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WORTHLESSNESS:  
TWO STORIES I KNOW,  
PLUS A MARXIAN  
REFLECTION

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# Regimes of Value and Worthlessness: two stories I know, plus a Marxian reflection<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Terence Turner has reminded us that Karl Marx built his critique of political economy not only on the labour theory of value, but also on a value theory of labour under capitalism. In this paper I will employ that important insight and approach ‘the devaluation of labour’ as an anthropological rather than a narrowly economic event. I will look at two life stories from my earlier work, stories from two different locations – one in the Netherlands and one in Poland – that express in very different ways a similar threat of being made ‘worthless’. The paper also seeks to save some key aspects of the structural Marxism of the 1970s, associated with the important Althusserian trope of ‘articulation’, in an effort to propose an updated Marxian anthropology that can help address key experiences in and core properties of capitalist modernity. I do this by rejecting the facile opposition of ‘etic’ versus ‘emic’ ways of knowing; by talking about ‘critical junctions/junctures’ rather than articulation; by suggesting a ‘relational account’ rather than a ‘structuralist’ one; and by using Marxian notions of class, value, accumulation, appropriation, contradiction, and alienation in an ethnographically driven effort at discovery.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Dina Makram-Ebeid for inviting me to give this talk at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in July 2013 and to Dina and her colleagues, as well as to Johnny Parry, Catherine Alexander, and Chris Hann, for inviting me to engage with their exciting research group on ‘Industry and Inequality in Eurasia’. For this MPI working paper I have received wonderful and challenging comments from Kirsten Endres and Stephen Reyna that have prompted me to revise and to extend. Kirsten, however, will be disappointed by the lack of further interview material. The reason for not offering this, against her sound counsel, is that this piece is supposed to become a chapter in an upcoming book where that more extensive material is planned for the next chapters. Stephen urged me to be more explicit about my key concepts, and about my Marxism. He wanted a ‘crystal clear’ rather than a ‘thick’ analysis. I have taken up that challenge, but probably more lightly than he would have hoped. The reason lies again in the function this piece is supposed to have within the upcoming book. I have presented this paper in 2013 at seminars at the Department of Anthropology in Oslo and at the Department for Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics. An early version was presented in February 2012 at the MEDEA conference organised by Susana Narotzky at the University of Barcelona. This final version was given in October 2013 at a workshop with Mats Lindqvist and his students from Stockholm/Södertörn at Central European University in Budapest. I am thankful for these invitations, and for the engaging, encouraging and thought-provoking responses of my colleagues at these institutions. I am happy they keep me thinking.

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## Introduction

Amidst growing public disbelief that capitalism will have a good ending after all, and for all, anthropologists and other social and cultural critics have in the last fifteen years begun to concern themselves more seriously with recurring, indeed systematic, phenomena of dispossession, proletarianisation, and alienation, and indeed with questions of class, as the ineluctable dark side of accumulation. In a sense, the 1990s dance of anthropology and cultural studies around ‘modernities’, local and multiple, is gradually reinventing itself as an engagement with *capitalist* modernities (as evidenced for example by the Comaroffs 2012; and in a very different way by Goody 2012). The philosophical backdrop to this shift also features new theoretical approaches to capitalism and its anthropological complexions by anti-capitalist theorists such as David Harvey, Jodi Dean, Hardt and Negri, Žižek, and others. New anthropologies of class (Carrier and Kalb forthcoming) and of labour (Kasmir and Carbonella forthcoming) that seek the conversation with this new theoretical landscape are being proposed from within the discipline. However, few anthropologists are as ready as Gavin Smith (Smith forthcoming) to take on the ‘elementary structures’ of capital as such (see also Barber, Leach and Lem 2012). David Harvey (2010, 2012) meanwhile keeps pointing out that anthropologists sustain an indefensible absolute preference for the description of local forms over the logical and historical discovery of universal structures – indefensible, that is, in the face of the sheer importance of understanding the on-going jumbo processes of global capitalist transformation. Many anthropologists, who seem aware of the global crisis, appear also proudly sceptical to go beyond local ethnography of observable interactions and audible utterances and then claim difference as a form of resistance: witness the ends to which the recent return of Marcel Mauss has been put in anthropology, or witness in the US the anthropological followers of Gibson-Graham. Even stellar scholars such as Jean and John Comaroff seem satisfied to refuse to aspire to anything but ‘grounded theory’ based in loose philosophical reflections on local knowledge and its hidden universalities. The Comaroffs’ otherwise enabling effort at ‘theory from the south’ disappoints in that it does not seek to transgress the threshold between the contextualised insights of ‘southern theory’ and the explicit and portable abstraction known as ‘real theory’ – which of course should not necessarily be ‘northern theory’ – even though there is quite a bit in their accounts that is groping toward it (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

Why this refusal of theory? Is anthropology perhaps haunted by the ghost of 1970s-style structural Marxism and its ‘theoreticist drift’? The memory of that iconoclastic moment may seem almost forgotten but is in fact starkly and uncomfortably present in the deep background to the contemporary, certainly among the current cohorts of senior anthropologists with influence on the discipline’s sense of taste. That should not surprise. The analytic and universalistic possibilities inherent to that moment were in retrospect inexplicably swiftly abandoned, indeed almost officially banned, as the 1980s mass return to ‘thick description’ and local knowledge as the discipline’s singular mode of being began. This local and descriptive turn was then philosophically polished up by the emergent lure of postmodernity’s desire to see existentialist contingencies all around – that is, freedoms of choice and the desire for being and becoming in the multiple, the fragmentation of the fragmentation of all narratives. What must make the memory of these fashionable reversals all the more unpalatable is their overarching contextualisation within the accelerated neoliberalisation of large swaths of the globe; and of the attendant threats of closure for academia and academic

careers. All this should be hardly contested by now. These are good reasons for some retrospective discomfort.

The retrospective ‘crimes’ of structural Marxist anthropology of the 1970s were its structuralism and its rationalism/theoreticism, both going back to the re-reading of Marx by the philosopher Louis Althusser in the late 1960s. These two aspects were implied in each other and came together in the notion of ‘articulation’. Articulation worked on two levels: first as the articulation between various structures within a ‘mode of production’, where articulations between the ‘infrastructure’ of ‘the economy’ and the ‘not-immediately economic’ super-structures explained function as well as contradiction, and therefore practice, continuity, change, and transformation; and second as an articulation between different modes of production, as in the articulation between capitalist and domestic modes of production, explaining the functional reproduction of both through complex and gendered structures of exploitation. The first form of articulation can perhaps be usefully associated with the work of Maurice Godelier (1977 for instance), the second with Claude Meillassoux (1982; see also Bloch 1983).

Articulation, thus, was probably one of the most theoretically ambitious concepts that anthropology ever embraced, competing directly with ‘culture’. The competition between the two, ‘articulation’ versus ‘culture’, focused on the importance of universalist and structuralist analyses of power, exploitation and accumulation versus local cultural meaning. This was expressed in sharply opposed research styles and conventions of writing: empiricism, local fieldwork, and ethnography versus ‘theoreticism’, logical deduction, structuralism, and historical observation/study. It was a frontal clash of starkly ‘etic’ versus programmatically ‘emic’ approaches about the hierarchies in the discipline.

My quest is to save some key aspects of Marxian structuralism while exorcising the *theoreticism* – “gallic logic chopping” as Eric Wolf (1982) once quipped – in an effort to re-appropriate a Marxian anthropology that can help address key experiences in and core properties of the contemporary capitalist world. I do this by rejecting the facile opposition of etic versus emic ways of knowing; by talking about ‘critical junctions’ or ‘junctures’ rather than articulation; by suggesting a ‘relational account’ rather than a ‘structuralist’ one; and by using Marxian notions of class, value, accumulation, appropriation, contradiction, and alienation in an ethnographically driven effort at discovery. The inspiration comes more from Brenner’s, Harvey’s, Gramsci’s and Thompson’s relational reading of the Marxian tradition than from Althusser’s more systemic one (see for example Kalb 1997), more from Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz than from Godelier or Meillassoux. It seeks to expose, among others, the social and cultural contradictions of place and space within the globalising value regimes of capital accumulation, explicitly and analytically. In particular, it seeks to understand ‘worth and worthlessness’ as meaningful relational forces and situated realities within the globalised structuration of local lives within capitalist modernity.

### **Value Theories of Labour: two stories in one**

In my work on Poland and the Netherlands I have made intensive use of two longer life stories narrated by key informants: one told over several meetings in 1992 and 1993 by Maria van de Velde in Eindhoven, the other by Krzysztof Zadrozny during two episodes in Wroclaw in 1999 and 2006. Against the background of numerous other life interviews and data I collected in these settings, those two exceptionally rich stories helped me understand in more subtle and surprising

ways some of the antagonistic, and indeed agonistic, immediate struggles that were among the key social realities of the dynamics of class and accumulation in the places and times in which these histories were lived and then narrated. It should at once be emphasised that these intimate antagonisms and agonies can never, in their situated particularity, just be ‘read off’ the ‘structural’ realities of a place, which can of course be anticipated but must always still be ethnographically discovered. These were working class stories grappling with some of the locally lived contradictions of Eindhoven in the pre- and high-welfare state period in the Netherlands (1950–1990), and of Wroclaw during the ‘transition’ from ‘really existing socialism’ to really existing capitalism in Poland (1985–2005), respectively.

It should be emphasised at once that both of these locations carry strong reputations as leading urban exemplars of industrial capitalist success in Europe. Wroclaw, close to the German border, is one of three or four fast growing urban economies in postsocialist Poland and is among the economic top performers in the imagined and desperate catching up race of Central and Eastern European ‘economies’ with ‘the West’. Eindhoven in the course of the 20th century became one of the key worldwide command centres in consumer electronics, light manufacturing, and then in particular in ‘opto-electronics’, the techniques that lie in the heart of the silicon economy. The urban region generates no less than a quarter of all the export-earnings of a country that has itself been the unmatched top-exporter of the EU for the best part of the last two decades. In 2011, Eindhoven received a prize from a New York foundation for being the ‘most intelligent city’ on earth.<sup>3</sup>

My anthropological stories form the agonistic flip side of these capitalist success stories. Both in fact express lives unfolding within the high-pressure relationships of export-oriented mass manufacturing in the light electrical sector. High-pressure relationships, because this sector thrives within some of the most competitive market environments in global capitalism, environments that also tend to restructure and rescale themselves continuously. Perhaps more than any other industry, since its start in the late 19th century this light electrical sector has been associated with ‘emerging’ and ‘catch up’ regions. In local contexts of perceived backwardness, investments in this branch have been surrounded by hopes and myths of modernity, welfare, social security, ‘middle class formation’, and consumption. This stems from the fact that the light electrical and electronics sectors produce emblematically ‘modern’ consumer items, from household appliances to electronics. At the same time, these industries are also characteristically labour-intensive, involve large numbers of often first-generation industrial workers, and are therefore keen to settle in ‘less developed’ locations with a surplus of labour at hand, where ‘primitive accumulation’ has done its dispossessive work and has exhausted the possibilities of locally rooted accumulation in agriculture or simple commodity production. Such labour is often keen to enter these ‘elevator industries’ that promise to move them and their territories swiftly up the global and local status scales. Unlike other labour-intensive industries such as textiles, shoemaking, and food processing, the electrical industries also tend to generate a good number of highly qualified jobs, seek liaison with institutions of higher education and research, and appear in general to promise a popular futurity that is decidedly more modern than all that came before. After dispossession, the electrical industries come as a promise to ‘be-come’ repossessed.

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘most intelligent city on earth’ is what local buzz makers in Eindhoven made of the award given by an association in New York City devoted to the creative use of broadband digital technologies, called the ‘Intelligent Community Forum’. See: <http://www.intelligentcommunity.org/index.php?src=news&refno=629&category=Partner+News&pid=629>

However, such re-possession does not come without exploitation of labour, of territories, of histories and ‘traditions’. Precisely because of their labour-intensive nature, the electrical industries often sank themselves over time ever more deeply into local relationships, as they sought to capture them for the purpose of securing competitiveness in the face of always recurring downward price-pressures emanating from newly emerging production sites in even less developed spaces. More often than not, the electrical industries – by seeking to ‘capitalise’ (on) community, culture, and locality – therefore tended to magnify the relational logics of ‘tradition’ and ‘backwardness’ embedded in those prior histories. Thus, the promised modernity regularly turned into something like a hollow shell in which an uncomfortable past was kept to linger. Despite its futuristic glamour, electrical production remained based on a large component of lowly skilled labour, often highly feminised, and therefore ‘internally’ disciplined and exposed to despotic regimes on the workshop-floor. Electrical labour thus tended to be strong on kinship ties, internal segmentation, hierarchy, and patriarchal control, both within and outside the point of production; and weak on formal organisation, solidarity, and horizontal ‘public spheres’. And, as said, it was always by definition exposed to ruthless competition from emergent sites with even more exploitable proletariats elsewhere. Inevitably, all of this rarely failed to exert downward pressure on the realisation of upward hopes. This also had a distinct urban aspect, an aspect which was tied into the creeping hollowness of the ‘really existing’ modernity on offer: until recently, and admittedly for different reasons, both Eindhoven and Wroclaw were often denigrated as a ‘peasant village’ and a ‘potato field’, respectively, by their less enchanted inhabitants and cultural critics.

I have never set these two stories in relation to each other. I saw them as part of separate projects: one in Western Europe, which I worked on during the early 1990s, the other in postsocialist Eastern Europe (now called Central Europe) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They were also part of apparently separate analyses. What could a socialist/postsocialist case study of industrial privatisation and restructuring after the fall of the Wall in Central-Eastern Europe have to do with a solidly capitalist and Western story in the 1950s–1980s? Yet, the stories, while decidedly discontinuous in time and place, are in retrospect closely implicated in each other, and in ways that are, on closer scrutiny, of surprising contemporary anthropological significance.

For one, the Whirlpool ‘white goods’ manufacturing complex in Wroclaw, one of the biggest in the branch in contemporary Europe, was an indirect offspring of the Philips ‘large domestic appliances’ sector once headquartered in Eindhoven. Exposed to fierce competition from cheaper Italian manufacturers, Philips in the 1970s sought to move up the ladder of added value, and sold this typically ‘mid-tech’ business to the Italians. Italian capital, similarly moving up in the 1990s, sold its mass-production interests to US based Whirlpool. Whirlpool then became the holding around which much of the mid-quality sector of this branch began to consolidate within a re-unified Europe. In 2002, it took over the ‘Polar’ plant in Wroclaw, then one of the biggest in Central Eastern Europe, and made it a prime European production site for refrigerators, dishwashers, washing machines etc., which were marketed under various labels, including the old Italian ones. Thus, while non-contiguous in time and territory, these were in fact different sites within one European/global rhythm of capitalist accumulation. This rhythm was based on a particular combination of technologies, consumer products for competitive markets, and local labour. And it was kept in motion by capital of an increasingly oligopolistic and transnational nature, in the end traded on the Amsterdam and New York stock exchanges, and hence thoroughly tuned into the global value regime and its unrelenting pressures.

More fascinating from the point of view of an anthropology of class, labour, and value, is that both stories were narratively framed around what I gradually came to understand as an involuntary and even somewhat compulsive conversation, waged both intra-personally, privately, and sometimes publicly – not necessarily with a steady voice – on value, or more precisely on questions of personal worth and worthlessness in relation to the production of capitalist value. This alludes to an urgent contemporary anthropological issue: the question of what is believed to generate value, the competing folk theories about value as well as worth (including those usually represented as ‘expert theories’ derived from them), their proponents, and the antagonisms, contradictions, and struggles among them. While being very different stories about very different local relations at the time, both addressed deep concerns with the possibility of lives being devalued in the context of particular regimes of value and accumulation, and hence, in local vernacular, of lives being made ‘worthless’.

Ideas of personal worth and worthlessness are in contemporary academic language often evoked through the lofty concept of ‘dignity’, which has also been taken over by the ILO and the World Bank. Dignity is also a key concept of Catholic-Christian theology and social teaching, as it is of other axial religions. The couple ‘cultural value and dignity’ has historically been offered, not only by conservatives, as a more wholesome and ethical rival to both the liberal and Marxist notions of ‘value and interest’, rejecting the latter’s connotations of individualism, materialism, conflict, and struggle as supposedly inescapable facts of modern life. ‘Value and dignity’ were also important notions within the ethical socialisms of Proudhon or Polanyi. ‘Personal dignity’ within mutuality is also a core idea of anarchism, which is presently being resurrected among the anthropological Left. My informants, though both Catholics, one of them a schooled Catholic social activist, rather than using that language of dignity, spontaneously coined their thoughts in the more down to earth language of ‘worth and worthlessness’, which seems an intentionally unstable hybrid of value theory, theories of hierarchy, and market-speak. While appreciative of the ethical foundations and prefigurative aims of these pre- and non-Marxian approaches, I suggest that a more analytic and relational understanding of the ‘origins’, ‘meanings’, and functions of these two compulsive conversations on value and worthlessness might well take its clues from some Marxian reflections.

Investment bankers these days talk about themselves with that characteristic lack of modesty that fits a ruling class as ‘the discoverers and producers of value’. They also speak freely about ‘high worth individuals’, the ones that magazines such as *Forbes* and *Fortune* report on. These are not only people with “heavenly bank-accounts”, as Frank Zappa would say, but they are also people worthy of unrestricted attendance to their needs and wishes by the ‘discoverers and producers of value’. Worthlessness, in contrast, is what describes not only the bank accounts of the plebs but also, and often in the form of a resolute critique, the kind of social relations and practical moralities they are held to inhabit: undependable, unreciprocal, undeserving, volatile, *lumpen*, less than solid, and with unpredictable edges, scrap metal rather than gold.

Terence Turner has reminded us recently that Marx built his critique of political economy not only on the labour theory of value under capitalism, but just as much on a value theory of labour (Turner 2005). Value under capitalism, Marx argued, was not measured by exchange prices on the market or the application of units of labour power, though the latter was certainly the ultimate source of all value. Rather, value in capitalism was realised only if and when products embodying the costs of ‘socially necessary labour time’, plus the fix and variable costs of the capitalist, could actually be sold with a profit on the market. The value theory of labour demands that living labour

can only be allowed to reproduce itself as 'valuable' living labour if it reciprocally allows capital a degree of exploitation and hence competitiveness that, in the end, does not compare unfavourably to the degree of exploitation and competitiveness realised elsewhere in the system. Under capitalism, that is the royal road to the production of value, indeed to those values which investment-bankers seek to discover.

Marx, classically, used the example of the Yorkshire handloom weavers after the introduction of machine driven looms in Lancashire. These machine looms doubled the productivity of labour around Manchester. From then on, Marx argued, the value of the labour of handloom weavers in Yorkshire was only half of what it used to be (Marx 1976: 125–131). It is this unrelenting value regime that is at the root of what Marx called 'the dull compulsion' of market-enforced discipline. It is also the origin of alienation, that ephemeral and yet utterly real anthropological flip side of value production in capitalism.

However, as Marxist anthropologists know, market discipline and the resulting alienation are not merely abstract categories or always-anonymous forces weighing down invisibly but tangibly upon particular people. Under capitalism, sometimes very visible impostors are delegated to promote the further alienation of control over one's life. Global regimes of value are often locally enacted with the help of visible financial actors, hands-on managerial power, local status and kinship hierarchies, national political elites, bureaucracies, legal protocols, etc. Capitalism, for Marxist anthropologists, was always already a thickly layered relational structure, perhaps even more so than for Marx himself (see for example, Kasmir and Carbonella, forthcoming; Carrier and Kalb forthcoming; Kalb 1997; Kalb and Halmai 2011; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Sider 1986; Wolf 1982). Hence, the value regime of labour, while ultimately determined globally by the anonymous pressure of the system of relationships itself, tends to announce and implement itself, too, through local and observable agents and through manifold and tangible local social forms. This is indeed what the structural Marxist anthropologist of the 1970s called 'articulation'. Sometimes such value regimes seem more straightforwardly induced by the nebulous forces of the invisible hand; at other times they come obviously embodied in visible drivers. The former is perhaps more characteristic of highly advanced locations, shielded from the greatest pressure from global competition by oligopoly, or of very peripheral ones where little local capital accumulation is taking place. The latter seems to be present rather often in the zones in between, those in which sectors such as electrical consumer goods usually appear to represent the royal road to the future. My suggestion is that local vernacular 'narratives of worth and worthlessness' are deployed in both obscuring and revealing what is being alienated, how and why, and on whose behalf.

These two stories of 'worthlessness' are thus affiliated in their deeper existential concerns and in their placement within a certain global industrial value regime associated with the spaces and times of 'backwardness'. Historically, however, my two stories arose from very different local political conjunctures, industrial periods, and social relations. They also reflected very different relationships of gender: they were indeed told by a man and a woman, and exhibit some remarkably contrastive properties associated with gender difference. In particular, they made non-identical connections between pasts, presents, and futures and had hugely contrastive repercussions for the possibility and nature of agency. Closely read, one might sense that the one would perhaps incline towards a certain depressive neurosis, while the other may have a feel of paranoia. The neurosis and the paranoia were about the possibility of being threatened with 'worthlessness' in a context of less than abstract capitalist value extraction. In what follows, I will not go into the



details of the interview narratives themselves, which have been presented at length in other publications (Kalb 1997, 2005b, 2009). Rather, I will place these stories in the context of what are the ‘critical junctions’ or ‘critical junctures’ (Kalb 2005a, 2011) of their emergence and meaningfulness.

### **Worthless Histories**

During my interview with her (see Kalb 2005b, Kalb 1997), Maria van de Velde regularly exclaimed, “this is my own history, but it is worthless! My kids always tell me ‘shut up mother, the past is the past and today is today’”. After some initial hesitation, she was visibly impatient to tell me a host of small stories, stories of growing up as a working class girl in the Eindhoven of the 1950s, stories of ‘her people’, stories that to me, as an anthropologist, were of fascinating significance but that to most others might have appeared unconnected, slightly confused perhaps, and without much of a point. I became puzzled by how precisely that imagined ‘worthlessness’ of her own history connected with what I increasingly started to see as a systematic, hegemonic, though always shifting regime of exploitation of daughters by an unspoken alliance of parents and local industrialists on behalf of capitalist as well as parental accumulation. The antagonisms of class on which the whole local electronics boom was based seemed steadily displaced onto relationships of kinship and gender. It turned the working class family into the site at which the actual contradictions had to be managed and contained, were then made inhabitable and turned into something habitual, and were therefore ultimately rendered ‘unspeakable’.

Maria grew up under the industrial conditions that I tried to capture with the concept of ‘flexible familism’ (Kalb 1997, 2005b). Mass production departments in the Philips plants (1890–1960) relied heavily on girls’ labour, just like the Foxconn plants in Guangdong or the *maquadoras* in Northern Mexico or Malaysia do now. Philips, over time, had succeeded by way of state sponsored selective immigration, psychological selection, social policy, and corporate urbanism, to shape working class family structures thoroughly around its own accumulation imperatives (Kalb 1997). That meant families tended to be very large (major neighbourhoods had averages of over ten people), and have a disproportionate number of girls in the working age. Fathers were rewarded with jobs, status, and a certain security for the family as a whole, including housing, health insurance, and a pension, in exchange for bringing in a number of unskilled but well socialised and highly disciplined daughters. This regime changed over time in its particularities. As Philips’ mass production departments were increasingly spread to low wage/high population sites first in the Netherlands and Flanders, then to Europe, and finally since the 1960s to the global south and east, local production in Eindhoven became ever more skill and education intensive. Over time, Philips families in Eindhoven were encouraged, through education, to climb up the ladder of added value more or less in synch with the production processes run around the headquarter functions of the increasingly global corporation. Philips was heavily involved in adult and professional education, as well as in primary and secondary education. This partly explains the good name Philips had and kept. In the early 1950s, there was still considerable mass production on the Eindhoven premises. And girls like Maria, whose unskilled father worked as an archivist in a Philips warehouse, were exposed to the intricately complex, despotic, and highly gendered regimes of production and reproduction, on the shop floor, at home, and during their leisure time, on which Philips’ profitability was based.

I proposed that concept of flexible familism to highlight a relational ensemble, a key set of interlocking relationships that in characteristic ways shaped not just families and the local industrial relations of the corporation but also the production of space, and hence the city and the region, its politics, its forms of socialisation, etc. (Kalb 1997). I called this ensemble a ‘critical junction’ in order to emphasise the multi-scalar and intersectional nature of the connective mechanisms and relationships. The concept of critical junction was intended to do broadly similar work as the 1970s structural Marxist concept of ‘articulation’ once did, but without the baggage of extreme rationalism and with a stronger mission to actually discover spatiotemporal relations, connections, the contradictory intimacies of social relationships, and the actual path-dependent historical trajectories of territorial development that were rolled out as accumulation was pushed on to higher levels. The concept sought dynamic relational explanations rather than conventional ‘structural’ ones, bridging the emic and the etic, the ‘cultural’ and the ‘structural’. The difference is a question of focus, emphases, and analytic vocabulary. ‘Critical junctions’ as compared to articulation was a call for multi-scalar relational and historical discovery versus macro-logical deduction, in the spirit of Eric Wolf’s programme.

I used flexible familism also to mark a contrast with Fordism. Fordism originally signified mass production for a national market, high male wages, mass consumption, and a life organised around the nuclear ‘modern’ family sustained by that male wage and by the private consumption and modern nuclear domesticity that the male wage made possible. These were what Gramsci in the early 1930s made out as the characteristic hegemonic moments of Ford’s ten-dollar a day regime in Detroit. For Gramsci, this exemplified how capitalist hegemony in advanced locations was secured (Gramsci 1971: 277–316). He then contrasted this with how such hegemony in less advanced locations in Europe, in Italy for example, could not be attained by pure market based processes and the wage. Productivity, revenues, and popular purchasing power were insufficient for that. Hegemony had to be forcefully imposed by repressive counter-revolutions of a conservative or fascist kind, ‘revolution from above’.

Philips and Eindhoven – flexible familism – were different from both Fordism and fascism, though they did embody, in a weaker sense, a revolution from above. Philips was hegemonic, but in a female dominated, low wage, large-family focused, export oriented production process. The crucial intermediating mechanism here was not high consumption and high male wages, such as in Fordism, or fascist state repression. It was the whole working class family itself that was set up as its key hegemonic mechanism. The firm did so by thoroughly integrating the social reproduction of workers’ families into the rhythms and cycles of its own accumulation. It employed family heads, fathers, who would bring in multiple well-disciplined daughters. It took on more children-workers from within families as demand rose, selectively, but it could also temporarily dismiss workers that mattered less for the status of working class households – girls – as downturns hit. All the while, it kept intricate control over an extremely hard-working and, indeed from the point of view of capitalist accumulation, highly valuable and reliable working class. Corporate housing policy was the essential enabling condition for that. Philips families acquired access to affordable and modern company housing, with controlled rents that the corporation could and did temporarily reduce if the business cycle demanded so, as in the early 1930s. This whole complex, the whole ensemble, is described by the notion of flexible familism.

In a sense then, flexible familism was indeed a managerial revolution from above with ‘social policy’ as its hegemonic banner. But it is important to stress that Philips learnt about the possible

functions of the working class family from the existing peasant-worker relations in South East Brabant, which it found when it started there in the 1890s. For a generation, until 1925, Philips' lamp production grew on the basis of these organic regional relationships. It was only with the massive expansions into radio set making around 1930 and the associated migrations that it decided to turn its knowledge about local family mechanisms into a large-scale managerial and hegemonic device centred on personnel and associated social policies. That the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in its 1932 report on *'Les Usines Philips'* (ILO 1932) should have pictured the firm as a unique 'model factory' that should serve as an example for other industrialists precisely because of its social policies, in particular housing, must surely be explained by the ingrained patriarchal short-sightedness of multilateral organisations (in those years as now), including of course those with a prominent place for labour concerns.

The working class family thus became a complex overlapping set of relationships of production and reproduction, set up as such by industrial management. Flexible familism thoroughly shaped the properties of the associated urbanism and the everyday ideologies and politics that reigned (for a detailed analysis see Kalb 1997). The straightforward upshot was that Philips made parents complicit in girls' exploitation in ways that were never openly talked about – this remained indeed a local secret overlaid with ideologies of company care and family care – in exchange for a certain durable loyalty the corporation offered to families, including housing and income, plus a set of implicit and explicit guarantees for parental social status and jobs for the next generation. Here was one of the largest concentrated sites of electronics production in the Western world – 40 thousand workers in one local complex in the 1950s – but socialism and unionism remained thoroughly tamed forces, even in the conflictive 1930s and 1960/70s. More than that, politics understood as the public discussion and shaping of social forms was a very small domain indeed and was instead fully occupied by capital and its social planning departments. The secret thus remained a secret, and not quite a public one.

As with so many of the older women I talked with in Eindhoven, Maria van de Velde, youngest daughter of a family of nine, had a very contradictory relationship with her parents (see Kalb 1997, 2005b for a full account). Her father appeared in her stories as simultaneously intimate and intimidating, his behaviour regularly bordering on violence, and he was nervously imagined as having been capable of rape and incest. Her mother was nice to her youngest daughter and made her nice suits for the Saturday night dances. However, Maria recognised in retrospect that precisely because of her mother's attention she had always been ready to exploit herself more than she was capable of enduring. She did not trust her mother's perennial 'illnesses', due to which it fell to Maria to take on extra household tasks. Of her lovers, including the one who became her lifelong husband, she was often just as uncertain as of her father.

The coming of Philips to this peripheral region of peasant-workers had intensified 'traditional' patriarchy and sex segregation, while it simultaneously produced the modern experience of youth amassed together by the hundreds in production departments, workers' neighbourhoods, and leisure spaces. Contradiction reigned. Local moralists described and deplored the 'immoral' distractions of love and consumption and recommended to keep the sexes separate as well as religiously trained. Philips battled the mixing of the sexes within production in order to secure super-efficiency. The parents, dependent on girls' earnings, sought to manage nerves, anxiety, and discontent through intimate authority and social policing, while collectively pushing up the local marriage age for girls as compared to other Dutch cities. All the while boys and girls were uncertainly seeking intimate

and reliable bonds, which always appeared to them as a possibly illicit escape from rightful conservative paternal domination and their obligations toward it. This conservative domination was popularly believed to be religious and traditional in origin, derived from conservative ‘values’, rather than modern and industrial and derived from the valorisation of capital within a particular branch of the global value regime and its peculiar appropriation and deployment of ‘tradition’. Class contradictions were displaced onto a whole urban cultural structure, and onto families, generations, and gender. Exploitation and solidarity, intimacy and intimidation were thus bundled into an entangled relational whole that was fraught with fragility and insecurity for young local women. While the local industry was churning out the consumption items of the future – lamps, radio sets, television screens – and while capital was indeed pushing up this urban territory to become ‘the most intelligent city on earth’, it was simultaneously mass-producing ‘worthless histories’, for which there was in the end little place in this territory of accumulation.

In the early 1950s, Philips was the quintessential foreign currency earner for an overpopulated Dutch state deeply dependent on foreign sources of food and raw materials. A European China in the small. Flexible familism, and a whole city geared to sustaining that relationship, helped to secure the necessary hard currencies. ‘Worthless histories’ were the gendered underside of the valorisation of unprecedented masses of capital sunk into an urban industrial complex designed for the flexible accumulation of both capital and households in one of the most competitive and transformative branches of the global market.

### **And Worthless Poles**

The second ‘critical junction’ of value and worth(lessness) that I want to relate was broadly situated within the same regime of accumulation based on electrical consumer goods in Europe. On the political level, however, it was very differently constituted. One aspect is the different time and place, postsocialist Wroclaw, Poland. Furthermore, the forces behind alienation and human devaluation here were thoroughly public, and expressly political, not abstract and hidden-hand like, nor so confusingly intimate, private, and relational as in the Eindhoven case. The site was also much more equitably gendered, partly due to ‘really existing socialism’. Instead of silence, there were strong public voices and counter-voices here, institutional ones such as the newly sovereign Polish state and its liberal state elites, *Solidarnosc* labour unions and their increasingly right wing political alliances, and individual ones. Among the individual counter-voices one stood out for its durability and consistency, Krzysztof Zadrozny’s.

Originating in the socialist build-up of domestic industry, electrical production in Wroclaw, as in Eindhoven, helped to urbanise rural people in a relatively underdeveloped part of Europe and offered them a way to education and modernity. Unlike Eindhoven, which rose full speed to the highest ranks of added value in the sector, Wroclaw under socialist auspices took the low-to-middle tech road of the ‘white goods’ sector, which Philips by the 1970s had deemed unexciting. White goods were a useful and achievable form of import-substitution for the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) market. The ‘Polar’ factory offered thousands of jobs to both men and women with primary (still more than 50% of employees in the 1990s were schooled on that level), secondary, vocational school, and university backgrounds.

As in Eindhoven until very recently, however, the achieved local modernity seemed somehow failed and hollow. It failed in the 1980s because of socialist stagnation and then collapse. And it

failed in the 1990s–2000s because of the appropriation of value by transnational capital, facilitated by privatisation and a new political elite that set itself up more as what Lenin would have singled out as a ‘comprador’ regime for international capital than as a popular sovereignty (in which it was of course far from unique). Here, in a sense, was a secret too, though it was a public secret rather than a private one, and yet not less misrecognised: sovereignty, parliamentary democracy, and rule of law served to transfer factories that by 1990 were *de facto* and *de jure* worker controlled, first to the state banks, then to the state, and finally into the circuits of transnational capital. ‘Successful democratic transition’ brought freedoms of speech and movement as well as free elections, but it also condemned local workers to life-long stagnation (Ost 2005; Kideckel 2008; Kalb 2009, forthcoming). What exactly was alienated from them was infinitely more complex and overwhelming than is described by that straightforward material fact.

Socialist forms of industrial organisation tended to delegate quite a bit of tactical power to worker constituencies as compared to capitalist forms (Burawoy 1985; Verdery 1996; Kalb forthcoming). In Poland, splits in the political and intellectual landscape were deeper than anywhere else in ‘really existing socialism’, which served to further reinforce such informal workers’ power. Between 1976 and 1980 this led ultimately to the formation of the mass labour movement *Solidarnosc*, which mobilised more than ten million people in Poland between 1980 and 1982, a quarter of whom were in fact Communist party members. The ‘Polar’ factory, with a lot of young workers in the late 1970s, was a hotbed of rebellion. Zadrozny and his family and friends were key actors in the making and development of the local *Solidarnosc* cells. Zadrozny also became one of the local heroes of the resistance against the military coup of December 1981 and was captured and imprisoned in 1982.

The contradictions of Communist military rule during the transition from central planning to what was first expected to be something like a socialist market mechanism paradoxically meant that the claims for worker self-management that had been made by the then outlawed *Solidarnosc* Union were eventually granted (Kalb 2009). Property rights, though, were shared between the firm and its worker-controlled board, on the one hand, and the state, on the other. In some regions, such as Wroclaw, clandestine *Solidarnosc* groups immediately took up these legal openings offered in 1984 and reconstituted themselves around the worker councils. By 1989, Zadrozny and his family and friends had rebuilt a network of worker activists that for all practical purposes was running the ‘white goods’ plants and all the social functions attached to them – housing, pensions, leisure, poor relief, health services, etc. – with massive local support.

In the years after 1989, a traumatic split occurred between democratic intellectuals then increasingly in control of positions in the state – a state incorporated as a peripheral capitalism in the global system – and worker constituencies that in several regions, including Wroclaw, were in *de facto* and *de jure* control of industries (Ost 2005; Kalb 2009). Workers in Wroclaw and elsewhere were demanding a privatisation that would facilitate worker cooperatives, but the liberal state elite was adamantly against putting labour unions in control of major assets. A long political silence followed while the state began unleashing shock-therapy on an economy that had lost its COMECON links but had not yet gained any access to the EU. As a consequence, industries were first made indebted to the state owned banking system, then practically bankrupted, then split up, subsequently consolidated via new loans under the Treasury, and later sold to transnational investors ‘for nothing’.

‘Privatisation’ in Poland was thus first of all state-orchestrated appropriation. The whole process took a decade. New legal and financial protocols, in combination with neoliberal shock therapy, reduced activist worker councils and labour unions to defensive fights for securing their very own – literally – factory communities. In the case of ‘Polar’, for example, they were forced to invest their own funds massively in new production lines in order to survive. By 1993, in the depth of shock therapy and crisis, the cooperative movement had tremendously failed. By 2000, worker management had all been dismantled by legal process and by the concessions demanded from the state by new international owners. Labour did not fail for lack of support on the ground or for lack of good arguments. In the late 1990s, there was still a tangible sense of popular moral ownership, but the legal reality had been thoroughly transformed, ‘globalised’, ‘disembedded’.

From the standpoint of transnational capital there was a specific logic here. ‘Polar’ was attractive for Whirlpool because local wages were some 70% below the standards for semi-skilled work in the European West or South; it was located in Poland, the postsocialist EU accession country with the largest home-market, and bordering Germany; and white goods were simply too big to be profitably made in China and then shipped to Europe. The local plant, however, while viable within the wider value regime, was exposed to fierce competition. Also accounting for the management, marketing and technology rents that ‘Polar’ was paying to Whirlpool, it was forced into an efficiency drive that raised productivity by an almost incredible 700 per cent in a few years’ time. A low wage, despotic, and increasingly hierarchical production regime emerged that combined, as Zadrozny concluded, “the worst of socialism and the worst of capitalism”.

While Maria van de Velde in Eindhoven talked in private about her “worthless history”, Zadrozny and his fellow activists were exposed to a dominant public discourse, emanating from the mouthpieces of liberal politics and to some extent from international capital that loudly claimed that “Polish workers were worthless”, in Zadrozny’s straightforward summary (Kalb 2009). In the first decade after 1989, while the liberal state was crushing worker sodalities, expropriating collectively claimed industrial and community assets, and repressing wages and unionism, workers and peasants were regularly depicted as ossified remnants of an Asiatic socialist despotism, a version of *Homo Sovieticus*. They were treated as a serious civilisational liability for Poland’s desperately sought middle class status within the West (Buchowski 2006; Kalb 2009). Workers and peasants were energetically debunked for a lack of education, habits of alcoholism, and lack of initiative and responsibility. Humiliated, their only role for the new Poland they had helped to establish seemed hard work under an unforgiving industrial discipline for stagnant wages and a continuous threat of ‘deserved’ unemployment hanging over them. This was a class war from above about the making and breaking of classes.

*Solidarnosc* Unions, thus attacked by their former liberal allies, regrouped and inverted the verdict. By the late 1990s they claimed the nation’s recently gained sovereignty as their very own and exclusive achievement, pictured the new liberal elite as willing traitors of the nation, and shifted to a nationalist position that celebrated Poland and the Poles against the on-going liberal “theft from the people” (see also Kalb 2011).

Zadrozny was keenly aware that the liberal-capitalist alienation of just won sovereignty had been forced upon them via a double dispossession. Material assets had been alienated surreptitiously by policy, obscure legal-financial means, and in political backroom deals. At the same time, but now in full daylight, the reputations of workers had been relentlessly attacked and devalued by narratives about ‘worthless Poles’. Transnational capital had acquired Polish assets “for nothing”

he concluded, while capital and the state dared to claim that they were doing this “for the people”. Zadrozny emphasised (in 2006) that

“(…) we cannot undo what was done. But it would be psychologically important to find out whether this company was sold for less than its real value. Then it could become easier for us to enforce something now, like better wages. It is all a question of honor. I myself never believed that this was how it had to be, that Poles are such that they cannot do this or that (…) it was a big mistake to say that Poles were worthless.” (Kalb 2009)

Capitalist value regimes, the reputations of the Polish state elite within the new European neoliberal order, and the value and worth of Polish labour, both in terms of its social dignity and in market exchange, had been massively at odds. There was no doubt that the latter had dramatically lost out. The forces they were up against were far more coherent than the communist party, the generals, or the Soviets had ever been since the 1970s. While the old enemies did control the state, by 1989 they were visibly out of synch with world time and global value regimes, and they could not rely on their local cadres anymore. Capitalist global-national-local levels, however, worked perfectly in unison. Zadrozny and his cohort of freedom fighters for a democratic labour-based Polish sovereignty now actively helped to launch a broad neo-nationalist mobilisation against transnational capital and the cosmopolitanised state class. In the end, they succeeded to put the Kaczynskis in power for a couple of years, the ‘terrible twins’ as *The Economist* famously wrote. But while postsocialist conservative identity politics had a field day and European liberals and multiculturalists were shocked in anger, little changed in the global position or bargaining power of Polish labour. Up to this day of writing, Polish elections still turn around the dialectics and contestations between value, worth, and worthlessness.

## Conclusion

In *Capital*, Karl Marx strove for an abstract analysis of the working of capitalist value regimes, because, he said, abstract modelling was the only way to get to an empirically concrete understanding of ‘the real’, which tended to show itself under capitalism in inverted ways. This is a necessary insight but not a sufficient one. In my two accounts here I have therefore emphasised that the actual pressures of global value regimes on concrete labour are often delegated to local actors, relationships, and histories. They are a continuous hotspot of politics: of everyday politics, public politics, and bio-politics, if you like. These relationships and histories, including their insertion in or capture by global systemic processes of value generation, can be described by the notion of critical junctions, a notion that serves both an exploratory and an explanatory function not unlike the more rationalist idea of ‘articulation’ in the Marxist anthropologies of the 1970s. Local vernacular narrative themes of worth and worthlessness – narratives of the presence and absence of social status and recognition – in the context of global value regimes serve to both obscure and reveal the relational mechanisms of alienation, dispossession, and de-valuation of labour upon which capitalist valorisation is based. The discovery and analysis of the precise critical junctions that structure such regimes in concrete territorial cases becomes necessary precisely in order to show what such notions obscure and reveal, and why.

My two accounts describe a woman and a man whose lives have unfolded within the rhythms of industrial accumulation associated with electrical production, and who see their life and labour

confronted by forces that appear to reduce them to an ontological 'worthlessness'. This shared experience is happening for very different and very particular reasons springing from the very different logic of their time, place, and gender, and is therefore structured in empirically different ways, reflected in their biographies, anxieties and narratives of worth and worthlessness. There is also a shared general cause, located within the very rhythms of accumulation of the sort of industries that seek out similarly 'backward' locations, such as the electrical/electronics industries are prone to do. Finally, threats to worthiness are also happening for very universal reasons, reasons that are caused within the global value regime in all its concrete abstractness. The sufficient analysis tries to bring all three of these perspectives into play.

Jonathan Friedman (1998), with a blink to Ingmar Bergman, has once aptly quipped that instead of searching for Geertzian 'webs of meanings' anthropologists should look for the 'tissue of lies' by which societies both get by and do not get by. The two narratives of worth and worthlessness that were discussed here do reveal one exact origin of alienation in these two cases: respectively parents who are set up by 'socially concerned' capital to embody a collusion of intimacy and intimidation, solidarity and exploitation, in the Eindhoven case; and liberal comprador elites that sell 'the people' out while generating 'economic growth' and performing 'democracy' in the Wroclaw/Polish case. However, the narratives only reveal the most observable actors within their specific critical junctions of value production. They are therefore necessarily partial and inevitably obscuring and confusing. Both expose the reigning local myths of enlightened liberal progress as a tissue of lies, the former doing so privately and with painful uncertainty, the other publicly and assertively. Both also fail to understand their perpetrators, not as sovereign moral forces, but as dependent actors within a wider relational field of global capitalist value generation that exerts pressures and sets limits on the sites and actors entangled in its webs. The same phenomenal property of capitalism that forced the revolutionary philosopher Karl Marx to penetrate a concrete abstraction with abstract concreteness prevented workers such as Maria van de Velde and Krysztof Zadrozny from perceiving the 'abstract' reaches behind their concrete alienation.



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