

ON SOME ASPECTS OF THE DIALECTIC OF LABOUR IN THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

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In the following lines we discuss the contradictions inherent in the category of labor that Marx underlines in his different writings where labor is examined in its multiple existence — labor as such, abstract and concrete labor, necessary and surplus labor. Though the bulk of the paper deals with labor in relation to commodity-capitalist society, it also touches upon, towards the end, the way the Critique of Political Economy ('Critique' for short) envisages labor in the 'union of free individuals' (hereafter 'Association') after capital goes out of existence.

I Labor, Labor producing Commodity. Labor Facing Capital

In the Critique labor appears as 'abstract' in a double sense. First, labor as such, "labor in general," that is, as the application of human labor power, is a "simple abstraction" (1953: 24). "Useful labor in general" is abstract in the sense that it is independent of all definite social forms, is "abstracted from all particular stamps which would mark this or that phase of economic progress of society." Labor as purposeful activity is abstract inasmuch as it is the natural condition of human existence independently of all social forms, an external necessity for mediating material exchanges between human beings and nature (1965: 727; 1958: 30; 1962a: 57). Labor process in its "simple and abstract moments," elaborates Marx, is "purposeful activity toward creating use values, the appropriation of natural objects toward human needs, the general condition for material exchanges between nature and human beings, a permanent condition for human life and thus is independent of all its social forms, rather common to all its social forms" (1962a: 198; 1962c: 373). Just as, in order to be value, a commodity has to be, before everything, useful, in the same way "labor considered (censé) as the expenditure of human power, as human labor in the abstract sense of the word, has to be, before everything, useful" (1965: 575: emphasis added. The sentence appears only in the French version).

However, all productive activity, considered as "appropriation of nature from the side of the individual," takes place" within and (is) mediated by a definite social form" (1953:9). When labor's specific social dimension is brought in, labor takes on a new meaning. Then it is a question of the labor process being "under the brutal lash of the slave supervisor or the anxious eye of the capitalist" (1962a: 198-99). It is precisely under the "definite social form" of commodity production that the 'abstraction' of labor assumes a second meaning. While labor as purposeful activity is realized in the infinite diversity of use values and divided into endlessly different moves — which makes this labor "concrete and particular" — labor posited in exchange value is realized in the equality of commodities as general equivalent and thus as "general, abstract and equal labor" (1958:30).¹ Here is the contradictory character — the "double being" — of labor represented in a commodity.

Strictly speaking there are no two kinds of labor in the commodity.

"The same labor is opposed to itself according as it is related to use value of the commodity as its product or to the value of this commodity as its pure objective expression (1965: 574; emphasis added. This sentence appears only in the French version). Labor posited in exchange value, the abstract labor, is at the same time reckoned as 'socially necessary labor' functioning within the 'socially necessary labour time' that is, with the average degree of skill and intensity corresponding to the given social conditions of production. Here labor does not appear as labor of distinct individuals.ⁱⁱ Rather the laboring individuals themselves appear as the simple organs of labor where the individuality of the labor is effaced (1958: 21, 24; 1962a: 53-54). However, if abstract labor (in commodity production) is socially necessary labor, the converse is not true. Socially necessary labor corresponding to abstract labor (in this sense) refers to a "specific mode (Art) of sociality," not to sociality in general. It is only under commodity production that labor acquires this specific sociality. It is a situation where each one labors for oneself and the particular labor has to appear as its opposite, abstract general labor and in this form social labor. This isolated, private labor represented in (exchange) value becomes social only by taking the form of its direct opposite, the form of abstract generality, and has this "social character only within the limits of exchange." In a non-commodity society human labor is also social labor, but this sociality is of an opposite kind. Thus in a communitarian society individual labor does not have to take the abstract form of generality in order to have social character. Here the community prepositing production makes individual labour appear as a direct function of a member of the social organism. Here the labor of the individual is posited as social labor from the beginning (1953: 88; 1958: 24, 27; 1959: 525; 1962a: 87).

Socially necessary labor (time) has a second meaning in the context of capitalist production, not only it covers the time required to produce a commodity, but also it refers to the time necessary to produce labor power as a commodity, where it is contrasted with the (unpaid) surplus labor time contributed by the laborer. In the latter case necessary labor, again, has a double sense. This labor is necessary for the self-preservation of the laborer and hence for the maintenance of the laboring class independent of the social form of labor — whether this laborer is subsumed or not under capital. It is also necessary for capital inasmuch as capital necessarily (pre)supposes the lasting existence, preservation and reproduction of the laboring class (1962a: 231; 1976: 153).ⁱⁱⁱ

Just as the term 'socially necessary labor' has two different, but not unrelated, meanings in the situation of commodity production as such and in the situation of capital-labor relation, respectively, in the same way the term 'abstract' labor takes on a different meaning in the context of capital-labor relation compared to its meaning in commodity production as such — where, again, the two meanings are not totally unrelated.

Abstraction of useful labor — manifested in the case of exchange value — extends to the abstraction of value-creating (wage) labor from the objectified labour appearing in capital.^{iv} Here abstract labor refers to the labor of the proletariat who, without capital and ground rent, is an "abstract laborer" living only from labor, that is, from "one sided abstract

labor," which signifies that the "largest part of the humanity is reduced to abstract labour" (1932:46).^v Abstraction of (living) labor in this context is just another name for its total exclusion from material wealth, the objectified labour. Separated from property, labor posited as non-capital is non-objectified labor, divorced from all means and objects of labor, separated from its total objectivity. This is living labor existing as "abstraction from these moments of its actual reality (realen Wirklichkeit," purely subjective existence of labor, denuded from all objectivity — labor as "absolute poverty, not as penury, but as total exclusion from objective wealth" (1953: 203; emphasis added).^{vi}

Abstracted, that is excluded, from all wealth, labor is abstract in relation to capital also in another, somewhat different, sense (which approaches the meaning of abstract labor producing commodity). Labor as use value confronting money posited as capital, not this or that (specific) labor but "labor in general (Arbeit schlechthin)," is "abstract labor" indifferent to its particular determinity but capable of assuming any determinity. Since capital as such is indifferent to each particularity of its substance — and this not only as the totality of this substance, but also as abstraction from the particularity of this substance — "labor confronting capital has in itself subjectively the same totality and abstraction" (1953: 204).

II Necessary Labor, Surplus Labor, Labor beyond Capital

The contradictory character of the necessary labor — surplus labor relation, true for all class societies, takes on a special meaning with labor's subsumption under capital. In the pre-capitalist modes of production where use values, and not exchange values dominate, surplus labor is more or less circumscribed by a definite circle of needs. In pre-capitalist class societies labor time is extended to produce, beyond the subsistence of the immediate producers, a certain amount of use values for the masters — the "patriarchal wealth." The importance of surplus labor beyond the labor necessary for the natural needs of consumption assumes a far greater importance when exchange value becomes the determining element of production. Under capital, which is basically generalized commodity production, the constraint on labour to extend labour time beyond necessary labour time is maximum.^{vii} To the extent that necessary labor time determines globally the magnitude of value of products under capitalist production, the pressure on labor to conform strictly to the labour time that is socially necessary to produce an object becomes intense under capitalist production. "The whip of the slave holder cannot attain the same degree of intensity as the constraint of the capitalist relation" (1976: 174). On the other hand, the laborer is forced to deliver surplus labor time to the capitalist just in order to have the possibility of devoting the necessary labor time to meet own needs. Thus the laborers can satisfy their needs of life only by selling their labor power and are thus forced to labor (and to labor gratis for the capitalist) in their own interest, not through any external compulsion.^{viii}

The contradictory relation of necessary labor to surplus labor (under capitalist

production) becomes more pronounced with the increase in labor productivity. A reduction of necessary labor time without lowering wages could only come through the increase in labor productivity, that is an increase in the productive powers of labor. This means that less time is now necessary for the reproduction of labor. Consequently the surplus labor time is extended to the extent that the necessary labor time diminishes. A part of the global labor time is now freed and is annexed by surplus labor time. In other words, the development of labor's productive powers under capital is aimed not at the reduction of labor time. It is aimed rather at the reduction of the part of the time during which labor is to work for itself in order to prolong the other part of the time during which it works gratis for capital (1962a: 340; 1976: 213).^{ix} However, the process is contradictory also from another point of view. While on the one hand capital continuously tries to suppress the necessary labor time, on the other hand surplus labor time exists only in opposition to necessary labor time, and capital posits necessary labor time as a necessary condition for its own reproduction and valorization. "Capital as the positing of surplus labour is to the same extent and at the same moment the positing and non positing of necessary labor. Capital is capital only to the extent that labor is necessary labor and at the same time not necessary labor" (1953: 241, 304).

Now, along with the ceaseless striving of capital to drive society's majority to labor beyond what is required to satisfy the immediate needs, it pushes labor toward a greater diversity of production toward an enlargement of the circle of social needs and the means to satisfy them and thereby the exercise of the human faculties in all directions, though "just as the surplus labor time is the condition of free time, in the same way the enlargement of the circle of needs and the means to satisfy them is conditioned by the shackling of the laborer to the necessary needs of life" (1976: 175). Surplus labor, labor beyond the laborer's own needs, is also, at the same time, labor for society though, in the capitalist society, it is immediately appropriated by the owners of capital in the name of society. However, this surplus labor really constitutes free time for society as well as its material and cultural basis and its development. Paradoxically, to the extent that it is capital's coercion which compels society's masses to labor beyond their immediate needs, "capital creates culture, it performs a historical-social function" (1976:173).^x

Under the system of exchange of living labor against objectified labor (mediated by the value form) the quantity of labor time applied to production is the decisive factor for the creation of wealth. However, contradictorily, this labor time creates its own negation to the extent that it contributes to the progress of industry which increasingly stands in inverse relation with the application of immediate labor to production and in direct relation with scientific and technical progress resulting in enormous disproportion between the wealth created and the magnitude of immediate labor applied to this creation. Labor in its immediate form increasingly ceases to be the great source of wealth and the labor time proportionately ceases to be its measure. Thus surplus labor of the immediate producers ceases to be the condition of the development of universal wealth. Thereby production based on exchange value marches toward its own demise. On the other hand, while in commodity (capitalist) economy immediate labor is individual labor which becomes social

only through exchange, in big industry, along with the subjection of the natural forces to social understanding and the transformation of the means of production into automatic process, labor ceases to be individual in its immediate existence and becomes directly social in the production process itself — in an antagonistic form though — thereby undermining the very basis of commodity (capitalist) production (1953: 595, 597).

Finally, how does the Critique envisage labor in a communitarian society — the Association — after the demise of capital?

Labor, freed from its hitherto existing mode, would, of course, continue to be the "creative substance of wealth" just as labor time would continue to remain the "measure of cost required by (wealth's) production" in the new society (Marx 1962b: 255).

The need for regulating production by appropriate allocation of society's labor time among different productive spheres would continue to hold in the Association. However, this regulation is effected without the need for social relations of individuals to appear as social relations of things. Under "communitarian production" the consideration of labor time as the creative substance of wealth and as the measure of production cost is "essentially different from the measure of exchange value (of labor or labor products) through labor time" (Marx 1953: 89).

Similarly a central economic law of all societies — the law of the economy of time — would continue to operate in the Union. However, here again, this law takes on a completely new character. There is a need for economizing society's global time for production not only indicating greater productive efficiency but also in order to release more (free) time for the "social individuals." Given social appropriation of the conditions of production, the earlier distinction between necessary and surplus labor time loses its meaning. Surplus product, the result of surplus labor, itself appears as necessary (Marx 1953: 506). From now on necessary labor time would be measured in terms of needs of the "social individual," not in terms of needs of valorization. Similarly the surplus labor time far from signifying non-labor time for the few would mean free time for all social individuals. It is now society's free time and no longer labor time that increasingly becomes the true measure of society's wealth. And this in a double sense. First, its increase indicates that labor time produces more and more wealth due to an immense increase in productive powers, unconstrained by earlier contradictions. Secondly, free time itself signifies wealth in an unusual sense because it means the enjoyment of different kinds of creation and because it means free activity which unlike labor time is not determined by any external finality that has to be satisfied either as a natural necessity or as a social obligation.

On the other hand, labor time itself, the basis of free time, takes on a new significance. Labor now is directly social, unmediated hierarchically or by the value form of its products and, bereft of its "pre-historic" antagonistic character, has a completely different quality compared with the one that is shown by the "beast of labor." However, the

time of labor, given its determination by external finality, remains within the realm of necessity, it does not belong to the kingdom of liberty which lies beyond the sphere of material production and hence is accessible only by going beyond the labor time, though the kingdom of liberty can develop only on the basis of the kingdom of necessity (Marx 1964: 828)

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ENDNOTES

- i. "While in relation to use value labor contained in a commodity counts qualitatively, in relation to value magnitude it counts quantitatively after it has clearly been reduced to human labor purely and simply (ohne weitere Qualität). In the first case it is a question of `how' and `what' of labor, in the second case it is a question of `how much,' a question of its time (duration)" (1962a: 60). Let us note that for Marx concrete labor is "real labor" (1958: 49).
- ii. "As abstract labor it is undifferentiated, socially necessary general labor, totally indifferent to any particular content and it finds its autonomous expression in money, expression common to all commodities and differentiable only quantitatively" (1969:20).
- iii. In a methodological note Marx adds: "Till now we have used the word `necessary labor time' for socially necessary labor time toward the production of a commodity. From now on we use it also for necessary labor time toward the production of the specific commodity, labor power. The use of the same technical terms in different senses is inconvenient, but in no science can be totally avoided" (1962a: 231).
- iv. Whereas the first meaning of `abstract labor' appears in the Critique for the first time in 1859, its second meaning dates from as early as 1844
- v. (In capitalist society) "The productive powers stand opposed to the majority of individuals from whom these powers have been torn apart (losgerissen), and who thereby have been robbed of all real content of life and have become abstract individuals" (1973: 74-75).
- vi. The same meaning of `abstract labor,' though without the specific term, appears in a later manuscript. Marx writes: "Labor power (Arbeitsvermögen) denuded of means of labor and means of living is absolute poverty as such, and the laborer, as the simple personification of this power effectively possesses his needs while the activity to satisfy them he possesses only as disposition (possibility) confined within his own subjectivity bereft of object (gegenstandlose). He is as such pauper — following its concept — the personification and the bearer of this power for itself, isolated from its objectivity" (1976:35).
- vii. "Capital as representing the universal form of wealth — the money — is the limitless, measureless drive to transgress (hinauszugehen) its limits. Its every limit must have to be limited. Otherwise it ceases to be capital — money as producing itself . . . Capital as such creates a definite surplus value because it cannot, at once, posit an infinity (of surplus value). but it is a perpetual movement to create more of it. The quantitative frontier of surplus value appears to it only as a natural

limit, as necessity, which it perpetually seeks to overcome, perpetually to transgress" (1953: 240; the expression "at once" appears in English in the text).

- viii. "The (wage) laborer labors to create himself his own means of life, to gain his own life. The slave is maintained in life by somebody else in order to force him to labor" (1976: 174).
- ix. Speaking of machinery supposed to shorten labor time Marx writes: "Under the domination of capital the employment of machinery does not shorten labor but prolongs it. What it shortens is the necessary labor, not the labor necessary for capital. Since fixed capital is devalorized to the extent that it is not employed in production, its growth is bound up with the tendency to perpetuate labor" (1953: 7-10). Hence, Marx notes, "the economic paradox that the most powerful means of shortening labor time is inverted as the most infallible means of transforming the lifetime of the laborer and his family into the time available for the valorization of capital" (1962a: 430).
- x. "The great historical side of capital is to create (this) surplus labor, superfluous labor from the standpoint of simple use values, and capital's historical determination/destination (Bestimmung) is fulfilled as soon as, on the one hand, the needs are so far developed that surplus labor over necessary labor is itself a universal need arising out of the individual needs themselves, and, on the other hand, the general industriousness due to capital's severe discipline, through which successive generations have passed, is developed as the universal acquisition (Besitz) . . . As restless striving for the universal form of wealth capital drives labor over the limits of labors' natural needs and thus creates the material elements for the development of rich individuality which is all sided in production as well as in consumption, and consequently whose labor appears no longer as labor but as the full development of activity itself in which natural necessity in its immediate form has vanished because in place of natural need has appeared a need that history has produced. That is why capital is productive; that is, an essential relation for the development of social productive powers" (1953: 231).

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