

Digital Labour and the Use Value of Human Work

Prof. Dr. habil. Sabine Pfeiffer

COST-Action „Dynamics of Virtual Work“
Plenary Session WG3
Athens, 8th October 2013

Big picture vs. details

Two questions

1. Value creation in the Web economy: Where does it happen?

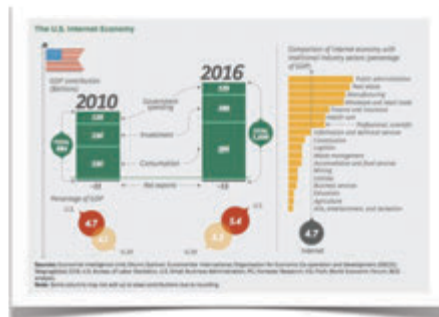
Pfeiffer, Sabine (2013): Web, Value and Labour. In: Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation, 7 (1), 12-30.

2. Value creation in the Web economy: Who/what makes it happen?

Pfeiffer, Sabine (2014): Digital Labour and the Use Value of Human Work. to be published in: tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Special Issue: Philosophers of the World Unite! Theorizing Digital Labour and Virtual Work: Definitions, Forms and Transformations, Summer 2014.

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Estimated growth of online purchasing. Amazing growth rates, still not too impressive share of GDP – and: partly based on weird assumptions (BCG 2012)

Computerization resulting in decline of labour's share of GDP (from the 70s to 2008: 6% down) (Kristal 2013).



Most claim the Web introduces a new era of economy. Some celebrate profit growth and new business models, others criticize enhanced exploitation.

Both see new forms of global value chains.

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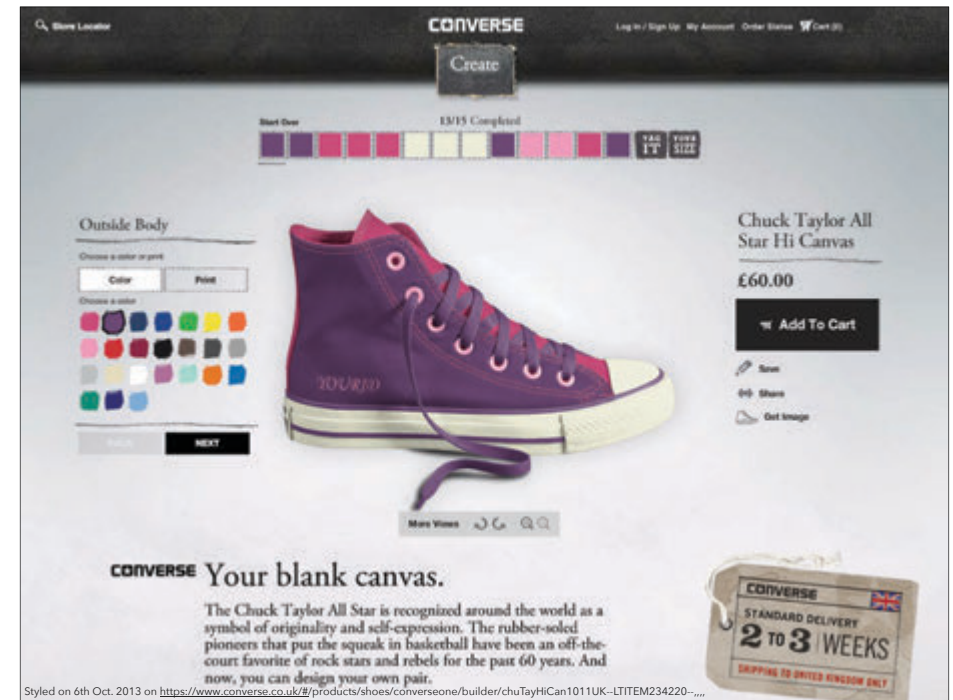
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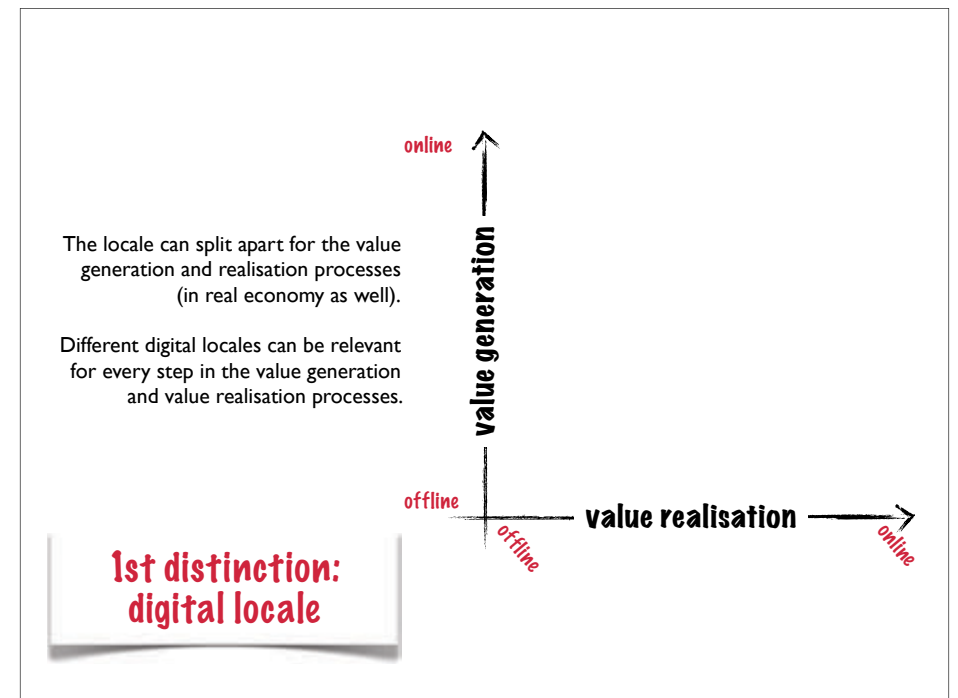
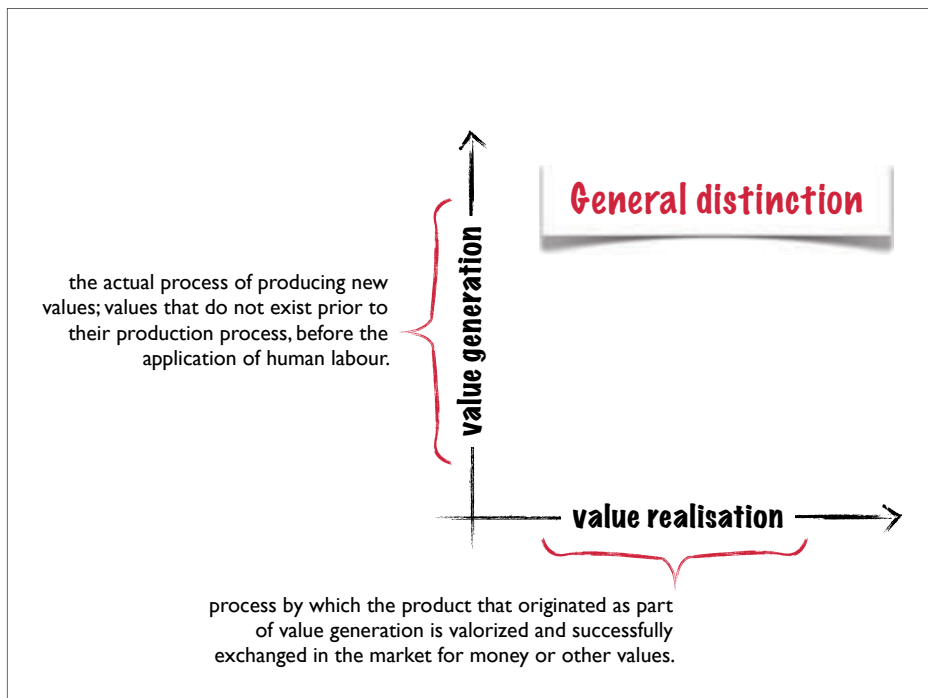
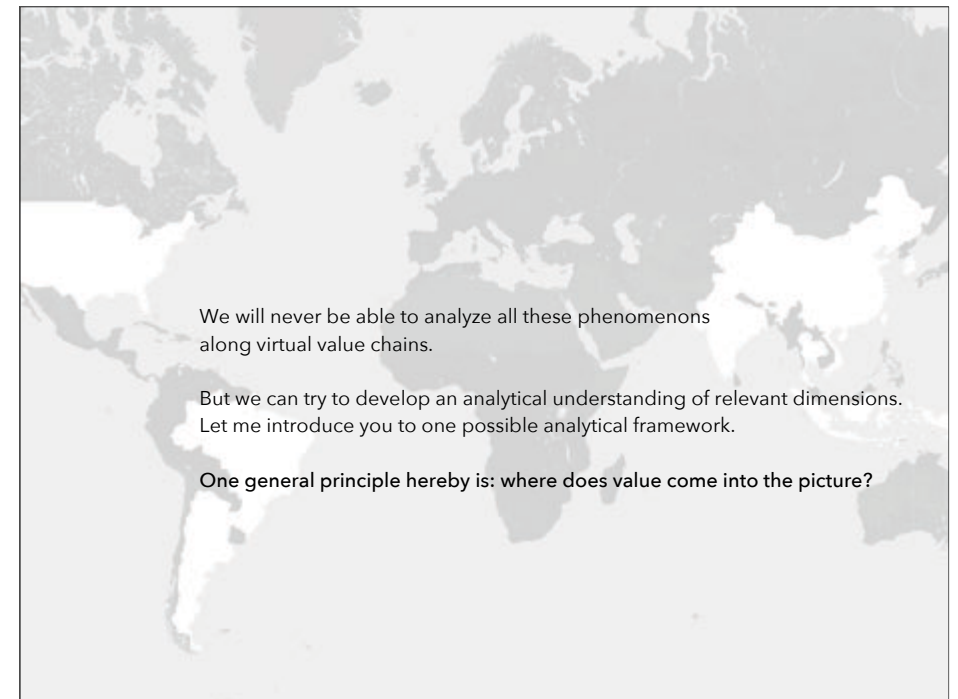
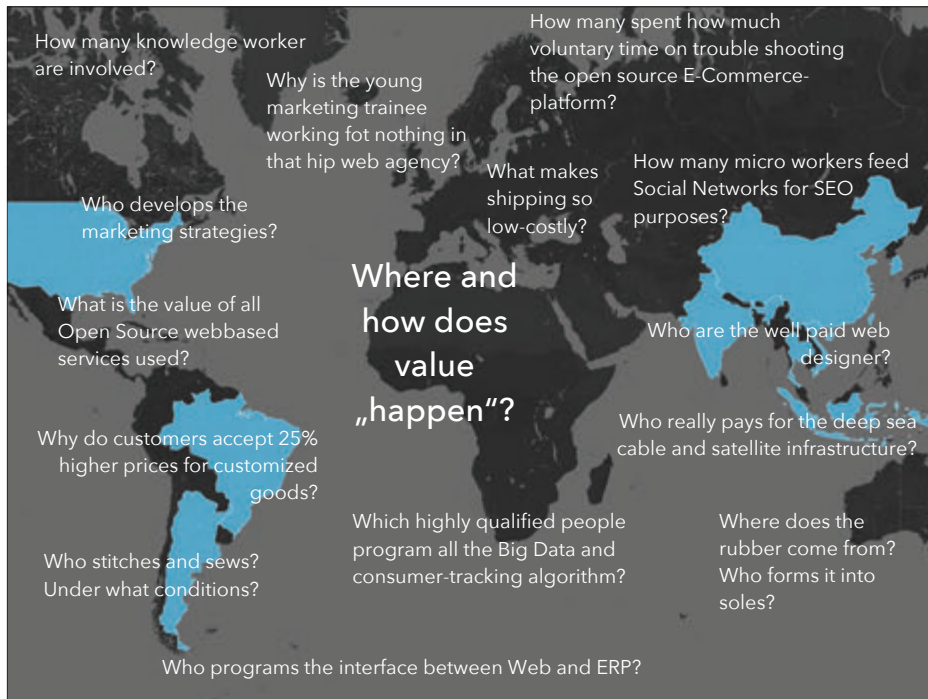
substantial changes of work along the value chain

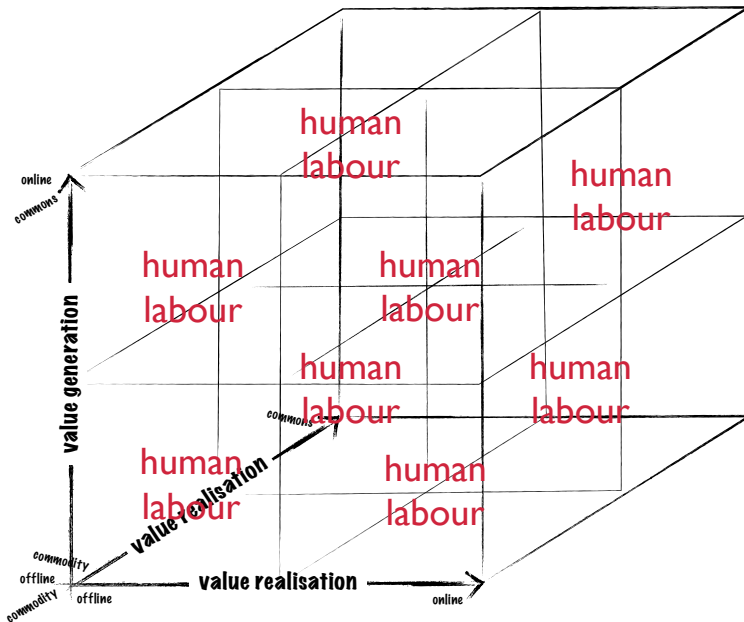
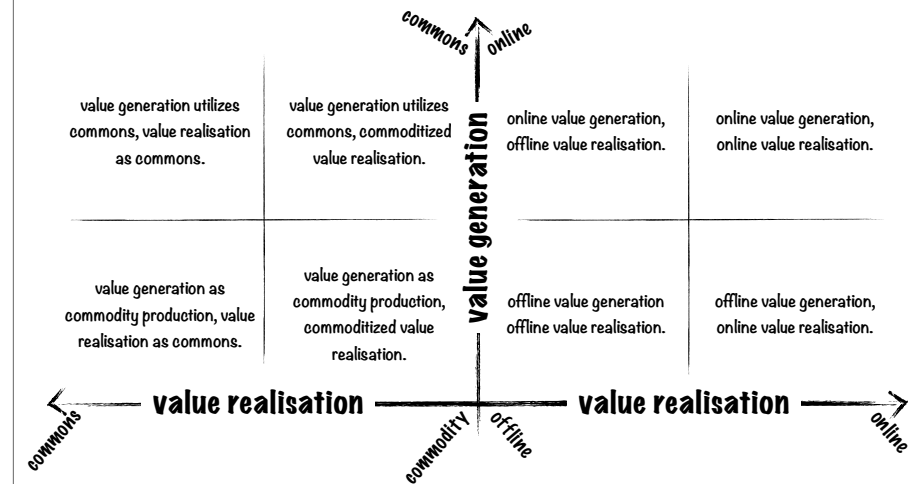
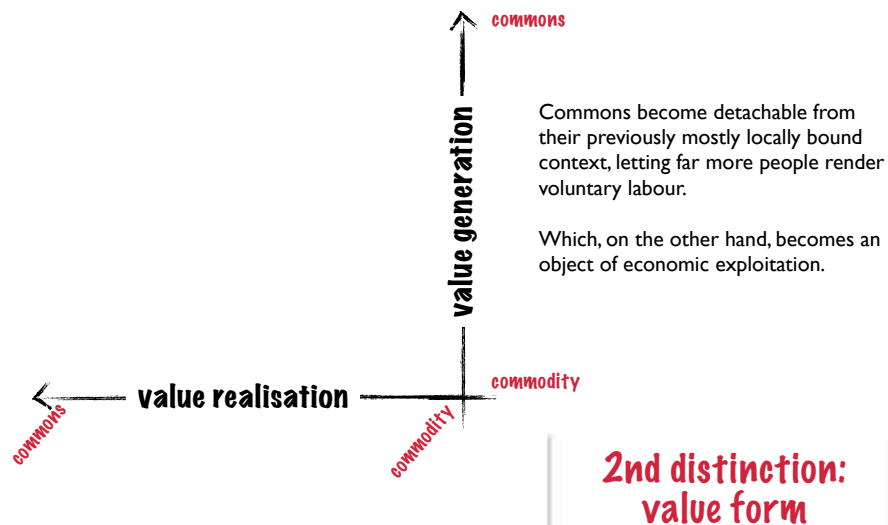
“anyone in the chain who produces and distributes knowledge products” and in between is found a steadily **growing army** of employees who “handle, distribute and convey information and knowledge” (McKercher & Mosco, 2010).

All those tasks are **increasingly interconnected along the global value chain**, and modularization and standardization are applied progressively so that these connections can be “managed as seamlessly as possible” (Huws, 2012:2).

This sort of **standardization** no longer just reaches into the production area, but meanwhile also impinges on the creative processes of innovation work (Pfeiffer, Sauer & Wühr, 2012; Pfeiffer, Schütt & Wühr, 2010).







In the web economy, value chains are changing dramatically, but it seems to be still human work which does the trick.

Marxists as well as traditional economists see human work as crucial. So, no news here.

And along the value chain we see more and more plain old exploitation: extracting as much as surplus value as possible, minimizing the costs of living labour. And we see new forms of exploitation using more and more commons.

But what exactly makes human work the ongoing source of value creation and value realisation? It's easy to answer from a basal economic perspective.

If human labour still is the key, labour theory has to answer also questions like: What brings the Open Source developer to contribute voluntarily in her freetime?

Why is the web marketing assistant working enthusiastically until his burnout?

One of many intellectual tools Marx' theory provided us with is:

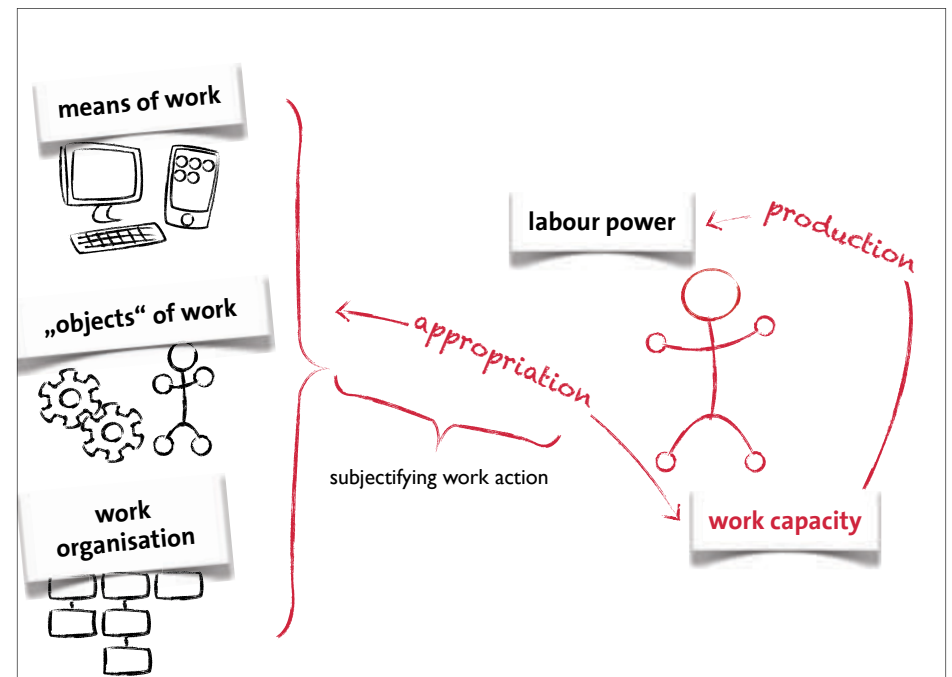
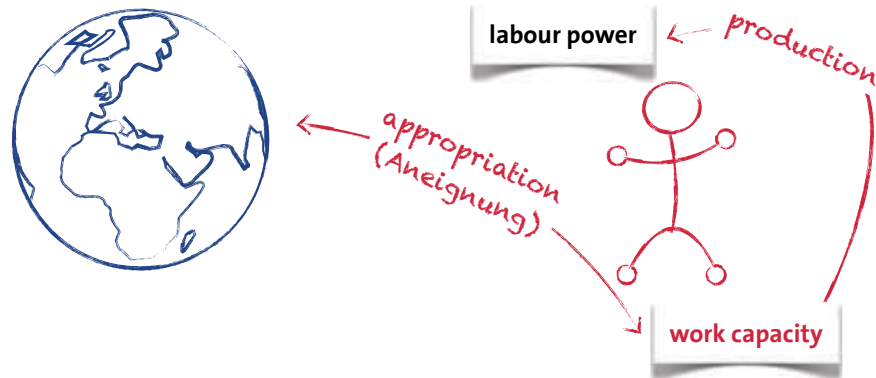
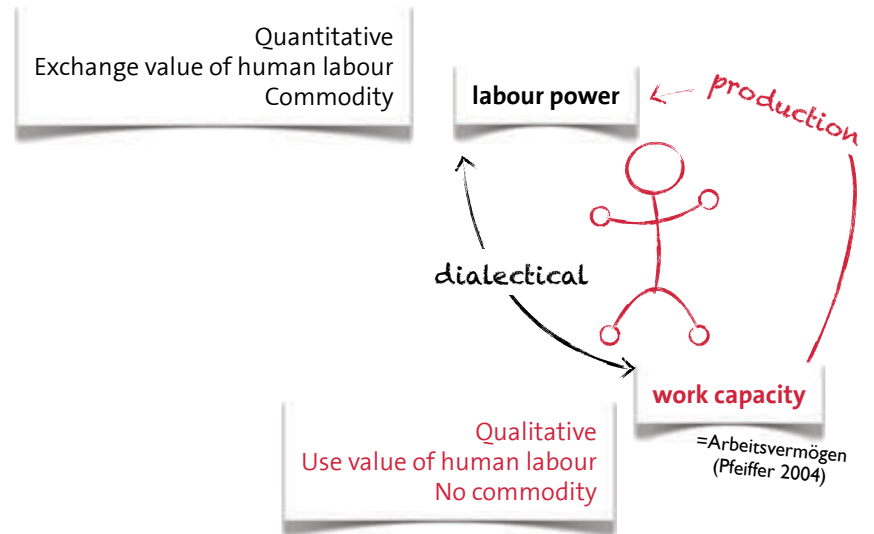
critique of commodity fetishism (McChesney (2007: 53; see Fuchs/Dyer-Witheford 2013: 792).

Capitalism commodifies human work. Therefore a critical perspective has to start with:

Acknowledging the **quality side of human labour**

Its ontogenetical core is not commodifiable (but ever more essential in globalized, flexibilized and thus on a everyday level imponderable work situations).

Human labour not only produces use value – is has/contains it.



objectifying

well-planned and methodical

analytical, rational, logical

exact by sensoric channels

objective and neutral

action

thinking

perception

relation

subjectifying

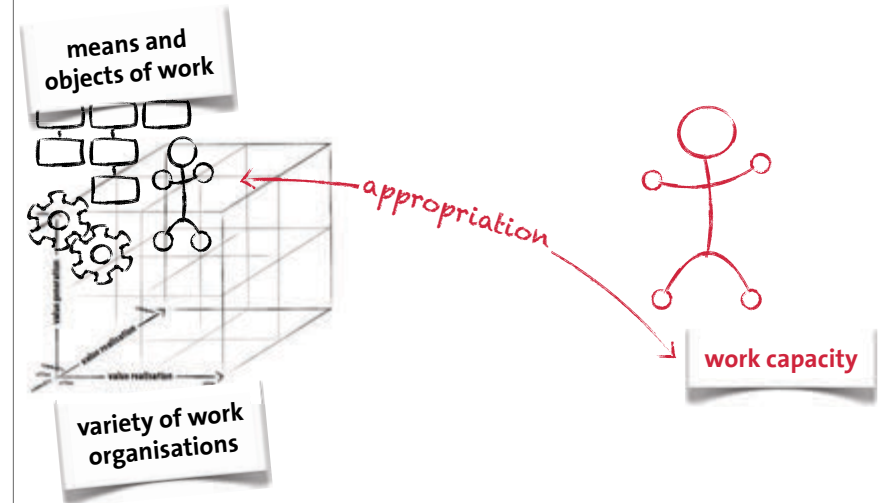
explorative and dialogical

associative and intuitive

fuzzily and holistic

empathetic and emotional

Böhle u.a. 2003



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The importance of human labour as producer of surplus is mainly of **quantitative** character.

The importance of human labour enabling the appropriation (Aneignung) of highly developed productive forces is of **qualitative** nature.

Although (and because of) deeply contradictory, the latter - work capacity/Arbeitsvermögen - is the precondition of the first - labour power.

Understanding labour as source of value creation in our ever changing, complex, globalized world and along its virtualized value chains needs a dialectical focus on work and its qualitative - subjectifying - capacity.

Thank
you !

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