HRM is Redundant?: Professions, Immaterial Labour and the Future of Work

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In the business school Human Resource Management (HRM) is perhaps the dominant lens through which we view the employment relationship and the future of work. However, if ever it was in touch with the changing nature of work, it certainly is not so today. In short I will argue that HRM should be made redundant. To make the case this paper will examine a range of changes in work. It will suggest that although HRM makes a range of claims such as enhancing the human, enhancing the individual and the collective; enabling greater satisfaction and freedom at work and encouraging responsibility; satisfying customer and producer needs and allowing the space to improve and learn, in reality it misses some of the key points of change in the 21st century and certainly misses the human. The paper will argue this by examining professional work and outlining some important aspects of transition within this arena. These areas of change concern marketisation, trust and rationality, and the shifting nature of work because of the expansion of immaterial labour expands as a form of production. It suggests that immaterial labour is the emerging work form and that increasingly work and products entail informational features and cultural activities that we do not usually associate with work e.g. taste, aesthetics, sensuality, language, etc. This paper will argue such an alteration makes the quantification of performance which is key to HRM (see Fleetwood in this volume) increasingly problematic.

Why Work, Why Marx?

In a paper entitled ‘The Meaning of Human Requirements where there is Private Property and under Socialism’, Marx accuses political economy of being both a science of wealth and of denial because it downgrades the worker to the lowest possible status. He argues political economy reduces the individual to the general or the crowd and hence sees the individual and their particular needs as a cost to be whittled down and denied. Expressing it rather trenchantly he writes ‘political economy, this science of wealth, is therefore simultaneously the science of denial, of want, of thrift, of saving – and it actually reaches the point where it spares the man the need of either fresh air or physical exercise. This science of marvellous industry is simultaneously the science of asceticism, and its true ideal is the ascetic but extortionate miser and productive slave’ (Marx 1988, 118, emphasis in the original). Marx bemoans the hold capitalist social relations in the form of money, profit and commoditisation have over humanity because we work ever more for ever less. Subject to these prevailing social conditions, we receive ever less because our humanity, our needs, our desires, our sensuality are increasingly filtered through a profit and loss account. He rounds off this passage by suggesting that ‘the worker may only have enough for him to want to live, and may only want to live in order to have [enough]’ (Marx 1988, 119). In short, the responsibility of the worker is to be an impoverished worker – emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, etc. to be otherwise is a luxury that needs cropping.

As Marx also noted, the centrality of work in our society presents capital with something of a problem. Capital and the search for profit dominates our society, however, in order to produce and to continue to dominate, it – capital - is reliant on labour and this is its fundamental weakness. Hence for example, the increasing refusal to work in the 1960s and
1970s through the growth of early retirement, university education, dropping out, the decline of the work ethic, etc. presented capital with a real dilemma (Bell 1974, 1976). Workers, via their strategy of refusal (Tronti, 1980), were increasingly challenging capitalism’s basis. Albeit somewhat subdued, these challenges to work continue today and are at the heart of the EU debates concerning retirement ages, 35 hour weeks, the 48 hour maximum working week, welfare reform, etc. (Jordan, 1998). To cite two examples: one, Digby Jones, ex-head of the Confederation of British Industry, suggests that individuals should be allowed to work longer than the 48 hours put forward by the EU if they wish to – he uses a summer holiday as a reason why one should be allowed to do; two, following the USA, the German state is attempting to increase the age of retirement (the UK is on a similar course). What Marx’s work demonstrates is both the centrality of work to modern life and the homogenization of humanity under capitalist private property. People are reduced to being workers and when not working they are seen as a depreciation of value or a loss in much the same way as machines left idle are seen as a loss. It is this reduction of the individual with all of his or her needs to the status of a worker, to being a general category whose needs are only to be met through labour and its rewards, and the simultaneous denial of that reduction via the argument that private property enables the satisfaction of wants and desires e.g. holidays, that Marx critiques. Humans undergo massification by capitalism as they are turned into objects and things to be manipulated (Friere, 2003; 148).

In this world, humanity becomes living capital 'but the worker has the misfortune to be a living capital, and therefore a capital with needs – one which loses its interest, and hence its livelihood, every moment it is not working’ (Marx, 1988; 85 emphasis in the original). Like any investment e.g. machinery or shares, our individual and collective needs, desires, wants, etc. are subordinate to the needs of capital and private property, i.e. to the needs of the investors. Work not leisure, responsibility not irresponsibility, training not education, the obligation but not the right to work are the order of the day. These are the things people must excel at to be useful under capitalism. In contrast to this, Marx values our individuality but sees it coming from our collective and historic labour – what we as a species are is simply the product of our historic labour by which he means our engagement with and modification of nature in its broadest sense (Marx 1988; 104-05). However, the difficulty under capitalism is that this engagement with nature is based on capitalism’s profit driven grounds and the subsequent rational instrumentalism which destroys a critical individuality (Held, 1980; 223-46, Jameson, 1971; 34-5, Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). One must therefore argue that at the heart of a Marxist critique of work is a concern about capital’s domination of production, of market forces, of objectivity and rationalisation, and the relationship between being an undistinguished part of a general mass and having real individuality.

Somewhat incongruously, human resource management also touches on some of these themes. Central to HRM are also a set of dichotomies: commitment and flexibility, individualism and co-operation, adaptability versus a stable organisational culture (Legge 1989, Noon 1992; 23). Unlike Marx however, HRM presents these dichotomies not as contradictory or fundamentally problematic but as things that will lead to universal benefits if managed correctly. But here is the rub, HRM’s exponents also argue that management’s right

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1 Incidentally, although he completely rejected Marx’s ideas Keynes noted something similar when he commented that every capitalist is only ever interested in her employees as an expense to be reduced and yet they are interested in every other capitalists employees as a potential consumer who is hopefully expensive as an employee and hence with lots of disposable income to buy goods and services. In short, as employees our needs, desires, wants are a hindrance to our employer.

2 A right which would challenge private property because our right to be employed regardless of profit would give labour power over capital (Marx 1973, 70).
to manage represents an universal interest (Noon 1992). By doing so of course they empower some and not others. In this sense Redman and Wilkinson (2001; 8-9) suggest HRM is aspirational because it seeks to wed the committed individual-worker ever more tightly to the capitalistic organisation as we shall see such aspirations shape its engagement with professional labour.

Professional Labour and Professional Ideology

Many writers from within and beyond management have argued that professional work has been undergoing a sustained period of change since the 1970s. This has come about via re-regulation by the state (Brazier et al, 1993, Abel 2003), the globalisation of both capital and the professional service firms that are a necessary part of this very process (Sassen 1994, Sklair 2001), the changing nature of organisations across a range of services – medicine (Kitchener 1999), law (Abel 2003, Muzio 2003), accountancy (Anderson-Gough et al 1998, 2000), science and education (O’Neill, 1998), etc. All of these alterations are currently reshaping the idea of professionalism, through an attempt to change values – the very normative variables that HRM often associates itself with (Redmand and Wilkinson 2001, Storey 2001).

These changes fundamentally entail a hegemonic shift away from an embracing of a social democratic consensus that had loosely stressed need over ability to pay, an acceptance that there was a gap between the social good and market delivered self-interest, state led growth of professional work over market led growth, etc. (Hanlon 1998). The emergence of a social democratic state and monopoly capitalism, coming out of the strife of the 19th and 20th centuries, led to a fordist compromise which enabled state led professional growth to be trumpeted as part of a wider package of reform which was deemed to be universally beneficial (at least in the major capitalist economies). This compromise brought with it a change in the nature of labour’s social reproduction – thus how people’s lives were reproduced in the 1920s was socially fundamentally different to the 1960s in areas as diverse as housing, education, healthcare, law, etc. But as importantly, it also delivered extra profitability and stability for capital (Aglietta 2000, Hall and Schwartz 1988).

As is well documented, key to these alterations were the development of the welfare state, the emergence of a dual labour market with an increasingly secure primary labour force, the agreed state goal of full employment and the right (of white males) to work, etc. – in short, a de-commodification of aspects of the labour market took place (Jordan, 1998; 30-73). These alterations reversed both the polarisation of income in the inter-war period and intensified capitalist social relations by expanding wage society in terms of the numbers of individuals enmeshed within it (Aglietta 2000, 94 and 243). They also secured for professionals increasing power over more and more areas of social activity via a state dominated by expert labour (Perkin, 1998) and the growing need for expert labour in large capitalist organisations (Mills 1951). In this world, what Marshall (1939) called ‘social service professionalism’ was presented as ‘best practice’ professionalism for a range of public and private sector professionals. Hence Marshall, Wilensky, Goode, Parsons, etc. present accounts of professional labour in terms of it being shaped by non-self-interested, social service oriented professional values. This was the dominant view of professionals and professionalism until it is challenged by people such as Freidson, Larson, Johnson, etc. in the 1970s.

Despite the growing criticisms of social service professionalism, it seems fair to say that its ideology and its seeming concern for the lay person helped to both shape, and be shaped by, a set of institutional structures that locked the social service professional into non-market organisations and behaviours such as the UK’s National Health Service or private sector
driven (but publicly funded) growth such as legal aid. This helped to shift their working practices away from competition towards co-operation, organisational hierarchy, state led growth, long-term client relationships, seniority led careers, etc. (Hanlon 2004). These institutional and working forms were then passed off as universally beneficial (Perkin, 1989; 286-359). Such a transition was a necessary compromise in the move from what Perkin calls a time of crisis for class society to a more stable corporate society. This transition was based on a growth in profitability via the triumvirate of productivity increases, collectively negotiated wage increases, and increased consumption. This claim to universalism however could only made good as long as Fordism – the name allocated to this era - was profitable.

Fordism’s run of profitability began to decline in the 1960s and with its breakdown we have been experiencing a difficult period. This shift came about because the social reproduction of labour under Fordism generated rigidities which led to a crisis in western wage societies. The way out of these rigidities was to (1), spread wage society via globalisation and (2), to deepen wage society via new products and services and the marketisation of previously non-marketed services and goods in an effort to recalibrate profitability (Aglietta, 2000; 413-15). These routes to profitability entailed attacking collectivised labour, globalising production and consumption, undermining of the welfare state, holding down wages and the subsequent polarisation of incomes and working conditions (Jessop 1991, Aglietta 2000).

HRM is both a result and a secondary casual factor in this process because it directly attempts to individualise wages and terms and conditions (see Korczynski in this volume), to increase worker commitment to the organisation and smooth out the employment conflict foreground in the introduction of this piece. That is, it is one of the tools in capital’s arsenal to break the triumvirate of productivity increases, collectivised wages and mass consumption which had become dysfunctional to profitability. As such it is an outcome of this dysfunctionalism – one that reallocates social wealth differently to the past. Its importance as an active agent stems from its popularity as a nomenclature for a variety of different labour policies. Within this backdrop, professional labour are an interesting group to examine for two reasons one, they are important in terms of extending wage society via globalisation (Sklair 2001) and two, they are key to intensifying wage society via marketisation or commercialisation (Hanlon 1998). Given the emphasis of this paper, I will only examine the second feature.

Professional Labour and the Intensification of Wage Society
Professional labour is undergoing something of a contradictory development. Although professionals such as lawyers, accountants, medics, etc. increasingly work in co-operative and inter-professional teams they are evaluated more and more on an individualised basis. For example, in the large law and accountancy firms seniority based models of payment for partners – often called the lockstep model – are being replaced by more individualised schemes wherein the amount of revenue generated is the key determinant in deciding promotion and salary. This ‘eat what you kill’ model has been designed to encourage staff to grow the firm and to develop new markets. It has also been accompanied by longer hierarchies and an elongation of the career path to partnership (Muzio 2003). This has helped to facilitate a huge amount of growth whilst simultaneously exposing firms to greater risk, to less organisational loyalty and more staff mobility. Greater risk has potentially been created because increasingly staff are promoted and rewarded on their ability to satisfy client needs, sell services and generate new revenue (Muzio 2003). Accountancy firms demonstrate this shift most obviously with the emphasis that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s on selling consultancy alongside auditing services – for example, Enron spent as much on consultancy

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3 In the USA, per capita GNP rose by 75 per cent between 1974-2004 while in constant dollars the wages per hour of the average male rose from $15.24 to $15.26 (Supiot, 2006).
fees with Arthur Andersen as it did on auditing. Thus the partner or staff member responsible for a particular client has to manage the tension between keeping the client happy or adhering to professional standards which historically stress a loyalty to some third party – the state, the citizen, shareholders, etc.

In today’s post-fordist environment many professional organisations have shifted so that they emphasise an obligation to the paying client – seen as senior management, and one’s career is judged on the variable over which this client has most say e.g. fee growth (Hanlon 2005). In this new institutional world professionals are altering their norms and ideology so that the paying client interest is presented as the universal interest. Thus today a commercialised professionalism is seen as the guarantor of this universalism because it supposedly stresses competitiveness in a globalised economy (an economy and a wage society that professionals have been crucial to developing, Sklair 2001). However, this makes organisations vulnerable to their employees as both Enron and Barings testify. A further feature of this emerging institutional structure is greater staff mobility as individuals and teams move from one firm to another in pursuit of greater rewards. Although their experiences have been different, other professions – teachers, academics, medical professionals, engineers, etc. have also experienced shifts in similar directions.

What these changes represent is an undermining of the old institutional structures of professional labour and its social reproduction. This undermining directly challenges the previous norms and values of professional labour. As such society’s trust in professionals has supposedly altered. In the past the state and capital enabled social service professionals to dominate and manage large areas of social life through sectors and organisations such as medical services, education, legal aid, etc. (Perkin 1989). In particular, professional groups gained increasing control over key elements of the welfare state and they were central to setting the goals and labour processes of major areas of social activity. They did so oftentimes in decommoditised social spaces hence they were not the raw ‘living capital’ described earlier and their needs were incorporated into the labour process because delivering professional services requires inter-subjective understanding. This is something the political right and HRM acknowledge and is reflected in their desire to use the market and consumers to break the ‘producer’ interests of the welfare state. However, replacing this ‘producer’ interest has oftentimes proved less appealing to the public than to the right because the public still tend to trust ‘professionals’ more than ‘managers’. In the recent past the state also trusted professionals to manage large elements of social activity because professional values and corporatist social service norms were seen as universally benign under fordism. With fordism’s demise, this is no longer the case. In light of this breakdown, professionalism and what it means are under threat. Groups in the private sector such as lawyers, accountants, architects, etc. have embraced commercialised or entrepreneurial professionalism whilst those in the public sector appear to be in a state of uncertainty as their old professional values and institutional structures are challenged (Hanlon 1994, 1999). The values of professionals, especially in the public sector, are no longer seen as universal. Today, they and their ideology are partisan and not to be trusted – in Hayek’s terms professionals defend a partial and damaging producer interest because labour’s needs are taken into consideration (Hayek 1944; 89-100).

Trust, Rationality and Professional Labour:
O’Neill (2002) has forcefully argued that trust in professional labour is currently being undermined by institutions such as the media and the state. However, she also comments that claiming that we trust less and actually demonstrating this are not the same thing. In her third Reith lecture she suggests that ‘the experts and exponents of a crisis of trust are mainly
sociologists and journalists: they tried to find out whom we do and don’t trust, in particular whom we say we do and don’t trust’. O’Neill (2002) questions these sentiments and goes on to argue that individual members of the public still trust medical consultants, teachers, the police, etc. in their daily actions. Drawing on Power’s work The Audit Society, she claims that what we have is a crisis of accountability and a world of suspicion primarily driven by a manageralist state attempting to restructure welfare. I would argue that this crisis is based on the perceived need by capital and state elites to put the state on a post-fordist footing of ‘international competitiveness’ (for an explicit statement of this distinction see the changes made to legal aid, Lord Chancellor’s Office, 1996). No longer are public (or indeed private) sector professionals simply to be trusted to manage and deliver services. Increasingly, they are ‘living capital’ only trusted if they exhibit a new commercialised professionalism which stresses cost, affordability, accountability, entrepreneurship, etc. as the state and capital attempt to redistribute the cost of labour’s social reproduction back to labour and to complete the transition to a new regime of accumulation (Aglietta 2000, Lipietz 1987). To sum up, as they seek to make this professional and skilled labour into the ‘productive slave’ highlighted by Marx (1988). Strikingly, these norms appear to be what these elites value rather than the public hence the disjuncture concerning the seeming crisis of trust and support for public professionals, their values and the welfare state between elites and the general populace.

Today, the professional world is an increasingly bifurcating one as private sector professionals experience changes wherein they become significantly more entrepreneurial and public sector professionals are increasingly told to act like they were in private sector organisations. This implies that private sector values are pre-dominant and offered up as universal on the basis that they will reverse the erosion of profit that took place from the mid-1960s under fordism. The rationality of the market place is reshaping professional norms thereby giving it an entrepreneurial and/or manageralist tinge. In ways similar to the historic importance bureaucratic control had beyond the large organisations where it was housed (Edwards 1979), the emergent commercialised professionalism of the private sector is challenging the organisation of professional labour in the public sector – especially as private sector professional organisations actively engage in restructuring this public space (Hanlon 2005). Indeed opening up the public sector to ‘market forces’ is one of the big hoped for future markets for private sector interests (Cogman and Oppenheim 2002). To return to the beginning needs, desires, individuality and so on are not important compared to time keeping, accountability, quantification, etc. In Marx’s terms the individual with all her needs and desires is reduced and cropped into the mass category of worker.

Townley (2002) has suggested that management is based on an abstract rationality that aims for consistency and control. This analysis of work is in direct conflict with many of the HRM theories of management which often emphasise flexibility, adaptability, individualised service quality, self-actualised work, etc. This is especially so in areas of professional labour. However, contrary to fashion, the evidence appears to support Townley’s view of management. If we examine health care there is a wealth of data to suggest that formally rational programmes, work protocols, best practice etc. are increasingly used to organise labour and to demand greater accountability and consistency from professionals. Berg (1997) argues that protocols, guidelines, standards etc. are increasingly being used as a management tool. He goes on to suggest that this undermines the individual, the hermeneutic, the affective and so on. These control techniques prioritise the quantitative over the qualitative. The measurable becomes ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ and that which cannot be measured i.e. the

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4 For the purposes of this paper, I will not examine issues concerning the spread of rationalisation and technical control of work in a host of non-professional arenas (see Ritzer 2000). Nor will I examine the worsening pay and conditions of large swathes of the working population (Burchell et al 2002, Jordan 1998, Ehrenreich 2002).
qualitative, the hermeneutic, the aesthetic is negatively rendered unscientific and subjective – quality is reduced to quantity.

Aspects of these processes can be seen in a variety of health professional occupations – general practitioner services (Berg 1997), tele-medicine (Hanlon et al 2005), occupational therapy and a range of other health services (Germov 2006). This seemingly rational emphasis on measurement and objectivity belies the de-humanising and political nature of asserting rationality (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). For example, in NHS Direct - the UK’s new tele-medical service - this informatics led, objective and rational, best practice view of objectivity is built into the technology and encourages nurses to prioritise the knowledge in the IT system over their own knowledge, experience and practice, over their interpretation of the health interaction and over the pooled knowledge of their colleagues. Hence the current structure of this innovative and new area of the health service in the UK actually resembles technical and bureaucratic control more than it does HRM. Indeed, where collegiality, individualised service, the breakdown of demarcation etc. does take place it often does so either against the rules (Hanlon et al 2005) and/or because the humanity of health care workers encourages them to work beyond their remit – this latter factor is also rue for other workers (Stacey 2006, Ehrenrich 2001).

What NHS Direct indicates is the political and normative nature of ‘rationality’ and ‘objectivity’ – the creation of winners and losers. These controls are presented as universal whereas in fact they are partial and organise production in ways that weaken labour in its relationship with management. Key in this process is the undermining of inter-subjective understandings in professional work (Apel 1973). Inter-subjective understandings of health care, education, language, etc. are central to professions because they are fundamentally subjective not objective, especially when they deal with ‘human’ issues such as cancer or value5. They are based on consensual agreement and shared rights at a variety of levels – individual, group, organisational, societal, etc. rather than a hierarchal view of management’s right to manage in the name to objectivity. Shared rights could of course weaken capital’s control (Marx, 1973; 70) and acting in the universal interest. Yet management claims of objectivity enable it to appear as rational, trustworthy and to portray other groups as not these things (Berg 1997, Townley 2002). These claims are being used by the managerialist state in its bid to control public sector work and oftentimes it uses the language of HRM to do so.

Immaterial labour, Value and the Future of Work:
These claims to rationality are even more undermining and redundant because as we move into a post-fordist world work is fundamentally changing (Hardt and Negri 2000, Lazzarato, 1986, Virno 2001, 2006). Increasingly, work is based on what autonomist Marxists call ‘immaterial labour’. Building on Marx (1973a; 706-08, the fragment on machines piece), these writers immaterial labour is based on two different aspects to work. Firstly, it entails the informational elements of the commodity. These are based on communication within organisations of a vertical and horizontal nature via information technology systems. Secondly, this labour increasingly entails the input of cultural content from activities that have not historically been considered ‘work’ but are, nevertheless, as fundamental to our species being or our collective history and knowledge (Held 1980; 243). Examples of this second form would include the development of taste, fashion, defining cultural standards, consumer norms, etc. (Lazzarato, 1996).

5 Shared understandings often exist between private professional labour and its clients and one could argue these understandings facilitated the redistribution of wealth upwards over the past thirty years.
One of the reasons for this shift is the mass intellectuality of the working class hence today they are knowledgeable and informed and develop opinions, subjectivities, etc. that were once the preserve of the bourgeoisie. Central to this change is the notion of the interface – workers increasingly interface between work teams, customers, hierarchies, functions, technology, etc. Key features of this interfacing are one, inter-individuality i.e. the bringing together of existing individuals to produce products and services and two, transindividuality wherein historically captured knowledge is based on a pre-individuality i.e. the received historic and collective knowledge that we are born into and that allows us to become an individual within an existing collectivity. Thus Virno (2006; 38) comments ‘post-fordist labour has absorbed into itself the transindividuality of the collective as well: so much so that many productive operations seem like political actions, in that they demand the presence of others, and must contend with the possible and the unexpected. For all these reasons it seems that labour expands infinitely, to the point of comprehending that which, in terms of political economy, is not labour: passions, affects, language games, and so on’

For our purposes the most important features of immaterial labour are: one, unlike traditional commodities it is not consumed in consumption but rather it is enlarged by it and two, labour goes beyond traditional notions of labour. One way of thinking about this is the use of NHS Direct. A person rings to enquire about a pain in their throat and are asked to describe pain – something that is not easy to do but between the non-work derived cultural and communicative skills of the nurse and the caller, an understanding of the problem is reached. Ideally at this point knowledge and learning have taken place on both sides so that the traditional ‘producer’ – the nurse – has further developed communicative and cultural skills to elicit answers concerning pain from callers and the traditional ‘consumer’ has learned something about their health and, indeed, participated in the joint production of the healthcare which will enable them to describe pain better in the future amongst other things. Education provides another example wherein both the teacher and the taught – the producer and the consumer – add value to production and learn from it, open source software appears to behave in a similar fashion.

All three have been enlarged in Lazzarato’s terms and the healthcare, etc. has not been consumed in the sense of destroyed or obliterated – in this world consumption is productive because subjectivities and ‘products’ are enhanced. Immaterial labour ‘gives form to and materialises needs, the imaginary, consumer tastes, and so forth, and these products in turn become powerful producers of needs, images and tastes’ (Lazaretto, 1996; 137.8) – in short, we as workers and consumers continue to use and to develop products hence the interface is constantly innovative, constantly evolving, constantly beyond capital’s control because to control it fully is to fossilise it. To return to the introduction, today it is the living part of Marx’s living capital and it is the needs of living labour that enables production – these needs are no longer the excess, the drain – they are the value (on living labour as excess see, Marx, 1988; 85). Learning, knowledge, innovation and value creation happen outside of capital because, in Marxist terms, it is based on mass intellectuality and species being.

This process of production, constant change, learning, innovation, evolution, etc. means that any measuring of labour’s ‘value’ or productivity is made problematic – ‘labour time is no longer the true measure of social wealth but continues to be the measure in use’ (Virno, 2006; 41). Furthermore, because immaterial labour transforms its users, it presents first and foremost a social relationship and only then is this relationship given an economic value. Hence immaterial labour makes explicit capital as a social relationship that puts subjectivity to work because its generation and regeneration is a social event that is now valorized in ways that appear qualitatively different to the past (one need only think of the areas of emotional
labour, designer employees, etc. that form an increasing part of employment in the West from trendy bars, to the media, to David Beckham’s real life as media persona, to perceive this shift in work). But this is also political in that ‘work’ and ‘non-work’, etc. merge and are subsumed into the form of the commodity. Again to take us back to the start of the paper, the non-work of the worker as living capital is no longer simply losing its interest ‘every moment it is not working’, it is in fact adding interest to social wealth even if this cannot now be measured. Within all of this, immaterial labour presents capital with a challenge – how do you capture and value mass intellectuality? But it is also evidence of our further enmeshing within capitalist social relations because the market is reaching deeper and deeper into our social activity as taste, affect, desire, human-ness, language, ideas – non work - are increasingly commoditised. It is a moment of both exploitation and socialization (see Negri, 1991; 33). However, if the legitimacy of this valuing is challenged, these social relations may come to be seen as an obstacle to value not a measurement of it e.g. the public in the UK appear to reject attempts to put an economic value on medical interactions, law abiding citizens seem happy to illegally download music etc. from the internet because they feel ‘Bach’ not EMI is the owner of the music and its value, large parts of the world supported the rights of poor states to generic drugs for HIV – all of these are challenges to or rejections of property rights in one form or another and they seem to be increasing.

Immaterial labour is thus changing work because firstly, innovation stands outside of capital and capitalist organisations respond to this and try to control or manipulate it e.g. fashion houses increasingly look to street fashion for design purposes. Secondly, manipulating taste, affect, emotion, desire, fashion, needs, etc. are becoming increasingly important as a labour activity thus labour and its management is ever more political and subjective. As a result management and capitalism may become open to potential challenge in terms of this management, this value and objectivity but also in terms of what the product, the work, the value actually is and who has the rights to it? For example, it may seem illegitimate that after modifying a strain of basmati rice, the US firm Ricetec Inc. can now label its rice as basmati even if it is produced outside of N/E India and the surrounding region simply because the US Patent Office has awarded it a patent to do so. Such an action could be construed as stealing away the generational knowledge, history and culture that developed this rice strain in the first place and made the brand ‘basmati’ valuable (as well as putting rice farmers in this region at risk). Following from this second point, thirdly, measurement, productivity, consumption, production are all being complicated by the proposition that subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, communication, cultural knowledge etc. are central to this new form of labour hence making knowledge of what the product actually is before it is created more difficult. Finally, immaterial labour by its nature demands and provides an individualised service in ways that management theorists always aspire to but can never achieve. The very human and interactionist nature of this work is a diversified experience which is impossible to manage, control, standardize and measure precisely because it facilitates a hermeneutic and phenomenological engagement between the producer and the consumer? As numerous interactionist studies of professional work in particular demonstrate these features have always made controlling professional labour difficult for managers. In light of these challenges, HRM’s claims to measure value, add value, assess productivity, be objective etc. look spurious – they look so 1970s.

**HRM is Redundant?**

This speculative paper suggests that HRM is both irrelevant to the future of work and that it is incorrect in many of its claims for the present day experience of work. In its more idealistic moments, HRM posits work as liberating, as productive play and a route to a form of self-actualisation. Yet it also has a contradictory performative streak wherein play needs to be
measured, controlled, manipulated and, if the player disagrees, then the HRM manager needs to enforce the rules of the game. Productive play by all means, but only on HRM terms. It is therefore simultaneously a science (if one may use that term) of freedom and control with the emphasis firmly on the second. This tension is fundamental to its existence because as Marx so forcefully pointed out the employment relationship is fundamentally conflictual within capitalism.

This contradiction can be seen today in the current commercialisation of professional labour, the attempts at managerialism within the public sector combined with elements of more ‘traditional’ forms of control such as deskilling, bureaucratic control, etc. However, damning as these criticisms might be, I believe the future of work presents HRM with an even bigger challenge. At the start of this paper, I suggested that ‘at the heart of a Marxist critique of work is a concern about capital’s domination of production, of market forces, of objectivity and rationalisation, and the relationship between being an undistinguished part of a general mass and having real individuality’. Immaterial labour is potentially making this domination more open to debate. It makes our subjectivities, our non-working lives, our collective historic knowledge, our practices, our desires, wants, affect, etc. key to the future of production – these living needs are the things that increasingly create value whilst simultaneously making value harder to define and measure. We need to rethink Marx’s formulation that the excess outside of work is a drain on capitalism. Today, this is where value is increasingly generated and this may herald a point of transition from capitalism and its notions of value. Value creation takes place outside of the organisation because customers add to value, workers generate it in their ‘personal’ lives, and so on.

Think of open source software – it is productive play or what Negri calls (1991; 34) ‘free planned activity’ but it is beyond the organisation. It is a seemingly anarchic generation of value without profit. Think of education, or a good restaurant or bar. Think of many of the black and Hispanic health carers who look after, mainly white, elderly, ill people and ‘add value’ through their unpaid overtime caring for individuals they have formed a bond with, subsidising medicine from their own pockets, their ‘use’ of their personal and subjectivities to ease someone’s pain and/or fear and/or loneliness (Stacey 2006)? We can use labour time to measure this but we are not measuring value by doing so. Value is escaping HRM – and capital – in these examples. People may begin to ask the question what is value in these instances? What are we paying and being paid for and does this enhance or lessen us? It may encourage people to question exchange value and examine use value in the future. As may thinking about work that traditionally requires less immaterial labour. We can think of Wal-Mart’s UK off shoot ASDA and its 250g Brazilian sirloin for £2.96 – a steak coming from an animal which is reared for 18 months, slaughtered, refrigerated, shipped and packaged to the UK for £2.44 less than it would cost to post a 250g package from the UK to Brazil (Lanchester, 2006).

These examples highlight a moment wherein what people perceive as valuable, as worth something in their everyday lives – their practices – may lose its connection with market value or labour value as measured by time. Oddly enough in the time of ‘bling’ conspicuous consumption we may actually be able to see the disjuncture between market value, wages and human worth more clearly – the real cost of a steak or healthcare for the producers, the worth of human succour, or the value of our subjectivities may not coincide with this market value thereby leading us to question it. This is not a prediction of what will happen – following Marx’s (1973a) lead in the introduction to the 1857 Grundrisse, it is impossible to predict what future social relations will look like except through the prism of where you currently are. Thus future social conditions are unknowable in many ways. However, HRM has no answers
to these possibilities except the tired answers of capitalism. At this point, suffice to say, the Marxists are asking much more interesting questions.

References
http://www.american.edu/ted/basmati.htm
1. HRM for Whom? Polarisation of Work – flexibility versus organisational commitment to employees – historically need to look at how dominant control systems spread through labour markets e.g. bureaucratic and technical control – Stacey, Professional Labour markets
2. Immaterial labour – false dichotomy of production and customer, more than emotional labour – stress sociality not individualism nor even teams – innovation comes from labour and clients – need for the hermeneutic, the phenomenological – Mrx and Grundrisse, Hall.
3. Need to control the immaterial hence Berg, Townley etc. rational control still King – trust but only trust the ‘responsible worker’
4. Utopianism of HRM akin to liberalism – we need more of it, more commitment, etc. Polanyi. Organisation – is a specific type of organisation – it is Microsoft not firefox – no communism of science here.