

Editorial note

## Valuation Studies and the Critique of Valuation

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### Critique of Valuation as a Topic

1. What are the possible relations and tensions between the study of valuation as a social practice and the critique of valuation? *Valuation* denotes here any social practice where the value or values of something are established, assessed, negotiated, provoked, maintained, constructed and/or contested. The question thus in effect asks how the very study of such practices relates to the exercising of critical judgement on these very same practices. This topic is pertinent here and now for a number of reasons.
2. First, it resonates with apparent scholarly preoccupations with matters of concern, critique, care and mattering, not least in relation to constructivist studies (e.g. Latour 2004; Boltanski 2011; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Where in these pensive positions would we find good support for worthwhile studies of valuation as a social practice? This question hinges on what counts as good and worthwhile research in the first place. Or rather, where *else* than in such pensive positions could any value be found? What comes to count as value can in the end only depend on what gets valued!

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3. Second, since the publication of this fourth issue of *Valuation Studies* marks an end to the journal's immediate infancy, we have an adolescent urge to reflect on where we have been and where we are heading. Incidentally, the editorial "we" has simultaneously been refurbished and enlarged. The new editorial board now encompasses in total ten editors for *Valuation Studies*, all of whom have contributed to this editorial note. This extension of the editorial "we" has opened up for the possibility of more disagreement on and around the pages of this journal, and further warrants reflecting on our positions (in the plural) vis-à-vis valuation and critique. The core premise of this co-authored editorial note is that the topic of the critique of valuation is central, and that it is precisely for this reason neither possible, nor helpful, to produce a fully coherent and agreed-upon editorial position on it. That is also why we have modelled this editorial note on the format of a "provocation piece" (see, for instance, Woolgar et al. 2008).
4. The broad question of critique has been addressed before. Working with valuation and critique here aims to articulate an on-going engagement and concern with how critique is done. Such an engagement makes the matter more actionable in terms of positioning than the more comfortable and conventional practices of referencing (visible) and peer reviewing (invisible). Treating critique as a practical concern rather than an epistemological trap also hopefully avoids its constraining placement *on* an analytical pedestal or *in* a hair shirt. (Both of which have the common characteristic of making social scientists different from everyone else—albeit "better than..." or "worse than..." respectively.)

### **Positions and Questions on Critique**

5. The study of valuation is, at its core, about making the social practices of valuation discussable and, possibly, thereby also accountable. It is about turning the establishment, assessment, and negotiation of values into topics for conversation. This obviously builds a bridge between the study of valuation and its critical examination. In fact, some could very well argue that critique and valuation are two angles for considering the same thing. Does not the social practice of valuation consist precisely in some sort of a critical examination of value? A sociology of critical capacities would lead us in that direction (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). But we could also turn the argument around and study critique as a particular kind of valuation practice.
6. One approach to the study of valuation is to examine valuation practices while assuming an impartial and symmetric posture, in a manner similar to that which has been honed in science and

technology studies when considering the production of scientific knowledge and the shaping of technology (e.g. Bloor 1976; Latour 1987). Such an approach would urge us to examine one or several sites of valuation while refraining from presuming that one or the other produces an inherently more true valuation than the other. This provides no leverage for independently assessing the veracity of any valuation practice since no firm values are available against which one can compare its outcome. This does not mean that different valuations do not come with different consequences, many of which may well deserve a critical challenge. Employing a principle of symmetry (Bloor 1976) in the study of valuation surely does not need to result in the moral flat-land of relativism concerning the consequences of valuations. Symmetry rather makes a valuation *and* its consequences discussable by articulating what contributed to the shaping of, and the mediation by, the valuation at hand. This argument connects with the philosophical endeavour of Michel Foucault: a historical critique of truth that would give way to a genealogy of regimes of “veridiction,” i.e. ways in which the truth of value is articulated and made sense of (Foucault 2008).

7. A further insight that we can take from science and technology studies is the analytical fruitfulness of moments of controversy and innovation. The “de-description” (Akrich 1992) of valuation devices, which can be seen as a form of critique, is made easier in moments when valuation techniques and practices are contested and new ones are proposed. Easier, since a critique is already performed by the actors themselves. There is no need then for the student of valuation to add a layer of critique or make valuation “discussable.” It is already criticized and discussed! Where are such fruitful sites for the study of valuation? Courts are certainly an interesting place to look (Fourcade 2011), as are other public arenas where the value of things—including peculiar things such as pieces of nature or years of human life—are debated and put on trial. Such arenas are increasingly populated with valuation techniques inspired by economics (and sometimes designed by economists themselves). Many scholars have, more or less explicitly, denounced this trend. Yet a diverse array of actors concerned by such valuations and involved in these debates have taken up the economic techniques imposed on them, with environmental activists calculating how much nature is worth protecting and patient groups demonstrating that their lives are worth saving. Do these developments call for a critique which points to the absurdities that inevitably follow from the attempt to quantify and monetize everything, or which warns against the perils of the continuous extension of neoliberalism? Or do these developments encourage a different form of critique, akin to what Isabelle Bruno, Emmanuel Didier and Julien Prévieux have called “statactivism,” i.e. the art to fight with numbers (Bruno et al. 2014).

This would certainly depict numerical valuation as (an instrument for) critique.

8. It is possible to examine and make discussable the social practices of valuation while not being impartial to what is being studied. Open and blatant critiques of a particular valuation practice may bring greater force to discussions through the independent assessment (whatever this means) of the merits and demerits of what a certain valuation practice renders visible and invisible. There is indeed much to be said about the importance of, and even need for, critique within constructivist analyses. This resonates well with Boltanski's (2011) claims about the inherent weakness of a pragmatic sociology of critique and the worth of a more traditional critical sociology. It is a perfectly acceptable academic (and not just political) point to say that a specific metric has strong limits and problematic consequences. Blatantly taking sides with a critical tinge might very well make the social practices of valuation more discussable. But perhaps a journal devoted to studying valuation as a social practice should then particularly encourage careful explication of the position from which critique is leveraged?
9. While taking sides with a critical tinge could make the social practices of valuation more discussable, it could also generate stale discussions. The very fact that others do not agree on the premises and conclusions of an analysis might be helpful in making valuations discussable, but can run the risk of not doing any generative work other than to render repetitious discussions (Verran 2001). Such entrenchments are characteristic of many public debates and would hardly be productive for developing the study of valuation as a social practice. In other words, taking sides too early and without much reflection can get in the way of analysing and developing an understanding of the inner workings of valuation practice.
10. Partial and one-sided critiques might run the risk of reproducing oppositions, thereby inhibiting a deeper examination of the issues at hand and the possibly generative and insightful moments that might occur beyond such positions. This is reminiscent of the situation encountered by Helen Verran (1999) on having completed an earlier version of the book which later became *Science and an African Logic* (Verran 2001). It was through the African math teachers' laughter at her account that she realized that she had created a perfect opposition between Western and African numbers which left out all the generative moments where practices of doing numbers didn't fit into her neat story. She would rewrite the entire book and move such disconcerting empirical moments centre stage. In short, to take a non-symmetrical position risks producing an analysis of logics that is uneven and serves to reify entrenched positions rather than opening them up. This further

directs interest from what possibly happens in trading zones (Galison 1996), between these positions, which might be very important to highlight when seeking to make valuations discernible and discussable.

11. What would a science devoid of critique look like? Could it look like an agnostic appreciation of things we utterly detest?

<sup>1</sup> Would such a position classify critical fields of study, such as postcolonial studies, whiteness studies, and feminist studies as biased and non-generative? Some favourite questions from the field of science and technology studies: If critique has run out of steam, where do we go next? How does agnosticism and symmetry intervene in practices? What would happen to our humanness if we imagined that we could completely leave our hearts and morals behind us? Objectivity? Nihilism? Amorality? What do we keep from agnosticism and symmetry, when we move from the study of knowledge production to the study of value practices? What is lost? What is found?

12. The intertwined principles of methodological and analytical symmetry are arguably only productive when considering asymmetric phenomena. These, of course, abound and make it interesting to ask how particular things, thoughts and practices become established and perpetuated (or the reverse). But if reality emerged *symmetrically* then there would be less need to understand how, when and why particular orderings emerged. In this sense, the field of valuation studies (also, if less visibly, in the first 'symmetric' sense described here) is premised on an assumption of the aesthetic (morality) of symmetry. Thus, the positions that 1) it *could have been otherwise*, 2) it *is otherwise*, or 3) it *should be otherwise*, are positions that are merely different in terms of analytic strategy. For all positions, it is (always) a question of how and where we do the valuation work—and what gets shown.
13. What about blatant celebrations of a particular social practice of valuation? Would reprints of, real or virtual, marketing brochures concerning a particular valuation practice qualify as a study of the very same practice? The study of valuation is not only a domain of academic inquiry, but also a professional activity in which valuation specialists and consultants claim expertise as well as the need to produce (and sell) knowledge. Such work delimits and stabilizes the very object that we aim to study. Should we be concerned about this? Can valuation studies contribute to an evaluation of valuation

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: Although this text is full of tensions and differences, this sentence caused a disagreement among the authors about whether it even was appropriate to include it. We have decided to strike a compromise and keep the sentence in this redacted form.

practice? Are we running the risk of entering into competition with consultants, as management scholars have sometimes done? And is this a risk? In the short history of the journal we have already had to ponder and articulate the possible differences between *presenting* a valuation practice and *studying* it. Among the issues involved here is the analytical leverage gained from some form of reflexive detachment of the study from the practices examined. (Be it in the form of the symmetric and impartial posture, or the pose of the stern and firmly positioned critique.)

14. What about reflexive *attachment*, rather than detachment? The notions of ‘posturing’ and ‘posing’ smacks of unauthentic positions! Attachment is the exact opposite, that is, deeply committed views. The sociology of attachment, in some radical versions (Gomart and Hennion 1999), translates into a methodological stance: one that is attentive to the inquirer’s *consideration* towards its object of inquiry. Some recent radical praise for the “reclamation of values”—the clarification of what “we” *cling to*, in the modern social sciences and the humanities—has been seen at work in these quarters (Latour 2013; Verran 2014). On the other hand, some would say with dismay, this leaves in quite an untenable position for the ones among “us” that *would rather not* stick to any value, at least not very firmly, and definitely not with a trenchant attitude (quite a cosmopolitan, liberal alternative).
15. What about the auto-ethnographic accounts of valuation or other accounts of intervention? They would not necessarily fall in either of the above genres, but would nevertheless have great potential in making valuation discussable. Given that we are no less involved in all sorts of valuations than the actors we study, and that values are never studied “from nowhere,” studying our own involvements can provide interesting cases of what Donna Haraway would call “strongly objective” studies of valuation (Haraway 1988). Obviously, such accounts would be in dire need of also including the failed attempts, the tricked consequences, the surprising successes and the redefinition of the valuation and the valuation scholar in order to avoid sentimentality (Becker 1967) or slick accounts.
16. What about constructivism and activism (Woodhouse et al. 2002)? Can the pursuit of studying valuations as social practices productively join with James Scott (2012) in giving not one, but two, cheers for anarchism? Or be partial to David Graeber’s (2004) agenda? Perhaps. But this is certainly complicated. The anarchist standpoint can very well be considered as just one type of value—a *political value*—in contradistinction to other such political values. But it can also be interpreted (perhaps more interestingly, some would say) as a

standpoint *against value*: no lord and no country, no superior principles to be hooked with, no overarching justification regime, just a flat land of unrepressed circulation. Daunting?

17. What about feminism? Would a feminist analysis of value practices demand a critical eye towards matters of power and subjugation as standpoint theory suggests (Harding 1991)? What would a non-critical feminist analysis of valuation look like? What would it mean to care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011) or to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2008), without being critical? What would a symmetrical and agnostic feminist analysis look like? Would a symmetrical and agnostic stance entail a type of “god-trick,” erasing the knower from the known (Haraway 1988)? Is the intellectual template of valuation studies (and of *Valuation Studies*, at any rate) phallic? And if so, *what is wrong* with it?

### **Situating the Journal *Valuation Studies***

18. What does it mean to make something “discussable” as referred to above? The conventional article format—which thus far has tended to dominate also *Valuation Studies*—is arguably not engineered for discussion but more for argument of a particular mode and manner. The difficult and typically time-consuming work of crafting a coherent line of argument, and choosing with whom to “discuss” and how, is commonly not visible by the time an article is published. A “beautifully written article” is arguably valued in part for its ability to make the hard work seem effortless. This makes academic work very similar to any number of other practices although we, as insiders, are more familiar with the cues that format discussion and disagreement when we have an “early draft” where “constructive comments are welcome” but “please don’t circulate.” Everyone knows that this goes on. But how the magic happens between that first and final draft is (more or less opaque) valuation work. Would it be generative to open the review process to public scrutiny by publishing the reviews and responses to reviewers as appendices to each published article?
19. The above discussion hints at the significance of making valuation discussable and the possibilities for various forms of critique to enable such discussions. At an overarching level, these concerns relate to how and where we make “punctualizations” (Law 1992) in the network of valuation practice that eases things and make a more delimited and comprehensible discussion possible. It is to us, as members of the editorial board, all the more clear that these issues are also at stake when assessing, individually and collectively, possible contributions to this very journal.

20. This editorial piece is an exercise in “doing something” with differences of opinion. Making disagreement and non-closure visible has the tendency to prompt further questions about what more can be done. Making the review process public would be one such measure. Perhaps we could ask of all of our authors, reviewers and editors to submit a section entitled: “A differential account.” While a question, of course, would be who might partake in the disagreement it could be a productive resource in making visible also to a broader audience the disagreements that are more often aired in closed rooms (for other examples, see Latour et al. 2011; and the “epistemological chicken debate” between Collins and Yearly 1992a; 1992b; and Callon and Latour 1992).
21. In a nutshell: whether we consider critique in a mundane sense of the word (saying about something, for example a value metric, that it is good or bad, flawed or accurate, interesting or useless, from a particular point of view) or in a more philosophical sense (assessing the truth of a value statement from all possible, or at least several, angles, and especially from the viewpoint of the conditions of truth in which the statement is embedded), we end up with complicated intertwinements between practices of valuation and practices of critique (both “ours” and “theirs”). Good for this journal’s agenda!

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