

# An Invisible Global Social Value

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**Abstract**—By remaining blind to an invisible global social value, we are unable to face up to the challenges posed by today's world. We do not ask insistently enough who we are, remaining content with traditional answers starting with those inherited from the Greeks: we are a species of animal, the rational animal, a social animal, a political animal, and proceeding to later answers in the modern age, including: we are individual subjects endowed with inner consciousness or free subjects with innate individual rights. This paper aims to lift the veil on some of our Western delusions about individual freedom in private-property owning, more or less liberal democracies in a globalized world — a world whose movement is constrained by a ceaseless, subterranean, circular, movement of thingified value that is never adequately conceived and named as such. To conceptualize it *as such*, and thus bring it to light, is the task of hermeneutic phenomenology. Doing so reveals that we are not free subjects, but players in a game whose movements we only darkly surmise, reduced to mere character masks in a farce.

**Keywords**—*interplay, social values, thingified value, valorization, private property, human rights, capitalism, market economy, global economy, ground-rent, environmental degradation*

## INTRODUCTION

In the concluding summary document of the ISTAS23 Public Interest Technology (PIT) Workshop on Innovation in Global Development we read of PIT's focus on "exploiting technological potential in the interest of justice and/or the public good". Ultimately, ISTAS23 as a whole was oriented toward "addressing local, regional, national, international, and grand societal challenges". The considerations raised in the present paper are prior to the many issues to be tackled in view of technological innovation. As such, they are intended to provide orientation by briefly illuminating the background in which efforts to deploy technology for the public good are embedded. The background here is the medium, namely, the global medium of sociation through which today we humans have dealings with one another, directly and indirectly, whether we want to or not. It is commonplace to say that we live today in a globalized capitalist economy. It is quite another to conceptualize explicitly what a capitalist economy is, its very principle of movement in a medium of sociation aptly dubbed thingified value. Without an orientating insight into this thingified medium and its principle of movement, we inevitably under-estimate the challenges posed to any prospect of "grand societal" change for the better. In the very first place therefore, the challenge posed is how we are to change our shared modern cast of mind by clearing away the many misconceptions and delusions that beset it. The practice that is able to recast a cast of mind is thinking itself — thinking that is intent on getting at the deeper truth of our world.

## I. WHO ARE WE?

What could be more innovative in the context of global human/social development than to take a step back and rethink who we are? What could be more pertinent for the future of humanity than to take up this question *da capo*, that is, from scratch, by going back to the drawing board to revise and recast answers that have been handed down to us from long ago? [1] In the context of *global* development, it is the Western tradition in philosophical thinking on our humanness, starting with the Greeks, that draws attention, for it can be said that the globalization with which we are more than familiar today proceeded, was forced and imposed from Europe in the age of European colonialism. We could ask for the *medium* of globalization and be wary of giving all-too-hasty an answer in terms of advances in sea-faring technology (ships, navigation instruments, etc.) or the steady development of trade along globe-spanning trade routes. As I will try to show, the answer lies neither in technological progress nor in historical narrative.

### A. Rational animals

Who are we? [2] The Greeks (Aristotle in particular) have already told us, and we have taken their answers on board, wholeheartedly so. We are a species of animal, they tell us, and this answer provides the basis, among other things, for today's debates over the survival of the human species through the transition to a sustainable global economy, a hard transition whose insuperable difficulties may be underestimated owing to our not conceiving adequately who we are. We are blind-sided through misdiagnosis. It may even be questioned whether survival of the human species is *the* crucial issue facing us. Such a definition of humanness may be drastically superficial, leading us to misidentify the challenges facing us. The base-line in this well-worn casting of human being itself is that we are animals, that is, living beings capable of self-movement, in particular, the ability to move from place to place, i.e. locomotion. The specific difference that defines us as a species is that we are animals endowed with the *logos*, that is, with language, reason. We are cast as the rational animal, a cast upon which all of today's sciences rest for their researches, progress and breakthroughs. It should be noticed that this interpretive cast which maintains its grip on our mind even today does not say *who* we are, but *what* we are; a kind of animal that is today struggling for survival on a planet that our own human activities have brought into dire straits for ourselves as well as all the Earth's living beings, albeit our own human activities are subject to a principle of movement that remains invisible. The scientific underpinnings for this worldview are provided by evolutionary biology, a science whose credentials derive from being evidence-based in the accepted empiricist sense. We brush aside the seemingly insignificant difference between what and who at our own peril.

## B. Social and political animals

The Greeks also tell us (and we readily accept) that we are *social animals*; as animals we *sociate* with each other, and must do so to survive as a species and also to flourish, or at least get along with each other in society. This latter is the concern of *ethics*, the philosophical reflection upon how we humans live together in society and what constitutes the good, shared life of a society congregated around the pole of the State, that makes us also into *political animals*. This is where ethical values come into play. They pertain to fundamental values of *justice* and *freedom*, of *fairness* in our interchanges with each other and our *freedom of movement* sociating in our social lives. It is striking that the movement of our 'ethical' sociating interplay with one another in leading our lives, both within civil society and in relation to the State, is not covered by the kinds of movement attributed to animals compromising, according to Aristotle, locomotion, qualitative change, quantitative growth & decay, as well as propagation. These four kinds of movement are those pertaining to *physical* entities, whose characteristic is taken to be that they can move or be moved. Since Aristotle and up to the present day, the science of physics is that of movable entities and their movement and, in particular, their laws of (loco)motion. Modern physics retains its status as the foundational science among all the sciences, even the social sciences, seemingly because it engages with the nitty-gritty of matter from which everything else appears to be made. This dogma has immeasurable consequences that today are scarcely fathomed. Physical entities are without exception conceived as kinds of *whats* which are today called objects, whereas, properly speaking, ethics could be said to be concerned with *who* we are through our interplay with one another. The disjuncture between physics and ethics over the question of what or who and their different kinds of movement, however, has hitherto not been brought into the light of an explicit interrogation. The fundamental difference in how movement is to be conceived in the case of physical beings (whats), on the one hand, and social beings (whos), on the other, remains unarticulated conceptually, even though it is well-known, in plain sight, but taken for granted as an obviousness.

It does not help to try to capture the difference between what and who by pointing to today's entrenched distinction between object and subject. Why? Because the subject with its interior consciousness is such only vis-à-vis an independent, external object whose representation (or copy) it builds within its consciousness. An object is such only for a subject. The conscious (and unconscious) subject thus becomes the object of study of a specific modern science called psychology that is duty-bound to objectively study the human subject in order to be taken seriously as a science at all. The human subject thus ends up as a kind of what, not a who.

Nor does it help to merely attribute dignity to the person as a moral value that *ought* to be respected, for this leaves the question of sociating interplay as a kind of movement in its own right not only unanswered, but not even posed. Ethics regarded as the human realm of *ought-to-be* falls short of providing an *ontology* of interplay, as will be discussed further.

## II. INTERPLAY

### A. The hermeneutic As

If the genuinely social (rather than physical) movement of humans sociating with each other is the proper domain of what has traditionally been called ethics, its kernel must be sought in this kind of movement, even, and especially, if it has hitherto not been adequately articulated as such. The 'as such' or Latin 'qua' stands for an explicit disclosing, or deconcealing, that removes the veil of implicitness to bring the phenomenon in question to light, initially by making it questionable. The prime task of hermeneutic phenomenology is to interpret the (most elementary) phenomena that show themselves with an adequate concept such that they show themselves explicitly as, or qua, they are. This is known as the hermeneutic As or hermeneutic qua that is indispensable for understanding any entities at all, by understanding them As such-and-such on the deepest level of their being.

The hermeneutic As applicable to the peculiar kind of sociating movement constituting our living together is that of 'interplay'. That is, we need to learn to see and articulate interplay *as such*.

### B. Esteeming and estimating each other: whoness

In all sorts of encounters with each other in the world, no matter how fleeting, we necessarily *estimate* who the other is, which in turn requires that others present themselves *as* who they are [3]. This presentation *as* who includes here also that someone presents him- or herself deceptively as *not* who s/he is. A self-presentation *as* who need not be via the senses in the present [4], nor even in the present at all, say, through rumour. It may be from the past or future. An individual's *reputation*, for instance, amounts to a self-presentation of who one is from the past, i.e. of who one has been and accordingly estimated by others.

A sensate self-presentation may be estimated (superficially) by the other merely in estimating one's clothes, one's looks, one's gender, skin colour or ethnicity, or any other sensate sign distinguishing one's *whoness*. The estimation, in any case, consists in appreciating or depreciating who the other is; the interplay of encounter in the present consists in *mutually esteeming* or *misesteeming* each other. Mutuality (or reciprocity) is an indispensable hallmark of interplay-movement. There is a bewildering variety of ways, in various directions, that this interplay of mutual estimation is played out. At the core is a mutual estimation of our *individual powers and abilities* [5], whereas a mutual estimation of social status is more superficial. The mutual estimation of powers and abilities renders the interplay a mutually estimative *power* interplay insofar as such powers and abilities are displayed and exercised. For any individual it is important to have his or her abilities properly estimated, esteemed and appreciated by others. The reflection from others is incorporated into one's own *self-esteem* in one's *own* whoness. Having one's potentials and abilities constantly misesteemed and depreciated by others is generally disastrous for one's own self-esteem. It may provoke the power to *resist*. Hence the concept of power is not the monopoly of an ontology of physical movement.

Mutually estimative interplay, a kind of sociating, intertwining movement, is the core concept of whoness through which it is explicitly articulated. This concept is

therefore key to the hermeneutic As of whoness that brings the phenomenon explicitly to light. Note that mutual estimation in interplay *as* who one is is *relational*. This is in stark contrast to the traditional focus on and articulation of the *whatness* of things, i.e. their essence or quidditas, in terms of an enduring substance with certain properties. An hermeneutic phenomenology of whoness (quissitas) therefore differs markedly from any of the traditional conceptualizations of whatness in the investigation traditionally called *ontology*, again starting with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The ontology of whatness therefore has to be clearly distinguished from the ontology of whoness. The sociating movement of interplay requires its own ontological (or, ultimately, even temporallogical [6]) interpretation. The need for a temporalogy arises through the phenomenological discovery that the very meaning of being is temporal [1]. The ontology of whatness comprises also the ontology of *movement* of whats, at whose core is physics, whereas movement in the existential ontology of whoness is captured first of all by the concept of mutually estimative interplay, a concept lacking in traditional philosophical discourse. Nevertheless there are implicit traces of the phenomenon of interplay already with the Greeks that, in a certain sense, is as plain as day, but overlooked and neglected for an explicit unfolding. This neglect is anything but fortuitous and has to do with Greek thinking's focus on phenomena of physical movement for the sake of gaining power and mastery over it [7] [8].

### C. Commutative justice and exchange-value

Mutually estimative interplay was first articulated implicitly, without being investigated more deeply, by Aristotle in his treatment of commutative justice in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* [9]. A commutation is an interchange, thus implicitly an interplay, in which goods are exchanged on the market, usually through the mediation of money. It requires that buyer and seller mutually estimate the good, such as a blanket, that is offered for sale, whose value is estimated quantitatively in monetary price, say,  $x$  dollars. If agreement is reached, money and the good change hands, and the exchange is *fair* if both buyer and seller are satisfied and it does not turn out later that the good in question has a defect not visible when the transaction was made. (The blanket may be a little moth-eaten, which was not immediately apparent, and the seller may have hidden the defect, thus making the transaction fraudulent.) The interplay is then fair, and commutative justice has been served. If one of the parties regards the interplay as unfair in some respect, the case comes before a civil court whose verdict is supposed to correct the injustice, i.e. the unfairness, in the commutation. The mutual estimation of the good and its price in the exchange is of the good's *quantitative exchange-value*. Its *qualitative exchange-value* consists in its being exchangeable at all. The good is not only useful for a certain use, but, secondarily, through being useful also for someone else, it also possesses exchange-value that is practically estimated by paying a monetary price [10].

In everyday life, going about one's daily business may consist in a concatenation of exchanges of sale and purchase, such as selling a blanket in order to buy a sack of flour. In this case, money serves (innocently) as a means of exchange in order to obtain one use-value in the place of another. This

employment of money, however, by no means exhausts money's potential, as we shall see.

The actual exchange of good and money is the realization of ideal values of the good mirrored in money and the money mirrored in the good, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The exchange-values of good and money apparently inhere in the things themselves and mirror themselves in each other in a kind of *mutual estimation of things*. Exchange-value itself is therefore *relational*, and not *substantial*, as will be seen in the further discussion of thingified value itself. To attribute exchange-value to things themselves therefore amounts to falling for the fetishistic illusion of value-substantiality. Because money can be used to purchase any good at all offered on the market, it is said to embody, as the thing it is, *universal exchange-value* [11]. Good and money may be regarded as two different forms of *thingified value*, on which more later. The buyer and seller in the exchange figure merely as the bearers of their respective thingified values and insofar are not estimated as having value in themselves. Rather, they estimate each other only mediated by things. This is a far cry from what have come to be valued today as human values in everyday discourse and enshrined in documents such as the Magna Charta or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Hence you might say, this is all well and good, but it concerns only *economic* value and not the values that traditionally, as well as today, are at the focus of attention as properly ethical. That human values must relate directly to human beings themselves seems obvious.

## III. VALUES

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out purportedly innate rights for how each and every individual human being — "everyone", without distinction — is to be, or rather *ought* to be, estimated, valued by others and accordingly treated. The Declaration reads as a list of Oughts. Article 3 already proclaims that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person", whereas the right to own property, either individually or in association with others, is relegated to Article 17, but is registered nevertheless. One could therefore rightly claim that the rights of life and liberty have priority over the rights of private property. Even the right to privacy (Article 12) is enunciated before the right to private property. The dignity of the individual human stands front and centre, and dignity pertains to the appropriate esteem and estimation of an individual in social interplay as opposed to his or her misesteeming and depreciation (with their often brutal practical consequences).

Life and liberty are only lived out as a freedom of social movement acknowledged by others and (especially) the State. Sociation pure and simple is the realm of civil society, whereas power interplay with the State, society's political instance, introduces socio-political aspects. Such freedom of socio-political movement may be taken to encompass freedom of speech (including freedom of the press) or the freedom to choose one's own religion or belief system. Although expressed as individual values, human rights are relational and are largely lived out only through negotiation with others. Freedom of geographical movement is not unbounded but confined to "freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State" supplemented by a right to temporarily leave and return to one's own country

(Article 13). Insofar the State, with its sovereign territorial power that is not laid out in the Declaration, has precedence over the rights of an individual to move freely across the globe, and live and shape a life in interplay with others in any country. The political entity of the State trumps the geographical entity of a country, thus carving up the surface of the globe into a multitude of State-governed, so-called sovereign territories, and the rights of the individual concern in large part the power interplay between the individual and the State. The individual is attributed rights to protect him or her against certain exercises of State power such as arbitrary arrest (restriction of physical freedom of movement by State-sanctioned physical force).

All these values are highly visible in ongoing discourses globally that aim to assert individual rights of all kinds against both abuses by State political power and unfair interplay among the members of society themselves, that is, in the ongoing power interplay of civil society.

#### A. *Squaring of the circle of power: Democracy*

Beyond the list of human rights proclaiming individual values, there is that one great value, the idea of democracy, through which a squaring of the circle of political power in a society is meant to be achieved. The people of a given country are supposed to take back the power the State exercises over it in such a way that it can be said that all political power over a people emanates ultimately from the people itself or, more precisely, from the will of the people as expressed in free and fair elections which are themselves a kind of social power interplay. Rights of free speech are also essential in the democratic power interplay between society and the State; only free media are able to create and maintain a transparency in the exercise of the State's political power and uncover the State's abuses of power, especially in its treatment of individuals (journalists), its citizens or otherwise. It is perhaps uncontroversial that, at least verbally, and perhaps hypocritically, democracy is proclaimed almost globally as the most self-evident social, or rather, socio-political value. Democracy as a value has at least nominal global currency, despite those systems of political rule that dissent, asserting instead that the value of liberal democracy is synonymous with Western decadence. On the other hand, the idea of and struggle for democracy has taken root also in non-Western countries. Democracy as the self-evident highest socio-political value is held high (especially, but not only, in the West) despite the more or less flawed perversions of its idea practised in certain countries, both Western and non-Western. Does democracy deserve its high status as socio-political value?

The squaring of the circle achieved by the idea, if not the practice, of democracy amounts to making the State's subjects, i.e. those subject to its political rule and exercise of (ultimately) physically effective power, themselves the ultimate *underlying subjects* of precisely this rule and power that is thereby *legitimated*. Thus 'subject' has two different senses deriving from Latin 'subiacio' ('to throw under, subject') and 'subiaceo' ('to lie under, underlie'). Legitimation of government is the hallmark of a successful squaring of the circle. In the modern age the conception of the people as the democratic subject goes hand in hand with the casting of the human being itself as a conscious subject endowed with self-certainty through its indubitable knowledge of itself by virtue of its own self-consciousness. The very word 'conscience' means literally 'co-knowing'.

The self-certainty of the self-conscious subject knowing itself corresponds in the socio-political realm to the right to assert one's 'self-certain' opinion in free speech. In the political realm this subjectivity of the individual conscious subject has two major consequences.

The first is that society itself is conceived as being made up of a *collectivity* of subjects, each with their own individual will that has to be collected together in a collective intentionality. This collectivity of individual wills is expressed, in particular, in elections to elect who is to exercise State political power over the collectivity of subjects (the people) on a day-to-day basis. This conception of individual, conscious, willed subjects entails that, to start with, they are *dissociated* from each other. This dissociation is initially conceived naïvely as *individuation* into individual bodies, i.e. quasi physically, which must be distinguished from (social) *individualization*, as I will show later.

The second consequence is that the will of the people as exercised via the State through the executive (including the bureaucracy), the legislature and the judiciary is conceived as making 'us' the ultimate masters of 'our' own destiny. After all, 'we', as a collectivity of individually willed, conscious subjects, are then (conceived as) the ultimate, underlying source of political power that moves the world in the interplay of political powers both domestically and abroad, i.e. nationally and internationally, locally and globally. Democratic politics therefore become the task and struggle to change the course of the world's movement on a smaller or larger scale by raising the consciousness of the people, i.e. the collective will, in one direction or another, at least enough to win majorities in elections. On the global plane, coming to grips with global problems such as climate change or war then amounts to consciousness-raising sufficient to push through globally agreed policies to come to terms with global issues.

Despite all the distortions and perversions of democracy as actually practised globally, even in those countries regarding themselves as bastions of democracy, it is seen, at least in the West (here including all those States that have signed up constitutionally to a more or less liberal-democratic form of government) to be a force for good through the exercise of the collective will of peoples expressed through their respective elected governments.

#### IV. THINGIFIED VALUE AND ITS MOVEMENT

I have now briefly discussed some of the values that are highly visible globally and have their origins in Western ways of thinking that may go against the grain of non-Western cultures, i.e. their historically cultivated ways of living in unity with how these ways of living are conceived. The title of my paper, however, promises an invisible global social value, one that is not on the radar screen of discourse on global social values. The invisibility of this invisible value does not exclude, but rather includes, that it is also as plain as day. That it can be both invisible and visible derives from the 'as such' already discussed that marks the distinction between implicit and explicit understanding. Hermeneutic phenomenology aims at bringing the hermeneutic As into the light of explicit, conceptual understanding that, at the same time, disposes of misunderstandings of and downright delusions regarding the phenomenon in question that have a more or less tight grip

on the mind. Perhaps we are more mired in delusion than we would care to admit.

#### A. The ontological difference

The mind here must not be conceived as individual consciousness, nor as a collectivity of such, but as the ineluctably shared understanding of elementary phenomena of an historical age such as our own modern age [12]. The conception of the individual, conscious, willed subject is, paradoxically, one such shared elementary understanding, namely, of the individuated human being as such. This conception of human subjectivity is taken for granted to such a degree that it can be said to be invisible. The hermeneutic *As*, through which this historically specific conception of human being has been cast, is almost entirely invisible in our own time, even in philosophy itself, that has been overwhelmed and ravaged by positivist and empiricist ways of thinking that have shut down the *ontological difference*.

The same holds true for what I have discussed about thingified exchange-value. It will be readily admitted as an obviousness that certain things have value in exchange on the market, and also that this exchange-value derives from their use-value. If they are useless, they are also valueless on the market. Marketable goods as things have exchange-value and are therefore a form of thingified value. That is straightforward enough but does not seem to warrant the introduction of the artificial jargon of thingified value, just because some things have value. Note that a 'thing' in this context is not restricted to sensuously palpable, physical things. It will also be readily conceded that money as a means of exchange, as this thing, has value and is therefore also a form of thingified value. It's simply obvious. Some philosophers [13] also claim that the thing called money has value only because 'we' subjects agree, by convention, to attribute value to it.

#### B. Shared mind of an age vs. intersubjectivity and the subject/object split

Monetary exchange-value is thus taken back into the vicious *hermeneutic circle* of subjectivity, according to which the individual conscious subjects, collected through their collective willed intention, decide what has value and what is valueless. This *collective* will is then conceived *as* a product of *intersubjectivity*. The phenomenon of thingified value is thus dissolved in collective, subjective will. If 'we' collective subjects decide to retract 'our' collective value-judgement from a certain kind of money, it will become valueless, and vice versa. Everything under the sun of this posited, presupposed underlying human subjectivity then seems possible, if only a collectivity of willed intention can be gathered together. You could say that this is an illusion generated by human being itself having been interpreted *as* individual subjective consciousness. It is an entirely naïve notion to imagine that objects are initially objectively what and how they are, independently of human subjectivity, and are then attributed value by subjective value-judgements. But it is an old *topos* that goes back a long way to philosophers such as Georg Simmel with his *Philosophy of Money* and Heinrich Rickert with his *Wertphilosophie* (value philosophy), and sociologists such as Max Weber with his "Wertfreiheit" (value-freedom). All three thinkers may be regarded as representatives of Neo-Kantianism that was especially dominant in Germany in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1930s. Kant's subjective idealism,

with its disjunction between *Is* and *Ought*, must therefore be seen as the source for many illusions in this subjectivist vein that persist to the present day, not only in Germany.

The two forms of thingified value so far identified have their phenomenal evidence, and there is no need to try to attempt to attribute them to one side or the other of the dichotomy between subject and object that has been a seemingly unquestionable, i.e. dogmatic, feature of Western thinking since Descartes. At least, to all intents and purposes, the subject/object split, serving as it does the limitless will to power over all kinds of movement, has not been interrogated and deconstructed but, on the contrary, upheld and entrenched in today's predominating Anglo-American philosophy and all the modern sciences.

#### C. Multiple interlocking ontological forms of valorizing thingified value

The phenomenon of thingified value and its forms deserves closer attention. The innocuous word 'form' itself has greater significance than appears at first sight. The distinction between form and content is part of the stock-in-trade of pedestrian thinking, but this usual signification hides the significance of the word 'form' as a standard rendering of Plato's *Idea* (ἰδέα). The forms are the 'views' or 'looks' that the phenomena present of themselves to the human mind as the looks of beings simply insofar *as* they are beings, i.e. the looks of a being *as* such in its 'beingness' (οὐσία) or mode of being. The '*as*' here is the hermeneutic *As* that occupies the *ontological difference* between a being and its mode of being. Thus, for example, to conceive the human being *as* a species of animal is already to interpret the human being ontologically in its beingness. The mode of being *as* an animal, in turn, calls for its own interpretation *as* animality. Aristotle interprets the beingness of the animal as psyche in Western thinking's first philosophical psychology, *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), that is worlds apart from today's science of psychology that knows nothing of the ontological difference.

Good and money, I have said, are two of the forms of thingified value, i.e. two 'looks' of thingified value that do not exhaust to phenomenon of thingified value itself which, as we shall see, has a whole range of interconnected looks or forms of appearance. One could say that thingified value itself remains invisible behind its forms of appearance in its various value-forms. Already due to its having various forms of appearance, one can say that thingified value itself is able to transform itself into multiple forms and insofar may be called Protean. These transformations of form constitute the movement of thingified value, a kind of movement demanding its own investigation and appropriate ontological interpretation that must not be confused with the ontology of physical movement implicitly employed ubiquitously by the natural sciences. Through its transformational movement, if the temptation to reduce it to the value-judgements of an underlying collective human subject is resisted, thingified value can be seen to take on a life of its own. Thingified value is thus *fetishized* [14], but this fetish is so ordinary, self-evident and taken-for-granted, that it is not seen *as* such. It remains invisible in its banal, quotidian normality.

The investigation and analysis of successive transformations of thingified value leads to the uncovering of further value-forms in a conceptually interconnected way [15]. Here I only name baldly the prime value-forms that come to light during

this investigation: i) money as capital, ii) wages, iii) surplus-value, iv) variable capital, v) fixed capital, vi) interest, vii) loan-capital, viii) ground-rent, ix) landed property, ix) profit of enterprise, xi) enterprise value.

Re money-capital: It should be noted that with the transformation of money into money-capital an *inversion* takes place initiating a topsy-turvy world, whereby money is no longer a means facilitating the exchange of one good for another, but the starting-point of a circuit in which money is advanced in order to return augmented (or bloated) with a surplus that is generally called (gross) profit. The advanced capital is transformed into wages and productive capital in order to set up some kind of production process whose products (including services) are intended to be sold at a profit, an aim that may not be achieved. These transformations of value-form themselves have only a purely formal, quantitative aim, namely, the augmentation of thingified value via its transformational movement through its value-forms, a movement called *valorization* (Verwertung). As such, this formal, augmentative movement of thingified value is entirely *indifferent* to its content, i.e. to what is produced, how it is produced and for whom. Although borne and executed by human beings, in its formal indifference, the movement of valorization can scarcely be regarded as human or humane. The product must merely find a market on which it can be sold to realize *revenue* containing a portion of profit. The formal movement *in itself* is indifferent to whether the product is harmful to consumers or the environment. Prevention of such harm requires intervention of the State's political power through law and regulation. The formal movement of valorizing thingified value is also *limitless* and *senseless*. It is senseless because its aim is solely the augmentation of thingified value, and it is limitless because there is no limit at which further augmentation would become senseless and cease. The limitlessness of the art of wealth-getting was already seen by Aristotle in his *Politics* [16].

Re wages: They are the form of thingified value through which living labour power, and thus employees themselves, subject themselves and are subsumed beneath the formal movement of valorizing, profit-seeking capital. Insofar one can say that, by hiring out their labour power to an employer, the employees thingify themselves for the sake of gaining wage income. Furthermore, wages paid are a cost, that is, a deduction and detraction from the potential surplus-value (gross profit). There is therefore at the core of the circular movement of thingified value as capital an *inherent conflict, antagonism and struggle* between the employees and the character mask of capital (the capitalist employer, either an individual or a company) over the level of wages and working conditions, both of which are costs. This is the classic *class struggle*. The gross profit generated by circuits of capital is divided up into further value-forms that form the basis of other kinds of class struggle, as will soon become plain.

Re fixed capital: This can generally be regarded as purchased means (of production or circulation) for enhancing the accumulation of thingified value through increases in productivity and efficiency (relative surplus-value generation) as well as means for accelerating the turnover time. In short, technology, digital or otherwise, is at the service of the valorization of thingified value, i.e. its own 'flourishing', which is not a human aim or intention at all.

The fixedness of fixed capital, which is only consumed gradually during the course of multiple circuits of capital, is in contrast to variable capital (e.g. raw materials and semi-finished goods) that is consumed during a single circuit of functioning capital. It is a delusion to regard technology as of service to us humans; it has long since been subsumed under the valorization movement of total global capital as one of its major means of enhancement — at the cost of 'human flourishing'. Thingified value and its valorizing movement is able to turn the world upside down, and this topsy-turviness remains unseen. Therefore the phenomena remain deeply ambivalent and ambiguous, providing countless possibilities for self-serving deception. Capital fixed in technology of any kind is deployed not to reduce the burden of human labour but to enhance valorization by intensifying the exploitation of labour power under the rubric of cost-cutting. What is praised disingenuously as labour-saving turns on its head into labour-intensifying.

## V. PLAYERS IN THE GAINFUL GAME

Wages, interest, ground-rent and profit of enterprise are the four basic *income* value-forms flowing from the four income-sources (the employee's labour power, the financier's loan-capital, the landowner's land and the entrepreneur's enterprise, respectively) of the *four basic classes* of character masks that bear and carry out the valorization movement. These four basic character masks, which may be regarded as individuals or associations thereof, vie with each other to earn their respective kinds of income in a competitive struggle I call the *gainful game* [17]. Character mask is an appropriate term because the ostensible underlying subjects are reduced to roles in a play played out as a more or less strenuous, bruising or vicious game that is taken out of their hands. The entrepreneur (either an individual or a company) has a key role to play because the enterprise organizes the production process of a circuit of valorizing capital by bringing the factors of production together and setting them to work.

The gainful game is competitive because the total social thingified value resulting from the augmentative circling of thingified value as revenue is composed of the cost of wages plus a surplus that is divvied up firstly into interest and ground-rent, leaving a residue of profit of enterprise (part of which may be shared out as dividends). Business economics and accounting have obfuscating alternative terminology for these magnitudes of thingified value, including cash flow, Earnings Before Interest and Taxes, Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization, etc. The players engage in *power interplays* with each other over the dividing-up of the total *revenue* generated by total social, valorizing thingified value in a zero-sum game. On the surface of society, this total appears disguised as Gross Domestic Product that is taken by economists to be a measure of a country's economic strength and wealth. As spenders of their respective kinds of income, the character masks assume also the mask and role of *consumers* who are required to realize the value of produced goods and services in the monetary form of revenue for the producing capitalist enterprises. Thus all the character masks are *players* in the gainful game constituting the four basic social classes. These social classes are not empirical, sociological categories, but conceptual distinctions. In empirical reality there can be all kinds of hybrid mixtures of the four basic income-forms that complicate the simplicity. Hence, for example, an employee

can receive interest-income from loans made to an enterprise, thus making him or her nominally a member of two opposed classes wearing two distinct character masks. Pension funds in modern capitalist societies tendentially make everyone, whether they know it or not, partially into capitalist entrepreneurs as recipients of dividends (representing a portion of profit of enterprise), but this empirical fact does not refute the deeper hermeneutic truth of four basic income value-forms that is disclosed only conceptually, i.e. by ideas in the genuine philosophical sense.

The competitive gainful game itself is the surface form of appearance of the underlying valorization movement of the total thingified value passing through the various value-forms of its circuit. Through playing the gainful game, the players are unknowingly valorizing thingified value in its formal circular movement, a movement that remains invisible *as such* to the players because thingified value *as such* also remains invisible.

The compulsion to valorize total social and total global thingified value appears on the surface as the competitive gainful game among many players, including many individual enterprises, each with many circling capitals. The game itself, in turn, appears to be driven by individual and collective *human greed* that is deemed to be an ineradicable part of ‘human nature’, an ‘anthropological constant’. This attribution of motives is one of the grand illusions generated by the gainful game that only serves to obfuscate it and make it appear as unchangeable human destiny.

#### A. *We are players, not subjects*

The players in the gainful game — which, due to its deeper senselessness, may be called a farce — are *individualized* by virtue of being *dissociated* players who are sociated with each other in earning their livelihoods only via the medium of thingified value in which they are thoroughly immersed existentially. This individualized dissociation that frees them from each other lies at the core of (Western) *individualism* and its deceptive individual freedom that is so highly valued in the West as its hallmark vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes. Through this thingly mediation the players are insofar not only free but also *alienated* from each other, estimating each other only as the bearers of different kinds of private property, different kinds of value-things, instead of estimating what they can do for each other’s benefit in an estimative interplay that is *not* thingly mediated. They know nothing of the thingified medium itself *as such*, nor of its endlessly valorizing movement that asserts itself behind their backs.

By virtue of its formal indifference and universality, the medium of thingified value is able to sociate the dissociated players of the gainful game on a global scale. Only through this ubiquitous, thingified medium is today’s globalized economy possible and thus the world itself globalized. As players, the individuals are not the underlying subjects of the gainful game, but are exposed to its ups and downs occasioned by disruptions to and dislocations in the underlying valorization movement. The total social and global valorizing capital is splintered into myriads and myriads of individual circuits of capital that have to neatly intermesh in order for valorization on the whole to run smoothly. This smooth running can be disrupted in many, many ways, including breaking supply chains or interruption

of credit lines for individual capitals (enterprises) or rising interest rates either locally or even globally (so-called credit squeezes).

### VI. PRIVATE PROPERTY AS COVER-UP

The ultimate cover-up for valorizing thingified value is its form of appearance, that is, its *disguise*, as *private property* and its sociating movement mediated by *contractual intercourse* among persons, the socio-political character mask of individual or associated subjects. Each kind of income is privately owned and derived from the respective kind of private property in i) one’s own labour power, ii) loan-capital, iii) land or iv) an enterprise (including shares in joint-stock companies). Thus everyone is a property owner owning more or less valuable property. The private property owners sociate with each other via the form of *contract* between legal persons. This form of sociation is protected by the State’s rule of law that is regarded as sacrosanct in liberal political thinking. Whether it be to earn or spend income, individuals are free to enter into the many and various kinds of contract. In particular, as consumers they have *freedom of choice*, just as they are formally free to enter into contracts to earn income, thereby picking and choosing what is the best opportunity including, of course, what is most lucrative. In particular, employees are formally free to choose their entrepreneurial employers, just as employers are free to choose their employees. Owning property and exercising private property rights appears as the freedom of individuals living their lives in a market economy in *pursuit* of happiness. The *formal* nature of the freedom of individuals to earn and spend income translates as their freedom being only *potential*, not actual. All that can be demanded and contested is that the conditions and rules of competitive play be fair. This is known as freedom of opportunity, whose contours remain forever nebulous. Moreover, the coercive, compulsive underbelly of this individual freedom remains invisible.

#### A. *Thingified value as highest social value*

That the various kinds of private property and their respective income fruits are forms of thingified value remains invisible. In affirming the freedom of individual property rights as a cherished social value, the dissociated individuals are in truth unknowingly, at the same time, affirming thingified value and its coercive valorization movement as the *highest value of societies* sociated by this sociating medium that itself is covered up by the bland term ‘free market economy’. The human right of the individual to own private property proclaimed and enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights is in truth, on its obverse side, an affirmation of thingified value as ubiquitous sociating medium. The individual freedom afforded by the dissociated nature of the individuals sociated via the medium of thingified value is duplicitous since it is undergirded by a realm of compulsion dictated by valorizing thingified value and its vicissitudes. Individual freedom is therefore constricted by the very sociating medium that enables it; the hidden underlying valorization movement of thingified value asserts itself behind the backs of any kind of human will. All submit and bow down to the unknown god of valorizing thingified value whom I call Pleon Exia [18].

The freedom of geographical movement of the individual within state boundaries proclaimed by the Universal

Declaration of Human rights is implicitly as well as factually trumped by the freedom of movement of valorizing thingified value, which knows no State territorial boundaries. On the contrary, States generally welcome an influx of thingified value in the guise of capital inflows, foreign direct investment, joint ventures, and the like. Today's globalized economy is enabled by and demands the free movement of thingified value, a movement that is far more liberal than any (relatively) free movement of individuals across the globe.

The State is called upon to ameliorate and mitigate the societal repercussions of disruptions and crises in the valorization movement on a national or global scale that appear only *as* economic crises to which economists attribute causes that never name thingified value *as such*, but only ever a superficial form of appearance of it. Attributing causes is also feigned insofar as the competitive *interplay* through which the valorization movement is perpetrated is riddled with contingency. Since national economies are tied into the global economy, their imbalances and disruptions are never localizable nationally.

The *welfare state* results from the attempt to soften the societal impact of disruptions and crises on individuals, especially wage-earners, whether employed or unemployed. Those players in the gainful game who are unable to play on a par with other players; those who are handicapped in some way, turn to the welfare state as a last resort. It therefore has a compensatory, smoothing function that may ameliorate some of the harshness of the gainful game, while enabling it to go on. Even such welfare for the needy is contested politically because it represents a diminution of maximum potential valorization.

## VII. INTERPLAY IN THE MEDIUM OF THINGIFIED VALUE

The competitive gainful game itself can be and is existentially bruising for all the players, but especially for employees, whose wages and working conditions (such as safety standards) represent a deduction from gross profit. The enterprise is under constant pressure to reduce costs in any way possible, including increasing labour productivity, i.e. getting more labour and more productive labour out of employees through the deployment of more efficient technology. Cost-cutting pressures are enforced by the competition with other enterprises, but the underlying pressure comes from the valorization of total social and total global thingified value itself. As long as we humans conceive ourselves as individual, conscious, willed subjects that underlie movements in the world and are therefore ultimately responsible for them, we remain blind to the underlying, globally determining valorization of thingified value and therefore also remain its puppets, its mere players in a game on the surface. The movement of the global economy asserts itself self-evidently as an inevitable fate, and the state of the national and global economy becomes a predominant part of politics on all levels. International institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are supposed to exert a steering influence on the global economy, just as central banks are supposed to on the national. Any democratic politician ignores economic issues — and there are countless myriads of them — at his or her own peril. They are omnipresent throughout democratic politics in myriad ways.

The faster the total global thingified value turns over, the more profit it generates in a given time interval. This *acceleration of turnover* accounts for the ever-increasing pace of life, including the ever-increasing stress levels of modern life, but this connection remains unknown due to the invisibility of thingified value itself and its principle of movement [19].

The conditions of valorization of thingified value constrain and constrict all willed movements on the empirical surface of society, no matter whether they be initiated by individuals, and groups thereof, in civil society or politically via democratic institutions.

The medium of thingified value through which dissociated individuals are sociated is deleterious not only due to the tough competitive struggle and the economic crises it forces upon the players in the gainful game, but is *existentially toxic* per se as prime medium of sociation. It infects and sometimes even poisons social interplay of all kinds, including friendships and love relationships, with conflicts over private property. These become the stuff of drama and literature. Such conflicts may be as banal (and distressing) as quarrels over who is to pay the monthly rent, through to disputes over property ownership that end in costly, strenuous and stressful litigation lasting years. The individual freedom enabled by the predominance of thingified value as sociating medium turns out to be hollow, insofar as it is also existentially *alienating* [20]. Even the successful players in the gainful game earning large incomes and spending them to support an affluent life-style are unwittingly aligned with the senseless aim of endlessly valorizing thingified value. Those who delude themselves about their true circumstances are often called 'chumps' and 'suckers' in colloquial English. We need to reflect on that.

## VIII. GLOBALIZATION AND THE EARTH

I have already pointed out that, due to the formal nature of the valorization of thingified value transforming through its various value-forms, it is indifferent (indeed callously so) to its impact on both living humans, especially the employed and unemployed, and the Earth. Both are exposed to ruthless exploitation if not countered by resistance. For the relentless valorization of thingified value, employed human beings — not just empirically, but due to the very nature of thingified value's valorization, its very concept — are a cost factor that detracts from a potential maximum rate of valorization (which appears on the surface as profit margins of individual enterprises and industries). Organizing into labour unions is only one way in which employees of various kinds assert themselves against the limitless demands of valorizing thingified value that is disguised and represented by employers and those politicians in the State who, in turn, represent the interests of employers. Citizens of democratic States have the right to organize politically around an issue to compel the government to take action against the collateral damage caused by thingified value's endlessly valorizing movement. In doing so, the government also has to take care not to interfere with the valorization movement, that is, with the smooth running of the economy. The citizens remain also players in the gainful game with their vested interests in earning income, including wage income. Jobs therefore remain a major political concern for an electorate desiring employment. This dilemma pertains in particular to the Earth, whose limitless exploitation proceeds



apace in the (deceptive) name of economic prosperity on which all seem to depend, in particular, the wage-earners. They are inevitably interested in employment opportunities and keeping their jobs, often at the cost of ruining even their own health, apart from environmental destruction. Workers in specific deleterious industries may even develop and defend their own workers' culture precisely through their thingification under the value-form of wages.

Formally indifferent, limitless, senseless valorization comes up against the limits of exploitation of the finite Earth, including degradation of the environment, destruction of habitats and ecosystems, careless extinction of species, reduction of bio-diversity, disregard for nature by using rivers, lakes and oceans as dumping grounds for waste, whether toxic or not, and so on. In our own time, the Earth itself finally asserts its own natural limits to exploitation through environmental disasters of many kinds, on all scales, from the local to the global. The pressure and compulsion to valorize thingified value never let up, but remain obfuscated by insidious ideologies of individual freedom and economic prosperity propagated, via the mass media, not only (but especially) by the big, ruthless players in the gainful game, who may also be entire industries with their powerful political lobbies. The mass media serve to indoctrinate the masses over multiple generations, lulling them with consoling narratives of their own individual freedom.

#### A. Ground-rent

Exploitation of the Earth's resources and degradation of the environment are empirically well researched and documented, and environmental activists, along with others, have been fighting for decades against these depredations. What remains invisible in these struggles is that the Earth itself has been subsumed under a specific value-form, namely, ground-rent, that dovetails perfectly with the overall valorization movement of thingified value [21]. Hence, by remaining oblivious to the medium of thingified value and its forms of appearance, the diagnosis of the depredations misses the mark. Consequently, the direction of political action is also misguided.

The value-form of ground-rent [22] is the kind of income derived from land, which may be taken here to include also stretches of water, rivers, lakes or even parts of the ocean. The Earth's surface is divided up into State territories, major parts of which, in turn, are divided up into parcels of privately owned land. The landowner derives ground-rent from leasing privately owned land to an enterprise of some sort; it is analogous to the interest paid for the use of loan-capital, with this 'interest' being paid for the use of a plot of land.

#### B. Capitalization of incomes

This circumstance introduces another queer and perverse *inversion* in the complex of interlocking valorizing value-forms that effects a further *topsy-turviness of the modern world*, namely, that the price of land is determined by the capitalization of the ground-rent treated as interest on a fictitious capital. One highly visible consequence of this on the surface is that when the level of interest rates rises, the price of the land itself, along with the real property on that plot of land, falls. This results in a real estate crisis whose connection with the valorization of thingified value remains invisible.

Any income at all can be conceived as the interest on a fictitious loan-capital and therefore capitalized: the net profit of enterprise is capitalized at a given interest rate to calculate the price of an enterprise; dividends are capitalized to calculate the price of shares in a public company, and even wages can be capitalized to calculate the price of a worker's life in compensation litigation. This last inversion corresponds to that achieved by the term, 'human capital', that implicitly expresses human subjection to the valorization needs of capital and thus thoroughly thingifies employees themselves — without anyone noticing it *as such*. It seems to be merely a way of speaking.

#### C. Calamitous consequences of private landownership

The dividing-up of the Earth's surface into parcels of privately owned land has immense consequences for sparing the Earth from exploitation and degradation. Despite this, the Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that individuals have the right to own property, including property in land itself. Policies of any democratic State that impinge on land-use in any way, such as the construction of infrastructure of all kinds, come up against the massive resistance of private landowners.

Private landownership also plays havoc with the age-old, culturally embedded practices of indigenous peoples on their land. The dispossession and massacres of the indigenous were (and are) driven by the gainful interests of landed property which, in turn, silently and surreptitiously align with the optimization of valorizing thingified value. Attempts to come to terms with today's pressing concern with global climate change face fierce resistance not only generally from income-seeking players in the gainful game, especially the enterprises, but specifically from landed-property interests. In the struggle for a transition to a sustainable economy that is said to be for the sake of survival of the human species of animal, we do not ask insistently enough *who* we are and what, exactly, we are struggling to sustain. The coerciveness of the globally sociating medium of thingified value and its 'sustained', endless valorization can only be conceived once the ontological difference is reopened historically. Then the veil of delusions of individual, property-owning freedom could be stripped away. Until then we remain clueless about the depth of our predicament in our more or less liberal, more or less perverted democracies, misidentify the crucial issues through misinterpretation, and therefore are not up to facing the challenges confronting us in today's world.

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