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Cover image:

# Art and Postcapitalism

by Danielle Child • 25.03.2020

*Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production* continues Dave Beech's enquiry into the relationship between art and the economic with a focus on postcapitalism [FIG.1](#). Those familiar with Beech's *Art and Value* (2015) will appreciate that this is not a book for the theoretically uninterested, as Beech tracks the changing arguments surrounding art, work and capitalism back to their historic moments of origin in order to understand how art is aligned with non-capitalist activity. While art has often been tied to the emancipatory revolutionary projects of the historical avant-garde, in the introduction to *Art and Postcapitalism* Beech observes that the role of art has been omitted from more recent descriptions of universal emancipation from capitalism. The book, therefore, poses a question: what has happened to art in the new emancipatory discourse? The short answer is that the role of the artist is negligible because the artist has become an exemplary post-Fordist worker. In order to understand how we got to this stage, however, Beech sets out to 'reconstruct the politics of art through the lens of the supersession of the capitalist mode of production'. That is, what is the role of art in overcoming the production of value?

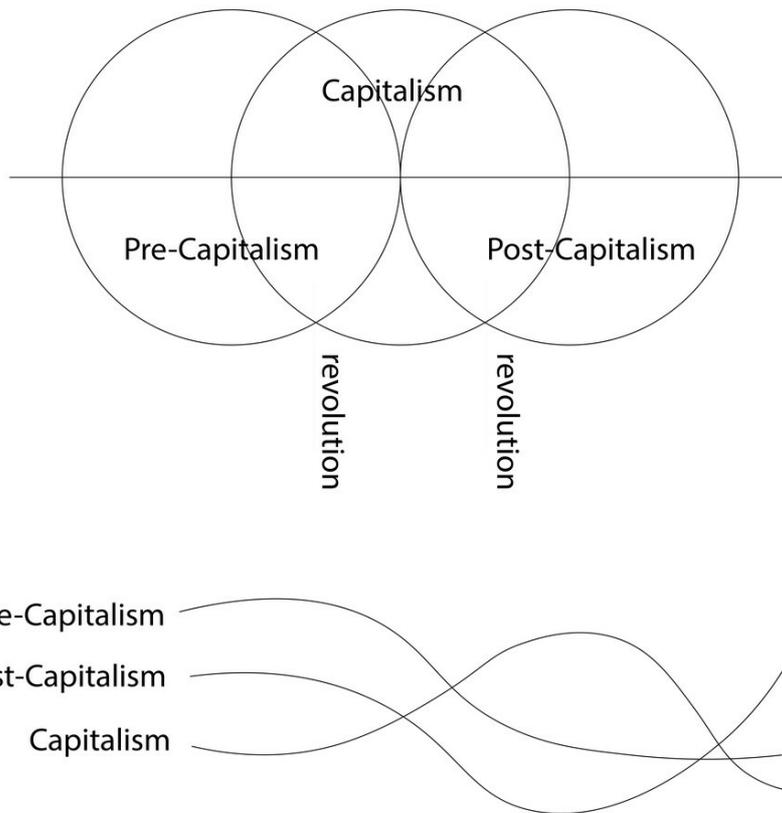
Underpinning Beech's analysis is a key tenet of Marxian economics, an understanding that the production of value is central to capitalism. Beech begins by introducing value theory [FIG.2](#), a tendency in Marxism and post-Marxism that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the global justice movement in the 1990s. Value theory presents an alternative perspective on postcapitalism to that of the traditional left, which imagined post-capitalism as a workers' state with collective ownership. For the value theorists, postcapitalism can only be achieved by supplanting value production. This affects labour (which is replaced in the new discourse by 'work' in order to further distance it from traditional left thinking), as these theorists imagine a life post-work, or at least post-human work. Beech claims that 'art is replete with critical practices but typically lacks a clear understanding of the difference between resisting the existing social system and superseding it'. The analysis is thus concerned with presenting a political theory of art that engages with ideas of postcapitalism.

The chapters are organised around different aspects of postcapitalist thought. In the first chapter Beech sets up the terms of his analysis before presenting his 'litmus test of

postcapitalism', that is, the abolition of value production. Here he returns to communism as a historical model of postcapitalism and shows how recent postcapitalist theories and movements – the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Occupy and the Zapatistas in the 1990s – have distanced themselves from the twentieth-century revolutionary tradition. In addition to the historical, the theoretical – the concept of value – is also established in this chapter. Here Beech distinguishes between value and material wealth: value is realised at the point of exchange (the waged labour that creates this value is understood as productive); material wealth, however, can be produced by nature and does not need to pass through markets.

After establishing the key terms and ideas surrounding postcapitalism, Beech returns art to the discussion in the second chapter. He situates the emergence of art's hostility to capitalism within the academies' distaste for the guilds [FIG.3](#). This is traced through the separation of the artisan and artist – the former is historically associated with the market and commercial interests, while the latter has distanced itself from handicraft to avoid association with the market [FIG.4](#). This precedes the development of nonalienated labour as a category to which art becomes historically aligned.

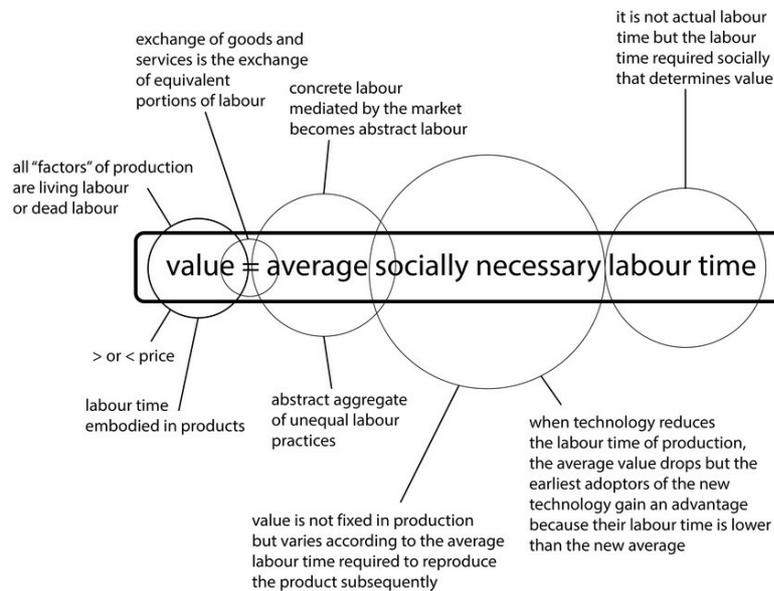
The third chapter takes up the understanding of artistic labour as unproductive (or non-productive) labour within capitalism. In addressing artists and the politics of work, Beech considers the impact of feminist thought on the subject, and also the notion of the gendered (male) genius in artistic discourse. He gives as an example Linda Nochlin's analysis of Berthe Morisot's painting *The Wet Nurse and Julie* (1880; private collection), which highlights the paid and unpaid work of the two women in the painting, and also the work of painting itself. This example prepares us for the discussion of unproductive labour that concludes the chapter.



**Fig. 1** Diagram of the co-existence of pre-capitalism, capitalism and post-capitalism, by Dave Beech. 2019. (Courtesy the artist).

The fourth chapter takes up the subject of the machine in relation to automation – a concept familiar in postcapitalist thinking – via the idea of the avant-garde. Beech shows how such theories of accelerationism and automation do not mean the abolition of work but rather the displacement of work to the robot. What Beech appears to be building here is an argument against machinery replacing human labour. In such proposals for the posthuman division of labour, Beech argues, humans ‘occupy the place of the privileged, the propertied and the workless genius’. This is problematic because automation is understood here as a regime of work and not an alternative to it. The technologies that replace work are still put to work for value production, thus Beech later argues that the ‘problem of work’ is not reconciled by eradicating it so that people can engage in ‘aristocratic pursuits’. Rather, a critique of what constitutes the ‘aristocratic good life’ needs to be simultaneously developed alongside the ‘revalorisation of all the labour that makes rest comfortable and rewarding’. By

this, Beech is referring to care-giving, social reproduction – labour historically deemed unproductive – and also the production of goods, infrastructure and services.

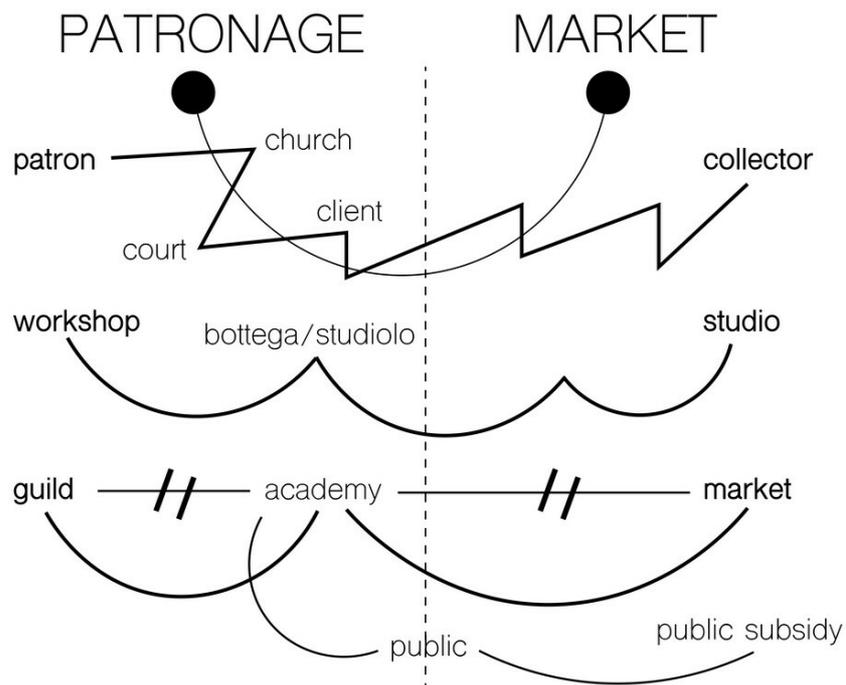


**Fig. 2** Diagram of the Marxist theory of value, by Dave Beech. 2019. (Courtesy the artist).

The final chapter addresses the technologies of rest (that is, those employed in the automation of work) and returns to consider aesthetic labour. Beech takes up Maurizio Lazzarato’s reading of Duchamp as presenting laziness as the ultimate refusal of work. As Beech notes, however, Lazzarato’s understanding of work excludes intellectual labour, and this eradication of manual labour from intellectual production is ‘the great delusion of privilege’. Beech shows that the elimination of degrading labour (in earlier theses such as Oscar Wilde’s) through automation ‘receives part of its promise from what survives of the aristocratic association of the mechanical with the subhuman’. As such, the distinction between aesthetic labour and unpleasant (or degrading) labour is an expression of the social division of labour from the position of privilege. Beech expands on this idea by asking why recent postcapitalist propositions have only advocated the abolition of the working class.

*Art and Postcapitalism* is a reminder that art has always been aligned with non-capitalist activity. Through his analysis, Beech highlights the classed nature of new post-capitalist imaginings that have no place for the worker (unless, of course, they are engaged in intellectual labour). The book opens with the claim that art is the space that hosts the countertendencies of ‘decoloniality, desegregation, queering and postcapitalism’. While he does not

conclude by presenting a new postcapitalist theory (which is not the book's intention), Beech offers critical food for thought in considering what postcapitalism could look like through reframing the debates on art and labour in relation to value theory. Beech states: 'I conceive of radical social transformation as necessarily taking place across multiple connected dimensions of social reality'. Within this account are the beginnings of a postcapitalist project that meaningfully brings together the divergent critical perspectives that emerged post-1968.



**Fig. 3** Diagram of the economics and division of labour in the transition from patronage to the market, by Dave Beech. 2019. (Courtesy the artist).

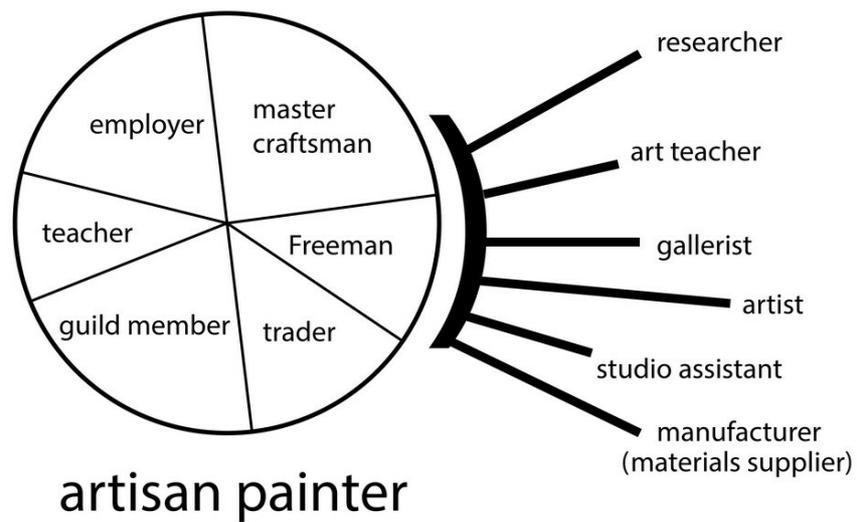


Fig. 4 Diagram of the transition from artisan to artist (from workshop to the social division of labour), by Dave Beech. 2019. (Courtesy the artist).

### About this book

	<p><b>Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production</b>          By Dave Beech          £19.99          Pluto Press, London, 2019          ISBN 978-0-745-33925-2</p>
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