

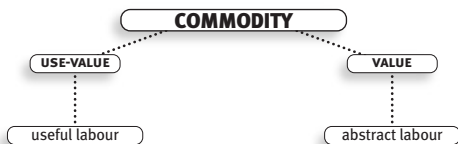
## IV The twofold character of labour

When Marx says in Section 2 of Chapter One that the twofold character of labour ‘is the pivot on which a clear comprehension of Political Economy turns’, it is because he wants to especially emphasize what is new and peculiar to the capitalist mode of production. He wants to bring out how the generalized imposition of the commodity-form adds value to usefulness through the control over labour, a control which creates abstract labour in the ways we have seen above. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the distinction and inter-relation between useful and abstract labour. Marx himself, in a letter to Engels, wrote: ‘...the best points in my book are: the twofold character of labour, according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value (all understanding of the facts depends upon this). It is emphasized immediately, in the *first* chapter.’<sup>1</sup>

The discussion of abstract labour has already revealed some of this importance. We saw how Marx arrived at abstract labour through an analysis of the useful labour that creates use-value. We also saw something of the dialectic of struggle over the division of useful labour through which capital tries to create value (abstract labour) and the working class tries to overcome it. In Section 2 he returns to the analysis of the twofold character of labour in three steps. First, he focuses on useful labour, which produces use-value. This then permits him to bring out the special character of value-producing labour (abstract labour). Finally, with these two perspectives in

<sup>1</sup> Marx to Engels, August 24, 1867, *Marx–Engels Selected Correspondence*: 180.

hand, he clarifies the analysis of productivity and provides the necessary underpinning for his later exposition of capital's strategy of relative surplus value.



## Useful labour

In order for capital to have commodity production and exchange, it must control a variety of kinds of concrete useful labour producing qualitatively different use-values. Without this, neither capitalist production nor exchange would take place. This implies a social division of useful labour in society. To have and control a growing number of kinds of production, capital must be able to allocate labour more or less as it sees fit — it must achieve just that malleability of labour which we saw underlying abstract labour. A constantly changing social division of labour implies that workers must be frequently shifted from one kind of useful labour to another.

Now the division of useful labour necessary for capitalist production occurs on several levels. Marx mentions the internal organization of the capitalist industrial factory as a place where the division of labour exists with no exchange between individual producers. We can see other branches of the larger social factory where this also holds. For example, in the family there is a division of labour among husbands, wives, and children. The production of use-values by each person is made available to the others with no market exchange. Yet, as we have seen, these divisions are essential aspects of the division of useful labour.

In his discussion, Marx makes the general assertion that useful labour, producing use-values, 'is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature imposed necessity'. By claiming that this situation is 'independent of all forms of society', he poses useful labour as a generic concept representing an aspect of human society present in all modes of production. This is parallel to his argument about production in the Introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In that discussion he distinguished between the general character of production present in all societies and the specific characteristics of production which are present in and distinguish different kinds of societies (as different modes of production).<sup>2</sup> The comments in *Capital* on useful labour (vs. abstract labour) further specify the general character of production as production of use-values.

To interpret this dichotomy between useful labour and abstract labour politically, we need to bring to bear the same kind of analysis that we have already applied to use-value and exchange-value. For example, as with use-value and exchange-value, we can

<sup>2</sup> Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, part 1 of the Introduction: 188–193.

easily see in useful labour the working-class ‘side’, and in abstract labour the capitalist ‘side’, simply because useful labour produces the use-values the working class wants and abstract labour is the substance of value and surplus value for capital. Unfortunately, Marxists have all too often stopped at this point and drawn the dangerous political conclusion that one could achieve the elimination of capital by simply eliminating the capitalist side of abstract labour while preserving useful labour. Indeed, in socialism and communism, the liberation of useful labour from value is argued to mean the liberation of the working class to achieve its full potential as a class involved in useful labour. This argument smacks of that approach of Proudhon which Marx criticized so thoroughly: the elimination of the bad side and the preservation of the good side.<sup>3</sup> One of the most infamous examples of this kind of reasoning is to be found in Lenin’s proposition in 1918 that Taylorism should be rapidly adopted in the USSR as an advanced and scientific organization of useful labour.<sup>4</sup> He assumes that the capitalist side of Taylorism as a sophisticated form of exploitation disappears automatically with the elimination of private property and the capitalist class after the revolution.

The theoretical, not to say the political, flaws in such arguments appear immediately when we carry through our class analysis, remembering the intimate relation between useful labour and abstract labour analysed in the section on the substance of value. We see that the concern with abstract labour (value) drives capitalists to shape the division, and hence the very structure, of useful labour in order to realize the homogeneity of abstract labour. Because of this, *useful labour in capital must be seen as the very material out of which abstract labour is crafted*. The work that is imposed on people through the commodity-form, which constitutes the substance of value in capital, exists only in the fluid structure of concrete useful labour. The elimination of capitalist work or abstract labour can only mean the elimination of concrete useful labour, insofar as this is an activity imposed as a form of social control. Time and again in *Capital*, Marx shows how the form of useful labour is shaped in the class struggle. Co-operation, as the basic form of the organization of modern labour, is the product of capital and bears its stamp. Useful labour in industry, whether of the period of manufacturing or of that of machinery, is always shaped by capital’s needs to control the class. Because useful labour is in this way the producer of value/control as well as use-value, it cannot be ‘liberated’. It must be smashed in its present forms in order to smash value itself. Some of Lenin’s comments on the problem of the overthrow of the capitalist state provide a better guide here: the state cannot be seized and used as is but must be destroyed. So, too, with useful labour as it exists in its concrete forms under capital.

To speak of postcapitalist ‘useful labour’ is as problematic as to speak of the postcapitalist state — its transformation must be both qualitative and quantitative. The concept of a postcapitalist state structured to ‘wither away’ — to be eliminated as

<sup>3</sup> See Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* or, for a short statement of his critique of Proudhon, see Marx to V. Annenkov, December 28, 1846, *Marx–Engels Selected Correspondence*: 29–39.

<sup>4</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*: 23–24.

quickly as possible — perhaps provides a useful analogy for one of postcapitalist ‘work’. We have seen that it is the tendency under capital to constantly extend work. The quantitative as well as qualitative (division of labour) extension of useful labour as a means of social control underlies abstract labour and thus value. But we have also seen this extension to have been achieved only in the face of working-class opposition. We can postulate that, in postcapitalist society, the victory of these struggles will certainly mean the quantitative reduction of useful labour as an essential element of its qualitative transformation — ‘the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum’.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the perpetuation and expansion of useful labour in contemporary socialist society, like the perpetuation of the state, is one sure sign that capital has not been destroyed. Thus, it is not enough to speak only of the qualitative transformation of work in abstraction from its quantitative reduction. Those who attack ‘alienated’ work or who speak of the ‘degradation’ of work under capitalism do grasp the way capital transforms useful labour into a mode of domination.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, they miss the dialectical relation between the quantitative expansion of work as social control and its qualitative transformation. As we have seen, capital is, above all, quantitative in its expansion. It shapes quality as part of that expansion. To speak of the overthrow of capitalist work we must take both aspects into account. The only way to achieve ‘unalienated’ work — or work as an activity which is not a function of domination — is through the elimination of the element of compulsion which has been inseparable from its quantitative expansion.

In effect ‘zerowork’ means the conversion of ‘useful labour’ into one element of what Marx calls ‘the full development of activity itself’. Capitalist development, he wrote, has created the material elements to permit, after the revolution, ‘the development of the rich individuality which is all sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself’.<sup>7</sup> What does ‘activity itself’ mean? In what kind of a situation is work not work? Marx had little to say on this subject, largely out of principle.<sup>8</sup> He rejected the utopian socialist project of outlining in advance the nature of postcapitalist society. He clearly felt that it would be invented in the process of revolution by the mass of workers on the basis of their possibilities and desires and not on the basis of some intellectual’s fancy. When he did speak of the general nature of postcapitalist society, his most frequently reiterated comments evoked the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free by the reduction of necessary labour to a minimum.<sup>9</sup> Thus Marx saw the revolutionary process as both negative — freedom *from* capital and the end of a class defined by work — and positive — freedom *for* the development of a new stage in the evolution of humankind. His refusal to give

<sup>5</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook III: 325.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook III: 325.

<sup>8</sup> Marx’s only detailed discussion of the relation between work under capital and activity in general was that part of his analysis of alienation concerned with ‘species-being’ — an analysis which, significantly, he did not take up again in either the *Grundrisse* or *Capital*.

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII: 706.

more than the briefest comments on that new stage is the clearest evidence of his commitment to its openness. What comments he did make came mainly from periods of revolution in which he would look to the actions of the workers themselves for indications of the direction of their struggle (e.g. during the Commune).<sup>10</sup> Thus, although he rejected utopian speculation, we can surmise that within the revolutionary process Marx would have warmly embraced the slogan 'All Power to the Imagination.'

To return to his discussion of useful labour within capital, human beings and Nature are presented as working together — both sources of wealth. But there is another problematic dichotomy here: an implied sharp division between the two that makes 'Nature' something outside to which humans are 'opposed'. When Marx takes up this analysis again in Volume I, in the chapter on the labour process, we find this distinction maintained. Nature appears as the object of work which is carried out by humans employing instruments and tools.<sup>11</sup> But, gradually, in *Capital* we begin to see another side, as Nature increasingly becomes one aspect of the social organization and is incorporated into it rather than standing outside it as an object on which individuals work as subjects. In Volume III, in the discussion of ground rent, it will be found that, as the soil (Nature) is increasingly worked up and capital invested in it, its original, or 'natural', fertility (the variations of which are one basis of differential rent) becomes largely unidentifiable. In short, we must recognize that any separate concept of Nature becomes increasingly diffuse as we see how capital englobes 'it' and transforms 'it' until it is no longer readily identifiable as something outside. These considerations are of paramount importance for understanding natural science and technology as integral elements of useful and hence abstract labour within capital. As we begin to see in the discussion of productivity-raising (and labour-reorganizing) innovations in Chapters 12–15 on relative surplus value, science and technology are inseparable from the class struggle.

Let us take two examples in the area of food production. In Volume III, Marx discusses the reticence of tenant farmers to invest in technological development because part or all of the extra profits will go to the landlord.<sup>12</sup> This slows change and keeps productivity down. More-recent studies have shown that the scientific research which led to the development of new strains of high-yielding grains for use in the Third World was a direct outgrowth of capitalist attempts to deal with working-class unrest and revolt in those parts of the globe.<sup>13</sup> More generally, one can argue that the very structure of science and the pattern of its development are shaped by their role in capitalist society and hence in the class struggle. Marx emphasizes this political side to science and invention, which is concretized in the ever changing forms of machinery and the useful labour associated with it: 'It would be possible to write quite a history of the inventions made since 1830, for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working class.'<sup>14</sup> The importance of this,

<sup>10</sup> See Marx's analysis of the Commune in 'The Civil War in France', in *The First International and After*: 187–268.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 7, Section 1.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, Chapter 47.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Cleaver, *The Origins of the Green Revolution*.

from a working-class point of view, lies in the necessity of analysing and grasping the present and emerging forms of useful labour in their political aspect: as weapons of capital. Anytime that capital plans a new organization of useful labour, or the introduction of a new technology, such plans should be analysed in terms of their role in decomposing the present level of working-class power. The project is not the generation of a new-Ludditism but rather that of anticipating capitalist strategy and tactics in order to formulate counter strategies and tactics.<sup>15</sup>

## **Abstract labour**

Elaborating on the origins and meaning of abstract labour, Marx explicitly brings in the mobility of labour in capitalism from one kind of useful labour to another. He refers to it here as a way the particularity of useful labour is overcome and abstract labour is generated: 'Moreover, we see at a glance that, in our capitalist society, a given portion of human labour is, in accordance with the varying demand, at one time employed in the form of tailoring, at another in the form of weaving. This change may possibly not take place without friction but take place it must.'<sup>16</sup>

To further explain this abstract labour, Marx notes that besides being qualitatively determined by mobility, and quantitatively determined by time, in a certain sense it has actual existence in the form of simple, or average, labour power. This is more completely explained in the *Contribution to the Critique*, where he states: 'This abstraction, human labour in general, *exists* in the form of average labour which, in a given society, the average person can perform, productive expenditure of a certain amount of human muscles, nerves, brain, etc. It is simple labour (English economists call it "unskilled labour") which any average individual can be trained to do.'<sup>17</sup> Now, this concept seems pretty vague. To bring in 'unskilled labour' is to evoke street sweeping, ditch digging, and other menial tasks. Yet, he clearly does not have in mind the lowest common physical denominator. 'This labour-power,' he says in *Capital*, 'must have attained a certain pitch of development before it can be expended in a multiplicity of modes.'<sup>18</sup> This is not a biological but a social determination, one which varies in character over time and in different countries. He seems to be saying that the labour an 'average person' can perform, say, in the United States of 1775 and in the United States of 1975, or in the United States of 1975 and in upland Papua of 1975, is quite different. When put concretely this way, the vagueness of the notion vanishes. Workers of all these periods and places could be trained to perform 'average labour' today in a New York City factory or office. But the amount of training our 1775 farmer or our 1975 tribesman would require would be substantially more and of a different order, involving not just linguistic, mathematical, or mechanical skills, but regularity and discipline. Certainly the concept of changes in 'average labour' is of the same

<sup>14</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 15, Section 5: 436 [International Publishers edition].

<sup>15</sup> For examples of this kind of analysis, see the articles in *Zerowork 1*, and Gambino, 'Workers' Struggles and the Development of Ford in Britain'.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, Section 2: 43–44 [International Publishers edition].

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: 31.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, Section 2: 44 [International Publishers edition].

order of difficulty as the concept of changes in standards of living over time, that is, in the value of labour-power.

## **Productivity**

Marx can now specify more precisely the meaning of a change in productivity in the light of the discussion of the twofold character of labour. 'Productive power,' he says, 'has reference, of course, only to labour of some useful concrete form, the efficacy of any special productive activity during a given time being dependent on its productiveness.' This means that a change in productivity is a change in useful labour and not a change in abstract labour. This is one of the most important reasons why the recognition of the difference between useful labour and abstract labour is 'the pivot'. Put another way, by grasping the distinct character of labour which capital tries to impose (abstract labour), he is for the first time able to analyse the meaning of productivity changes which have been such an important part of the class struggle. An example: to say twice as many use-values are produced in a given period of time, by the same number of workers, is to say that the productivity of useful labour has doubled. Since the time of labour remains the same (although he fails to mention it, one must also keep the intensity of work fixed in order for the amount of value to remain the same), then the amount of abstract labour or value in each unit of product is halved.

One of the most important strategies of capital is based on this phenomenon. In Chapter 12, on the concept of relative surplus value, we discover how capital is driven by the struggles of the working class (to shorten the workday, reduce intensity of work, raise wages) to raise the productivity of useful labour through the substitution of the means of production for labour-power.<sup>19</sup>

By raising the productivity of the useful labour that produces the means of subsistence (or the inputs into their production), capital reduces the value of the commodities the working class receives to reproduce itself. If the values of the means of subsistence fall, then capital can pay workers less value than before and yet they will still receive as many (or even more!) use-values. If the amount of variable capital that must be invested in labour-power can be reduced in this fashion, at the same time that the total amount of work and hence value remains the same, then the relative share of that value which capital receives as surplus will rise. This is the relative-surplus-value strategy.

Not only has relative surplus value long been one of capital's fundamental strategies in the class struggle, but also, as we saw in the Introduction, during the Keynesian era capital sought its institutionalization in 'productivity deals' that linked wage increases to productivity increases through union contracts and state policy. If we consider that one of the most fundamental aspects of the current international crisis is the way

<sup>19</sup> In Chapter 25 of Volume I, Marx discusses this substitution of means of production (*MP*) for labour-power (*LP*) as a rise in the technical composition of capital (*MP/LP*) or, insofar as the value composition (*C/V*) reflects changes in the technical composition, as a rise in the organic composition of capital (*C/V*). As a mathematical ratio, the organic composition measures the technical composition in value terms, but as a political index, it represents a certain division of labour and the related political composition of class power.

working-class attacks against productivity (coupled with its wage demands) have ruptured these productivity deals and undermined relative surplus value, then this little Section 2 of Chapter One, which is often overlooked as a redundant exposition of points made in Section 1, begins to take on its true significance and the contemporary relevance of Marx's emphasis is revealed. Moreover, when we look around and see how capital's massive attack on the value of the wage through global inflation is being accomplished by a world-wide restructuring of the division of labour, we can see the importance of grasping the concrete manifestations of this strategy in order to better understand how to anticipate its directions and deal with it.