

Space for Notes



**A Brief Exchange
on the
Difference between Labor and the Labor Process
that took place on the aut-op-sy listserv
in
December 2001**

Date: Wed, 12 Dec 2001
From: mike posner
Subject: marx question

Hello

Just joined this list today. My question is what does Marx mean when he says that the capitalist buys labor power, as opposed to labor? It's been baffling me for a while and I haven't found anyone that could explain it.... [. . .]

Thanks, mike

Date: Wed, 12 Dec 2001
From: cwright
Subject: Re: marx question (response to Mike)

Mike,

Quite understandable. Bit rough to grasp. I'll give it a go, though Harry will prolly do a much better job than me if he pops in.

Under capital, the capitalist does not exploit your 'particular activity'. The capitalist exploits your 'activity' in general. Capital does not care what kind of specific 'work' (labor) you perform, as long as it produces a commodity for sale, as long as you alienate your 'ability to labor' (labor power), which is not qualitative, but quantitative, which means homogenous labor power that can be commodified and monetarized, as opposed to specific labors which are qualitative and therefore not, by themselves, commensurable.

Labor therefore indicates the specific task performed (carpenter, autoworker, doctor, painter, etc.) But under capital, all of these get reduced to generic labor power, to magnitudes of a homogenous unit so that they can all be quantified and monetarized. There is no labor power without labor, but under capital, all the diverse human activities are transformed into generic labor, work, which in turn, involves being exploited as just one more specific means of draining labor power.

Of course, part of capital's recreation is the constant imposition of this reduction of specific labors to labor and labor power. Capital is the domination of generic work. Under communism, there will be no more work because there will be no more labor power, because there will no longer be a separation between those who own the means of production and those who own the means of production ie alienated labor, fetishized human relations, will no longer exist.

Hope this helps.

Cheers, Chris

Oops, ment "those who own the means of production and those who produce."
Need to sleep... Chris

Date: Wed, 12 Dec 2001
From: mikus
Subject: Re: marx question

hmm, thanks. But what would be a concrete example of the difference between the two?
Thanks, Mike

Date: Thu, 13 Dec 2001
From: cwright
Subject: Re: marx question (response to Mike)

Hmm... Labor is the specific activity: making a coat Labor power is the 'generic' human energy spent performing the labor which is really the social relation between the capitalist and the worker (the worker works for 4 hours on the coat, the capitalist pays a wage that equals two hours worth of labor power) (let's say, 4 hours creates \$50 value, \$25 of which goes to variable capital (wages roughly), \$25 goes to surplus value)

Then a shoemaker makes a pair of shoes. The shoemaker works for four hours and the capitalist pays for two, same monetary breakdown.

How can we say that both activities are socially equal? Because both represent a generic amount of 'work', expenditure of labor power, that is indifferent to the specific labor done. Is the activity of the shoemaker equivalent to the tailor? Only in a world dominated by abstract labor power. The labor power, the generic work rendered as value (exchange value), gives them something in common that means that the shoemaker does not need to want a coat and the tailor does not need to want shoes. They are made with the intent to sell first and foremost. Use value is important, but secondary.
Chris

Date: Thu, 13 Dec 2001
From: Jan Reise
Subject: Re: marx question

No! Labor power is the worker's *potential* to perform the labor - which is what the capitalist actually buys. Which is also all the capitalist *can* actually buy.

So yes, it is "really the social relation between the capitalist and the worker", Chris, but in a sense different from yours: The core of the capital relation is capitalists' constant struggle to actually extract labor from the labor power they have bought - and workers' constant struggle to have less labor extracted from us in a given time. Which is why the rate of profit and all it entails is ultimately determined by value production at the shop floor (this is the famous question of the "domination of the process of production" (*Herrschaft ber den Produktionsprozess*), IMO really what capitalism is about).
Jan

Date: Thu, 13 Dec 2001
From: jbrandon
Subject: RE: marx question

Hello,
For my part, I found it worthwhile to think about the problem historically. I

will try to give a brief and partial view of what is admittedly a complex problem. This at least is my reading of Marx:

In European feudal-peasant economy, production was largely for use or given over to the lord, church etc, in kind. Such markets that did exist involved the exchange of surpluses. The ratios of trade among commodities were determined largely by custom. All peasants were commanded by the sin of Adam to labour, but that labour was never disassociated from daily life, but instead was enmeshed in tradition and culture.

Around the sixteenth century (though some would prefer to date this to the C14th), European merchants began to accumulate riches from their colonial plunder. At the same time, the state and higher nobles were enclosing the common lands that had previously served to supplement the livelihood of peasant communities. The coming together of the landless poor and the monied class of merchants marks the beginning of capitalism proper.

At first it was conducted on a small scale, still in the peasant households. In the time that the peasants might have previously used to tend their plots on the commons, they now used to make products for the merchant. Still, at this time, the peasants retained control over the productive process. Their labour was still concrete and dedicated toward their traditional household skills of weaving, spinning, tailoring etc. In order for the merchant to make a profit, he had to either use his power to pay them less than the value of their labour (i.e. to give them only a day's wages for two days work), or find customers willing to pay for the products above their value (to sell one day's product, for two days wages). This is the merchant's principle, "buy low, sell dear".

So long as production occurs out of view from the capitalist, there are limits to its profitability. However, if a capitalist invites workers into a factory he owns and controls, then he can oversee the whole process. Instead of buying coats from the peasants directly, now he buys only their capacity for labour. This he may pay at its full value, and still realise a profit. Here is how:

The coat is really a materialised form of a certain quantity of labour, say eight hours. Let us assume the price of a coat is fifty dollars, and that fifty dollars a day is what it costs to keep a worker alive, ready to work and reproduce. The capitalist can derive surplus value in one of two ways, from extending the working day longer than eight hours, so that the worker produces 1 1/2 coats a day, or by intensifying production, by breaking down the work process and extending the division of labour. Once the worker has sold her labour power, for admittedly a fair price, 50\$/day, then she no longer has the power to complain about how she spends that time, since it is no longer her own.

The difference between labour and labour power is essentially the difference between concrete activity of a person under their own control, and the abstracted, alienated activity of workers under capitalism. This is why it is the purchase and sale of labour power that is at the root of capitalist exploitation. I hope this helps, Josh

Date: Thu, 13 Dec 2001

From: cwright

Subject: Re: marx question (response to Jan Reise)

I can go with that. It's true, labor power is purchased potential labor. However,

I will maintain that it is really both what I said and what you said, since the reduction of all labor to one commensurable, quantifiable homogenous form is important here.

Cheers, Chris

Date: Fri, 14 Dec 2001

From: Paul Bowman

Subject: RE: marx question

Labour, as an input to the capitalist production process, is a commodity. Like any other commodity it has a cost which is based on the amount of "socially necessary" (see Chris' notes on the distinction between specific and abstract) labour time it took to produce or - in the simplified case of a daily wage - to reproduce. That (schematically) is the sum of the value of the food, drink and heating, etc. taken to reproduce the proletarian for another days work.

As productivity in the production of these "inputs" increases, the total value of the labour commodity decreases. Consider in times past nearly all our ancestors spent nearly all of their productive activity in food production for subsistence. Today less than a 20th of the population in metropolitan states are engaged in food production. If there were nothing in our society except for food production and consumption, then the value of these hypothetical proletarians would be a 20th of the working day of the agricultural workers.

When the capitalist hires labour s/he pays the value of the labour - i.e. the cost of reproducing that labour for the next day. If that cost is only, in abstract terms, the equivalent of an hours social productive activity - that is what is paid. However what s/he gets is the actual days work done i.e. the product of our power to produce labour values (whether embodied in physical commodities or less tangible services), perhaps the equivalent of 7.5 hours of socially necessary labour. S/he pays the cost of the proletarian as commodity, but gets the product of that proletarian's productive power. This mismatch is the source of surplus value.

It's the difference between labour as product and labour as producer, our ability through increased productivity to increase product above subsistence, eventually to the potential for abundance - a situation where a quantitative difference actually effects a qualitative change, one that makes possible the end of compulsion in production entirely - i.e. communism (which is not simply the result of the common ownership of the means of production - that's socialism which, without communism, is contradictory and doomed to failure). But that potential for abundance cannot be realised within capitalist social relations which artificially maintain the experience of scarcity and marginal existence, long after the forces of production (social productivity) have overcome material scarcity.

Date: Sat, 15 Dec 2001

From: Jan Reise

Subject: Re: AUT: marx question (response to Paul Bowman)

I agree with all that, but insist it is not enough. The capitalist can never be sure how much "the product of that proletarian's productive power" will actually be because that is determined by class struggle at its most atomical level.

And I think it's extremely important to keep that in mind, because otherwise one risks to reify value and surplus value into something "economical"

removed from struggle and simultaneously reify class struggle into something "political", removed from social production.

Jan

Date: Sun, 16 Dec 2001

From: "Harry M. Cleaver"

Subject: AUT: Labor and labor power (was:marx question)

(response to Mike Posner)

Mike,

If I had answered you right away, I would have said the following: Labor is the work that people do, labor power is the ability and willingness to work.

Capitalists buy labor power and then must utilize every trick at their command to make sure that the workers actually work.

H.

(response to Chris)

> Mike, Quite understandable. Bit rough to grasp. I'll give it a go, though Harry will prolly do a much better job than me if he pops in.

Chris, I don't know if its better, but I'm now popping in.

>Under capital, the capitalist does not exploit your 'particular activity'.

Chris, I wouldn't put it like this. There is really no other activity for the capitalist to exploit. All labor is concrete. The question is what does it mean to "exploit"?

>The capitalist exploits your 'activity' in general.

Chris, this is the issue, or an issue. What Marx's value categories provide are analytical tools to understand exploitation and what they reveal is that exploitation means in one period is making people worker longer than necessary to produce their means of subsistence; dynamically it means subordinating labor for the workers to labor for capital, i.e., surplus labor.

>Capital does not care what kind of specific 'work' (labor) you perform, as long as it produces a commodity for sale, as long as you alienate your 'ability to labor' (labor power),

Chris, yes and no. Yes, ultimately it doesn't care what kind of concrete labor you perform, and what kind of product you produce, as long as that product can be sold and a profit made. No, in that alienating your labor power isn't enough, capital has to successfully realize its use value: work and surplus work embodied in a profitable commodity.

> which is not qualitative, but quantitative, which means homogenous labor power that can be commodified and monetarized, as opposed to specific labors which are qualitative and therefore not, by themselves, commensurable.

Chris, I think you are confusing labor power with Marx's category of "abstract labor", that he calls the substance of value. That substance is precisely work abstracted from its particularity and that abstraction makes sense (to me at any rate) because what is essential to capital is putting people to work, not how they are put to work. That is the "quality" of abstract labor --labor as the means of capitalist organization of society regardless of its particular qualities. It is

that one quality that is quantified, so to speak (formally, you can't have quantity without having a quantity of some quality). What the concept of "abstract labor" provides is a name for what all concrete labor have in common in capitalism, their basic role as the vehicle of capitalist domination.

>Labor therefore indicates the specific task performed (carpenter, autoworker, doctor, painter, etc.) But under capital, all of these get reduced to generic labor power, to magnitudes of a homogenous unit so that they can all be quantified and monetarized.

Labor does indicate the specific task, but all specific tasks under capitalism have something in common and that common element is "abstract labor", not "labor power" which is, once again, the willingness and ability to work (see chapter 6 of *Capital* vol 1).

> There is no labor power without labor,

Chris, this is true only in a roundabout sense. Day to day as a form of resistance people avoid capital's efforts to extract labor from their labor power. Ultimately, if that failure is too widespread capital fails and the very notion of labor power would hopefully disappear along with the concept of labor itself.

>but under capital, all the diverse human activities are transformed into generic labor, work, which in turn, involves being exploited as just one more specific means of draining labor power.

Chris, this is the phenomena Marx is talking about when he talks about "abstract labor" in section one of chapter one of *Capital* vol 1. But "transformed" only in the sense that they serve this transcendent purpose for capital: command.

>Of course, part of capital's recreation is the constant imposition of this reduction of specific labors to labor and labor power. Capital is the domination of generic work.

Chris, I would say capital is the domination via work, all kinds of work, which means, therefore, work in general, work in the abstract, abstract labor.

>Under communism, there will be no more work because there will be no more labor power,

Chris, I would say it the other way around, as I did above. After capitalism there will be no more labor power because there will be no more labor, no more labor in the sense that there will be no reason to regroup all the diverse activities that people engage in under the common rubric of "work" or "labor". The generic concept of labor/work is specific to capitalism and should pass with it.

>because there will no longer be a separation between those who own the means of production and those who own the means of production ie alienated labor, fetishized human relations, will no longer exist.

Chris, I'd say ownership is only one means to commanding the means of production, but yes, once we all command those means then we will reorganize them to eliminate alienated labor, fetishized human relationships, etc.

H.

(response to Chris)

>Then a shoemaker makes a pair of shoes. The shoemaker works for four hours and the capitalist pays for two, same monetary breakdown.

Chris, just substitute "abstract labor" for "labor power". But both concrete labor and abstract labor are "social relations." "Abstract labor" designates one specific dimension of the relations of concrete labor: that concrete labor is the form of capitalist command.

>How can we say that both activities are socially equal? Because both represent a generic amount of 'work', expenditure of labor power, that is indifferent to the specific labor done. Is the activity of the shoemaker equivalent to the tailor? Only in a world dominated by abstract labor power.

Chris, dominated by abstract labor, not abstract labor power, all labor power is concrete, specific willingness and abilities.

>The labor power, the generic work rendered as value (exchange value), gives them something in common that means that the shoemaker does not need to want a coat and the tailor does not need to want shoes. They are made with the intent to sell first and foremost. Use value is important, but secondary.

Chris, with "abstract labor" substituted for "labor power" the above statement is to the point.

H.

(response to Jan Reise)

>No! Labor power is the worker's potential to perform the labor – which is what the capitalist actually buys. Which is also all the capitalist can actually buy.

Jan, correct!

>So yes, it is "really the social relation between the capitalist and the worker", Chris, but in a sense different from yours: The core of the capital relation is capitalists' constant struggle to actually extract labor from the labor power they have bought - and workers' constant struggle to have less labor extracted from us in a given time.

Jan, yes, as long as we limit the domain of discussion to the factory. At the level of the social factory that included unwaged as well as waged workers the capitalist must struggle to impose not only the work of producing commodities on which a profit is to be (hopefully) realized but also the work of producing and reproducing labor power. And of course as you indicate workers struggle AGAINST these impositions and, I might add, FOR other forms of being that do not fit within capital's plans.

>Which is why the rate of profit and all it entails is ultimately determined by value production at the shop floor (this is the famous question of the "domination of the process of production" (Herrschaft ber den Produktionsprozess), IMO really what capitalism is about).

Jan, personally I don't like the expression "value production" because value is "produced" only in the most metaphorical sense. To produce is a transitive verb and "value" is not an object (see my comments on chapter 8 of *Capital* vol 1 on

my 357k website). To say the imposition of work "at the shop floor" level is "what capitalism is about" is both true and too limited. It is about the subordination of life to work, but that subordination takes place throughout as much of society as capital is able to organize for its own purposes - thus the social factory.

H.

(response to Josh)

>In European feudal-peasant economy, production was largely for use or given over to the lord, church etc, in kind. Such markets that did exist involved the exchange of surpluses. The ratios of trade among commodities were determined largely by custom. All peasants were commanded by the sin of Adam to labour, but that labour was never disassociated from daily life, but instead was enmeshed in tradition and culture.

Josh, This is basically Polanyi's story, which unfortunately, uses the concept of labor generically.

>Around the sixteenth century (though some would prefer to date this to the C14th), European merchants began to accumulate riches from their colonial plunder. At the same time, the state and higher nobles were enclosing the common lands that had previously served to supplement the livelihood of peasant communities. The coming together of the landless poor and the monied class of merchants marks the beginning of capitalism proper.

Josh, This is basically the story of primitive accumulation.

>At first it was conducted on a small scale, still in the peasant households. In the time that the peasants might have previously used to tend their plots on the commons, they now used to make products for the merchant.

Josh, this was called the "putting-out" system. Merchant capital instead of buying goods for resale begins to command labor directly.

> Still, at this time, the peasants retained control over the productive process.

Josh, this Marx called the "formal subordination of labor to capital" (as opposed to the "real subordination" that comes as capitalists transform the processes of production.

>Their labour was still concrete and dedicated toward the their traditional household skills of weaving, spinning, tailoring etc.

Josh, labor is always concrete, it never ceases to be so. What happens is that it acquires a new dimension, a new meaning within the context of its imposition by capital.

>In order for the merchant to make a profit, he had to either use his power to pay them less than the value of their labour(i.e. to give them only a days wages for two days work), or find customers willing to pay for the products above their value (to sell one days product, for two days wages). This is the merchant's principle, "buy low, sell dear".

Josh, while such cheating (exchange at unequal value) happens, Marx's theory of exploitation argues that whatever labor power that capital commands can be assumed to get its full value, i.e., enough value to reproduce itself. It doesn't

matter whether the labor being commanded is in-house (in-factory) or out-sourced in cottage industry. The capitalist must pay the outsourced craftspeople the value of their labor power or they will starve. If they are engaged in part-time subsistence agriculture then the value of their labor power may be lower, and capitalist profits higher, but they still must get the value of their labor power.

Moreover, in the typical putting-out system the merchants provides the inputs and buys the output and while this provides them with an opportunity to manipulate prices to enhance profits, they still must provide the value of labor power or their out-sourced workers die.

>So long as production occurs out of view from the capitalist, there are limits to its profitability. However, if capitalist invites workers into a factory he owns and controls, then he can oversee the whole process.

Josh, This is Marx's "real subordination of labor to capital" (discussed in chapter 15 of vol 1 of *Capital* plus in the appendix).

>Instead of buying coats from the peasants directly, now he buys the only their capacity for labour. This he may pay at its full value, and still realise a profit. Here is how:

Josh, what you have here is a change in form, but not in essence. In either case the producers must receive the value of their labor power or die.

>The coat is really a materialised form of a certain quantity of labour, say eight hours. Let us assume the price of a coat is fifty dollars, and that fifty dollars a day is what it costs to keep a worker alive, ready to work and reproduce. The capitalist can derive surplus value in one of two ways, from extending the working day longer than eight hours, so that the worker produces 1 1/2 coats a day, or by intensifying production, by breaking down the work process and extending the division of labour. Once the worker has sold her labour power, for admittedly a fair price , 50\$/day, then she no longer has the power to complain about how she spends that time, since it is no longer her own.

Josh, Oh but they very much have the power to complain, as Marx points out in the beginning of chapter 10 of *Capital* vol 1 on the working day. "Between equal claims, force decides"

>The difference between labour and labour power is essentially the difference between concrete activity of a person under their own control, and the abstracted, alienated activity of workers under capitalism. This is why it is the purchase and sale of labour power that is at the root of capitalist exploitation.

Josh, you wind up here at the end repeating what Chris said and giving to "labor power" the definition of what is really "abstract labor". The one of the four dimensions of alienation is that the concrete activity of work (under capitalism) is NOT under the workers control but under that of the capitalist. "Labour" refers to that capitalist controlled, alienated activity? I assume this was just a slip.

H.

(response to Chris)

>I can go with that. Its true, labor power is purchased potential labor.

However, I will maintain that it is really both what I said and what you said, since the reduction of all labor to one commensurable, quantifiable homogenous form is important here.

Cheers, Chris

Chris, the "reduction of all labor to one commensurable, quantifiable homogenous form" is indeed important, but the term Marx uses to refer to that common essence is "abstract labor" not "labor power."

H.

(response to Paul Bowman)

>Labour, as an input to the capitalist production process, is a commodity. Like any other commodity it has a cost which is based on the amount of "socially necessary" (see Chris' notes on the distinction between specific and abstract) labour time it took to produce or - in the simplified case of a daily wage - to reproduce. That (schematically) is the sum of the value of the food, drink and heating, etc. taken to reproduce the proletarian for another days work.

Paul, in Marx's jargon the commodity is labor power, not labour, otherwise, yes.

>As productivity in the production of these "inputs" increases, the total value of the labour commodity decreases.

Paul, assuming that real consumption remains the same this is true, Of course, success in the wage struggle, etc., may raise real consumption enough to offset the fall in the per-unit value of the means of subsistence so the total value doesn't fall.

>Consider in times past nearly all our ancestors spent nearly all of their productive activity in food production for subsistence.

Paul, it all depends on how you define productive activity. Given recent anthropological evidence that "our [ancient] ancestors" spent little time gathering food and lots of time hanging out and interacting and one might want to call such activity productive in some sense, it seems we should be careful about such characterizations.

>Today less than a 20th of the population in metropolitan states are engaged in food production. If there were nothing in our society except for food production and consumption, then the value of these hypothetical proletarians would be a 20th of the working day of the agricultural workers.

Paul, yes dramatically increased labor productivity in agriculture lowers the value of the means of subsistence. Of course this is also offset by ever increasing transportation, preservation, and processing that adds value, but in general one suspect it falls. however, it is not "the value of these hypothetical proletarians" that tends to be reduced as a result but that of their labor power.

>When the capitalist hires labour s/he pays the value of the labour - i.e.

Paul: "pays the value of the labour power"

>the cost of reproducing that labour for the next day. If that cost is only, in abstract terms, the equivalent of an hours social productive activity - that is what is payed. However what s/he gets is the actual days work done i.e. the

product of our power to produce labour values

Paul, see my comment above about the misleading term "produce labor values" or "produce value"

>(whether embodied in physical commodities or less tangible services), perhaps the equivalent of 7.5 hours of socially necessary labour. S/he pays the cost of the proletarian as commodity, but gets the product of that proletarian's productive power. This mismatch is the source of surplus value.

Paul: yes.

>It's the difference between labour as product and labour as producer, our

Paul, labour is never product except metaphorically, nor is labour producer. Producers labour and bring forth products (products with a value that can be discussed in terms of embodied labor).

>ability through increased productivity to increase product above subsistence, eventually to the potential for abundance - a situation where a quantitative difference actually effects a qualitative change, one that makes possible the end of compulsion in production entirely - i.e. communism (which is not simply the result of the common ownership of the means of production - that's socialism which, without communism, is contradictory and doomed to failure). But that potential for abundance cannot be realised within capitalist social relations which artificially maintain the experience of scarcity and marginal existence, long after the forces of production (social productivity) have overcome material scarcity.

Paul, this is a highly debatable position, the necessity of capitalism to the transcendence of "scarcity", but not one I will take up here.

H.

(response to Jan Reise)

>I agree with all that, but insist it is not enough. The capitalist can never be sure how much "the product of that proletarian's productive power" will actually be because that is determined by class struggle at its most atomical level.

Jan, and at its most macro level as a study of the IMF will reveal.

>And I think it's extremely important to keep that in mind, because otherwise one risks to reify value and surplus value into something "economical" removed from struggle and simultaneously reify class struggle into something "political", removed from social production.

Jan, yes, all these categories are inseparable.

H.

Date: Mon, 17 Dec 2001 02:48:28 -0700

From: jbrandon

To: "Harry M. Cleaver",

Thanks for your comments Harry. I still do not understand however why you wish to maintain a rigid distinction between abstract labour and labour power. As I see it, labour power can only be based on abstract labour, since is without

a pre-defined essential form.

<snip>

>Josh, *This is basically Polanyi's story, which unfortunately, uses the concept of labor generically.*

But is Polanyi's story so much different in this instance from Marx's? It is true that at one point in *Capital* a distinction is made (by Engels) between precapitalist 'work' and 'labour', but the terminology is not maintained throughout Marx's writings (though a German speaker might correct me on this). For example, "In both cases [i.e. free petty landownership and communal landed property] individuals behave not as labourers but as owners - and members of the community who also labour. The purpose of this labour is not the creation of value, although they may perform surplus labour in order to exchange it for foreign labour, i.e. for surplus products." - Precapitalist Economic Formations

Both Polanyi and Marx held that money and commodity trading existed only "in the pores of feudal society", therefore exchange value did not dominate the regulation of production. Customs, feudal ties played a much greater role.

<snip>.

>Josh, *labor is always concrete, it never ceases to be so. What happens is that it acquires a new dimension, a new meaning within the context of its imposition by capital.*

True, there remains a concrete dimension to labour and to labour power also (e.g. concrete skill and willingness), as you point out, but there is an abstract dimension as well under capitalism. Namely what is primarily purchased is the workers' time. But time is nowhere to be seen.

>Josh, *while such cheating (exchange at unequal value) happens, Marx's theory of exploitation argues that whatever labor power that capital commands can be assumed to get its full value, i.e., enough value to reproduce itself. It doesn't matter whether the labor being commanded is in-house (in-factory) or out-sourced in cottage industry. The capitalist must pay the outsourced craftspeople the value of their labor power or they will starve. If they are engaged in part-time subsistence agriculture then the value of their labor power may be lower, and capitalist profits higher, but they still must get the value of their labor power.*

>

>Moreover, *in the typical putting-out system the merchants provides the inputs and buys the output and while this provides them with an opportunity to manipulate prices to enhance profits, they still must provide the value of labor power or their out-sourced workers die.*

On the contrary, in terms of merchant capital, unequal exchange is the norm. This is why it is generally organised as as monopolies, such as Hudson's Bay Co. and supported by the state. Even the putting out system relied on territorial control. Marx only intended his theory of surplus value to apply to industrial capitalist society, to capital in full bloom as he called it. Even there, in England, he was well aware that it continued (and continues) to be supported by various forms of unequal exchange.

The merchant capitalist is not in a position to control or even calculate accurately the quantity of time spent on a product, all he alienates is the

product itself- a concretion of a certain quantity of labour. So yes, it does matter if the labour being commanded is in house or out sourced since in the one case the labour is controlled directly, and is purchased as an abstract capacity to labour. In the other, all that is purchased is the labour itself in a certain form, e.g. so many pelts, yards of textile, designer jeans, etc.

The abstract character of labour power is an important element. It is by the nature of it being abstract that it becomes a commodity of variable value. Under the putting out system, the merchant makes a contract for x yards of cloth at y pence per yard. Under industrial capitalism, the labour power itself is purchased, at z shillings per day. Although the productivity of the out worker may vary for reasons of weather or quality of equipment, this does not generally affect the merchant. These matters however are of central importance to the purchaser of labour power.

The real subsumption of labour, as I understand it, involves not only the capitalist control of the process of production, but also involves capital in the process of reproducing the worker, hence state education, importing cheap grain etc. So long as subsumption is merely formal, the adequate provision for the workers is not always the norm. As a result, out sourced workers often do starve. Or their standards of living, and hence the normal value of their labour is progressively eroded as Marx showed to be the case throughout the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries (a point Polanyi conveniently passes over). A third possibility is that capital pays less than the full value of reproducing the worker, providing wages only for the productive portion of the worker's life cycle: e.g. immigrant women who home-work in Canada and US.

<snip>

>Josh, Oh but they very much have the power to complain, as marx points out in the beginning of chapter 10 of Capital vol 1 on the working day. "Between equal claims, force decides"

True, I should have said right, and only the narrow bourgeois sense of right, to complain. Power the workers do have.

>Josh, you wind up here at the end repeating what Chris said and giving to "labor power" the definition of what is really "abstract labor". The one of the four dimensions of alienation is that the concrete activity of work (under capitalism) is NOT under the workers control but under that of the capitalist. "Labour" refers to that capitalist controlled, alienated activity? I assume this was just a slip.

But unless under hypnosis, we are under our own control, even under orders from capital. This is entailed in the point Jan made that labour power is all the capitalist can purchase. The resistance that occurs on the microeconomic scale, for example slowing down, is an important contradiction in capitalism as I know you are aware. The key problem for capitalists is that they are purchasing something abstract namely an unrealised potentiality to work, in the hope of turning it into something concrete actual labour, and from that real products.

Josh

Date: Mon, 17 Dec 2001
From: "Harry M. Cleaver"
To: jbrandon

> *Thanks for your comments Harry. I still do not understand however why you wish to maintain a rigid distinction between abstract labour and labour power. As I see it, labour power can only be based on abstract labour, since it is without a pre-defined essential form.*

It's just that "abstract labor" and "labor power" are two different concepts for two different things. Abstract labor refers to an aspect of labor --one aspect of work done under capitalism, while labor power refers to the ability and willingness to work, to do some kind of concrete labor --labor that will have, as one of its aspects that quality designated by the term "abstract labor." I guess you might say I'm just being a Marxologist here demanding we stick to Marx's terminology and definitions of terms. But I'm not. I am persuaded that these really are two quite different things: the ability and willingness to work (labor power) is not the same as that dimension of work itself designated by the term "abstract labor", i.e., that aspect of any and every form of concrete labor (that produces a profitable commodity) which is that it provides the same opportunity to capital to impose work and thus to organize and subordinate life to itself.

Now I agree that to a considerable degree labor power is "without a pre-defined essential form", at least in the sense that the "ability and willingness to work" usual includes a kind of general discipline and need to do any old kind of work. But this can also be overstated. Vis à vis schooling for instance, in general I tend to emphasize the centrality of conditioning and inculcation of discipline, including self-discipline, whereby spontaneous little humans are gradually converted to people who will do what they are told, how they are told, when they are told, etc., i.e., prepared for waged labor, or subordinate unwaged labor. But it is also true that there are concrete skills taught (and sometimes learned) such as the use of specific languages (Americans are trained to take orders in English not Russian or Chinese) and that is certainly a "pre-defined" form, even if not the essential one. So labor power is not entirely "abstracted" from specific skills, a condition of *tabula rasa*.

This said I would agree that it only makes sense to talk about "labor power" (the ability and willingness to work) in general under the conditions of capitalism and thus under the conditions in which it also makes sense to talk about "abstract labor," that is to say that no matter what the form of concrete labor it all basically serves the same capitalist purpose: social control.

<snip>

> *But is Polanyi's story so much different in this instance from Marx's?*

No, his story is not so different; indeed as I understand it Polanyi was a Marxist turned Polanyist. I wasn't criticizing, just labeling. I like a lot of Polanyi even tho he talks about "market exchange" instead of capitalism. His work is invaluable --not only on pre-capitalist society but for envisioning post-capitalist society. I use his stuff in my courses.

> *It is true that at one point in Capital a distinction is made (by Engels) between pre-capitalist 'work' and 'labour', but the terminology is not maintained throughout Marx's writings (though a German speaker might correct me on this)*

I think Engels is completely wrong on this point. I don't think there is any difference at all between work and labour. I see both as designating the same kind of human activity under capitalism. (And here, I guess I should point out,

I differ from Marx because he does use the term "labor" generically to talk about non-capitalist social relations. I think that when he does so, he violates his own methodological position in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, i.e., that we must recognize that all concepts are historically specific. So in the example you give below, he talks about labour in non-capitalist societies.

> *For example, "In both cases [i.e. free petty landownership and communal landed property] individuals behave not as labourers but as owners – and members of the community who also labour. The purpose of this labour is not the creation of value, although they may perform surplus labour in order to exchange it for foreign labour, i.e. for surplus products." - Precapitalist Economic Formations*

In the above example he feels free to use the concept labour but not that of value to analyze these "pre-capitalist" formations. I would use neither.

> *Both Polanyi and Marx held that money and commodity trading existed only "in the pores of feudal society", therefore exchange value did not dominate the regulation of production. Customs, feudal ties played a much greater role.*

Yes. As I said, I think Polanyi's work is a great complement to Marx's.

<snip>

> *True, there remains a concrete dimension to labour and to labour power also (e.g. concrete skill and willingness), as you point out, but there is an abstract dimension as well under capitalism. Namely what is primarily purchased is the workers' time. But time is nowhere to be seen.*

Yes, there is an "abstract dimension" to labour --that is what is designated by the term "abstract labor". And I would agree (see above) that there is something like an "abstract dimension" to labour power as well, but these are not the same. As for time, well time is to be seen in the doing, I would say, either the concrete time of concrete labor or the socially necessary (average) labor time that measures the substance of value "abstract labor". ("Abstract labor" is the substance of value; socially necessary labor time is the measure of value; exchange value is the form of value.)

<snip>

> *On the contrary, in terms of merchant capital, unequal exchange is the norm. This is why it is generally organised as monopolies, such as Hudson's Bay Co. and supported by the state. Even the putting out system relied on territorial control. Marx only intended his theory of surplus value to apply to industrial capitalist society, to capital in full bloom as he called it. Even there, in England, he was well aware that it continued (and continues) to be supported by various forms of unequal exchange.*

Unfortunately, the above is mere assertion, not argument. It does not demonstrate the contention. Like I said, while Marx clearly understood the existence of unequal exchange his theory of exploitation sets it aside. The issue is whether or not that theory is applicable to situations in which capital commands labor not by paying for labour power with a wage but through another form of exchange.

> *The merchant capitalist is not in a position to control or even calculate accurately the quantity of time spent on a product, all he alienates is the product itself- a concretion of a certain quantity of labour. So yes, it does*

matter if the labour being commanded is in house or out sourced since in the one case the labour is controlled directly, and is purchased as an abstract capacity to labour. In the other, all that is purchased is the labour itself in a certain form, e.g. so many pelts, yards of textile, designer jeans, etc.

While I agree "it matters" whether the form of command is through the wage or through a manipulated exchange, it "matters" whether labor is commanded directly or indirectly, I disagree that it changes the essential character of the relationship. The merchant in a putting-out system doesn't need to calculate the quantity of time spent on a product. The merchant spends money on inputs and pays for output at rates that guarantee a profit. But it remains true that that manipulated exchange must be such as to guarantee the survival of the workers, i.e., be equal to the value of their labor power, or they will die. It was only when the capitalist formation of factories and power loom production lowered the socially necessary labor time that the terms of exchange of capital with home, hand-loom weavers resulted in the value received by the latter falling below the value of their labor power - and they did starve. But whether the labor of weavers was commanded by capital in factories or in the home, it was still labor commanded, labor from which surplus value was extracted, it was labor being accumulated in a very capitalist way.

The same is true for the more recent period of the "hollow corporation" or, as the Italians say, the *fabrica diffusa*, or diffused factory. As modern capitalists have diffused their machinery into homes and coordinate production with vans instead of conveyor belts, they continue to extract surplus value, they continue to command labor, they continue to subordinate people's lives to work and surplus work.

In both the putting-out system and in the modern *fabrica diffusa* much more is alienated than the product. In both cases the capitalist commands labor and thus the labor is alienated, the product is alienated, the relations among workers are alienated and they are alienated from their species-being because their will is subsumed to that of the capitalist.

> The abstract character of labour power is an important element. It is by the nature of it being abstract that it becomes a commodity of variable value.

I would put it the other way around: that it is through the process of primitive accumulation in which people are forced to sell aspects of their lives that labor power emerges as a commodity and hence as this process generalizes the labor realized takes on more and more of an "abstract" quality. Early on in capitalism only a few forms of concrete labor are commanded (mostly in the textile, food production and ship building industries etc). But as more and more of "production" and more and more people are subordinated to capital, as firms rise and fall, as industries rise and fall, as labor is forced to be more and more mobile, to adapt and learn new skills (however minimal), it makes more and more sense to see that no matter what the form of concrete labor there is a common "abstract", essential element, and thus that "abstract labor" is one characteristic of all concrete labors. As I argued before, one can say that "labour power" is abstract in the limited sense that peoples' ability and willingness to work is shaped through the process of reproduction to prepare them for various kinds of work. But this preparation only becomes truly general in the modern period of mass schooling. Prior to that most workers, especially in industry, apprenticed and learned specific skills. As is well known, even in the present period the degree of skill specificity of labor power is still so great that many older workers have great difficulty finding different

kinds of jobs if their production sites are closed down for any reason. Clearly the degree of "abstractness" involved in labor power may vary enormously. But the common aspect of all concrete labors, designated by the term 'abstract labor', has no such variation. Either a particular kind of concrete labor can be used by capital to impose work, or it cannot. The only variation is quantitative through the product cycle, the rise and fall of products and hence of the concrete labors that produce them.

> Under the putting out system, the merchant makes a contract for x yards of cloth at y pence per yard. Under industrial capitalism, the labour power itself is purchased, at z shillings per day. Although the productivity of the out worker may vary for reasons of weather or quality of equipment, this does not generally affect the merchant. These matters however are of central importance to the purchaser of labour power.

These are differences associated with the different forms of command and reasons for which capital passed from the "formal subordination of labor to capital" to the "real subordination of labor to capital" - but, and this is what you have to see, whether "formal" or "real" both are forms of the "subordination of labor to capital."

> The real subsumption of labour, as I understand it, involves not only the capitalist control of the process of production, but also involves capital in the process of reproducing the worker, hence state education, importing cheap grain etc.

Not in Marx. What differentiated "real" from "formal" subordination was the takeover and control of the labor process itself, its reshaping through organization and through changes in technology. As Marx explains in chapter 23 on simple reproduction for the most part, even at this stage, capital leaves the reproduction of the worker to the worker. The systematic intervention of capital in reproduction comes with the success of workers in freeing time from waged work, thus the formation of public schooling, etc. Now things like cheap grain, sure, as in the abolition of the corn laws, but that was just aimed at undercutting rents and raising profits, not in the management of reproduction per se. The post-Marx rise of the "social factory" of systematic capitalist intervention in the managing of reproduction as well as production might better be characterized as the "real subsumption of society."

> So long as subsumption is merely formal, the adequate provision for the workers is not always the norm. As a result, out sourced workers often do starve. Or their standards of living, and hence the normal value of their labour is progressively eroded as Marx showed to be the case throughout the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries (a point Polanyi conveniently passes over).

These things even happen with waged labor and do not differentiate it. Remember the need to reproduce a given set of workers is always conditioned by the availability of other workers. Wherever and whenever cheap labor can be had the value of labor power can be kept so low that a worker's life is short - as was the case in England throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries as Irish, etc. were pitted against English workers, or with Southern slavery during the slave trade. So the observation about capital having to pay the full cost of labor power to guarantee its reproduction must be modified to this extent --whether the labor power commanded is commanded and exploited directly through the wage or indirectly through exchange.

> *A third possibility is that capital pays less than the full value of reproducing the worker, providing wages only for the productive portion of the worker's life cycle: e.g. immigrant women who home-work in Canada and US.*

The above statement seems to confuse what particular capitalists pay and what capital pays. If the women do not receive the full value of their labor power (be it high or low) from capital, they starve. It is secondary whether they receive this value from the capitalists for which they do home work, or from their husband's (or other family member's) wage. If you are saying that there employers don't pay for their earlier costs of reproduction - before they immigrated - that may be true enough, but capital in some other incarnation had to have paid in some form or another or they would not have been alive to immigrate! (Unless you assume that they come from some space outside of capital - and I don't know many, other than partial terrains of self-valorization.

<snip>

> *But unless under hypnosis, we are under our own control, even under orders from capital. This is entailed in the point Jan made that labour power is all the capitalist can purchase. The resistance that occurs on the microeconomic scale, for example slowing down, is an important contradiction in capitalism as I know you are aware. The key problem for capitalists is that they are purchasing something abstract namely an unrealised potentiality to work, in the hope of turning it into something concrete actual labour, and from that real products.*

Yes.

(Albeit with my previous caveats about the limited degree to which it makes sense to say that labor power is abstract - and to repeat, a final time, even to the degree labor power is abstract, it is NOT the same as "abstract labor".

Now let me add something: I think it IS important to point out this degree of "abstractness" of labor power, i.e., this degree to which what is being formed is an undifferentiated ability and willingness to work. I wouldn't go calling labor power abstract, but after this discussion I think that when I lay out the meaning of "labor power" it may prove helpful to use the terminology of "abstract" and "concrete" when discussing the components or dimensions of labor power.

In looking back over my discussion of chapter 6 of volume I of *Capital* on the "buying and selling of labor power",

<<http://www.eco.utexas.edu/facstaff/Cleaver/357ksg06.html>> I think that I will expand the discussion of the "definition" of labor power to include more of the things we have discussed here --I usually discuss them in class lectures but in the light of this discussion I think I'll beef up the text. This has been useful.

Thanks.)

H.

Date: Mon, 17 Dec 2001

From: cwright

Subject: AUT: Re: Labor and labor power (was:marx question)

See, told ya :)

No real disagreement, but I feel like a putz. No more late-night, too-little sleep posts on Labor vs Labor Power. I'm wrong often enough as it is. LOL.

Cheers, Chris ps Seriously, good food for thought. Thanks Harry.