

Submission for the year 2000 Value Theory Mini-Conference.

IWGV.T.

Eastern Economics Association.

The Labor Theory of Value and the Strategic Nature of Alienation.

By

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Introduction.

Marx's radical critique of capitalism has been given a plethora of meanings and been put to use in a number of distinct, at times diametrically opposed, projects. Many interpreters of Marx have suggested a 'scientific' reading, in which the categories Marx utilized are given an 'objective' meaning and are claimed to play predictable parts in the structural 'laws of capitalism.' John Holloway (1995) recently denounced the practitioners within this tradition for objectifying and reifying Marx's categories and transforming his analysis into vulgar determinism. Holloway called for a focus on the dynamic character of Marx's categories. 'Once the categories of thought are understood as expressions not of objectified social relations but of the struggle to objectify them, then a whole storm of unpredictability blows through them.' (176)

In order to go beyond this Marxist fetishism and re-establish Marx's analysis as a useful radical critique of capitalism, we ought to examine what social relations and elements of class struggle Marx signified when using his particular analytical categories. For example, what is the social content of value? What is the social meaning of abstract labor? What is the social rationale for imposing alienation? Where in these categories is the dialectic of class struggle embedded? These are some of the questions I will pursue in the following attempt to contribute to the tradition of 'political readings of Marx,'ⁱ through which Marxism is restored as a 'theory-against-society.'ⁱⁱ

According to the autonomous Marxist interpretation (Cleverly 1979), Marx elaborated a labor theory of value because it focuses our attention upon the core of capitalism, namely the organization of society around work. The labor theory of value provides a theoretical framework for understanding how capital reproduces its social control. Based upon this interpretation, I argue that value, for capital, is the continuity of social control and the instrument whereby capital

achieves social control is abstract labor. The fundamental characteristics of abstract labor are boundlessness, imposition, and alienation, of which, I argue, the latter is playing a strategic role in capital's self-valorization project. Hence, in capital's quest of continuity of social control, alienation is strategically imposed, and the weapon of choice has often been technology.

In this paper, I ascribe an explicit position and strategic role for alienation in the reproduction of capitalist social relations, and, as such, given that Marx's categories denote the realities of capitalism, I suggest that alienation can be interpreted as playing a pivotal part in Marx's labor theory of value. This interpretation clearly highlights the social relations of class struggle that permeate Marx's categories and it draws our attention to the fundamental contradictions within capitalism that need to be ruptured for a meaningful emancipation to be possible. In the process of analyzing the interconnections between Marx's analyses of value and alienation, I refute the Althusserian claim that there is a radical conceptual break between the 'early' and 'mature' Marx. In addition, I will show that there is still a useful role for the labor theory of value to play in the autonomous Marxist analysis, despite claims that "the law of value. . . is seen by the autonomists as being redundant." (Holloway 1995: 164)

The Social Constitution of Value.

Marx gleaned the labor theory of value from the British Classical economists, as it focused on the very core of capitalism, namely, work, or more precisely, the organization of the social order around the imposition of work. The labor theory of value is 'the theoretical expression of capital's own view of work and the meaning of work in [capitalist] society' (Cleaver 1979: 79), and as such, it was useful to Marx in that his theory of 'the rupture of capitalist society [had to] incorporate an understanding of the reproduction of capitalist society.'

(Holloway: 156)

The labor theory of value is neither an alternative economic theory of exchange, nor just a theory of economic exploitation, but a theory of the *social constitution of value*,ⁱⁱⁱ that is, a theory of the particular social relation that is valued, a theory of the substance of this social relation, a theory of the qualitative characteristics of this substance, and a theory of the class struggle that lies at the core of value. I will begin by briefly describing the fundamental characteristics of the interpretation of the labor theory of value that I am building upon, after which I will provide an analysis of the *social constitution of value*.

The particular autonomous Marxist interpretation of Marx's use of the labor theory of value, that I take as point of departure is that of Harry Cleaver (1979). He argues that not only is work a means of exploitation, and exploitation (extraction of surplus work) the means for imposing more work; work must be recognized as the predominant means of organizing society. If this is true, he argues, then work has become the primary means of social control in capitalism. Interpreted in this manner, social control does not just refer to such familiar means as police, prisons, or cultural manipulation, but includes the most generalized vehicle of domination in capitalism: imposed work.

Work functions as social control in the following manner. As Marxists have long insisted, capital's virtual monopolization of the means of production forces the bulk of the population to sell their labor power to capital in order to ensure their sustenance. But in capitalism, the labor market however unpleasant is only the gateway to hell: the sphere of production, the sphere of work. Given that this work is managed, supervised, and controlled by capital and that the amount of it dominates and shapes people's entire lives, it constitutes the activity through which virtually all of human life in capitalism is shaped and organized. This is how it serves as capital's primary

means for social control.

In sum, work serves as the primary means for social control in capitalism and the labor theory of value is an appropriate theoretical construct to use in analyzing capitalism, as it focuses our attention on the degree to which capital is successful in finding ways to impose work, and hence, reproduce its social control.

But what is really meant by *value*? Value can be defined vaguely, as what is ‘good’ or ‘useful.’ The effective distinction, in a class based society, between what is ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘useful’ and ‘useless,’ is generally governed by the particular project or praxis that a social class, acting as class-for-itself, is involved in. The means, or tools, used to obtain a valued end may be called instruments. We say that a tool functions well when it satisfactorily fulfills the function for which it was conceived by its originator. For example, if one views as capital’s *raison d’être* the maximization of the production of commodities, then commodities are value, work is the instrument used towards this end, and price is the index of the amount of value. Using a similar criterion, but going beyond this fetishism, we shall evaluate whether, and under what circumstances, capitalist work functions in conformity to the interests of those who impose it, and in that sense, is instrumental in generating value.

Clarence Ayres, building upon James Dewey’s pragmatism, posited that value is an *instrumental continuum*. He argued that ‘value means continuity, literally. . .’ (Ayres 1962: 220) and that it ‘is used as a relational term to point to some particular stream of relationships.’ (222) Borrowing this conceptualization we may claim that value, in the labor theory of value, is an *instrumental continuum*, in that it signifies the continuity of the relationship of domination and social control, which was created during the Primitive Accumulation. The instrument used to create value *qua* continuity of social control, is the uninterrupted imposition of work. Hence, in

the autonomous Marxist interpretation of the labor theory of value, social dominion and control is the *instrumental continuum*, that is, the dominant aim of capitalist production, and therefore, *it* is what is ‘good’ and ‘useful,’ and accordingly, the particular social relation which is valued by the class who controls production. Value, as an *instrumental continuum*, is a social process that exhibits circular and cumulative causation whenever capital is successful in imposing work, but it is non-deterministic, as every moment contains elements of refusal and struggle.

So far, I have posited that continuity of social control is value for capital. Next, we shall inquire as to what the substance of value is, and what its main characteristics are.

Massimo DeAngelis (1995) articulated the claim that *abstract labor* is the substance of value. He posited that the substance of value: abstract labor (1) is semantically meaningful because work has become more and more abstract in its concreteness, and (2) has particular characteristics, namely it is alienated, boundless, and imposed. In an otherwise insightful article I find De Angelis’ specification of both the semantic meaning of abstract labor and the characteristics of abstract labor unsatisfactory. (1) De Angelis’ argument, about the way in which the concept of abstract labor can be meaningful because within capitalism there is a real tendency for labor to be reduced in its complexity (deskilling, Taylorism, Fordism), can be found in both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* and has been highlighted by previous commentators. This argument, however, which relates the concept of abstract labor to a concrete historical tendency fails to highlight a more basic characteristic of work within capitalism, one which even grounds the very historical tendency De Angelis indicated. That characteristic is that the particular concrete character of work is secondary to the basic role it serves in capitalism: the domination of society through the imposition of work. Regardless of how work evolves over time, the particular forms of useful labor are but largely means to this end. Therefore, we can say that it

makes sense to talk about ‘abstract labor’ as the substance of value precisely because the capitalist use of labor as means of social control abstracts from the concrete forms of labor.

(2) In De Angelis’ exposition, the characteristics ‘alienated,’ ‘boundless,’ and ‘imposed’ appear as co-equal traits, three dimensions of a common substance. But while this delineation is useful, we can go further and examine their interrelationships. When we do, ‘alienation’ appears to have a strategic centrality vis a vis the other two and thus deserving of far deeper analysis.

Let’s examine these three characteristics in reverse order.

(A) “Imposed.” De Angelis says abstract labor is imposed, and in this he is certainly correct, as Marx made vivid in his discussion of primitive accumulation and as autonomist Marxism has highlighted. But why does work have to be imposed in capitalism? De Angelis says because it is alienated and not determined by the needs of the workers. The second part of this explanation corresponds to the usual Marxist answer that capital has to impose more work than workers would otherwise perform to meet their own needs, i.e., surplus work, in order to generate surplus value and profit for themselves. This is true enough. But what is the purpose of this surplus value? In all of his writings Marx downplayed the use of surplus value for capitalist consumption and focused on its role in reinvestment and accumulation as expanded reproduction of the system itself. But he also insisted that accumulation is first and foremost accumulation of the classes. In other words, it is only by imposing surplus work that capital can reproduce itself - as a social system organized not only around work, but around ever more work to boot. We can therefore see how this standard argument can be understood within the theoretical perspective outlined above.

When De Angelis also says work has to be imposed because it is ‘alienated’ he evokes the various nasty characteristics of work involved in ‘alienation,’ i.e., workers do not have

control, the product is used against them, workers are pitted against each other and against their own humanity. In as much as no one would voluntarily seek such employment, it has to be imposed. This establishes a link between imposition and alienation, but one which leaves them external to each other. As I will show shortly, we can identify a much more internal and intimate interrelationship between the imposition of work and its alienated quality.

(B) 'Boundless.' Imposed work is boundless, De Angelis claims, because the imposition of work is subordinated to capital's accumulation quest, which is itself boundless. True enough, once more, but as mentioned just above, accumulation is first and foremost accumulation of classes or the perpetuation of capitalist society through expanded reproduction - expanded reproduction of a society shaped around and through work! In earlier forms of society the imposition of work was geared to particular ends; building a pyramid, an aqueduct, a cathedral, etc., i.e., it was limited by the use value desired by those with the power to impose work. But in as much as the capitalist organization of society around work has no end outside itself - as one particular approach to the organization of society - the imposition of work will last as long as expanded reproduction can be achieved. And while Marx showed how working class struggle may succeed in terminating this kind of social organization, capitalism sees itself as eternal. Thus, the boundlessness of abstract labor expresses this aspiration to social immortality

(C) 'Alienated.' De Angelis argues that work is alienating, because in capitalism work presents 'itself as something alien, as power external to the workers themselves.' (111) Workers are told what to do and how to do it, organized not by themselves but by capital and thus stripped of their autonomy and subjected to outside power and control. 'Alienated,' in short, because the work is imposed from the outside and not a manifestation of their own will (individual and collective), or their humanity (species being). This formulation establishes a relationship

between ‘alienated’ and ‘imposed’ similar to that just pointed out above; there would seem to be a causal relationship in which the imposed nature of the work causes its alienated characteristics. Of course, this can also be reversed which helps overcome any sense of linear causality: work has to be imposed because it has certain alienated aspects.

At this point, we can see some interrelationships among ‘alienation,’ ‘imposition,’ and ‘boundlessness.’ What is missing, however, is any analysis of *how* a situation in which all of these characteristics has been and continues to be realized by capital. We can say that ‘alienation’ and ‘boundlessness’ are realized through the imposition of work, but that does not tell us *how* that ‘imposition’ is itself achieved.

This question leads us to determining whether answers can be found within the scope of this analysis or must be sought outside it. While the aspiration to ‘boundlessness’ might tell us why it is desired, it does not tell us *how*. Similarly, while ‘alienation’ tells us something about the consequences of the imposition of work, the interpretation we have been examining does not tell us *how*. But is this interpretation exhaustive. I think not. Indeed, I think that a deepening of the analysis of alienation can provide general answers to this question of *how* and in the process reveal the central strategic nature of alienation in the capitalist project.

The Strategy of Alienation.

At bottom, one now feels when confronted with work - and what is invariable meant is relentless industry from early till late - that such work is the best police, that it keeps everybody in harness and powerfully obstructs the development of reason, of covetousness, of the desire for independence. For it uses up a tremendous amount of nervous energy and takes it away from reflection, brooding, dreaming, worry, love and hatred; it always sets a small goal before one's eyes and permits easy and regular satisfactions. In that way a society in which the members continually work hard will have more security: and security is now adored as the supreme goddess.

F. Nietzsche, The Daybreak.

On a society wide basis, the continuum of domination is aided by governmental and supra-governmental policies, which strive to ensure that an appropriate amount of work is being created. These social engineering institutes take for granted that the jobs generated are of the abstract character and therefore contribute to the reproduction of social control. However, this is obviously not the case on the micro level, where workers are struggling to transform labor processes and capture as much control as possible over their work place - a recomposition^{iv} of workers' strength vis a vis capital. This forces capital to invent new strategies which will enable them to regain control - decomposition - , or in other words, make work alienating, which transfers control over the product and the labor process from the direct producers to capital. The incentive for the individual capitalist to continuously strive to make work alienating, is so that enough control is established over the worker, allowing for the imposition of surplus work and thus the extraction of surplus value. This is not possible in a labor process where workers have significant power, enabling them to exercise control over what products are produced, the qualitative characteristics of the labor process, the pace, intensity and amount of work, and the links between the conceptual and executive phases of the process. Hence, contrary to those who view alienation as an unfortunate and automatic side effect of capitalist production, I suggest that alienation establishes the requisite power relations - domination - necessary for capital to be able to continue the boundless imposition of work and thus the reproduction of social control. In this sense, alienation generates both docility and utility.^v

Marx articulated clearly what alienation meant to the worker who was exposed to this degradation, however, the view he provided was one-sided: 'we have until now only considered this relationship [alienation] from the standpoint of the worker and later we shall be considering

it also from the standpoint of the non-worker.’ (1844: 116). Marx never did get to this task, which means that we have to supply the political intuition behind this category by reversing class perspectives, that is, analyze what alienation of workers means to capital.

Marx began his radical study of society at the root; man himself, and his basic mode of existence; activity.^{vi} Marx found that the fundamental novelty capitalism ushered in was the qualitative and quantitative reduction of man’s activity, imploding man’s multifarious activities to *work*. This reduction of man’s life-activity to *work* meant that life was now subordinated to an external force. This process of subordination and loss of control of one’s life through the imposition of *work* is what Marx called alienation. For workers, alienation denotes the abstraction of specificity, the failure to realize potentiality, the loss of meaning and purpose, and the absence of originality and diversity.

Marx described four types of alienation: *Man’s Alienation from his work*. Capital tries to structure work so that it maintains perfect control over how work is carried out, what is being produce and in what numbers. *Man’s Alienation from the product*. Each worker is ideally only in contact with one part of the production process so that the concrete use-value produced never reaches an individual worker and workers are forced to purchase the goods they produce. *Man’s Alienation from his species being*. Separating a worker’s conceptual faculties from his executive abilities implies that the worker is alienating from his species-being. This separation means that life during work hours is not life *qua* life, ‘[t]he worker only feels himself outside his work and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home.’(1844: 110) *Man’s Alienation from his fellow man*. As capital forces people to exist and to act only for capital, they are separated from each other in so far as they are defined only in terms of capital and not in terms of one another, i.e. their relationships are

mediated by capital.

These separations, however, are not incidental. What is lost to some people through alienation is gained by someone else, namely, those who impose this situation. ‘If his own activity is to him related as an unfree activity, then he is related to it as an activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion, and the yoke of another man. . . , someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him.’ (116) Hence, the abstraction of specificity, loss of originality and diversity, on the part of the worker, is translated into tractability, homogeneity, malleability, and manageability, in other words; control, in the eyes of capital.^{vii}

Capitalism is the only social system that has relied on work to function as the *primary* means of social control. In feudal times, slaves, serfs, and peasants were forced to work through different mechanisms, but the coercion and social control was external to work. Man ‘related to himself as a proprietor, as master of the conditions of his reality. . . [and]. . . the purpose of labor [was] not the *creation of value*, although they may [have] performed surplus labour in order to exchange it for *foreign* labour. . . [and] wealth. . . , in its capacity of value, is the mere right to command other people’s labour, not for the purpose of dominion, but for private enjoyment.’ (1867: 480) However, after workers had been divorced from the control of land and the means of production, the purpose of labor was no longer use-value, but value and social domination. Alienation was born, and work had become something more than a means to obtain use-values.

This monumental change was brought about by enclosures, the formal subordination of labor to merchant capitalism, and finally, especially the industrialization of capitalism. New technology allowed for a complete reorganization of the production process designed to fulfill the needs of capital. In the place of formal subsumption, workers were now forced into a situation where *real subsumption* prevailed and the worker became cogs whose work was

regulated by the machines. This process of the strategic imposition of alienation is described by Marx in chapters 14 and 15 of *Capital*. A few examples will suffice: ‘The separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour, and the transformation of those faculties into powers exercised by capital over labour, is, as we have already shown, finally completed by large-scale industry erected on the foundation of machinery.’ (1867: 549)

‘Machinery is misused in order to transform the worker, from his very childhood, into a part of a specialized machine.’ (547) ‘Therefore, the worker himself constantly produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that dominates and exploits him; and the capitalist just as constantly produces labour-power, in the form of a subjective source of wealth which is abstract, . . .in short, the capitalist produces the worker as a wage-labourer.’ (716) ‘. . . the capitalists distort the worker into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment, . . .transform his life-time into working time. . .’ (799)

These effects on the workers, described by Marx, have been interpreted by most to be disastrous side-effects of industrialization. However, I suggest that Marx was describing processes whereby alienation was strategically imposed by capital in order to seize control over the labor process. Control, which is a necessary condition for the continuity of boundless imposition of work. Hence, the central strategic nature of alienation resides in the fact that it establishes the necessary conditions for capital to be able to impose more and more work and, consequently, continue the reproduction of capitalist class relations, the very foundation that allowed for the stupendous material expansion that ‘accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals.’ (Marx 1848: 83)

Thus, value, for capital, is the continuity of social control, and social control is achieved

through the imposition of abstract labor. In the sense that capital can only succeed in its self-valorization project when it maintains sufficient control over the labor process, we may discern the strategic character of alienation. That is, it is through alienation - the transfer of control over the product and the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the labor process from the direct producers to capital - that capital maintains the power to continuously impose work, and hence, reproduce its social control. As such, there is an immediate interconnection between value and alienation, and thus, a conceptual continuity in the writings of the early and mature Marx - negating the Althusserian doctrine.

In sum, I suggest that alienation should be regarded both as a *result* of successful imposition of a particular form of labor and as the *pre-requisite* for future impositions of more such work, and thus, for a reproduction of the system itself. If this circular and cumulative process is managed efficiently, more work means more alienation, which translates into a higher likelihood that life is mere labor-power and is materialized into labor, which augments capital and increases its power, etc.; ‘. . .it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself - his inner world - becomes. . .’ (1844: 108) Hence, the more the worker is alienated the easier it is to continue to impose the commodity form. ‘The machine accommodates itself to the *weakness* of the human being in order to make the *weak* human into a machine.’ (149) and ‘If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation.’ (110)

The imposition of alienation, considered both as the means of continued accumulation and of social control, follows the circuit;

Alienation-Social Control.....AL’-SC’AL”-SC”etc.

which fits into Marx's commodity circuit in the following manner;

M-C(MP, LP)...P(AL-SC)...C'-M'-C'(MP', LP')...P(AL'-SC')...C''-M''-C''(MP'', LP'')...P(AL''-SC'')...C'''-M''' . . . etc.

Alienation of workers from their work, fellow workers, and their species-being is accomplished during the production process (P), whereas alienation from the product occurs both in (P) and when the commodity is sold (C'-M'), which forces workers to continue selling their labor power in order to be able to purchase their means of subsistence [LP-M-C(MS)].

Rubin (1927) and Clarke (1980) focused on a different moment of abstract labor within the valorization process. They argued that '[i]n the process of direct production labour is not yet abstract labour in the full sense of the word, but has still to become abstract labour' (Rubin 1927: 124) and 'labour becomes abstract through the assimilation of its product with a universal equivalent, . . .' (ibid.: 119) And 'the sum of value expressed in a particular commodity. . . can only be established when private labours are socially validated through the circulation of commodities and of capital.' (Clarke: 133) I recognize that the sphere of circulation is indeed integral to the valorization process, as Marx pointed out in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*. However, given that labor is alienated, and thus takes on the form of abstract labor, in the sphere of production, I do not find claims that put primary emphasis on the sphere of circulation convincing, such as Himmelweit and Mohun: '[t]hus the reduction of labour to abstract labour is something that can only be done by the market. . .' (1994: 158).

Viewed in relation to the commodity circuit provided above, we can more clearly comprehend value as an *instrumental continuum*, in which the means-ends relationship between work and social dominion, is fluid and continuous, as long as capital is successful in its project. Naturally, workers struggle against the strategy of reducing life to alienating work, making the

imposition of alienation a major battleground. It is to this struggle we now turn. First, I will analyze the basic strategies used by capital to reproduce and impose alienation, and then I will focus on ways that we can avoid and go beyond these strategies.

V Technology and Alienation.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.

K. Marx and F. Engels

The basic thesis presented below is that technology is used by capital to reorganize the production process in ways that control is achieved through alienation, that is, workers are separated from control over the production process, their relationships with each other are mediated by capital, they are prohibited from exercising their conceptual abilities, and they are denied access to the use-value they produce. This, in itself, is not a novel suggestion or perspective,^{viii} however, by explicitly focusing on technology as a weapon used in the strategic imposition of alienation, and to conceptualize this within Marx's labor theory of value, I hope I may provide some further insight into how we can use this theory for a *political* understanding of capital's accumulation strategies.

The strategic imposition of alienation is generally not openly articulated as a goal of capitalists,^{ix} who are preoccupied with fetishized indicators of value and social control, namely efficiency, productivity, profits, and growth. Therefore, the strategies used by capital are veiled in a fetishized language, which we have to translate into a politically useful terminology.

In order for capital to successfully extend and reproduce its domination it must constantly strive to further impose work. Even if capital gains certain success in wresting control over

production, products, and workers from the direct producers, this success is never lasting. Workers constantly find ways to organize themselves, re-organize the labor process, and shape technologies in ways that re-appropriate control from capital. This recomposition of workers' strength vis a vis capital, forces capital to come up with new strategies that will enable them to regain control; decomposition. Various strategies have been used by capital as stratagems to achieve and reintroduce alienation. The most utilized, by far, has been technological innovation. One way of defining the *real subsumption* of labor to capital, during industrialization, is the achievement of decomposition through technologically induced reorganizations of the production process. One of the most blatant early examples of how technology was used as a weapon against the working class, was the introduction of interchangeable parts in manufacturing, in the North-eastern parts of the US, during the first half of the nineteenth century. This American Manufacturing System alienated the workers from the production process, deskilled workers through the fragmentation of the job tasks, in ways that F. Taylor would later build upon. At the same time the interchangeable parts-technique was put to use producing locks, clocks, and guns, all of which were immediately useful to capital in their strife to subordinate the unruly American workers to the commodity form.

Marx clearly saw the role played by technology in class struggle and described this strategy throughout his writings. As early as 1846, he wrote in a letter to Annenkov; 'Since 1825, the invention and application of machinery have been merely the result of the war between employers and workers.' (Padover 1979: 48)^x Marx expanded upon this analysis in part four of *Capital*, where he described the constant strife of capital to come up with new ways to gain control over the working class. 'Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. . . By means of machinery, chemical processes and

other methods, it is continually transforming not only the technical basis of production but also the functions of the worker and the social combination of the labour process.’ (1867: 617)

This aspect of Marx’s analysis was left to the ‘gnawing scrutiny of the mice’ for nearly a century, until R. Panzieri (1972 and 1976) revived the ‘strategic’ interpretation of technology in the process of criticizing the naïveté of the technologico-idyllic perspective held by the ‘objectivists’, viz. those with an excessive faith in the ability of technology to automatically emancipate the working class.^{xi} Panziere argued that ‘the capitalist development of technology, as it passes through the various stages of rationalization, involves more and more sophisticated forms of integration, etc. - a continual growth of capitalist control.’(1972: 49) This ‘growth of capitalist control’ through the gradual unfolding of capital’s technological rationality did not imply an inevitable defeat of the working class, as new technologies are introduced new opportunities for radical change are opened up. However, to the extent that workers are successful in molding new technologies and resulting labor processes to their needs, capital will initiate new searches for even more inventive strategies to regain lost turf. Thus, Panzieri clearly saw the endogeneity of technological innovations to the dynamics of class struggle.^{xii}

In sum, capital uses technology as a political weapon to rearrange the labor-process in ways to alter the *form* of labor imposed so that the workers are alienated, that is, denied authority to control the labor process and its temporal boundaries, separated from their co-workers, and precluded from using their creativity to tailor the labor process to the workers needs, which allows capital to enjoy a period of increased social control. Capital will try various technologies, choosing to implement only those that fulfill their objectives.

The *form* of labor that does answer to capital’s needs, i.e. successfully transfers control to capital through alienation of the worker, is *abstract labor*. In other words, *abstract labor* is any

form of work that is alienating and, thus, allows for the boundless continuity of the imposition of work and thus, functions as a means towards social control.

There is a great variety of *forms* of work that falls under the heading of *abstract labor* and, due to the dynamics of the class struggle, the *forms* of work that qualify as *abstract labor* change constantly. Capital, in its vampire-like manner, is never satisfied with the number of people it has managed to bring under its control, hence, the variety of *forms* of useful labor that has been made into abstract labor through technological innovations has constantly increased. Capital always focuses its efforts on sectors of the working class that pose the greatest threat of instability. Braverman (1974) analyzed how Taylor's and Gilbreth's methods were applied not only to the factory, but also to clerical, and service work, as business sought to standardize motion patterns and skills, so that workers can be used as interchangeable parts.^{xiii} Lately, in response to the increasing number and importance of white collar employees, technicians, engineers, and specialist,^{xiv} capital has been on the move to make even 'higher' skilled workers and managers interchangeable by standardizing their knowledge, decision processes, and work habits. The system of 'higher education' and human resource soft-ware programs^{xv} are instruments used to make high skill workers malleable, tractable, and individually interchangeable. This form of work is surely different in its concrete manifestations from the 'lower' skilled occupations, however, they both have alienation in common which qualifies them as *abstract labor*, allows for social commensurability of labor, and implies a continued relevance of the labor theory of value. In particular, this understanding of abstract labor allows us to use the labor theory of value even though most jobs are not 'low-skilled' factory jobs. It enables us to analyze all *forms* of work that fulfill capital's objective, i.e. contribute to capital's social control. Hence, we are not in need of mechanisms, such as skill coefficients (Devine 1989), to

make various forms of work commensurable.

While being essential to capital's aim of increasing its social control, increasing alienation on all levels of the social hierarchy is potentially counterproductive for businesses as it tends to choke the creativity and innovative interest of workers. Because workers are the *active* subjects of production, the source of the skills, innovation, and cooperation that capital must harness for continued accumulation, too much alienation of too many workers can limit capital's growth potential and flexibility. Many bourgeois writers have realized the destructive effects that too much alienation might have on future growth. One of the first to do so was Joseph Schumpeter (1934), who thought that the professionalization of businesses, i.e. the replacement of the entrepreneur by the executive and the routinization of innovation as technology becomes the business of specialists, would slowly, but inevitably lead to capitalism's own demise. This realization has since led to many attempts by so-called Schumpeterians to find a balance between alienation and allowance for creativity, i.e. ways to maintain social control while tapping the resourcefulness and creative wealth of the working class.^{xvi} Job rotations (to alleviate alienation from work), quality circles (to alleviate alienation from the product), team concepts (to alleviate alienation from fellow man), and time set aside for pursuing own ideas^{xvii} (in order to bridge the gap between conception and execution, i.e. to alleviate alienation from species-being), are examples of adjustments that capital has made.

Some firms have tried to go even further in compromising social control for workers' participation in innovation. However, these gambles have many times backfired as the extra freedom and space does not lead to the release of energies that capital can harness for their own purposes, but rather creates situations where workers converge in demands for self-management and autonomy. Examples of this development are Lucas Aerospace in the UK, Toshiba-Amplex

in Japan (Witheford 1995) and the Volvo plant in Sweden. These failed experiments points to the fact that alienation is a necessary condition for capitalism to reproduce itself. If the labor imposed is not of the *abstract form*, i.e. if it does not alienate the workers, it does not function as domination and the whole social structure is in peril. From capital's point of view, this means, on the one hand, that capital can *never* abolish alienation while still maintaining its social domination, but on the other hand, that capital can not survive unless it feeds off the intelligence and inventive abilities of the working class, which requires some autonomy- an autonomy that is precariously creative. However, from the workers' point of view, given that alienation is the cornerstone of capital's social control, it is quite apparent that if we are to go beyond capitalism we need to find ways to go beyond alienation by avoiding the capitalist form of labor; *abstract labor*. It is to this topic that we now turn.

Alienation - the Fundamental Contradiction within Capitalism.

Phew! to believe that higher pay could abolish the essence of their misery- I mean their impersonal serfdom! Phew! to be talked into thinking the machinelike workings of a new society, could transform the shame of slavery into a virtue! Phew! to have a price for which one remains a person no longer but becomes a gear!.....Do your ears ring from the pipes of the socialistic pied pipers, who want to make you wanton with mad hopes? who bid you be prepared and nothing else, prepared from today to tomorrow so that you wait and wait for something from the outside, and live in every other respect as you have lived before..

F.

Nietzsche, The Daybreak.

The end of capitalism entails an elimination of the whole capitalist institutional nexus, namely, private property, the internal market,^{xviii} money *qua* universal equivalent, and alienating

labor. Certain writers tend to prioritize the elimination of specific institutions over others, perhaps because they feel they have detected a weak link in the chain or because they view the transcendence of one institution as particularly crucial for meaningful change. I suggest that Marx prioritized the eradication of alienating labor, not because it is the easiest institution to rid humanity of, but because it is the institution that most directly relates to the human experience in capitalism. The worker's 'own activity is to him related as an unfree activity, then he is related to it as an activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion, and the yoke of another man.' (Marx 1844: 116)

Marx provided an analysis of different forms of post-capitalist societies in the 1844 Manuscripts' chapter on *Private Property and Communism*, evaluating each upon its potential to emancipate mankind.^{xix} The first version is the 'crude communism' offered by Fourier, Proudhon, and Saint-Simon, where all people are to be reduced to workers. In this form 'the task of the *laborer* is not done away with, but extended to all men . . . The community is only a community of *labor*, and or equality of *wages* paid out by communal capital . . . Both sides of the relationship are raised to an *imagined* universality - *labor* as a state in which every person is placed, and *capital* as the acknowledged universality and power of the community.' (1844: 134) This form of communism will not alter the relationship between workers and their labor and it will not eliminate labor as the fundamental activity around which society is organized, i.e. as the primary means of social control. The categories of the labor theory are still relevant in this societal arrangement, only difference being that it is now society as a whole, as an abstract capitalist, that is the imposer of alienated labor.^{xx}

The second version of communism Marx criticized was that of Etienne Cabet, who proposed^{xxi} a society where all are equally obliged to work and 'the community must do its best

to see that everyone eats the same food, wears the same clothes, and lives in the same kind of dwelling.’(Kolakowski 1978: 213-4) Marx described this society as ‘[c]ommunism (a) still political in nature - democratic or despotic; (b) with the abolition of the state, yet still incomplete, and being still affected by private property (i.e. by the estrangement of man).’(1844: 135) Being better than *crude communism*, it still did not get to the root of the problem; *alienation*. ‘In both forms communism already is aware of being reintegration or return of man to himself, the transcendence of human self-estrangement; but since it has not yet grasped the positive essence of private property, and just as little the *human* nature of need, it remains captive to it and infected by it. It has, indeed, grasped its concept, but not its essence.’ (135)

The third form of communism is the one that Marx himself subscribed to. Marx kept with his habit of not giving a blueprint for a post-capitalist society, but he described the effects of a complete abolition of alienated labor, from which we can see how a new, multiplicity, of societal forms would spring. This version is not just a change of form, but a complete alteration of the whole societal composition. It is not the final stage in societal development, but a start of a new movement, where the evolution of society will be guided by truly human needs, which themselves are guided by the historical progression. To quote Marx at length;

‘*Communism* as the *positive* transcendence of *private property*, as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation of the human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e. human) being. . . This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equal naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man- the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between

freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.’ (1844: 135) ‘[T]he positive transcendence of *private property*, as the appropriation of *human life*, is therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement . . .’ (136)

The abolition of human estrangement is the realization of human diversity, creativity, and potential. Mankind, released from the yoke of imposed work, will be able to redirect life-activity towards fulfilling a multiplicity of needs and curiosities, some of which will be satisfied through unalienated labor. We will have the potential to reshape our existence in accordance with our own free will, as we are no longer forced to perform acts that are alien to us. This situation creates the ‘subjective and objective conditions for work to become *travail attractif*, to be the self-realization of the individual, which in no way implies that work is pure fun, pure amusement, as in Fourier’s childishly naive conception.’ (Marx 1858: 530) Hence, the point is that the kind and amount of labor that is carried out is subordinated to the needs and wants of the individual who performs it, and that labor is ‘a free manifestation of life, hence an enjoyment of life.’ (Marx 1986: 228) This negation of alienation and abstract labor, which is not simply a realization of the *one* opposite, but a realization of a *multiplicity* of opposites, will reshape all of our *human* relations, and hence create a society that is reflective of the diversity within humanity, i.e. a society composed of a multiplicity of forms. This will ensure that society will not again become an ‘abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual.’ (138)

Hence, it is within alienation, and thus, within value, that we can find the key to a meaningful transformation of society. This situation can never materialize as long as we are subordinated to a life-time of imposed, alienating - and therefore, abstract labor. Thus, the very key to a meaningful transcendence from capitalism is to abolish alienating work. So, for the very reason that alienation contains, in its affirmation, the strategy whereby capital tries to impose its

control and, in its negation, the key to workers' emancipation, it is the *fundamental contradiction within capitalism*.^{xxii}

The autonomous Marxists have suggested a form of struggle that may be particularly useful and potent in the process of transgressing alienation permanently: self-valorization. The term self-valorization was first used by Marx to denote the process of value creation and accumulation through the imposition of alienated labor. The autonomists are using the term to signify the direct opposite, namely, the process of transcending alienation through autonomous praxis.

The use of the concept self-valorization grew out of the writings of the Italian autonomous Marxist tradition^{xxiii} and denotes 'a self-defining, self-determining process which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorization to a positive project of self-constitution.' (Cleaver 1992: 129) It is the process of filling liberated space, time, and energy with alternative and autonomous projects that may allow us to go beyond capital's valorization strategies. It is a process of refusal of the capitalist form of alienated life, but also, at the same time a process of moving from the 'present to the future,' by creating ways of living which build a post-capitalist society, in the process of destroying the old. Unlike utopias posited by many socialist and communists, self-valorization, due to its inherent diversity, does not 'designate the self-construction of a unified social project but rather denotes a "plurality" of instances, a multiplicity of independent undertakings. . .' (130), which means that the resulting society will be one of multiple and diverse forms.

In arguing that self-valorization is the 'future in the present', the multi-dimensional and open-ended processes through which a diversity of post-capitalist societies may be built, I am not describing an omnipotent form of struggle. I realize that this form of struggle is of limited use

unless it is accompanied by struggles that can carve out the necessary space, time, energy, and resources that will allow us to embark on our autonomous projects of self-valorization. Hence, any form of struggle that can bring us more money, less work, better work conditions, more control over our lives, etc. is integral to our attempts to go beyond capitalism. In other words, it is not my intention to suggest that there is a hierarchy among different forms of struggle, I am merely pointing out that workers' self-valorization is an essential and subversive strategy which not only challenges capital's strategy of alienation, but entails a diametrically opposite life activity.

Conclusion

Work functions as capital's primary means of social control, a modern form of Ixion's wheel. The form of labor in capitalism - abstract labor - is of particular characteristics, namely, it is boundless, imposed, and alienating. I have argued in this paper that alienation deserves special attention, as it serves as one of capital's most important strategies, in that it establishes the requisite power asymmetry for capital to be able to continue its boundless imposition of work, and thus, reproduce its social control. Given Marx's pragmatic approach of selecting categories that embody and denote the actualities of class struggle, I suggest that this aspect of capitalism is captured by Marx's labor theory of value and, consequently, that there are important inter-connections between Marx's analyses of value and alienation.

By focusing on value, as continuity of social control and as measured by the amount of imposed abstract labor - which may only be imposed boundlessly when work is alienating - I have shown that these categories are denoting inherently antagonistic and conflictive social relations. By viewing value and alienation as relational categories, we can see the possibility of rupturing capital from within, by overcoming alienation, which would explode the abstract form

of capitalist work, and thus, eliminated capital's primary means of generating value, that is, social control. Of course, nothing ensures us that the loss of capital's primary means of social control would not be replaced by other methods of social domination, such as, continued increases in incarceration rates and repressive state violence. However, I have suggested that we may increase the potential for a meaningful transgression of alienation, if we are able to create new societal forms within the process of refusing the old. Workers' self-valorization was posited as a 'future-in-the present' form of struggle that may contribute to our goals of emancipation from capitalist social relations.

Notes:

ⁱ Harry Cleaver. (1979)

ⁱⁱ John Holloway. (1995)

ⁱⁱⁱ Terminology borrowed from Werner Bonefeld. (1995)

^{iv} For an analysis of class composition, please refer to Cleaver (1992) or Witheford (1994). The autonomist tradition introduced the concept of ‘class composition’ in order to analyze this particular class dynamic - ‘a gauge of each side’s internal unity, resources and will.’ (Witheford: 52)

^v Using Michel Foucault’s (1977) terminology.

^{vi} This is *not* to imply that Marx meant that work, viz. the type of productive activity that capitalism introduced, is man’s life-activity or essence. For Marx, man’s life-activity meant the active, creative, and productive side to human existence, in which he finds ways to realize his needs, curiosities, and interests. It is the process whereby a human being creates his own existence by being active, as opposed to being acted upon. Marx wrote ‘what is life but activity?. . . the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life.’(1844: 112-3)

^{vii} Abstract labor or ‘abstraction from the concrete forms of labor. . . is not something that exists only in the pages of the first chapter of *Capital*, but exists as well in the mind of the capitalist, the manager, the industrial engineer.’ (Braverman 1974: 181)

^{viii} See Marcuse (1964), Panzieri (1972 and 1976), Braverman (1974), Cleaver (1981), Witheford (1994), etc.

^{ix} Except for particularly candid strategists, such as Frederick W. Taylor. (1911:13-14)

^x This is of course remarkably similar to the famous quote from *Capital*; ‘It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt.’ (1867: 563)

^{xi} ‘There exists no “objective,” occult facto, inherent in the characteristics of technological development or planning in the capitalist society of today, which can guarantee the “automatic” transformation of “necessary” overthrow of existing relations.’ (Panzieri 1972: 49)

^{xii} Others within the autonomous Marxist tradition, such as, Tronti (1972), Bologna (1972), Cleaver(1981), Negri (1984), and Witheford (1994), have expanded upon Panzieri's thesis.

^{xiii} 'Despite the variety of means used in all the innovation we have been describing, their unifying feature is the same. . . : the progressive elimination of the control function of the worker, insofar as possible. . .' (Braverman 1974: 212)

^{xiv} Marcuse called this group the 'new working class', which could by virtue of its position, 'disrupt, reorganize, and redirect the mode and relationships of production.' (1964: 55)

^{xv} For example, the German software S.A.P.

^{xvi} For further analysis of the Schumpeterians and their strategies, see Lee (1997).

^{xvii} E.g.: the experiments at 3M, where employees were given the time and resources to tinker with their own ideas. If these ideas materialized into something that 3M could commercialize, the inventor would receive a fraction of the revenues.

^{xviii} Karl Polanyi. (1957)

^{xix} '[T]he emancipation of society from private property, etc., from servitude, is expressed in the *political* form of the *emancipation of the workers*; not that *their* emancipation alone is at stake, but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation - and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and every relation of servitude is but a modification and consequence of this relation.' (Marx 1844: 118) Hence, since society will change with the abolition of imposed alienated work, all relations, not just that between capital and labor, will be altered in one way or another.

^{xx} Marx used the labor theory of value to analyze capitalism as it was a society based on the universality of imposed work, not because it is a superior methodological tool that can be applied

ahistorically. Hence, for Marx, the abolition of capitalism also means the obsolescence of the labor theory of value, as such a society would no longer be organized around imposed work. Marx clearly points this out in the *Grundrisse*, e.g.; ‘. . . then, on the one hand, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual; and, on the other, society’s productive power will develop so rapidly that, although production will now be calculated to provide wealth for all, the *disposable time* of all will increase . . . Then wealth is no longer measured by labour time but by *disposable time*.’ (Marx 1858: 94)

^{xxi} And tried to establish an egalitarian community in Texas in 1849. See Fischer (1980)Chapter 6.

^{xxii} Holloway have criticized the autonomous Marxists for not viewing the class struggle as being internal to capital. That is, Holloway claims that the autonomists perceive capital’s history as ‘ a history of reaction to working class struggle’ (1995: 163), which ignores that ‘capital is the product of the working class, and therefore depends upon the working class for its reproduction.’ (ibid.) I do not find Holloway’s criticism particularly accurate. I have shown that the working class and capital, although having separate subjectivities, are symbiotically related. One cannot exist without the other. ‘The working class, as long as it works for capital, is not ‘something else’ - it exists as labor power within capital.’ (Cleaver 1979: 74) Consequently, if alienation, and thus, capital’s valorization project can be ruptured, capital has no basis for existence - it is exploded from within.

^{xxiii} For a full account of the development and meaning of workers’ ‘self-valorization’ see Cleaver. (1992)

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