

The Aesthetics of Industrial Capitalism: Historicizing the Social Factory

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In a 2009 essay, artist and critic Hito Steyerl remarked on the widespread tendency among contemporary museums to inhabit deserted factories. Deindustrialization, she has it, recast the Fordist workplace as the white cube of late capitalism—a site of artistic production, consumption, and exhibition. Steyerl’s claim is one of many recent iterations of what is commonly known as the “social factory.” First articulated by Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri in the 1960s, the social factory indexes not only the demise of the real factory, but also its allegorical dispersal across all realms of the postindustrial labor process. Today, the social factory has become part and parcel of a new Marxian vocabulary aimed at theorizing and critiquing the “immaterial” turn in capitalist production.

Building on this current body of Marxist thought, my paper offers an alternative perspective on the historical emergence of the social factory and capital’s subsumption of artistic labor. By closely examining the production apparatus in one of the first modern factories in the history of Western capitalism, I challenge the widely accepted view that the social factory began where the industrial factory ended. Rather than a midcentury development in the postwar West, I argue that the social factory was already fully fledged in eighteenth-century industrial manufacturing. In order to ground the idea of a social factory in space and time, I focus on a 350-acre “factory town” called *Etruria*, built and owned by the acclaimed ceramics manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood from 1769 to 1795. Employing over 450 workers, Wedgwood’s factory was the largest of its kind in Britain and a leading growth point in the industrial revolution. And although it was a paragon of the impending factory system, *Etruria* was also a stronghold of neoclassical art: the earthenware vases its workers produced were among the finest ornaments in eighteenth-century Europe, celebrated for their artistry and beauty by critics, connoisseurs, and artists. Treading the boundaries of art and commodity, Wedgwood’s vases throw into relief the industrial origins of the social factory along with the historical thread tying the factory to the museum, consumerism to art markets, and capitalism to modern aesthetics. On this account, the subsumption of artistic labor and the absorption of aesthetic semblance that characterize the social factory of the present must be understood as vital elements in the development of the factory system in the wake of industrial capitalism.

The paper is organized in three parts. In Part 1, I examine the ways in which contemporary Marxist thinkers view the social factory as a recent configuration of postindustrial capitalism. In Part 2, I trace the historical origins of the social factory back to the rise of the industrial factory system in late eighteenth-century England. In Part 3, I bring my historical findings to bear on Marxist theories of postindustrial capitalism, arguing that capital’s encroachment of artistic labor must be understood as a phenomenon born out of the alliance forged between industrial capitalism, luxury, and modern aesthetics that culminated in the rise of the factory system *and* the invention of the “fine arts” as a distinct category from craft and manual labor.