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The concepts of the first chapter of *Capital* are there presented *abstractly*. At a more concrete level 'value', 'abstract labour', and 'socially necessary Labour time' must be situated in the capital relation; e.g. the time that is 'socially necessary' is that in which capital 'pumps out' labour. The essentially contested expropriation of the workers' powers by capital leads to a new understanding of the labour theory of value as a dialectic of negativity. Value is the shape of reified labour, the outcome of class struggle in production.

# Value, Labour and Negativity

by Christopher J. Arthur

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## Introductory Remarks

The following paper takes particular positions on several of the key debates in the theory of value. First, while the mainstream position in Marxist theory has read concepts such as value, socially necessary labour time, and abstract labour, largely in a technical sense, I adhere to the growing minority that centralises the idea of *social form*, insisting that all such categories have to be explicated within an account of specifically capitalist social forms of production and exchange. Here the rediscovery of the Soviet scholar I. I. Rubin's masterly exegetical work *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (1923, 3rd ed. 1928) in the 1970s was an important influence on us. However, it has to be said that Rubin concentrated very much on the forms of *exchange*. In this paper I deepen the category of social form to include the bearing of the form of the capital relation, as essentially conflictual, on the primary value categories.

Second, this feature of my approach also has an important bearing on the debate over the reading of the initial chapters of Marx's *Capital*. The orthodox tradition, from Engels, through Sweezy, through Meek, to Mandel, understood these chapters not to be about capitalism but to be about a putative mode of production termed by them 'simple commodity production'. A growing minority, again, insists that right from the first sentence

the object of Marx's *Capital* is indeed capitalism. It will be seen below that I agree with this.

Third, this issue in turn raises the problem of Marx's *method of presentation*; for it has to be acknowledged that the early chapters of *Capital* do not even mention wage labourers, capitalists and the like. Why not? The orthodox understanding of Marx's method explains this by arguing that he presents his theory through a sequence of *models*, that a model of simple commodity production as a one class society allows him to give a complete account of the law of value, and that the subsequent introduction of a model of capitalism as a two class society allows him to demonstrate the origin of surplus value through the specific inflection capital gives to this law of value; subsequently more complicated models including landed property and the like introduce still further distortions of the operation of the law of value. In opposition to this reading the position taken here is that the order of Marx's presentation is not that of a sequence of models of more and more complex objects, but that of a progressive development of the forms of the *same object*, namely capitalism, from a highly abstract initial concept of it to more and more concrete levels of its comprehension. The paper has as its main problem the consequences of taking seriously this understanding of Marx's method. The results presented arise from an insistence on the dialectical interpenetration of these levels of abstraction such that no concept can attain its finished form at its original introduction but retains a *fluid* character, gaining a more comprehensive determinacy as it is systematically brought into relation with richer content.<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, the paper should be situated within the 'value-form' paradigm of Marxist theory. Much mainstream Marxism ignores Marx's warning that previous labour theories of value had failed to grasp the significance of the value *form* as the social appearance acquired by capital's products. Many Marxists still simply collapse value into labour. Rubin, again, long ago rightly pointed out that this leaves no mediation between labour and price. He rightly insisted that value is distinct from both labour and exchange value: value is related to the concept that precedes it, abstract labour, as its content, and, through its form, with the concept that follows it, exchange value (Rubin, 1972: 122). It will be important to my argument below to show that labour and value are not to be *positively* identified with each other, but rather are dialectically interpenetrating *opposites*.

Fifth, the paper advances a novel interpretation of ‘exploitation’. The orthodox interpretation founds its concept of exploitation on the expropriation of the surplus value ‘created’ by labour. Even many who disagree strongly with the labour theory of value, as an account of price and profit, still accept that the existence of a ‘surplus’ may be assigned to the exploitation of labour. Both the orthodox view and ‘the surplus approach’, in this long-running debate, have in common an account of exploitation in the context of a struggle over the *distribution* of the surplus, however measured, ‘after the harvest’ so to speak. My argument will be that exploitation is primarily located in *production*; that it is capital which ‘creates’ value; but it does so only through the unremitting ‘pumping out’ of labour services throughout the working day; it will be shown that ‘socially necessary exploitation time’ determines the magnitude of value.

### A New Reading of ‘*Capital*’

Contrary to received opinion, then, I do not believe that *Capital* is structured according to a sequence of ‘models’, beginning in chapter one with so-called ‘simple commodity production’, a term invented by F. Engels after Marx’s death (see Arthur, 1996);<sup>2</sup> not only does the term not occur in *Capital*, its first sentence makes clear that the circulation of commodities and money discussed in the early chapters is that of *the capitalist economy*; in fact, from the start the object of investigation is the capitalist totality, and this is grasped first of all abstractly and then more and more concretely.<sup>3</sup> If ‘simple commodity production’ is not what chapter 1 of *Capital* is about, what then is going on there? Marx is dealing with ‘simple’ determinations to be sure; but the abstract moment of the whole system that he analyses is that of *simple circulation* in which the origin of the products circulating is bracketed, commodities being taken as given. Only after developing the categories of circulation is it appropriate to turn to the relations of production that underpin exchange relations apparent in simple circulation. The key transition in *Capital* is not from simple commodity production to capitalist production, but from the ‘sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities’ to ‘the hidden abode of production’ (Marx, 1976a: 279–80). Once this turn is taken circulation is grasped as the sphere in which production

relations are reflected. But to begin with circulation is not comprehended as thus mediated; the exposition must therefore begin with it as the most immediate aspect of capitalism, but one which is at the same time abstract and indeterminate. The dialectical development of the argument further determines it until it is grasped in connection with the concrete totality.

The exposition of the system, in starting with some simple yet determinate relation (such as the commodity form), is thereby forced to abstract it violently from the other relations that in reality penetrate it and help to constitute its effectivity; thus it is necessary at the end to reconceptualise the significance of the beginning. Because this starting-point is severed from the whole, as abstracted thus it is necessarily inadequately characterised. As Hegel put it of his own system: 'Because that which forms the beginning is still underdeveloped, devoid of content, it is not truly *known* in the beginning.' (Hegel, 1969: 72)

Since the concept of 'capital' as 'self-valorising value' is far too complex a concept to be introduced immediately Marx started with commodity value as such; not because value pre-existed capital, but because 'value...is the most abstract expression of capital itself and of the production resting on it' (Marx, 1973: 776). However, just because it is thus abstracted from the capitalist totality, no finished definition of value can be given at the start; for it is to be understood only in its forms of development. It acquires greater concreteness and determinacy when these later developments are *reflected back on it*, as it were. Because this is so, all the concepts of Marx's first chapter have only an *abstract* character, and the argument as it advances develops the meanings of these concepts, through grounding them adequately in the comprehended whole.

Thus I believe that if the concepts of the first chapter are necessarily highly abstract it follows that something gets lost, the more concrete determinations are elided. Specifically, I claim that such central categories of value theory as 'abstract labour' (the solution to the so-called qualitative value problem) and 'socially necessary labour time' (the solution to the so-called quantitative value problem) (Marx, 1987: 305; Sweezy, 1970: 25) are necessarily inadequately conceptualised when articulated as presuppositions of value in the context of simple circulation prior to any discussion of the production process. They are insufficiently *determinate*. Since the circulation of commodities discussed in the early chapters is in truth the circulation of *capitalistically produced*

commodities, their value, and the relevant determinations of labour, are concretely constituted only in the capital relation.

### A New Concept of Abstract Labour

While it is a condition of a commodity being exchanged that it is a use-value, it acquires in the value-form the new determination of exchange-value which abstractly negates all difference of use-value between commodities and thereby declares them all identical as values. This value-form inverts the relation between the particularity of commodities as concretely natural bodies and their general social determination as exchangeables, because now the body of the commodity counts only as the 'bearer' of its value (as Marx puts it).

Insofar as this is so, the labours related through the mediation of commodity exchange thereby are equally reduced to abstractions of themselves. However, if the commodities concerned are taken as products of capital, this theorisation implies a conception of labour as abstract within the capital relation itself.<sup>4</sup> But here there is a textual question to be considered. In *Capital* discussion of abstract labour is confined to the first chapter. There, the context of labour's determination as abstract is clearly that of the practice of *exchange*. Implicitly, this is considered as exchange of capitalistically produced commodities, but this does not alter the fact that it is the character of exchange as a 'real abstraction' from the existence of commodities as differentiated products issuing from concrete labours that is the relevant determinant. When Marx turns to discuss the capital relation, and such matters as the valorisation process, the term does not appear. However, textual support for my view can be found outside *Capital* in the following passage from Marx's *Grundrisse*:

As *the* use value which confronts capital, labour is not this or that labour, but *labour pure and simple*, abstract labour; absolutely indifferent to its particular specificity but capable of all specificities. Of course the particular labour must correspond to the particular substance of which a given capital consists; but since capital as such is indifferent to every particularity of its substance, and exists not only as a totality of the same but also as the abstraction from all its particularities, the labour which

confronts it likewise subjectively has the same totality and abstraction in itself. For example, in guild and craft labour, where capital itself still has a limited form, and is still entirely immersed in a particular substance, hence is not yet *capital as such*, labour, too, appears as still immersed in its particular specificity: not in the totality and abstraction of labour as such, in which it confronts capital. That is to say that...capital ...confronts the *totality* of labours potentially, and the particular one it confronts at a given time is an accidental matter. On the other side, the worker himself is absolutely indifferent to the specificity of his labour; it has no interest for him as such, but only in as much as it is in fact labour and, as such, a use value for capital. (Marx, 1973: 296-97)

Therefore, beside the abstraction constituted in the exchange of commodities there is also abstraction in the constitution of labour in the capital relation. The reason why labour is properly conceptualised as ‘abstract’ within the capital relation is that industrial capital treats all labours as identical because it has an equal interest in exploiting them regardless of their concrete specificity. So the qualitative identity of labours posited in the equation of products is complemented by a process that posits them as abstract in production itself. In the passage above it might seem that labour considered as ‘capable of all specificities’ is not ‘abstract labour’ but ‘concretely general labour’. Taken ‘in itself’ this is so; but here we have to take it in the form capital takes it. Capital as an abstract totality considers labour as its opposite, simply as the instrument of its valorisation. While it is forced to allocate labours to different tasks the point is that exploiting them yields a homogeneous product, the accumulation of capital itself. However, it is important to the ‘practical truth’ of the category ‘abstract labour’ that capital can exploit the ‘concretely general’ capacities of labour so as to reallocate it as and when necessary (Marx, 1973: 104-05).<sup>5</sup> But there is an inversion inherent in the capital relation such that the different concrete labours count merely as instances of their abstract identity with each other in their potential for valorisation—hence, as an abstract totality. Similarly whenever workers treat their labour instrumentally, as a wage-earning activity, they abstract from whatever concrete tasks they perform. Separated from the objective conditions of their activity the workers’ subjectivity is thrown back into itself. Each becomes a mere ‘work-man’, looking for ‘work’ in general. Their

use value for capital is simply the capacity for such 'work'. It is important that when one 'finds work' in a capitalist firm this is undertaken under the capital relation in which the object and instruments of production are the property of another; this does not therefore overcome estrangement between subject and object but rather preserves the alienated relationship, while allowing production to proceed.

It is a mistake to *identify* the abstract labour that is the substance of value with the supposedly 'abstract' character of the modern labour process in its *physical* form. Marx himself apparently drew such a conclusion in the *Grundrisse* immediately after the passage earlier quoted:

This economic relation—the character which capitalist and worker have as the extremes of a single relation of production—therefore develops more purely and adequately in proportion as labour loses all the characteristics of art; as its particular skill becomes something more and more abstract and irrelevant, and as it becomes more and more a *purely abstract activity*, ... a merely *physical* activity, activity pure and simple, regardless of its form. Here it can be seen once again that the particular specificity of the relation of production ... becomes real only with the development of a particular material mode of production and of a particular stage in the development of the industrial productive forces. (Marx, 1973: 297)

Notice that in the earlier passage capital confronted a set of specific labours, *totalised* abstractly, but here it is the *members* of the set that supposedly lack specificity: two very different notions. To postulate the reality of the latter is in fact very dubious, because it relies on a contestable empirical claim that simply cannot be sustained. Even if the labour process could be said to have a somewhat abstract character in a material sense, this would make no difference because the conceptual mistake remains. This mistake consists in conflating the concept of abstract labour, which is a determination of *social form*, with a peculiar kind of concrete labour, a material simplification of the labour required of the worker. This simplification may well be a consequence of its social form but is to be understood as merely an approximation to the 'content' of the concept of 'abstract labour'. The simplification of labour refers to an impoverishment of its quality. But even the

simplest motion still has *some* quality, it can never be abstraction as such.

Harry Braverman used the term ‘correspondence’ to cover the case when he wrote: ‘Labor in the form of standardised motion patterns is labor used as an interchangeable part, and in this form comes ever closer to corresponding, in life, to the abstraction employed by Marx in analysis of the capitalist mode of production.’ (Braverman, 1974: 182) The value content thereby shadows the value form through the agency of capital organising the labour process in such a way that labours do not merely *count* formally as abstract but *become* more abstract in the material sense of generically homogeneous.<sup>6</sup>

However, it remains the case that the labour employed by capital is formed as ‘abstract’ *no matter* what degree of ‘correspondence’ exists. For the *opposition* between concrete and abstract remains just as long as that between use-value and exchange-value. When capital organises the production process so as to maximise valorisation the real object aimed at is money returns. Money is the existent form of ‘abstract wealth’ (Marx) and this means that the activity producing it is itself posited as abstract; hence the living labour employed in the capitalist production process counts only as a passage of working time. The worker becomes ‘*time’s carcase*’, in Marx’s phrase (Marx, 1976b: 127). Thus ‘abstract labour’ is so posited by the social relations within which production goes on.

Of course it is convenient for capital if the concrete forms of labour are simple enough to make an ideal ‘precommensuration’ of the labour time determining the value it hopes to realise on the market. In this respect Braverman was quite right to say with respect to time and motion studies that ‘this abstraction from the concrete forms of labour...which Marx employed as a means of clarifying the value of commodities ...exists as well in the mind of the capitalist, the manager, the industrial engineer.’ (Braverman, 1974: 181) The more labour becomes simple motions in time the more it approximates to how it is anyway ‘cognized’ ideally in valorisation.

But the distinction between abstract and concrete cannot be collapsed. There may well be pressure on the factory to make the labour process one in which capital moves as if in its own element, namely the universal time of production, but since it is always burdened with matter it is necessarily particularised in concrete labour processes. Conversely, insofar as value is



produced capital has translated concrete into abstract more or less effectively. While immediately concrete labour, the work of each becomes socially posited as abstract in virtue of its participation in the capitalist process of valorisation. As abstract it is a question of how labours are counted, and not how they are concretely; it is a question of the social form living labour acquires within the valorisation process; as form-determined by capital it functions as a particularisation of its abstract essence, as abstract movement in time. As Marx says ‘the different working individuals seem to be mere organs of this [socially abstract] labour.’ (Marx, 1987: 272)

In sum, the commodity form of the *product* embodies in dead labour an abstraction from the concrete heterogeneity of labours. Capitalist *production* posits living labour processes as abstract activity, pure motion in time. These must be grasped as informing each other.<sup>7</sup>

If anything, the constitution of labour as abstract in the capital relation is *more* fundamental than its constitution as abstract in exchange.<sup>8</sup> Since generalised commodity circulation exists only on the basis of capitalist production, value becomes determinate only with capitalistically produced commodities. Prior to competition between industrial capitals there is money and hence price; but without the aim of production being set by valorisation, and without the rigorous policing of labour time by capital, any value-form implicit in earlier relations, for example merchant trade, is empty of content, and prices relatively contingent. It follows that any ‘substance’ of value, such as abstract labour, cannot exist prior to generalised commodity production on a capitalist basis.

Moreover this conception allows a solution to the following contradiction:

On the one hand, commodities must enter the exchange process as objectified universal labour time, on the other hand, the labour time of individuals becomes objectified universal labour time only as a result of the exchange process. (Marx, 1987: 286)

This statement of the problem comes from Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). There he solved it to his own satisfaction by the introduction of money (Marx, 1987: 288-89, 307). But it might be thought that although money certainly posits the labour it represents, and hence by reflection

the labour represented by all commodities, as abstract universal labour, the abstraction is still not posited *prior* to exchange. While abstract labour is no longer considered merely ‘our abstraction’ (Marx, 1987: 285) but one really posited in and through the exchange of commodities for money, it may yet be true that this abstraction cannot be read back *into production*. It may still be the case that labour becomes ‘abstract’ only when products are priced. If this is so, it might be thought that the counting of labour only as an abstraction of itself is a social illusion, a ‘shadow form’ cast by monetary circulation. To put it in terms of our original problem, it seems the category is not yet fully determinate.

I. I. Rubin addressed the same ‘contradiction’ (Rubin, 1972: 147) and rightly pointed out that, if what happens prior to exchange is the capitalist production of commodities *for* exchange, this leaves its imprint on the process of production itself (Rubin, 1972: 149). This is what was demonstrated above when it was shown that if production is value-formed, that is, undertaken by self-positing capital, then living labour is treated as abstract *prior* to exchange precisely because it is treated as abstract *in* exchange.

In effect, abstract labour as a form-determination of the living labour of the wage worker and abstract labour as the dead labour objectified in a commodity are the same thing, in the one case looked at as activity, in the other as its result.

### A New Concept of Exploitation

It is a feature of Marx’s concept of ‘abstract labour’—and of our extension of it—that it depends on a process of inversion to give it significance as a reality. In the value-form, and in the labours set in relation to each other in it, ‘the abstractly general counts not as a property of the concrete, sensibly real, but on the contrary the sensibly concrete counts as the mere form of appearance or definite form of realisation of the abstractly general.’ (Marx, 1994b: 18-19) In truth this inversion in the relation of abstract and concrete is a result of the fact that the whole relation of production is inverted, that subject and object are inverted, that the producers are dominated by their product (value, capital) to the extent that it is doubtful whether the workers may be said to be producers at all, but rather they are reduced to servants of a production process originated and directed by capital. There is a

close connection, therefore, between abstract labour and alienated labour; labour is alienated in part just because it is socially recognised as a source of 'wealth' only as abstract activity; conversely this social form of labour arises from the peculiar way in which the estrangement of workers from the objective conditions of their labour is overcome in the capital relation.

Marx speaks of 'this inversion, indeed this distortion, which is peculiar to and characteristic of capitalist production, of the relation between dead labour and living labour'. (Marx, 1976a: 425) This inversion inherent in the value-form determination of production has definite material consequences. In capitalist commodity production there is an *inversion* of subject and object in that the real subject of the process is capital; it sets the agenda for production and 'employs' in the most literal sense labour as its instrument. As Marx puts it: 'It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker.' (Marx, 1994a: 122; Marx, 1976a: 425)

Labour considered in itself is concretely universal, being able to expend itself in a wide variety of concrete specifications on demand. Moreover ideally the labour process would proceed in the manner outlined in *Capital*, in which the worker is said to be like an architect in conceptualising the product before producing it. But (with the real subsumption of the labour process under capital) the adaptability of labour is taken advantage of to redraw labour so as to make the workers more like bees, supplying their efforts to the collectivity of production but without attaining any meaningful individual relation to the enterprise as a whole, which is beyond their ken, being put together by the representatives of capital on the basis of the technical specification of labour, machinery and materials. The subjectivity of the mass of workers is reduced to a matter of understanding simple instructions. Anyone less like an architect than the assembly line worker would be hard to imagine. Even skilled workers operate only as fragments of the collective labourer. Since all—whether skilled or unskilled—contribute piecemeal to the process of production, the whole is not constituted as their productive power but as that of the capital hiring them. This means not only that each individual does not produce a commodity but that since the collective labourer is set up under the direction of capital it is hard to say that the collective does either. It seems more reasonable to say that capital produces the commodity than that labour does.

There is certainly warrant in Marx's texts for this claim that capital, not labour, embodies the forces of production. Let us review three important passages. Firstly a lengthy passage from Marx's *Grundrisse* :

The transformation of labour...into...capital is, in itself, the result of the exchange between capital and labour, insofar as it gives the capitalist title of ownership to the product of labour (and command over the same). This transformation is *posited* only in the production process itself. Thus the question whether capital is productive or not is absurd. Labour itself is productive only if absorbed into capital, where capital forms the basis of production, and where the capitalist is therefore in command of production. The productivity of labour becomes the productive force of capital.... Labour, such as it exists for itself in the worker in opposition to capital, that is, labour in its *immediate being*, separated from capital, is *not productive*.... Therefore, those who demonstrate that all the productive force ascribed to capital is a *displacement* [verrückung], a *transposition of the productive force* of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this *displacement, this transposition*, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, there is this *transubstantiation*, the necessary process of positing its own powers as *alien* to the worker.... Others say, e.g. Ricardo..., that *only labour* is productive, not capital. But then they do not conceive capital in its specific character as *form* [spezifischen Formbestimmtheit], as a relation of production reflected into itself.... (Marx, 1973: 308-309)

Secondly he gives a neat formula in *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*:

Thus capital [is] *productive*:

(1) as the *compulsion to* [do] *surplus labour*. Now if labour is productive it is precisely as the agent that performs this surplus labour....

(2) as the *personification and representative*, the reified form of the 'social productive forces of labour'. (Marx, 1976a: 1056)<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, in *Capital* Volume Three Marx speaks of

that inversion of subject and object which occurs in the course of the production process itself....how all the [social]

productive forces of labour present themselves as productive forces of capital. (Marx, 1981: 136)<sup>10</sup>

Striking as these quotations are, still more striking consequences may be drawn from them. On the basis of passages like these, one important theorist, Claudio Napoleoni, concluded that it is meaningless to speak of 'productive labour' if labour is nothing but a reified factor of production, and all 'productive power' is an attribute of capital. If capital, not labour, produces commodities then it seemed to Napoleoni that labour cannot be the source of value, nor, *a fortiori*, surplus value. It also follows, he thought, that it is impossible to read into the capital relation an account of exploitation on the basis that the capitalist expropriates some or all of what the workers have produced; for it is capital which has to be taken as the effective producer. (Napoleoni, 1991: 232-36)<sup>11</sup> His view that exploitation in capitalism must be radically rethought follows not so much from his rejection of the labour theory of value on technical grounds as from this deeper material claim.<sup>12</sup>

From the premise that in capitalism a class of non-workers appropriate under the form of value some of what the workers produce it might be concluded that there is exploitation in much the same sense as in pre-capitalist formations. For example, Ernest Mandel argued that surplus value has 'a common root with all other forms of surplus product: unpaid labour'; this 'deduction theory of the ruling classes' income', as he called it, is *ipso facto* 'an exploitation theory' (Mandel, 1990: 20).<sup>13</sup> So close is this theory to an ahistorical account of exploitation that the same 'deduction' is postulated by some who reject Marx's value theory. Thus G. A. Cohen, in a well-known paper on exploitation, offers a refutation of the labour theory of value; but he goes on: '[The workers] create the product. They do not create *value*, but they create *what has value* .... What raises a charge of exploitation is not that the capitalist gets some of the value the worker produces, but that he gets some of the value *of what* the worker produces.' (Cohen, 1981: 218)<sup>14</sup>

These views are exactly those which Napoleoni opposed. Even if it is true that in pre-capitalist exploitation the source of the surplus is a 'deduction' from what the worker creates, it is not so in capitalism, he believed. Rather, if capital is the true productive power a deduction has to be made from *what capital*

*creates* so as to provide subsistence for the workers (Napoleoni, 1991: 236). If the 'subject' of production is no longer labour but capital, how can a theory of exploitation specific to capitalism be provided that does not rely on the attribution of a surplus, whether surplus value or surplus product, to the special contribution of labour? By a neat twist Napoleoni reintroduced the term 'exploitation' as the appropriate characterisation of the very alienating relationship that makes nonsense of the old definition! 'Capitalist exploitation is in reality that inversion of subject and predicate ... by which man, the 'subject', is but the predicate of his own labour.' (Napoleoni, 1991: 235)

Let us return to the Marx passages cited earlier. As we saw, Marx thinks capital is productive both in the sense that it organises production and that it enforces exploitation. On the other hand it is able to do this only because it can rely on its 'agent', the working class, whose social productive powers are 'displaced' and 'transposed' to capital. Capital as value in motion is not distinct from matter in motion shifted by labour; labour acts *as* capital, not just at its behest. Marx says: 'Labour is not only *the* use value which confronts capital, it is *the use value* of capital itself.' (Marx, 1973: 297)<sup>15</sup> This labour is absorbed by productive capital and acts as '*a moment of capital*', he claims. (Marx, 1973: 364)

A genuine aporia emerges here: just whose productive power is this? Is it not the very same productive power that is ascribed both to labour and to capital?<sup>16</sup> This is indeed so. But this is not due to the ambivalence of the theorist, it arises from the contradictory interpenetration of the poles of the capital relation, within which 'labour becomes productive only by producing its own opposite' (Marx, 1973: 305).

The ontological inversion inherent in the value-form means that production acquires an ideal reality in addition to its mundane material one. Under one description it is the combined power of labour and machines. Under another, equally valid, description it is the productive power of capital. Hence the necessary ambiguity in such phrases as 'the productive power developed by the workers socially is the productive power of capital' (Marx, 1976a: 451).

The value forms, 'commodity', 'money', and 'capital' initially are pure forms which subsequently gain a footing in material production. There is a sense in which the forms *apply themselves* to the material to be formed, rather than the form naturally

being taken on by the content. This means that form and content are not fully unified but retain a structure of abstract contraposition: the content is inscribed in the form while retaining much that cannot be grasped in it. It is worth recalling Marx's treatment of abstract and concrete labour: it is the very same labour that is referred to, but under different descriptions that signify the existence of labour in two different frames of reference, of value-form and of use-value.

This can be generalised to the whole system of capital. Thus, if the 'principle' of production becomes valorisation, the exact relation between the 'principle' and what is 'principled' is puzzling. Since the workers are 'possessed' by capital and the material labour process is simultaneously a valorisation process, the same thing has two frames of reference. But this is not merely a matter of different ways of talking, or of the coexistence of alternative realities, it is also a matter of determination, of one side informing the other with its own purposes. Capital determines the organisation of production but the character of labour, natural resources and machinery limit it in this endeavour. Although capital is hegemonic in this respect (Marx, 1973: 693) its subsumption of labour can never be perfected; labour is always 'in and against' capital.

This is what Napoleoni overlooked when he ascribed 'productive power' only to capital. Albeit that the production process is really subsumed by capital, the problem for capital is that it needs the *agency* of labour. It is not really a matter of reducing the worker to the status of a mere instrument of production, like a machine, or like an animal whose will has to be *broken*. It is a matter of the *bending* of the will to alien purposes. In *Capital* Marx spoke of the producer employing the cunning of reason in the use of the means of production. But with the 'real subsumption' (Marx) of labour to capital the cunning of reason is turned against the erstwhile 'producer'. The former 'subjects' of production are treated as manipulable objects; but it is still a question of manipulating their activity, not of depriving them of all subjectivity. They act for capital, indeed *as capital*, but still in some sense *act*. Even in the limiting case in which they could theoretically be replaced by robots they still have to be induced to set themselves to *act as robots*.

Thus, even if Marx is right that the productive power of labour is absorbed into that of capital to all intents, it is necessary to bear in mind that capital still depends upon it.

Moreover, the repressed subjectivity of the workers remains a threat to capital's purposes in this respect.

It is because of this that I do not follow Napoleoni in abandoning entirely the labour theory of value, or the possibility of a measure of exploitation in surplus value. Rather, I present below a new theory of value determination founded precisely on the above discussion of capital's 'productive power'.

### A New Theory of Value Determination

In its endeavour to organise production, and to maximise output, capital finds that it is confronted with a special difficulty: the residual 'subjectivity' of the worker poses unique problems for capital because it gives rise to a definite recalcitrance to being 'exploited' which the other factors do not possess. The other 'factors' of production, land, machinery, materials, enter with their productive potential *given*, known in advance; only with labour is productivity contestable and contested, known only in the *upshot* of the working day. So if capital has replaced labour as the 'subject' of production it certainly cannot produce under conditions of its own choosing. Capital is limited by the extent to which it can enforce the 'pumping out' (Marx) of labour services. The consequence of this special feature of labour is that the relation of capital and labour is intrinsically antagonistic and that in this sense there is reason to speak of waged labour not so much as 'productive labour' but as '*counterproductive labour*' in that the workers are actually or potentially recalcitrant to capital's effort to compel their labour.

This is why, for a theory grounded on the *social form* of the economy, labour is to be correlated with value. New value is the successful reification of living labour. As Marx says, value 'is the product of alien labour, the alienated product of labour' (Marx, 1973: 638). Capital can produce value only through winning the class struggle at the point of production. As Michael Lebowitz superbly states the case:

In capitalism as a whole, the two-sided totality, capital does not merely seek the realisation of its own goal, valorisation; it also must seek to suspend the realisation of the goals of wage-labour. Capital, in short, must defeat workers; it must negate its negation in order to posit itself. (Lebowitz, 1992: 85)



The distinction in *Capital* between the living labour employed and its representation as ‘dead labour’ in the value of the product, is put even more strikingly in Marx’s *Grundrisse* where labour is defined as ‘not-value’, that which stands opposed to value but on which valorisation depends (Marx, 1973: 295-96). Value is not the social recognition of labour’s success at producing a good, but of capital’s success in producing a commodity through alienating labour to itself, producing value through exploiting ‘counterproductive labour’ during the working day. Thus, whereas at the start of *Capital* Marx assumes there is no problem about labour appearing as (reified in) value, we now discover that this is consequent only on the success (partial and always contested) of the struggle to subsume labour under capital.

My position is quite different from that of the orthodox tradition, which sees labour creating something *positive*, namely value, then expropriated (a position which is presupposed in any theory of value rooted in a model of ‘simple commodity production’ of course). Rather I hold that behind the positivity of value lies a process of *negation*. Capital accumulation realises itself only by negating that which resists the valorisation process, labour as ‘not-value’. This new concept of valorisation allows a restatement of the labour theory of value as a dialectic of negativity.

Ernest Mandel went so far as to say ‘For Marx *labour is value*’ (Mandel, 1990: 11)—emphasising the point. Mandel is directly refuted by Marx’s own text. Marx said that ‘labour is not itself value’; although ‘labour creates value’ it ‘becomes value’ only in ‘objective form’ when the labour embodied in one commodity is equated with the labour embodied in another commodity (Marx, 1976a: 142). Moreover labour is socially validated thereby only as ‘abstract’, and this in turn requires the presence of the money commodity to ground the universal dimension required. In brief, like the orthodox tradition generally, Mandel overlooked the importance of the value *form* in the labour theory of value.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, any theory that conflates labour and value is bound to consider their relation in an entirely *positive* light. The activity of labouring is immediately identical with a value stream; the critique of capital then has to take the form of a complaint that, while there is a reflux of value to the labourers under the wage-form, capital diverts part of the stream to its reservoir of

accumulated value. Exploitation consists in expropriating this value. But, on my view, surplus value is not appropriated *from* the value product of labour, since expropriated labour is precisely the real content of value; it is *under the value-form* that the specifically capitalist exploitation of labour occurs; value is *constituted* through the dialectical overcoming ('sublation') of living labour, which is both negated and preserved ('dead labour') as its 'substance'.

My new way of conceptualising the labour theory leads me to say that the magnitude of value is determined by '*socially necessary exploitation time*'. If labour time is the determinant of the magnitude of value it is nonetheless at the same time a determined determinant; for it is *capital* that perpetually strives to reduce the socially necessary time of production through compelling workers to increase their productivity. In the early chapters of *Capital* it is not yet clear to what exactly 'socially necessary labour time' refers; lacking any other information one takes it in a technical sense; but once this labour time is set in the context of the capital relation it has to be seen as primarily the necessity capital is under to extort labour from the exploited, something which is informed by the balance of class forces.

It is obvious here that this exploitation time to which I refer comprises the whole of the working day, not just the so-called 'surplus labour time'.<sup>18</sup> It is not the case in reality that the workers first supply themselves and then check into the factory to work the extra. On the contrary, the accounting of necessary and surplus labour time is the outcome of the struggle at the point of production over exploitation; and the unremitting pressure of capital's representatives on the workforce is present the whole day from the first minute. Since capital 'takes charge' of production, the 'pumping out' of surplus labour cannot be distinguished on the ground from the pumping out of labour generally because during the whole working day its use-value is exploited. So there is a conceptual distinction hidden here, between exploitation in this sense, and the sense in which exploitation is identified with only the extension of the working day beyond its necessary part. I would be inclined to reverse Marx's emphasis when he said: 'Capital is not only command over labour, as Adam Smith thought. It is essentially command over unpaid labour.' (Marx 1976a: 672) Instead I would write: 'Capital is not only command over unpaid labour, as Karl Marx thought. It is essentially command over labour, i.e. of the entire

working day.’ Of course Marx knew perfectly well that it is only because capital acquires ‘command over labour’ that this ‘coercive relation...compels the working class to do more work than would be required by the narrow circle of its own needs’ (Marx 1976a: 424-5).

It is also obvious that I reject implicitly the labour theory of value where so-called ‘simple commodity production’ is concerned; and I do so just because I do not see how socially necessary labour time can be calculated and enforced where each is their own master.

My view allows for a ‘traditional’ measure of exploitation if we distinguish two kinds of exploitation. Exploitation in *production* is in effect not dissimilar to alienation in that it involves the subjection of workers to alien purposes; it goes on throughout the day. Exploitation in *distribution* arises from the discrepancy between the new wealth created and the return to those exploited in production. Interesting examples of *purely* ‘distributional’ exploitation are mentioned by Marx when he discusses forms *transitional* to capitalism. Where the actual producers fall prey to usurers and merchants, because of their lack of market power, they are reduced to a subsistence existence and forced to part with the surplus product. This is so in spite of the fact that the capitalists concerned have no control over the process of production (and cannot therefore develop it). (Marx, 1994a: 117ff.) No capital relation takes charge of production. For this reason Marx says ‘no capital exists yet in the strict sense of the word’. It is only ‘formally’ capital as yet, lacking an adequate ground in production (Marx, 1988: 32). In these transitional cases it makes perfect sense to say the workers create what is expropriated. But the tendency of exploitation within production under the *control* of capital is to substitute the productive power of capital for that of the erstwhile ‘immediate producers’.

Accordingly, Napoleoni argues that this kind of exploitation has replaced what I call ‘distributional’ exploitation and thereby made redundant all calculations of value and surplus value rooted in the ‘special contribution’ of labour.<sup>19</sup> To Napoleoni such a notion of surplus value makes no sense if it is capital that creates the new value. But, on my account, if this value commensurates the expropriated labours out of which capital produces commodities, and reproduces itself, then it is still possible, *ex post*, to distinguish necessary and surplus labour

within the working day. Napoleoni's error is encapsulated in the following remark: 'The phenomenon of value takes place entirely at the level of capital, i.e. it starts when the transfer of productive powers from labour to capital has already been accomplished.' (Quoted in Rodano, 1999: 20 n.32) We see here that Napoleoni treats 'transferred' labour as part of the technical conditions of production organised by capital, leaving value to be negotiated between capitals. But on my view the category of value should be rooted precisely in capital's struggle with labour to accomplish this 'transfer' of the said productive powers. Likewise, the actualisation of the form 'abstract labour' is rooted in the manner in which capital measures what it appropriates therewith and makes into its substance.

When I base the labour theory of value on the daily round of exploitation this does not mean I am motivated primarily by a moral or political concern, promoting an externally applied criterion of justice or fairness unconnected with a scientific theory. If class struggle is *ontologically constitutive* of capitalism then the labour theory of value is explanatory as well as critical. Value measures capital's success in this battle to appropriate labour to itself and as a first approximation each capital would be rewarded accordingly. Then a *different* relation supervenes, that between capitals themselves, so it is necessary to elaborate further categories to conceptualise this; but the *fundamental* relation is between capital and that which is its other and has to be subdued by it. It is through this relation to labour that capital *constitutes* itself as self-valorising value and it is therefore logically prior to any analysis of relations *between capitals*.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the concepts of the first chapter of Marx's *Capital*, value, abstract labour, and socially necessary labour time, are posited *abstractly* at that point.<sup>20</sup> As the argument proceeds, and the capitalist totality becomes comprehended in more complex and concrete terms, these original 'markers' require rethinking. New determinations come to light that must be integrated into the concepts concerned.

'Abstract labour', I have argued, must be seen as internal to the capital relation, although this is conceptually tied to its immediate appearance as the identity posited in the value

equivalence of its products. Such an identity in its product flows from its position in the capital relation, in which both sides are constituted as ‘abstract totalities’ (Marx) confronting one another. Under the form of value production, labour counts only as an abstraction of itself, a bearer of the time for which it is employed.

On the ground of the separation of the worker from the object of productive activity there results the subordination of the worker to capital, and therewith the expropriation of their productive powers by capital which exploits them for its own ends; but we have derived from the essentially contested nature of this exploitation a new understanding of the labour theory of value as a dialectic of negativity. In short, capital is the subject of production, producing above all itself, while labour is negatively posited as its sublated foundation.

‘Socially necessary labour time’, considered as the determinant of the magnitude of value in the first chapter of *Capital*, must also be reconsidered in the light of the discovery that value is the shape in which labour as ‘not-value’ is reified. Once ‘socially necessary labour time’ is situated in the capital relation, it has to be seen as the time during which labour services are ‘pumped out’ of the employee. Value is the result of abstract alienated labour, and its magnitude is determined by the time of such exploitation. It is the outcome of class struggle at the point of production.

In sum all the relations of the capitalist system determine one another from beginning to end.

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1. Although I lay no stress on it here, along with some other ‘new dialecticians’ I find Hegel’s logic helpful in this respect (Arthur, 2000). It is interesting to see that Rubin too cited Hegel favourably: see Rubin, 1972: 117, Rubin, 1994: 49-50, 58, 66-69.
  2. Ernest Mandel, an eminent Marxist economist, composed the article on ‘Karl Marx’ in *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics* (Macmillan 1987). This multi-volume work contained the distilled wisdom of the economics profession, and it included enough articles on Marxian economics to enable a separate volume on it to be extracted and published, *The New Palgrave: Marxian Economics*, 1990, in which Mandel’s overview has pride of place. He referred to ‘what Marx calls “simple commodity production” — “*einfache Waren-produktion*”.’ (Mandel, 1990: 4) In this, quasi-official expression was given to the most enduring myth of

## Notes

- Marxology. The truth is that Marx never called anything ‘*einfache Warenproduktion*’. The occurrence of the term in *Capital* Volume Three (Marx, 1981: 370) is part of an insertion by Engels; Engels also inserted later the phrase ‘and commodity production in general’ (Marx, 1981: 965).
3. I argued this in a previous paper (Arthur, 1997) on which this discussion draws; there I argued that value is concretely determined only when the commodity is a product of capital; here I look at the forms of labour constitutive of its value. I showed in the previous paper that the developing determination of *concepts* is not the same as the introduction of successive *models* of greater complexity practised by Sweezy, Meek and others.
  4. Claudio Napoleoni argued this and he was the first to draw attention to the important passage from Marx’s *Grundrisse* quoted below. (Napoleoni, 1975: 104-6)
  5. This means that it is a precondition of the category ‘abstract labour’ having effectivity in a law of value that labours must be sufficiently adaptable to be potentially mobile between jobs. I have argued that this is an ontological precondition of the specification of labour as abstractly universal in commodity exchange in my paper ‘Dialectics and Labour’ (Arthur, 1979). In a private communication Ernest Mandel urged against my view that it would make the category meaningless where pre-capitalist simple commodity production was concerned. So far from this being an objection to my view it is a consequence I fully accept (as I think Marx does in the passage given at the start of this section).
  6. David Gleicher (1994) provides a sophisticated account of the development of the specifically capitalist division of labour in industry. He explicitly opposes this historical account of developing ‘abstraction’ to the so-called ‘logical abstraction’ derived from value-form analysis. But in my view his discussion relates to the *consequences* of the latter.
  7. See R. Bellofiore, 1999, pp. 51-6; he concludes: ‘The successive determinations of abstract labour have led us from the *final* commodity market (where labour is *objectified* labour: the abstraction of labour as a real hypostasis actually going on in exchange, as analysed by Colletti), to the *initial* labour market (where labour is *labour power*: the real hypostatization process now affects the worker who becomes a predicate of her/his own capacity to work), to the *centre* of the valorization process, the immediate process of production (where labour is the *living* labour of the wage worker as ‘other-directed’ work: the real hypostasis here is the worker becoming a predicate of abstract living labour as value in process).’
  8. Using the quotation at the beginning of this section as an epigraph to their paper ‘Capital, Labour and Time’, R. Bellofiore and R. Finelli have already developed a position similar to mine here: ‘The abstractness of labour in the process of exchange is the consequence ... of the subjection to capital of wage workers’ living labour.’ (Bellofiore and Finelli, 1998: 54)
  9. Note the mistranslation: ‘appears’ should be ‘is’ as in Marx, 1994a: 459. (I concede other cases of ‘appears’ in this translation of *Results*... are genuine.) Marx first arrived at this formula in the 1861-63 manuscript; see Marx, 1994a: 128; the whole section (121-29) is very instructive.

10. Here I read 'social' with Marx's manuscript (Marx, 1992: 61): F. Engels changed it to 'subjective' in his edition of it.
11. I have commented on Napoleoni's views in my paper 'Napoleoni on Labour and Exploitation', given at the Napoleoni memorial conference, organised by R. Bellofiore, held at the University of Bergamo, 1998. The conference papers appeared in a special issue of *Rivista di Politica Economica* (IV-V April-May 1999; English and Italian editions). The present paper draws on this but is somewhat more critical of Napoleoni.
12. Thus, while he agrees with the neo-Sraffian approach to the calculation of prices and profits, Napoleoni attacks the residual Marxism of 'the surplus approach' promoted by I. Steedman which retains the category 'productive labour'. (Napoleoni, 1991: 236; 237 n.9.)
13. It is worth remembering that Marx warned us that the expression 'unpaid labour' is scientifically worthless, no matter how attractive as a 'popular expression' (Marx 1976a: 671). This has not stopped most Marxists using it without Marx's health warning! Why is 'unpaid labour' a fraudulent notion? —Because as the source of value labour cannot itself have a value, and therefore there can be no question of its being 'paid' or 'unpaid'. What is paid for is labour-power. Marx's tremendous achievement was to show that even when the capitalist pays the full value of all the inputs to production a surplus value can still emerge from it. It is misleading, therefore, to call this a 'deduction' theory. F. Engels showed great insight into the specificity of Marx's value theory when he illustrated it by using the analogy of the modern theory of combustion (see his Preface to *Capital* Volume Two). Whereas previously it was thought the element undergoing combustion *lost* something, the scientific revolution in this field occurred when it was understood that something was *added* to it. In the same way Marx's breakthrough was to see that capital gained surplus value through *adding* a *new* value to those in play in its circuit. Engels may have drawn on Marx's own use of this analogy in *Capital* Volume Three (Marx, 1981: 130).
14. Note that his approach means 'exploitation' loses much of its explanatory power, and is reduced effectively to a normative category.
15. For the topic of this section Notebook III of Marx's *Grundrisse* is important; see especially Marx, 1973: 295-312, 331-334, 358-364.
16. Napoleoni believed it was not possible for the same thing 'to be counted twice' (Napoleoni, 1991: 234); he also claimed Marx knew it too, but the text he relies on for this is corrupt; see my paper 'Napoleoni on Labour and Exploitation' (Arthur 1999a: 155 n.25 n.26).
17. A leading contemporary theorist, G. Carchedi, explicitly identifies (abstract) labour and value. 'Often one runs into expressions such as ... labour being "the substance of value", etc.... But... value is *not* created by (abstract) labour. Value *is* labour....' (Carchedi, 1991: 102). The unnamed offender is, of course, Marx, who routinely used expressions such as '(abstract) labour is the substance of value', '(abstract) labour creates value', 'labour is represented in value' etc., all of which presuppose the difference Carchedi contests. However, Carchedi is himself uncertain about

- his own claim; compare with the above p.11, and p. 104 (where the longer expression is said to be a 'short-cut'!).
18. 'Exploitation should not be understood so much as the expropriation of surplus product or surplus labour, which are common enough phenomena in pre-capitalist social forms too, but rather as direct and indirect imposition and control that affects *all* labour.' (Bellofiore and Finelli, 1998: 63)
  19. An example of such a justification of the labour theory of value is that offered by Simon Mohun: 'Value is labour-time because of an essentialist ontology that what defines human existence as specifically human is purposive productive activity.' (Mohun, 1994: 215-16) But what if the labourers' 'purposes' are overwritten by capital?
  20. This paper draws on a much shorter one (Arthur 1999b) with the title 'Marx, Orthodoxy, Labour, Value'. But in that I thematised abstract labour and alienated labour only; whereas here I relate the determination of value to exploitation, in the special sense given the term here.

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