something metaphorical in this extension of the concept of work, or “services” (cf. Raymond et al. 2013 for the political and ideological underpinnings of this and related metaphors). But metaphors are not inadmissible as such in science – on the contrary, insofar as “explaining” a new phenomenon involves offering a description of the unknown in terms of the known, scientific theories essentially consist in metaphorical redescriptions (cf. Barnes 1974, ch. 3). Scholars need to make sure, however, that the metaphor is not misleading, i.e. that both phenomena, the one the metaphor is taken from and the one it is applied to, share the characteristics in question. Let us test this, then, for the metaphor of unpaid work as applied to nature.

There is one crucial characteristic of work which “ecosystem services” (or nature's “unpaid work”) obviously do not share: their “work” is not an intentional activity, and as a consequence it is not subject to the logic of means and ends. I do not hold this to be a flaw in the metaphor, though. On the contrary, this is the very reason why it is a metaphor and not a direct description (if the absence of intentionality were a flaw, the notion of work would also have to be banned from physics). But there is one further point which I do hold to be problematic, one which is of direct concern to the thesis of a necessary dependence of capitalism on non-capitalist milieus. As regards our relation to nature, the thesis of a necessary dependence is a truism – regardless of the way in which the economy is organized; in a certain sense, it holds even for sustainable societies. Hence the immediate plausibility of Moore's claim. But does the same claim really hold for the relation between the market and domestic work? A second look at Moore's book shows that he assumes this claim rather than arguing for it. My main point is this: the metaphorical extension of the notion of unpaid work from domestic activity to ecosystem services masks a backward transfer of “necessary dependence” from nature to domestic work, which is perhaps not wrong but is certainly highly problematic and in need of supporting arguments. It is, of course, true that, as a specific way to organize the economy, capitalism depends on nature; but does the same hold for capitalism and the non-capitalist domestic sector?

To be sure, there is one meaning of “depends on” which again renders the claim trivial. Of course, the workforce is reproduced outside the market (both

individually from day to day and phylogenetically from generation to generation), and in this sense capitalism does indeed depend upon non-capitalist domains (traditionally the “family”). The crucial question is whether these domains *cannot*, for any reason, be organized in a capitalist way. Can it be imagined, without contradiction, that all the social relations necessary for society’s reproduction can be translated into relations between providers and consumers of services? “Can society be commodities all the way down?”, Nancy Fraser recently asked (Fraser 2014). Fraser is absolutely sure that society cannot, and as an argument she offers a “structuralist” re-reading of Polanyi’s essentialist account:

Understood in this way, attempts fully to commodify labour, land and money are conceptually incoherent and inherently self-undermining, akin to a tiger that bites its own tail. For structural reasons, therefore, society cannot be commodities all the way down.

Let us call this the ‘structural’ interpretation of fictitious commodification. Unlike the ontological interpretation, this one does not suppose an original condition of labour, nature and money that inherently resists commodification. It directs attention, rather, to the tendency of unregulated markets to destroy their own conditions of possibility. (Fraser 2014, p. 548)

The reasoning Fraser offers might best be called a transcendental argument, because it points to a contradiction between full commodification and its conditions of possibility. However, from this key paragraph it does not really become clear at what level Fraser is pitching her argument. The last sentence suggests an empirical reading, and in this case Fraser is right to speak of a “tendency of unregulated markets”. This is an empirical hypothesis awaiting verification. In any case, it is weaker than the claim of a necessary dependence. The first sentence in the above quotation, by contrast, points to a purely conceptual level of reasoning: full commodification would be “conceptually incoherent”. While this is a good candidate for the dependence thesis in its strongest sense, I do not think that this kind of question can be decided from the philosopher’s armchair. Not as a counter-argument, but as a counter-proposal, I refer to John Harrison’s interesting paper “The political economy of housework” from 1977. In this paper, Harrison too does not offer any arguments for or against the possibility of full commodification. He simply takes the possibility for granted and then asks under what conditions a hybrid economy is sustained and under what circumstances society would be fully commodified. Viewed from this perspective, everything turns out to be a question of productivity levels. Whether it is more profitable for the capitalist to exploit the housewife directly (commodification) or to exploit her indirectly through her husband (hybrid economy) depends on the relative productivity levels of capitalism and of households (Harrison 1977, p. 46).

This is certainly not an argument for or against Moore's central claim of a necessary dependence of capitalism on non-capitalist domains. What it does show, though, is that there is still a need for debate, and it is this very need for explicit argumentation that risks being disguised by the metaphor of unpaid work insofar as the latter grants to society's unpaid work what is unproblematic only for nature's unpaid work. It should also be mentioned, finally, that establishing "unpaid work" and then "ecological surplus" as basic terms of an analysis of capitalism requires much more than merely recognizing that (a) domestic activities are work and (b) ecosystem services share the relevant characteristics of "unpaid work" in the sense of (a). It should be stressed that "ecological surplus" is identified as a *ratio* which holds between two *quantities*, capital invested and unpaid work. Unpaid work thus has to be measured in economic terms. Moore does not provide any quantitative data. The story of shifting "commodity frontiers" is at first sight a purely qualitative one. But Moore claims explicitly that in each historical case the cheap input appropriated by a new investment actually helped restore profits. This is a claim about a quantitative relation, and if it is to have empirical meaning, one should be able to offer methods of monetarization of unpaid work both of people outside the market and of ecosystem services. The monetarization of non-market goods, however, brings with it a host of new problems. Crucially, all existing methods of monetarization are bound up intimately with the utilitarian and individualist approach of neoclassical economics (cf. e.g. National Research Council 2005). They rely on notions such as "willingness to pay", "consumer's surplus", and "contingent valuation", which one would hardly wish, or even be able, to integrate into Moore's Marxist account. How, then, can the concept of generalized "unpaid work" be operationalized? Would it make sense to extend the Marxian labor theory of value to unpaid work, and if so, would this be technically feasible? These questions have to be tackled for the theory of ecological surplus to be more than "merely" metaphorical.

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