

II The commodity-form

Why does Marx begin his study of capital with the analysis of commodities — of useful products of human labour that are bought and sold? He gives us one answer in the very first two sentences of Chapter One: ‘The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as “an immense collection of commodities”, the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of a commodity.’¹ He begins with the commodity because it is the elementary form of wealth in capitalist society. When we read the rest of *Capital* we discover why it is that all wealth takes the commodity-form in bourgeois society. That knowledge makes even clearer why we should begin with commodities: because *the commodity-form is the fundamental form of capital*. It is my purpose in this chapter to clarify this fundamental point by specifying those basic aspects of capital that Marx designates by ‘commodity-form’ and by sketching the historical development of capital in terms of that form.

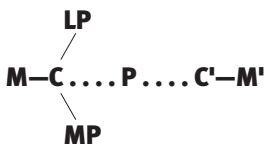
Capital is about capital. But what is capital? In Marx’s view capital was above all a social relation, more specifically a social relation of struggle between the classes of bourgeois society: capitalist and working classes. If capital is basically the dynamic of the class struggle, then it would be reasonable to begin its study by examining the

¹ In the traditional Moore and Aveling English translation from the third German edition, the first sentence reads, ‘The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities”, *its unit* being a single commodity’ (my emphasis). The new Ben Fowkes translation, from which the passage in the text is taken, translates the German ‘elementarform’ more accurately as ‘elementary form’. In the preface to the first German edition, in which Marx talks about the method he uses in this chapter, he refers to the commodity-form as the ‘cell-form’: ‘Moreover, in the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction must replace both. But for bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour, or the value-form of the commodity, is the economics cell-form. To the superficial observer, the analysis of these forms seems to turn upon minutiae. It does in fact deal with minutiae, but so similarly does microscopic anatomy.’ (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, translated by Ben Fowkes: 90).

most basic characteristics of that struggle. Although that is exactly what Marx does, the relation between commodities and class struggle is not immediately obvious. To clarify this relation, it must be understood that the class struggle is over the way the capitalist class imposes the commodity-form on the bulk of the population by forcing people to sell part of their lives as the commodity labour-power in order to survive and gain some access to social wealth. In other words, the overwhelming majority of the people are put in a situation where they are forced to work to avoid starvation. The capitalist class creates and maintains this situation of compulsion by achieving total control over all the means of producing social wealth. The generalized imposition of the commodity-form has meant that forced work has become the fundamental means of organizing society — of social control. It means the creation of a working class — a class of people who can survive only by selling their capacity to work to the class that controls the means of production.

It may sound paradoxical to say that capital is the struggle between capital and the working class. How can something be the struggle between itself and something else? Simply because the working class, as long as it works for capital, is not 'something else' — it exists as labour power within capital. Does that mean capital is both the whole and a part? No, it is always the whole, and that is the difficult point, because the working class finds itself opposed by the whole, including itself in a very special sense. Under the reign of capital, labour creates useful goods, commodities, revenue, and ultimately surplus value, or profit, that in turn, as managed by the capitalist class, are used to dominate labour — and ever more labour to boot. Thus, through the commodity-form, labour in the alienated 'dead' form of the products and value it creates dominates itself ('living labour') as capital. In this sense we can also see capital within labour as a particular kind of social distortion in which a very specific kind of social activity — work — takes on a zombie-like existence in its dead form and dominates all social activity by imposing ever more labour. In fact, *we can define capital as a social system based on the imposition of work through the commodity-form*. Because of the way in which dead labour not only dominated living labour but in that domination also sapped the latter's life force for its own expansion, Marx often referred to capital as being 'vampirelike'.

This understanding of the nature of capital is obviously markedly different from that of bourgeois economics and some interpretations of Marx, which see capital in a reified manner, that is, as simply things: means of production, profit, investable funds. These are indeed moments in the organization of the social relation but must not be mistaken for the relation itself. This point should be easy to remember if we keep in mind Marx's formulation of capital as a circular, self-reproducing set of relations that include all these aspects:



In this formulation, where dashes represent exchange relations and ellipsis points represent production relations, we can see how *investable funds* (M) purchase the *commodities* (C) used in *production* (means of production, MP and *labour-power* LP) in order to set them to *work* (P) producing *commodity-capital* (C'), which can be sold for *revenue* (M') that yields a profit ($M'-M$). All are moments of the totality which is capital. An examination of each aspect of this totality is taken up in Volume I, although the analysis of the form of this process is most fully developed in Volume II of *Capital*, in which Marx analyses the circuits of reproduction in terms of each of these moments.²

If the commodity-form is the fundamental form of the class relation of capital, and if that form consists of the forcible creation of a situation in which the only access to social wealth (food, clothing, etc.) for workers is through the selling of their labour-power, then *it follows that all the products of labour must perforce take on the commodity-form*. This is simply because they must be sold to the working class to ensure its survival and growth. Since wealth for capital is nothing but the accumulation of labour and the products it produces, and since both labour and those products take the commodity-form in capital, then the individual commodity appears as the elementary form of that wealth.³

The commodity-form is thus a set of power relations. Whether and how it is imposed depend on capital's power, vis-à-vis the working class. The commodity-form is not some apolitical concept which simply describes or denotes a set of relations in capitalist society. Capital's power to impose the commodity-form is the power to maintain the system itself — a system in which life for most people is converted into labour-power. Herein lies the importance of the distinction between labour-power and working class. When it functions as part of capital the working class is labour-power, and capital defines the class by this fact. This can be clarified by using Marx's distinction between working class in itself and for itself. The working class in itself is constituted of all those who are forced to sell their labour-power to capital and thus to be labour-power. It is a definition based purely on a common set of characteristics within capital. The working class for itself (or working class as working class — defined politically) exists only when it asserts its autonomy as a class through its unity in struggle against its role as labour-power.⁴ Paradoxically, then, on the basis of this distinction, *the working class is truly working class only when it struggles against its*

² It is in Volume II, Part I, 'The Metamorphoses of Capital and Their Circuits', that Marx analyses the circuits of money-capital (M), productive capital (P), and commodity-capital (C'), both separately and together.

³ In Chapter One of Volume II, Marx makes this point explicitly. 'On the other hand if the wage-labourers, the mass of direct producers, are to perform the act $L-M-C$, they must constantly be faced with the necessary means of subsistence in purchasable form, i.e., in the form of commodities ... When production by means of wage-labour becomes universal, commodity production is bound to be the general form of production' (*Capital*, Volume II, Chapter 1, Section 2: 33. All page references to the second and third volumes of *Capital* will be to the International Publishers edition. To facilitate finding quotes in other editions, I will also specify chapter and sections).

⁴ Marx's classic discussion of this distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself is to be found in his analysis of the French peasantry. He finds that they formed a class the way a sackfull of potatoes form a class. That is to say, they all had the same characteristics and were a class-in-itself, but because they failed to act together politically they did not form a class-for-itself. See Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach: 238–239.

existence as a class. The outcome of the dialectic of working class in itself and for itself is not the creation of a pure working class after the revolutionary overthrow of capital but rather the dissolution of the working class as such.⁵

When we study the commodity-form that is imposed on the working class, it is important not to equate that imposition with the imposition of the money wage. This is the error of those who read Marx too narrowly and define the working class only as wage labour. To say that the working class sells its labour-power to capital must be understood broadly: the working class includes those who work for capital in various ways in exchange for a portion of the total social wealth they produce. As Marx pointed out in his discussion of wages in Part VI of *Capital*, and as the Wages for Housework Movement has emphasized, the money wage represents payment only for a part of that work. In the factory the unpaid and unwaged part counts as surplus value; the development of the analysis of the social factory (see Introduction) has brought out how capital is able to force the working class to do unwaged work for it in many other ways. The most closely analysed aspect of this is the work involved in the training and upkeep of labour-power itself — work performed by the wage worker but also by unwaged household workers — mainly wives and children. Other formally unwaged work includes such things as travel to and from the job, shopping, and those parts of schoolwork, community work, and church work that serve to reproduce labour-power for capital. Unwaged work is not unpaid; rather it is at least partially sold to capital in return for nonwage income. The important point here is that the analysis of the commodity-form in the class relation must include this kind of exchange as well as the direct exchange of wages for labour-power.

If the commodity-form is the basic form of the class relation, then its study is fundamental to the understanding of the character of the class struggle in any historical period of capital, including the present. This is not to say that understanding the basic determinations of the commodity-form is sufficient for comprehending the struggle, only that it is necessary. There are obviously many more determinations that must also be grasped to see the historical specificity. But to see this fundamental importance is to see why it is so vital to understand the seemingly arid abstractions of Chapter One. To drive this point home I will sketch the history of the class struggle as it is outlined in *Capital* in terms of the omnipresence of the commodity-form.

⁵ This basic point, that the working class struggles to end its existence as such, must be kept in mind in all discussions of 'Communism'. The fact that the revolutionary overthrow of capital will mean the end of the working class as such does not mean that class cannot fight together against capital, as Jean Cohen has recently suggested in his review of Agnes Heller's book, *The Theory of Need in Marx*. Cohen argues that the working class, as a class created within capital, cannot have demands or 'interests' which go beyond capital, and that the only such demands, which he would call 'radical needs', that threaten capital can come from individuals 'who challenge their status as workers and oppose the reduction of their needs, personality, activity, and individuality to the imperatives of class relations' (*Telos* 33 [Fall 1977]: 180). But the point is that those individuals do face capital as a class-in-itself — they all have the same basic characteristics vis-à-vis capital — and the only way they can obtain the power necessary to overthrow its system is by acting together as a class-for-itself. Once they have burst the doors and escaped the social factory, then the opposition to capital which presently binds them together will be gone and post-capitalist society can be created, as Marx said, for 'the free development of individualities' (*Grundrisse*, Notebook VII: 706).

Primitive accumulation

In Part VIII of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx shows us how capital originally imposed the commodity-form of the class relation. He shows how what he calls primitive accumulation was basically the original creation of the classes of capitalist society through the imposition of work and commodity exchange. In Chapter 27 he shows that the secret of this original imposition of the commodity-form was exactly that 'historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production' (basically the land) which meant that workers would have to sell their labour-power to capital to obtain the means of subsistence, and that all the products of labour would thus have to take the form of commodities. In Chapter 28 Marx describes how the peasantry was driven off the land and into the city, where, along with ex-feudal retainers, they formed a potential source of labour-power for capital. Yet, Chapter 28 shows that this expropriation of the land, the source of food and clothing, was not enough to drive people into the factories, as many preferred vagabondage or a life of 'crime' to the oppressive conditions and low wages of capitalist industry. Their struggles against the new discipline of the capitalist organization of work forced those in power to enact 'bloody legislation' to force them into the factories. 'Thus were the agricultural people, first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system.'⁶ In the *Grundrisse* manuscripts Marx had described the dilemma facing capital as follows: 'They must be *forced* to work within the conditions posited by capital. The propertyless are more inclined to become vagabonds and robbers and beggars than workers.'⁷ As we see in Chapters 29 and 30, the counterpart of this creation of a working class compelled to sell its labour as a commodity was the emergence of the capitalist class responsible for this imposition — first agrarian and then industrial capitalists.

Although this 'primitive' creation/accumulation of a working class was first carried out in a massive way in England and Western Europe (the 'rosy dawn' of capitalism), it was also rapidly undertaken everywhere in the world. Capital, as it expanded, restructured the existing society in order to expropriate its wealth and to gain control over the labour of its population. Marx analyses this extension of primitive imposition of the commodity-form in Chapters 31–33. Over and over we see how the key to capitalist colonial expansion, beyond the initial rape of local wealth, lay in its ability to separate labour from the land, and other means of production, and thus create a working class, both waged (working in the factories, on the plantations, etc.) and unwaged (working to reproduce itself as a reserve vis-à-vis the waged). In some cases the creation of waged labour was entirely marginal. Capital often either reinforced existing forms of social control and production (e.g. indirect rule) or transformed existing societies into new forms that did not use wage labour yet were well integrated into capital (e.g. sixteenth–nineteenth century slavery; sharecropping after the Civil War). Such unwaged sectors of the working class formed a vital portion of capital's new,

⁶ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 28: 787 [International Publishers edition].

⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII: 736.

world-wide labour force. 'The veiled slavery of the wage-workers in England,' Marx wrote, 'needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.'⁸ The ways in which the work performed by these unwaged workers has been important to capital have varied greatly, ranging from simple self-maintenance as a latent reserve army to the production of food and raw materials vital to capital's entire world order, as in the case of cotton slavery.

During such periods of original accumulation, the struggle between the emerging classes was about *whether* capital would be able to impose the commodity-form of class relations, that is, whether it had the power to drive peasants and tribal peoples from the land, to destroy their handicrafts and culture in order to create a new class of workers. *It is important to see that this was indeed a matter of struggle and not a one-sided manipulation.* Not only did the struggles of prospective workers make it difficult for capital through crime, vagabondage, uprisings, and wars of resistance, but also capital did not always 'win'. It never was, for example, able to convert the mass of American Indians into a sector of its working class. It could only eliminate them as a race through genocide and import black slaves and white immigrants to replace them.

The struggle over the working day

Where the possibilities of avoiding capital were reduced or eliminated, the struggle shifted from *whether* the commodity-form would be imposed to *how much* it could be imposed. In other words, the new class of workers, unable to avoid all work for capital, nevertheless fought to limit that part of their lives and energies which they had to give up in order to survive. The struggle over how long work would be became central.

Marx's analysis of the history of conflict over the length of the working day in Chapter 10 of Volume I shows clearly how the struggle over the degree of imposition of the commodity-form continued even after its existence was no longer in question. In Marx's analysis of this struggle there are only two actors: capital and the working class. In Section 5 of Chapter 10, he shows how in England, for a long time during its rise, capital sought to impose, often through the state, an ever lengthening working day on its growing labour force. During this time workers' efforts were directed at limiting and stopping this increasing drain on their time and energy. It was thus no easy matter to squeeze these additional hours out of the working class. As Marx points out, it took 'centuries of struggle between capitalist and labour' before the latter 'agrees, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity to work, for the price of the necessaries of life, his birthright for a mess of pottage'.⁹

At the beginning of the colonial period capital had to use force to make the indigenous populations accept the commodity-form at all. In the face for continuing resistance to regular and extended labour, the colonial governments were repeatedly forced to use such means as massacre, money taxes, or displacement to poor land to force these populations to work enough to bring capital a profit. This refusal of work

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 21: 759–760 [International Publishers edition].

⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapter 10, Section 5: 271.

was naturally called ‘backwardness’ by economists of capital (who developed a ‘backward-bending’ supply curve of labour to describe it), and the use of force was justified by bourgeois political scientists with appeals to the necessity of ‘civilizing’ primitive peoples.¹⁰ This problem has always been most acute where land is plentiful (Western Hemisphere, Africa) and the ‘backward’ natives can flee to the hinterland. This flight to avoid capital must not be seen as simply an avoidance of ‘capitalist’ work and a preference for ‘self-control’ of work. But rather it must be recognized, as some recent anthropological work has shown (e.g. Marshall Sahlins’ work on the ‘original affluent society’),¹¹ that ‘self-control’ of work really meant less work and more time for other social activities. Today, we can rediscover Marx’s awareness of this: ‘The most developed machinery thus forces the worker to work longer than the savage does.’¹² As Marx’s analysis of E. G. Wakefield’s theory of colonialism in Chapter 33 shows, it was where the availability of land made such escape possible that the ideologues of capital saw its nature most clearly and thus most coherently enunciated the need to restrict that availability.

Under these conditions *the class struggle presented itself as the contradictory combination of two active classes*. The capitalists tried to shape and expand this new form of social control. The working class tried to escape and then to limit the imposition on their lives. Since capital had the initiative during this period it can correctly be seen as on the offensive and the working class as resistant and defensive in its attempts to set limits to its exploitation.

Yet as capital developed rapidly during the industrial revolution and the working class grew in size and strength, the latter’s activity became increasingly aggressive; it began to assert its own autonomous demands against capital. At this point the recent work that brings out the notion of working-class autonomy also helps redirect our attention to certain aspects of Marx’s analysis of the past. We can rediscover that Marx analyses how the struggle to limit the working day succeeded and, passing over to the attack, the workers sought to shorten that day — asserting an autonomous demand for less work. In Sections 6 and 7 of Chapter 10, Marx paints one of his most vivid analyses of the class struggle, outlining the growth of a working-class power and militancy which forced capital, via the state, to repeatedly shorten the working day. Here it is not capital but the working class whose rising power gives it the initiative. It passes from resistance over to the attack. Marx shows how, faced with this working-class offensive, ‘the power of capital gradually weakened, whilst at the same time the power of attack of the working class grew’. This growing power repeatedly pushes down the workday from fifteen or more hours to the eight or so hours we consider

¹⁰ The ‘backward-bending’ supply curve of labour is based on a trade-off between wages and ‘leisure’. At low wages, workers will work more as wages rise, but if wages rise beyond some point, they will begin to substitute ‘leisure’, and the number of hours worked will fall. In the colonies the response was often to set a ‘hut tax’, or a given money payment that had to be paid by the indigenous inhabitants to the colonial government. Since working in a mine or plantation was the only way to obtain money, indirectly forced labour was the result. Keeping the wage rate very low forced the local workers to work many days in order to gain the money necessary to pay the tax.

¹¹ See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone-Age Economics*.

¹² Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII: 708–709.

'normal' today. It also reduced the workweek from seven days to five, creating the weekend in the process. Thus, Marx shows us how the determination of the time period over which the commodity-form is formally imposed, how the 'creation of a normal working day', was 'the product of a protracted civil war more or less dissembled between the capitalist class and the working class'.¹³

This analysis of the time element of the commodity-form that shows how the official 'legally sanctioned' structure of the normal working day emerged is invaluable in helping us understand what Marx meant when he spoke of the 'laws' of the capitalist mode of production. Referring to those legal laws that regulated the time structure of work, Marx says 'these [legal] minutiae ... were not at all the products of Parliamentary fancy. They developed gradually out of circumstances as natural laws of the modern mode of production. Their formulation, official recognition, and proclamation by the State, were the result of a long struggle of classes.'¹⁴ These 'natural laws' are hardly the metaphysical, unexplained regularities usually evoked by traditional Marxists. The 'laws of motion' of capitalist society *are the direct product of the class struggle* and denote only what capital has had the strength to impose, given the rising power of the working class. They occur 'behind the backs' of the actors only in the way they are the unforeseeable outcome of the confrontation of the two classes' power.

Moreover, we also discover the development of working-class power in the way it is also successful in maintaining and ever increasing its share of social wealth at the same time it works fewer hours. The working class can be seen, in effect, to have *used* capital to provide its needs at the same time it worked less. This is one phase of that long process Marx described in which the development of capital is also the development of the material foundation on which the working class can eventually move beyond capital.

Although the discussion of those periods in the history of the class struggle concerning the question of how much the commodity-form will be imposed has so far been couched in terms of how long, it should also be clear that it equally involves the questions of how hard and under what conditions work will be performed. The struggles over these questions are taken up by Marx in a number of places. In Chapter 10, on the working day, it is shown how the struggle over the length of the day is also, to a degree, a struggle over the conditions of work — for example, in Section 4 on day and night work. But the most detailed analysis of the questions of how hard and under what conditions appears in the analysis of Chapter 15. There, Marx demonstrates how the development of machinery, which proceeded rapidly as workers forced down the length of the working day, turned out to be not only a means of raising productivity but also a means of vastly increasing the speed and intensity of work. In Section 3, part c, Marx shows how machinery imposes on the worker 'increased expenditure of labour in a given time, heightened tension of labour-power, and closer filling up of the pores of the working day, or condensation of labour'.¹⁵ This speed-up, he goes on to show in Sections 5, 9, and elsewhere, produces new kinds of struggles by the working class,

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 10, Section 6: 296 [International Publishers edition].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 283.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 15, Section 3, part c: 410.

from Luddite sabotage of machines to the longer-term struggles against capital to limit and reduce the intensity of labour and to improve its conditions. All these struggles over the length, the intensity, and the conditions of work concern the labour-power which the working class is forced to sell to the capitalists. They are quantitative questions of *how much* the commodity-form will be imposed. As Marx says, 'The duration of labour and the degree of its intensity are two antithetical and mutually exclusive expressions for one and the same quantity of labour.'¹⁶

The struggle over productivity and the value of labour-power

The success of the working class in reducing work historically created a profound crisis for capital and forced it to seek new strategies. One response to a decrease of unpaid work in the factory was to extend the unwaged workday outside the factory. The analysis of the social factory has brought out how the shortening of hours and the exclusion of women and children from factory labour — a tendency which began after Marx wrote *Capital* — was partly offset for capital by an increase in work done in the home and in the school to maintain or improve the quality of labour-power. But given that these increases could not completely offset the decline in factory hours, a different kind of shift was needed. The other major way that capital found to maintain, reproduce, and expand its control was, as we have just seen, to substitute machinery for labour, so that less human labour would still produce as much or more than before. It is important to see that the attempt to raise productivity was not simply another aspect of capitalist exploitation but was a *shift in capital's strategic plan forced on it by the growth of workers' power*. For Marx there was no doubt about this: 'So soon as the gradually surging revolt of the working class compelled Parliament to shorten compulsorily the hours of labour, and to begin by imposing a normal working-day on factories proper, so soon consequently as an increased production of [absolute] surplus value by the prolongation of the working-day was once for all put a stop to, from that moment capital threw itself with all its might into the production of relative surplus value, by hastening on the further improvement of machinery.'¹⁷

At that point the struggle passed over from being one primarily concerned with *how much* the commodity-form will be imposed to one primarily concerned with *at what price* it will be imposed. The working class puts up with the commodity-form but demands a larger share of social wealth, that is, a higher price for its commodity, labour-power. Unable to offset a secular increase in the price of labour-power by an increase in the working day, capital turns to increased productivity as the only means both to pay the higher price and to maintain and increase profits. This is the relative-surplus-value strategy whereby it is possible for the wealth and hence the power of both capital and labour to grow absolutely: while the value of labour-power falls relative to surplus value thus raising profits, the absolute amount of use-values acquired by the working class can still rise.¹⁸ The changing relation between price and productivity

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 409.

¹⁸ See Chapter IV below, last section, for further discussion of relative surplus value.

determines the relative distribution of that power. In Marx we see that this relation emerged first through the separate efforts of individual capitals. Thanks to the work by Panzieri, whose rereading of *Capital* rediscovered the organization of work as a planned organization of the working class, and thanks to the work of Tronti and others on the Keynesian period, we can also see how capital tried to institutionalize relative surplus value through union contracts and the Keynesian ‘productivity deal’ in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁹ What a careful study of *Capital* brings out is how this possibility is inherent in the relative-surplus-value strategy. It also, I might add, finally brings post-Marx Marxism up to date with bourgeois economics, which has long grasped, albeit in a distorted way, both the essence of relative surplus value (the linking of wages to marginal productivity in neo-classical microeconomic theory) and, even more coherently, the essence of production as corporate planning of the power relations between the classes (the domain of both efficiency engineering and labour management generally).

By linking wages and productivity, capital tries to create a situation in which working-class struggle over the price of the commodity-form becomes the very motor of capital’s growth in a new way. Just as working-class success in shortening the working day forces capital to develop new strategies, so also does the pressure for rising wages in the factory (and for rising income outside it) force capital to develop science and technology so that it can raise productivity apace. This occurs partly through the individual corporation’s efforts to raise its own profits directly, as in Marx’s day, and increasingly, as the pressure of the working class forces the capitalists to become conscious of their common class interests, through the combined efforts of the capitalist class as a whole — through the state as planner — through both the government and private planning institutions, such as the National Planning Association.²⁰ Each working-class attack becomes a spur to new forms of capitalist growth. To the degree that the strategy works, *this phase of the struggle over the commodity-form sees two active parties using each other for their own development.*

The working-class position, however, is ambiguous. While on the one hand it increasingly gains power — more wealth on which to base its struggle — and on the other accepts the commodity-form in a way that also permits capital’s expansion, its activity is not against capital but for it. The struggle for a shorter workday presented a direct attack on capital’s profits and control as unpaid labour time was reduced relative to paid labour time. But the productivity deal ensures capital’s continued profits and power. Working-class struggle (as organized by labour unions) develops capital and, as it does, increases the intensity of work as well as expanding its imposition to new sectors.

Here we have a strange situation. The essential meaning of rising productivity (increased output in a given time) is that one gets more product with less work, but under the reign of capital productivity increases are transformed into more, rather

¹⁹ Panzieri, ‘Surplus Value and Planning’; Tronti, ‘Workers and Capital’.

²⁰ For a brief introduction to the various institutions of capitalist planning, see William Domhoff, *The Higher Circles*.

than less, work: 'Hence, too, the economic paradox, that the most powerful instrument for shortening labour time [machinery] becomes the most unailing means for placing every moment of the labourer's time and that of his family, at the disposal of the capitalist for the purpose of expanding the value of his capital.'²¹ So much for the dreams of Aristotle, who Marx cites as having visualized the development of tools to such a point that 'there would be no need either of apprentices for the master workers, or of slaves for the lords.'²² So much, too, for the working class, whose struggles have been largely dedicated to reducing the amount of work they have to do. This social paradox of increasing work at the same time as increasing productivity can only make sense from the point of view of a class whose basic means of social control is the imposition of work.

Yet, as the working class uses capital for its own development, it comes to see that exactly because of the incredible rises in productivity the social wealth which it desires decreasingly requires its labour. It sees that the evolution from labour-intensive methods of production (e.g. textile factories of Marx's day which required vast numbers of workers) to highly 'capital'-intensive methods (e.g. the petrochemical refineries of today which require very few) has been increasingly based on the development of science and technology by capital — under the pressure of working-class demands. Marx perceived this general tendency over a century ago: 'But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies [machinery, etc.] set in motion during labour time, whose "powerful effectiveness" [of those machines, etc.] is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and the progress of technology.'²³

But the measure of capital's imposition of work is value and the index of its control is surplus value. If the development of machinery proceeds to the point where it eliminates the need for work, then capital is faced with a fundamental crisis. 'Capital itself is a moving contradiction, (in) that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side as the sole measure and source of wealth ... it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created.'²⁴ The crisis appears because capitalist production is not concerned with production as such but with social control through the imposition of work through the commodity-form and thus the realization of value. But if 'labour in the direct form' ceases 'to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure and hence exchange-value (must cease to be the measure) of use-value.'²⁵

Marx saw in the development of this contradiction the growing potential for workers to liberate themselves from work and for the overthrow of capital. He saw

21 Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 15, Section 3, part b: 408 [International Publishers edition].

22 *Ibid.*

23 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII: 704–705.

24 *Ibid.*: 706.

25 *Ibid.*: 705.

that it would become increasingly difficult for capital to find ways of imposing work as productivity grew and that it would be increasingly obvious to the working class that work should be decreasing rather than increasing. With the growing contradiction between the rising level of social productivity and capital's continuing insistence on more work, working-class struggle has more and more taken on the character of a struggle against work. In the terms I have used here, this amounts to a reopening of the question of *whether* capital has the power to impose work through the commodity-form — at any price. Thus the depth of the current crisis. What is in question is the very survival of the system. Either capital finds new ways to impose work and hence realize value, or the working-class struggle against work explodes the system and founds a new one.

Today the creation of a new social order no longer requires a return to the land and handicrafts, as some socialists — romantic or scientific — think, but rather includes the fuller development of a highly productive social system of adequate wealth and of work which decreases, rather than increases, as productivity grows. In such a system, as Marx so brilliantly foresaw a century ago, 'the measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather *disposable* time'.²⁶ Thus the development of capital, driven on by working-class demands, has created the real material foundation to go beyond 'the reduction of necessary labour so as to posit surplus labour' to a system devoted to 'the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc., development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.'²⁷

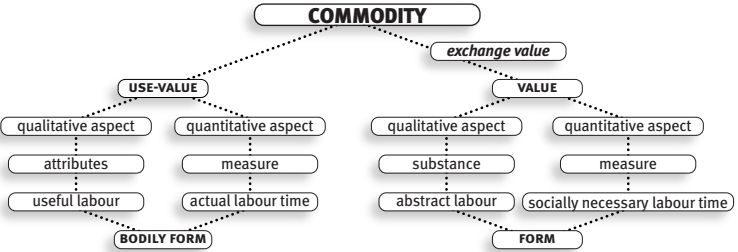
The foregoing classification of the class struggle by questions of *whether*, *how much*, and *at what price* the commodity-form will be imposed is both historical and analytical. While there is some general historical trend of development as Marx outlines, in which one or the other type dominates, it is also evident that these struggles are always mixed together. The point I want to emphasize is that in each case and throughout each period the struggle between capital and the working class is always about the commodity-form because it is always about work, and work in capital is imposed through the commodity-form. This is why a detailed dissection of the commodity is of interest today. It provides a point of departure for understanding the nature of the class struggle in the present crisis. Furthermore, if it is true that the very essence of the system is at stake in the present crisis, then we have all the more reason to be clear about just what the fundamental characteristics of that system are.

Marx's presentation of the fully dissected commodity in Chapter One begins with the apparent commodity-form, passes through a carefully organized and extremely detailed exposition of the nature of the *substance*, the *measure*, and the *form* of both the use-value and the value aspect of the commodity, and terminates in the money-form (see Figure 2). As indicated in the Introduction, there is a definite logic to the

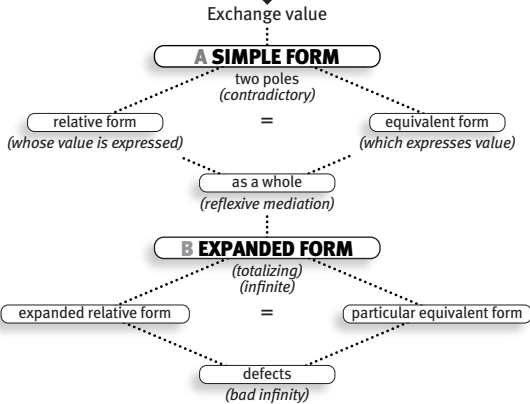
²⁶ *Ibid.*: 708.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 706.

SECTIONS 1 and 2



SECTION 3



SECTION 4

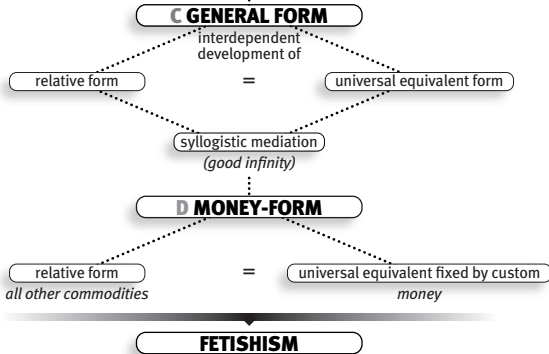


Figure 2: Diagram of the structure of Chapter One of Capital

mode of presentation used by Marx. After an initial analysis of the commodity into use-value and exchange-value, of use-value into a qualitative and a quantitative side, and of exchange-value into its qualitative essence (value), he then presents a synthetic progression in the exposition of the nature of value from relatively simple categories of few determinations (e.g. abstract labour) to increasingly complex categories (e.g. value forms), which are more concrete because they are syntheses of more and more determinations and therefore represent 'the unity of diverse aspects'. The *substance* of value is first discussed isolated from measure and form (Section 1). Its *measure* is then discussed related to substance (Sections 1 and 2). *Form* is then the developing expression of both substance and measure (Section 3). Moreover, the relations between the increasingly concrete concepts are 'dialectical' in that they reproduce particular aspects of the dialectical relations of capital. The presentation thus appears as an '*a priori* construction', which Marx hoped 'ideally reflects the life of the subject matter' — the class struggle — even though it was arrived at by years of painstaking analysis and piece-by-piece reconstruction.²⁸ As I have also indicated in the Introduction, the kind of reading which I do here requires the integration of the material in Chapter One with that in other parts of Marx's work. To the extent then that I bring to bear on the interpretation of certain passages material from other parts of *Capital*, or from other works, I do so with the aim of grasping Chapter One within the larger analysis, rather than reconstructing the evolution of what Marx wrote and thought.

²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, 'Afterword to the Second German Edition': 19 [International Publishers edition].