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## **VALUE AND ITS ABOLITION**

The following text is an abridged translation of *L'abolition de la valeur*, to be published in 2016 by Editions Entremonde, Genève. The text has been published in the US as part of a book by Bruno Astarian and Gilles Dauvé: *Everything must go - the abolition of value*, Ardent Press, January 2016.

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## Chapter 1- Marx's vision of the abolition of value

### 1.1 - The Critique of the Gotha Program

Before looking at Marx's theory of value as it is set out in chapter one of Capital, we must examine the way he conceived the abolition of value in his period of maturity. This is not an inversion of priorities. Communist theory is not a science which deduces communism from the economic analysis of capital. Rather, communist theory starts from the class struggles of the proletariat and endeavours to understand how the contradiction revealed by these struggles offers a possibility for overcoming the CMP and establishing communism. Marx' later views on the abolition of value are best expressed in the Critique of the Gotha Program, but he holds very similar views in Capital. Here I will limit myself to the Critique..., which is a good example of the "proletarian program" of the revolution, i.e. the set of measures by which the proletariat assumes its hegemonic power and replaces the bourgeoisie to manage the economy.

#### 1.1.1 - Distribution of the social product and rate of exploitation of "free men".

Marx criticizes his German comrades' notion of "undiminished proceeds of labor", which would be a right of workers in a socialist society. Marx says that before the total product is distributed to the workers, various reserves and funds must be deducted. And he makes two successive deductions. First, he sets aside the means of production, which cannot be distributed to the workers. Second, he divides the means of consumption into one category that is consumed collectively and another category that is distributed individually. All this is well known.

Now, in Marx's view, the first deduction from the total product cannot be put to discussion among the "associated producers". Marx only says:

*"These deductions from the "undiminished" proceeds of labor are an economic necessity, and their magnitude is to be determined according to available means and forces, and partly by computation of probabilities, but they are in no way calculable by equity. "*

In others words, the "cooperative society" does not have much choice, and Marx insists that justice has no place in this debate. This means that the first repartition of the social product appears as a given, imposed by the "available means and forces". This impression is confirmed further on in the text when Marx explains the relationship between the distribution of the means of production and the distribution of the means of consumption. In capitalist society, the means of production are controlled by the capitalists, and the workers have only their labor power. Marx concludes that

*"the present-day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically [meaning: low wages and misery for the workers]. If the material conditions of production are the co-operative property of the workers themselves, then there likewise results a distribution of the means of consumption different from the present one."*

One can but agree with this reasoning, but it is important to note that here again he ignores the question of the repartition between means of production and means of consumption. Although Marx presents this division as an objective fact determined by conditions, it is in fact a fundamental issue. There is ample matter for discussion: the same steel, the same cement can be used for factories or for housing. It is up to the cooperative society of free men to decide, to arbitrate between immediate enjoyment and delayed consumption to permit investment. Another aspect worth discussing is the replacement or enlargement of the means of production – it is a political question. Marx never mentions it when he talks of the state in the transition society. This is especially the case in the rest of the Critique... In Part IV, the "democratic part", Marx asks:

*"What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what*

*social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions?"*

And his only answer is:

*"This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word 'people' with the word 'state'."*

And he leaves us in ignorance about what "science" has to say on the question. This is another example of Marx' silence regarding the "rate of enjoyment" of workers in the future society. This formula of a rate of enjoyment is proposed so as to stay in line with the internal logic of the proletarian program. Actually, however, we should talk of the rate of exploitation, while admitting that in the programmatic project, this rate is lower than in capitalist society.

We agree with Marx's critique of the Gotha Program regarding the fact that the total social product cannot be distributed to the workers. However, we note that the workers are not entitled to a say on the size, and probably not even on the nature, of the "proceeds" to be ultimately distributed. For them, the "cooperative property" changes nothing other than perhaps the level of their wages. The main decisions concerning the new society, namely the share of production to be allocated for consumption, remain beyond their power and implicitly fall within the planners' purview.

### **1.1.2 - Abolition of the market and abolition of value**

What about value in all this? It is abolished.

*"Within the co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of total labor."*

There is no longer any exchange. This assertion is fundamental, since it establishes the abolition of value. "Just as little" makes the link. In the proletarian program, the abolition of exchange is the nec plus ultra of the abolition of value. And this applies right from the transition society. The abolition of exchange and its replacement by the plan and labor certificates, the obligation to work and the prohibition of individual property other than personal means of consumption – all of these measures abolish value by making exchange useless or impossible. But the plan necessarily becomes a separate function within the "association of free men." This function pertains to property, albeit "cooperative". The separation is implied in Marx's text because he says nothing about the plan's mechanisms and about its disconnection with society as far as the first repartition, between means of production and means of consumption, is concerned. Yet this repartition determines the rate of exploitation of the workers and their standard of living. Apart from a hypothetical enthusiasm for the plan's objectives, nothing indicates that the socialization of workers is "direct". For them, work remains a means without personal content, work certificates notwithstanding.

### **1.1.3 - Work certificates, the law and the police.**

Now we come to the distribution of that part of the social product that is consumed individually by the workers. Marx adopts the system of the work certificates.

*"the individual producer receives back from society -- after the deductions have been made -- exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual quantum of labor. For example, the social working day consists of the sum of the individual hours of*

*work; the individual labor time of the individual producer is the part of the social working day contributed by him, his share in it. He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such-and-such an amount of labor (after deducting his labor for the common funds); and with this certificate, he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labor cost."*

This passage calls for several remarks:

The producer has a certificate showing the amount of labor he has done, and with it he buys the "same amount of labor cost". Actually, the exact amount of work done could be mentioned on the certificate, but the amount of work contained in the means of consumption is necessarily an average. So we would need two ways of counting the amount of labor: exact for the individual worker, but average for the means of consumption to be withdrawn by the consumer.

Indeed, this is what we understand when Marx speaks of the "individual quantum of labor". He talks of the social working day as a sum of individual days, but then asserts that the individual labor time of each worker is defined as his share in it, not as an average. And when, a little further on, Marx admits that in the transition society, an equal (bourgeois) right still prevails, he quickly adds that:

*"principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, while the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange exists only on the average and not in the individual case. "*  
*(Marx's emphasis)*

Unless every single means of consumption is counted for the exact individual work time contained in it, one has to admit that the exact number of hours will only be counted for the living labor of each worker. The plan, which is supposed to be the elementary "bureau of accounting," is thus bound to have a double accounting system. Such a system in no way fosters the simplicity and transparency assumed to replace the commodity fetishism.

Moreover, Marx admits that:

*"one man is superior to another physically, or mentally, and supplies more labor in the same time, or can labor for a longer time; and labor, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This equal right is an unequal right for unequal labor... it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment, and thus productive capacity, as a natural privilege."*

This analysis of the principles underpinning the law is fine, but Marx leaves it up to the reader to imagine how the law is to be applied. He limits himself to stating that "these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society," probably assuming that the dictatorship of the proletariat discussed later in the text will be responsible for checking that the unequal endowment among workers does not take the form of cheating the time clock that measures their "exact" contribution. Everyone knows the difference between "time of work" and "time at work". Work certificates don't abolish wage labor. How can one assume, then, that workers would cease considering their work as a mean and trying to get a maximum income for a minimum effort? In other words, whatever right exists, equal or unequal (which it is increasingly today), timekeepers, foremen, policemen and judges will always be needed to check that the law is enforced.

#### **1.1.4 - Father Enfantin's benediction**

Are we simply confronted with the inevitable defects of the transition phase? At this point we move on to the second phase, the passage from socialism to communism. Marx devotes only one paragraph to it, which is nonetheless a beautiful conclusion, in which every word counts.

*"In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly -- only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"*

This famous text is still referred to when describing communism in its most advanced form. However, it remains strictly within the programmatic limits. Even though it doesn't mention the abolition of value, it deserves a close reading. It consists of three premises and two conclusions.

What are the premises?

1) End of the enslaving division of labor, mainly between manual and intellectual work. Intellectual work here means two things. One the one hand, it concerns conception and management work in the economic sphere. This would include the planners' work. Marx's assertion is that workers will acquire the necessary knowledge for this kind of work during the transition phase.

Let's admit that that it is so. Now, the producers have full control over production. They really are "an assembly of free men acting according to a concerted plan" (Capital). In fact, however, Marx omits the many mediations required for the conception, calculus and control of the plan. He wants to believe that the plan could be an institution that is not separated from the workers. And he tells us that "the society" is immediate to the individual workers, who work assiduously to develop the productive forces while receiving from that society – without having participated to some of the fundamental decisions - the means of production, the instructions on how to use them and their subsistence.

This is another fiction about the transition society, which wants us to believe in its transparency and in the social immediacy of the individual (another one is the self-extinction of the state). Actually, right from the start, the first layer of opacity and power can be detected in the silence on the subject of the first division of the social product, between means of production and means of consumption. The rest ensues.

On the other hand, "intellectual work" designates the sphere of culture. We know what Marx has in mind: forging iron in the morning, writing poetry in the afternoon. Here, the separation typical of a class society between production and enjoyment, between work and art, is reproduced but internalized in a single class rather than defining two separate classes. The transition society simultaneously develops the productive forces and reduces the working time (in order to leave spare time for education and art). Seemingly contradictory, "the all-around development of the individual" will provide society with super-productive workers. This may be a premonition of capital's need for literate, educated workers, which will soon manifest itself in all countries, but it is far from the abolition of value.

2) In this context, work is posited as "the first need". This is the second premise before the conclusions. Of course, work as envisaged by Marx is not exhausting and degrading as it is in capital's factories. Nevertheless, it is still work, an activity separated from life just as the morning at the forge is separated from the afternoon in the library. When Marx talks of "all-around development of the individual" and of work as the first need, is he aiming at the unification of productive activity and the needs to be met? Is he thinking of the "reconciliation of man and nature", as he aspired to in his early writings? This is very unlikely, since Marx is fundamentally a productivist. One example is how he envisages the schooling of children later on in the text. On the whole, work as "prime life's want" doesn't mean that work is transformed into something different,

but that work is the essence of man.

3) The third premise before the conclusions is the reference to abundance, attempting to drown the fish of value in the springs of the developing productive forces. This is a recurrent feature. Abundance is the miracle solution capable of "overcoming" value. On the one hand, abundance is here to make us understand that production will be more than sufficient to cover needs. People would only have to help themselves according to their needs, thus eliminating the need for accounting. We will see that this is illusory. On the other hand, the necessary development of the productive forces and the affirmation of work as a separate activity lead Marx and the other programmatic authors to insist on a systematic accounting of everything to balance supply and demand (see below the case of the GIK). This is the role of the "concerted plan". The argument in favor of abundance is of course that freedom amidst shortages is impossible. But abundance and shortages are merely the two sides of the same coin. They refer to norms of needs which are determined separately from the activity by which they are met. And this is precisely what has to be criticized.

After presenting these three premises, Marx concludes with two points regarding communist society.

1) First, communism will cross "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right". Does he mean that right in general will be eliminated? Apparently not. The considerations on equal and unequal right indicate that the latter will prevail. This unequal right is easily conceivable, since that is what we have today in many countries where one's rights are modulated according to age, health, family and so forth. But if such a right is kept under communism, the judiciary which applies and controls it must also be kept. As a result, crossing the narrow horizon of the bourgeois right doesn't bring us very far in terms of liberation.

2) How could it be otherwise? The final glorious formula of Father Enfantin, the Saint-Simonian leader, clearly opposes needs and resources and necessarily requires a tradeoff between them. Admittedly, "from each according to his ability" indicates that the obligation to work is applied with qualifications, not with the brutality of capital. So it is clear that young children, elderly or disabled people, etc. do not contribute to the productive forces (although children must be trained to do so, alternating between school and the factory). The others work as much as they can, thus satisfying their prime want, and if they can only do a little, they won't be put at a disadvantage in terms of consumption. Those who lack a "natural privilege" won't be condemned to misery. The unequal right is there to protect them. But the judiciary also has to be there to see that lazy workers do not take advantage of society. Does Marx think that work will be so pleasant that nobody would want to skip it? If that is the case, his text sorely lacks details to help us understand what could be attractive in work as he envisages it. We can only conclude that the various contributions and needs of every individual worker will have to be evaluated and controlled. Society will have to check that an individual's contribution is not beneath his or her ability. Similarly, it will have to check that an individual's needs are real and not exaggerated. Unless we assume that everything that one could need or desire is abundantly available (and then why work?), a system of controls is required to balance abilities and needs, to check that a worker doesn't own more than what he or she needs for subsistence, etc. There again, Marx's visionary outlook doesn't take us much farther than the unequal right of today.

## **1.2 - GIK and labor-time accounting.**

Unlike Marx, the members of GIK (Groep van Internationalen Kommunisten) knew what "real socialism" and its plan were. In the Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and

Distribution (1930), they start with a lengthy critique of the Bolshevik experience. GIK thinks that the elements contained in Marx's Critique... must be strictly applied, so let's look at the results.

For GIK, work-time accounting is equivalent to the abolition of value because it would enable continuous control over production and repartition. GIK lays out its basic point of view: the workers-consumers

*"must keep an exact accounting of the number of hours they have done, whatever their form, in order to be able to determine the number of hours contained in each product. No "central administration" has to distribute the social product; it is the workers themselves who, helped by their work-time accounting, decide on this distribution" (my translation from French, as with all other quotations from GIK).*

Although the link between work-time accounting and the rank and file working class' power is tenuous, GIK affirms that Marx's ideas can be applied without relinquishing property and power to the planners, without giving up communism and the abolition of value. However, we observe that all along the text, the "producer" is replaced by the "enterprise". For example:

*"The enterprises place their products at the disposal of society. Society supplies the enterprise with new means of production, new raw materials, new labor forces... Each enterprise computes how much social product it has consumed in its different forms."*

The free and equal associated workers appear completely subsumed under the enterprise, which is now the real subject in the social relationship. True, managers are elected and accountable to the workers, but the enterprise still mediates between the workers and society. It is the enterprise that will enter the number of hours worked by each individual worker in the ledger. One can easily imagine all the problems and cheating this implies. The mediation by the enterprise, which keeps the work-time accounting, provides no guarantee whatsoever that "social relations of men to their work and to the products of this work remain simple and transparent in production and in distribution" as GIK claims, quoting Marx.

Faced with many difficulties when they have to prove that their system of time accountancy abolishes value (whereas it actually only elevates value to self-consciousness), GIK ends up talking a magical language. For example, in an attempt to refute Kautsky's objection that establishing an average price for commodities in the same category is difficult, GIK takes the example of a shoe factory, which very easily (?) computes its average labor time. All shoe factories do likewise. And all together, they will compute the average of their averages. GIK concludes:

*"We see that the necessity to compute the average social work time leads directly to a horizontal union of enterprises, and this junction is not due to a system of civil servants but arises from the enterprises themselves, pushing from the bottom upwards. The how and the why of activities is absolutely clear in the eyes of each producer, everything becomes transparent, and thus the need is met for accounting that is open and controlled by all".*

The magic comes from words like "horizontal", "from the bottom" or "transparent". These words are designed to make us believe that a private bureaucracy (the horizontal union) won't impose itself on the workers from above. Only much later in the text does GIK admit that "a central management of a cartel [another name for the horizontal union of enterprises] could confiscate for itself all the power over production. Such a risk has to be taken into account." And the answer is that the workers will have to fight actively against such a tendency "inherited from the capitalist mode of production". That's all.

After the verbal magic, self-suggestion comes to the rescue of GIK's attempt to turn the very truth of value (time accounting) into a hypothetical abolition of value. We have seen that the enterprise is,

in GIK's scheme, the real subject, and that it imposes itself as a mediation between the workers. In a passage discussing the question of the wage scale, GIK insists that the wage differentials have to be minimal "lest the workers lose the sense that the enterprise is part of themselves" (chapter 5). Here, the producers' social immediacy rests on a feeling. But if we take a closer look at the text, we understand what the so-called all-around development of the individual is in reality: in order to "feel" that the enterprise is part of his or her life, the worker spends hours in meetings to decide on everything, to note all the hours done, to check the accounts, to meet with other enterprises, to go to the consumer co-op to express and discuss his or her needs, all this on top of his or her basic job. This is another angle of the fiction proposed by the proletarian program. Instead of an "all-around developed individual", we have a militant of the economy. The all-around developed individual works all around the clock.

GIK itself doesn't really believe the fiction it has built. Although it affirms that work-time accounting is self-regulating and doesn't require persnickety controls as does centralized planning, it finally admits that abuses are possible.

*"In the event of actual carelessness in production, sanctions are imposed on the business organization by the relevant social jurisdiction".*

Thrown out by the door, power comes back in through the window. This should not surprise us, as nothing of the old world has disappeared. Value has become self-conscious in work-time accounting, and the market is still there in the form of a constant dialogue among cooperatives.

In conclusion, three main points can be drawn from the Fundamental Principles...

1) First, as we have noted, in GIK's vision of communism, workers disappear behind their enterprise and their consumer co-operatives. What about the length of the working day, working conditions, the organization of production, etc.? The Fundamental Principles... have nothing to say except that workers will adopt Fordism with enthusiasm. Their immediate work is identical to what they lived under capitalism, except for the feeling that the enterprise is part of them. Concerning the payment of their work, it depends on all the averages that are required before the content of an hour of work can be defined, meaning that there is no direct relationship between their immediate activity in the enterprise and their living standards.

2) The second point is that the enterprise is still, and even more so, the pole around which the workers group together and with which they identify. However, these enterprises cannot avoid competing with each other. This stems from the complicated and illusory way in which GIK tries to convince us that increases in productivity will circulate freely from one enterprise to another. Each enterprise declares the number of hours it spent to produce a given volume of output. And society replaces the means of production consumed in that same amount of hours. What GIK says is that if a factory succeeds in producing the same output in half as much time, it won't conceal that gain, it won't try to obtain more hours from society than it contributed to it. In other words, they will let their own productivity gains benefit the rest of society. But, unless the workers-managers-salesmen-accountants are saints, they are bound to hope for a little benefit for all their efforts and conceal that they worked more rapidly than the average. This means that competition remains too, as is normal with value, which rests on the existence of separate and independent (private) producers.

3) Lastly, GIK's scheme maintains a complete separation between production and consumption. In its view, workers after work go to the consumer co-op to discuss their needs. But the fact that the same person or group assumes different functions does not mean that there is no separation. It only means that the person or group is internally divided. In the case of the GIK's communist workers, they are at the same time both workers and managers, executives and controllers, producers and consumers. What a hell of a work day!

GIK's claim to be true to Marx's Critique... is only partially verified. GIK's Fundamental

Principles... diverge from Marx in rejecting central planning and putting the enterprise in the forefront. Nevertheless, the claim is verified in the sense that GIK described the many intricacies of time accounting only mentioned by Marx. In doing so, however, GIK shows that the abolition of the market as we know it is far from sufficient to abolish value. It is very striking that its Fundamental Principles... actually promote a utopian self-conscious value, and call it communism.

## Chapter 2 - Marx's theory of value, as per the first chapter of Capital<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 - The starting point: the commodity

#### 2.1.1 - Use value

In order to introduce the commodity, Marx starts with its use value. This is simple: "The utility of a thing makes it a use value". Use value is identical to the usefulness of an object. And, "In the form of society we are about to consider, they [the use values] are, in addition, the material depositories of exchange value". This excessively naturalistic way of looking at use value may be the reason why Marx comes back to the question at the end of the first section of the chapter. He first asserts that:

*"A thing can be a use value, without having value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not due to labour. Such are air, virgin soil, natural meadows, &c".(section 1)*

But then he has to clarify (with the help of Engels):

*"To become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, to whom it will serve as a use value, by means of an exchange".(id)*

It is Engels who remarked to Marx that taxes in kind are use value for another, but are not commodities. Hence the addition in the 4th German edition concerning the "means of an exchange". Hence, for Marx and Engels, use value is a natural category which must be further defined by exchange when it applies to a commodity. We will return to the question, and see that use value is an entirely social category, which has to be distinguished from a thing's mere usefulness.

#### 2.1.2 - Exchange value, value.

Marx first introduces exchange value as a seemingly arbitrary quantitative relationship between two commodities ( $x_A = y_B$ ). He then turns to the labour which produced them, as the only thing the two commodities have in common, making them comparable. Further on in the text, he develops:

*"If we say that, as values, commodities are mere congelations of human labour; we reduce them by our analysis, it is true, to the abstraction, value; but we ascribe to this value no form apart from their bodily form. It is otherwise in the value relation of one commodity to another. Here, the one stands forth in its character of value by reason of its relation to the other." (section 3, §b)*

We note that Marx considers "congelations of human labour" as an abstraction. We will return to that point later. For the moment, let us follow Marx's reasoning:

1. The commodity is produced as a congelation of human labour, but remains a pure use value...
2. ... until it is put on the market, where it confronts other commodities.
3. Only then is its "character of value" established.

We have here, as it were, a definition of value by stages: use value as depository, value per se as the congelation of labour, which cannot yet be distinguished from the usefulness of the thing, and exchange value as the form of appearance, ie as the social reality of value. We find here, again, the emphasis put on the market in the Marxian concept of value. The market is not only the stage at which the value produced by labour is realised. The market is the moment when the product of labour effectively constitutes itself as a commodity. By virtue of their confrontation on the market, commodities appear as value, assert their essence of value. They were already value in production,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from Chapter 1 of Capital and taken from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/marx-capital-a-critique-of-political-economy-volume-i-the-process-of-capitalist-production>. As internet versions have no pagination, I refer the table of contents.

but that could only be understood by entering the clouds of abstraction. That becomes obvious when reduced to the concreteness of the equation  $xA = yB$ .

However, this way of reasoning by stages leaves an ambiguity. Is value, the true value, created at the level of labour, or only later, at the level of exchange? The proletarian program answers first "at the level of exchange", because abolition of the market is in its view the aim of the revolution and because labour, being a natural activity which has always existed and will exist after value has disappeared, cannot be per se the bearer of an alienation such as value. However, and secondly, isn't the proletariat, the class of labour par excellence, the source of all bourgeois wealth, and thus of value? Labour must then be the source of value, but this source and this value are relegated to the sphere of abstraction in an attempt to solve the ambiguity arising from the fact that the labour which creates value, is not characterized beyond an expenditure of human labour power - which, unlike exchange, exists in all societies. The labour which creates value is thus posited as "abstract" because of the indetermination of the crucible in which value is formed. Actually, in the first chapter of Capital, Marx doesn't care much for this adjective "abstract". When he uses it, it means labour "in general". Marx didn't elaborate a conceptual definition of abstract labour. It is mainly his followers who have tried to give substance to this notion.

### 2.1.3 - Rubin on abstract labour

In his Essays on Marx's Theory of Value (Black and Red, 1972), Rubin devotes a whole chapter to the concept of abstract labour. He very clearly formulates the problem of the positioning of the source of value, as already seen with Marx: where is abstract labour really formed? Rubin begins by describing the question as "very serious and profound" (p. 147). However, after explaining that Marx did in fact say that concrete labour is reduced to abstract labour only through exchange, he asserts that "it is not hard to reconcile these views" (p. 149) with the other Marxian assertion, that value is created in production. According to Rubin, the solution consists in

*"distinguish[ing] exchange as a social form of the process of reproduction from exchange as a particular phase of this process of reproduction, alternating with the phase of direct production" (p. 149)*

These two concept of exchange are to be "adequately distinguished". In other words, Rubin evades the issue by playing on production and reproduction, by giving a definition of exchange that includes everything. Thanks to this trick, exchange is everywhere, in exchange and in production. Please note the subtle shift from "value is created in production" (p. 148) to "exchange as a social form of the process of reproduction" (p. 149), and then to "exchange is above all a form of the production process" (p. 149). Rubin explains that

*"when Marx constantly repeats that abstract labour is only the result of exchange, this means that it is the result of a given social form of the production process. Only to the extent that the process of production acquires the form of commodity production, i.e. production based on exchange, labour acquires the form of abstract labour..." (p. 149)*

This confirms our first impression: now "exchange" means "commodity production", so that we are in a tautology. Value-creating labour is labour taking place in a society grounded in value. But we still don't know what specificity this labour has as a general productive activity taking place in the conditions of commodity production.

## **2.2 - The substance of value: the issue of abstract labour.**

### **2.2.1 - From commodity to labour-substance of value.**

Starting from the equation representing the exchange of two commodities having different use values, Marx concludes that this equation can have only one basis:

*"If then we leave out of consideration the use value of commodities, they have only one common property left, that of being products of labour." (section 1)*

And, if we leave use value out of consideration, we also leave concrete labour out of consideration. Labour here is not that of the carpenter, of the blacksmith, etc.

"there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract."

Note that Marx removed the word "abstract" from the French translation, which he supervised, and replaced it by "without consideration to the particular form in which this force has been expended". This means that the adjective was not crucial to him, and that "labour in the abstract" means "labour in general". That said, did Marx mean that the substance of value is the expenditure of human labour power? Not exactly. The expenditure of human labour power, a physiological phenomenon, appears initially as nothing but a loss. To attain the substance of value, this destructive process must also be creative (bear in mind that we are talking here of labour in general, without considering the concrete aspects of labour and its product). Here Marx, without troubling about complexities, shifts from the expenditure of human labour power to the creation of a substance of value by a simple verbal apposition. Without the reader noticing, this results in an overlapping of two different senses of the term labour - living labour and dead labour (adjectives not used here by Marx).

*"All that these things now tell us is, that human labour power has been expended in their production, that human labour is embodied in them." (section 1, my emphasis)*

Marx identifies labour in general, the expenditure of human labour power, which is a loss, with the substance of value which is preserved and accumulated. There he speaks of crystallized, or sublimated, or gelled or dead labour - the adjectives vary. Hence, the expenditure is not a pure loss. It brings something into the commodity. This crucial point is not proven at all. This something that is "brought in" is introduced without notice and presupposes that there is something to be transferred. The conclusion which immediately follows the above quotation is thus improper, because it is already contained in the assumption:

*"When looked at as crystals of this social substance, common to them all, they are – values." (section 1)*

And then Marx poses the question of how to measure the magnitude. For him, the question of value and its substance is settled. Everything clear? Not really.

### **2.2.2 - The two approaches to abstract labour.**

The first chapter of Capital shows that Marx was following two ideas when trying to define the substance of value. On the one hand, he has a "social" approach, based on the "total labour power of society" counting "as one homogeneous mass of human labour power". On the other hand, Marx has a "naturalistic" approach resting on the notion of "expenditure of human labour power".

#### *2.2.2.1 - Social approach*

Strangely, the social approach appears after Marx seems to have settled the question of the substance of value, since he now wants to deal with the question of its magnitude. He wants to understand how value is measured. The magnitude of value, says Marx, is measured by the labour

time. This is easy to accept, except that some workers are slow and can thus be expected to produce more value than workers whose productivity is higher. This problem brings Marx back to the question of the substance of value

*"The labour... that forms the substance of value, is homogeneous human labour, expenditure of one uniform labour power. The total labour power of society, which is embodied in the sum total of the values of all commodities produced by that society, counts here as one homogeneous mass of human labour power" (section 1, my emphasis)*

Whereas we thought the matter was settled, we now have a new approach to the question of the substance of value, which differs significantly from the previous one. Here, the emphasis is put on labour as a social totality, and the averages based on that whole presuppose all kinds of social processes that have nothing to do with the expenditure of human labour power in a physiological sense.

As we shall see, the "social" approach to value and abstract labour is the most fertile one. It leads to the division of this "homogeneous mass of human labour power" into private and independent producers, etc., as an essential factor in defining value. But Marx doesn't follow that lead to its end. In the second section of the first chapter, Marx looks at the labour of the whole society.

*"To all the different varieties of values in use there correspond as many different kinds of useful labour, classified according to the order, genus, species, and variety to which they belong in the social division of labour. This division of labour is a necessary condition for the production of commodities [but not sufficient, as seen in the case of the primitive Indian community or of the modern industrial workshop...]. Only such products can become commodities with regard to each other, as result from different kinds of labour, each kind being carried on independently and for the account of private individuals." (section 2)*

This is true, and I only quote this passage to underline the fact that Marx, at this stage of his thinking, makes an opening towards the division of labour, the necessary complementarity of the productive branches, towards the social organisation of the production of value. But he doesn't dwell on this and returns quickly to commodities "with regard to each other". This apparently innocent bias makes sense when the way Marx envisages the abolition of value is taken into account - namely the abolition of the market and its replacement by the plan. Now, the issue of the social division of labour is crucial in understanding value as a form and in defining the labour that creates it. We will come back to this in the next chapter.

#### 2.2.2.2 - *The physiological approach*: the expenditure of human labour power.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx only touches on the social approach, which does not affect the issue of the substance of value. In the first chapter as a whole, Marx speaks most often of the substance of value in the physiological sense, and this approach ultimately prevails, without a real social definition having been found for abstract labour.

As we have seen, the common feature shared by the labour of all producers of commodities is that it can be reduced to "an expenditure of human labour force, without consideration to the particular form under which this force has been expended" (translation of the Roy French edition of *Capital* for the passage quoted above). At the end of the second section of the chapter, Marx similarly underlines the physiological approach:

*"... all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of*

*commodities. " (section 2)*

And here Marx chose to add the adjective "abstract" in the Roy French translation:

*"... labour must first and foremost be useful for it to be assumed an expenditure of human labour power; human labour in the abstract meaning of the word" (my translation)*

The physiological approach is prevalent throughout the chapter. There are other examples. One is a passage at the beginning of the fourth section, on fetishism, which discusses the characteristics of labour that determine value. Looking for the "theological niceties" which characterize commodities, Marx first eliminates the faulty explanations:

*"The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value." (section 4)*

What are these factors? There are three of them: first, it is a "physiological fact" that all forms of labour are "essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, etc."; second, "in all states of society, the labour time that it costs to produce the means of subsistence, must necessarily be an object of interest to mankind"; and third, "from the moment that men in any way work for one another, their labour assumes a social form."

Then, when Marx situates in the commodity itself the origin of its mystical character, he explains that the general characteristics of labour are transformed as follows:

*"The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products." (section 4)*

This passage indicates that characteristics exist that determine value, but at the same time do not determine it, since they are to be found in all types of non-mercantile societies, past and future. Among those characteristics, we find the expenditure of muscles, brain, etc. which, in the previous sections of the chapter, defined the substance of value. Now it is a general feature of all forms of labour. This leads us to understand that the social conditions of commodity production are what causes the expenditure of human labour power to become value. That is obvious, but what is left to explain is commodity production. Something that Marx does not do, at least not here. He seems satisfied with simply mentioning here and there the precondition constituted by the existence of private and independent producers.

The conclusion is that the expenditure of human labour power becomes value-creating labour when commodity production is the form of social production. Not only is that tautological, but we also have to conclude that labour remains unchanged whatever the social relationships. So the transformation of the physiological expenditure into value rests on the exchange between producers. Exchange appears as the decisive moment in the creation of value because labour cannot be that moment, since it is the eternal and necessary form taken by the organic exchanges between man and nature. We are back to what we already saw: the expenditure of human labour power has to be further defined by the social conditions for it to become value creation and abstract labour.

### **2.3 - Measure of value**

Measuring the magnitude of value by the labour time is not a problem. An average time between less and more productive workers has to be calculated. The value of a commodity is then

determined by the mean productivity in the branch under consideration. When discussing the question of the impact of productivity and its variations, Marx says that labour time

*"changes with every variation in the productiveness of labour. This productiveness is determined by various circumstances, amongst others, by the average amount of skill of the workmen, the state of science, and the degree of its practical application, the social organisation of production, the extent and capabilities of the means of production, and by physical conditions".(section 1)*

He then gives examples. For him, the formation of that average of individual labour times appears to be a merely arithmetic process, a simple observation that producers make when they enter the market to sell their commodities. Some producers need more time than the average, some less. This is what averages are made of. But this apparently common-sense way of looking at the question eludes a crucial element. The producers never know if they are above or below the average time. They are therefore under constant pressure to reduce their own labour time. For that reason, we should say that the average socially necessary labour time is the average of all the minimal times of each producer. We will come back to this question. Here I only want to ask the question: why doesn't competition appear in Marx's analysis of the socially necessary labour time? I suggest that the reason is to be found in the model of society he relies on in the first chapter. This model is an idealized simple commodity mode of production, in which competition is not as fierce as it is in capitalism.

## **2.4 - Value and society in the first chapter of Capital**

Although the first sentence of the chapter tells us that the frame of reference is a capitalist society, the text of the first chapter as a whole, and even of the first section of Capital, doesn't bother to show the specific traits of capital, those which distinguish it from the simple commodity production model. According to many commentators, all the developments devoted to value are posited at a level of abstraction which would exempt Marx from any details on the social relationships where value exists. Is it possible to speak of value in the context of a hypothetical commodity-based social model that would be so general as to encompass all cases that have actually existed? Although this is a quality that is often attributed to the first chapter of Capital, I don't think so. We need to take a closer look at the social partners in the first chapter.

### **2.4.1 - Which producers?**

Who are these producers which Marx represents with their commodities?

*"Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange". (section 4)*

What kind of society are we in? In the first place, there is one striking aspect: the society of value which appears throughout the chapter has no classes. Producers produce and exchange. The only "social" relationship they know is exchange. We do not see craftsmen with their apprentices, nor capitalists with their workers.

This is why many commentators say that Marx posits his analysis of value in a "theoretical", not historical, society, where he finds the requisite level of abstraction. My opinion is that Marx uses a social model which is very close to simple commodity production. This is somewhat puzzling. We have seen that Marx approaches the question of value from the standpoint of the market, and we found out why (abolition of the market as the abolition of value). We now have to ask the question: why doesn't he proceed from the capitalist market rather than from a market where the producers themselves sell their products. I tentatively make three hypotheses:

A plausible explanation is simplicity. In the first chapter, producers produce, and then they exchange. Value would be more complicated to explain on the basis of a capitalist society. A

capitalist would have to be called "producer" since he is the one who exchanges, whereas in reality, the workers are the ones who produce, but they don't exchange since the product doesn't belong to them - which makes things more difficult to analyse.

Another possible explanation is that Marx in the first section of Capital follows a historical plan of sorts. There is no capital in the first part of book 1 (chapters 1-3), and it is only at the end of the second part that the exchange of labour power for capital appears. This plan is certainly not historical. All the same, the path followed goes from simple commodity production to capital proper, through the "contradictions in the general formula of capital" (title of chapter 5), contradictions which are solved by "the buying-selling of the labour power" (title of chapter 6). In other words, Marx's logical plan is very close to actual historical developments. And, when Marx reaches the analysis of capital (part 3 of book 1), the problem of value is considered settled and remains untouched.

A third hypothesis lies in the particular way Marx has of looking at simple commodity production. Here we have to make a detour and leave the first chapter.

In part 8, chapter 32: *Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation*, Marx offers a powerful analysis of the advent and of the demise of capitalism. He reveals - and seems to regret - what the emergence of capitalism has destroyed. The secret of primitive accumulation is

*"the expropriation of the immediate producers, i.e., the dissolution of private property based on the labour of its owner... The private property of the labourer in his means of production is the foundation of petty industry, whether agricultural, manufacturing, or both; petty industry, again, is an essential condition for the development of social production and of the free individuality of the labourer himself."*

Marx is more explicit in the French translation of Roy. There he says that petty industry is "the nursery of social production, the school where the manual dexterity, the ingenious skill and the free individuality of the labourer are emerging" (my translation). The difference is significant: petty industry is more than a condition, it is a positive development of the "free individuality" of the labourer. And Marx looks at that period as if he regretted what primitive accumulation has destroyed. Marx makes a distinction between two types of private property:

*"Private property, as the antithesis to social, collective property, exists only where the means of labour and the external conditions of labour belong to private individuals. But according as these private individuals are labourers or not labourers, private property has a different character."(chapter 32)*

In this distinction, Marx looks positively at the property of labourers. And he uses tones not often found in Capital when speaking of the expropriation of labourers in petty industry. He describes

*"the transformation ... of the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few, the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence, and from the means of labour, this fearful and painful expropriation of the mass of the people forms the prelude to the history of capital" (id.)*

Marx is well aware of the narrowness of petty industry. He nonetheless expresses a sort of nostalgia for an era when the "labouring people" (as in the Roy translation) was in harmony with its labour and the conditions thereof. Labour and property were unified. This indicates the possibility of a labour that is not exploited, the possibility of a peaceful coexistence of workers' (collective) labour and of (cooperative) property. Let's recall that one of the problems of the proletarian program is that it keeps work and the economy, and at the same time wants to abolish exploitation. Hence my third hypothesis that independent and private producers, the "labouring people" of the first section of Capital somehow announces the possibility of the associated workers of socialism. But this implies

that the heart of value creation is not in labour, but in exchange. Had he examined value in a capitalist context, Marx couldn't have done that so easily.

### 2.4.2 - Which exchanges?

A close look at the first chapter shows that Marx's producers are always sellers, never buyers. They always come to the market to offer their product, never to buy their inputs (tools, raw materials, subsistence goods). This bias is in conformity with the general logic of the chapter. It is only after producing, when they bring their product to the market, that the producers enter into a "social" relation. If, after introducing money, Marx had split the exchange

$$xA = yB$$

into

$$xA = \text{money}$$
$$\text{money} = yB$$

we would have seen the producer sell his product for money and become a buyer of his working conditions. We would have seen him as an investor, that is as trying to insert himself into the social division of labour. Marx puts his producers on their downstream market, never on their upstream market. We have to wait until chapter 3 to see the producer as a buyer, not only as a seller. There, in effect, he splits the basic barter exchange into two exchanges as indicated above. However, he treats selling and buying in an unbalanced way, which is interesting and meaningful. This justifies yet another departure from chapter 1.

#### 2.4.2.1 – Selling:

In chapter 3, Marx develops the selling process at length. He insists on the division of labour, which engenders the market and the obligation to pass through the market to satisfy one's needs. These are interesting views, where Marx explains the multiplication of the productive branches. He even shows the case of a producer opening a new branch by splitting an ancient trade:

*"A particular operation, though yesterday, perhaps, forming one out of the many operations conducted by one producer in creating a given commodity, may to-day separate itself from this connexion, may establish itself as an independent branch of labour and send its incomplete product to market as an independent commodity".*  
(chapter 3, section 2, §a)

This passage describes exactly the way value develops. This is precisely what has to be considered and developed today. As Rubin would do later, Marx starts out along a promising path but then abandons it, because his approach to value and the importance he gives to the market don't move him in that direction. Considering the development of value, his description lacks only two details. On the one hand, the fact must be stressed that here, the division of labour is, at the same time, a division of property. A new "independent branch of labour" is also, in this case, a new independent branch of property. Marx of course knows that and says so, but in another place and without drawing all the consequences. Drawing all the consequences would mean saying that those producers are also property owners, and consequently exploiters of a labour which is neither owner nor exploiter. On the other hand, the reason why a particular operation splits from the former production process should be explained. The explanation is the requirement to increase productivity. I think that the link between value and productivity is essential. And it never appears in Marx's analyses on value. Now, the reason why productivity has to increase is to be found in exploitation. Increased productivity increases the surplus product. These two simple points have a considerable impact, as we'll see.

On the whole, Marx considers the selling side of the exchange mainly for the problems the seller

might encounter. He devotes much time to the risks of non realisation of value. For him,

*“the division of labour converts the product of labour into a commodity, and thereby makes necessary its further conversion into money. At the same time it also makes the accomplishment of this transubstantiation quite accidental” (chapter 3, §2, a)*

“Quite accidental ” is exaggerated. The CMP is not always in a situation of overproduction. But Marx wants to insist on this risk for the seller.

#### 2.4.2.2 – Buying

On the opposite, Marx doesn't dwell long on the risks the buyer is facing when investing his money into new means of production. Is he going to insert himself into the social division of labour? Marx doesn't seem to care much. Is it by chance that, the two times when we see a producer in a buyer's position, Marx ridicules him? One of the producers shown by Marx as buyer buys a bible, and the other buys brandy. Now, the weaver buying a bible after having sold his linen actually needs new yarn, and the bible seller needs paper or new books. Why does Marx neglect this side of the market? Since the beginning of Capital, the exchanges we see are exchanges between producers, who need working means and subsistence to go on with their activity as producers. But now Marx presents the weaver and the book seller as frivolous consumers.

Marx's developments on the social division of labour should come with considerations about the producer purchasing his means of production, i.e. about the social division of labour in process, about the producer actively entering into global social production. Placing the producer on his upstream market doesn't eliminate the fact that the realisation of value on the downstream market is the ultimate sanction, the practical proof that the producer is actually integrated into the labour of society as a whole. But it does show the producer finding the commodities and the information (prices) he needs to take part in the social division of labour. Instead of spending his money on a bible, he buys a quality of yarn likely to give him an advantage over his competitors or a machine that will raise his productivity. When considering the selling process, Marx insists at length on the potential problems producers may encounter. He sees clearly value and its realisation. When speaking of the buying process, he could have gotten closer to the way value is produced, but doesn't. He could have approached the way in which the conditions of commodity production impose a set of norms and forms on labour that determine it as an activity specific to the reign of value, as opposed to a general, eternal activity momentarily subjected to the outside constraints of the market.

Did Marx anticipate this objection? Yes and no. He writes (chapter 1, section 4):

*"This division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production. From this moment the labour of the individual producer acquires socially a twofold character. On the one hand, it must, as a definite useful kind of labour, satisfy a definite social want, and thus hold its place as part and parcel of the collective labour of all, as a branch of a social division of labour that has sprung up spontaneously. On the other hand, it can satisfy the manifold wants of the individual producer himself, only in so far as the mutual exchangeability of all kinds of useful private labour is an established social fact, and therefore the private useful labour of each producer ranks on an equality with that of all others. The equalisation of the most different kinds of labour can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz. expenditure of human labour power or human labour in the abstract."*

There, Marx added in the Roy translation:

"... and only exchange can realise this reduction, by bringing together on an equal foot the products of various kind of labour".

We note in passing that, here again, Marx considers that what defines abstract labour is the expenditure of human labour power. Furthermore, he explains that value has to be taken into account before exchange, in production. This is important, but doesn't go far enough. What is taken into account is only the fact that the product must satisfy a social want. But it does not tell us how labour is transformed by the fact that the product must satisfy a want from which the producer is fundamentally separated, for he is only an independent private producer. Marx only insists on the use value of commodities when he needs to have the individual labour be part and parcel of the collective labour of all. He sees the whole process of value from the standpoint of the product, not from that of the activity itself. And this is why he ends (in the French version) with the fact that "only exchange" equalizes all sorts of labour.

*"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. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity."*

This is the well-known first sentence of Capital. I suggest replacing it by: "The source of the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an anthill of workshops and factories and offices where men and women labour. Our investigation must therefore begin with this divided and unified labour". This is what we will try to see in the next chapter.

## **2.5 - Commodity fetishism**

What is the *raison d'être* of the fourth section of the first chapter of Capital, devoted to "the fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof"? How does it find its place in the general plan of the chapter? Many commentators have raised the question. And many have seen in the section the basis of a theory of alienation, since the theme of the lack of control over production is pervasive. By producing commodities, men transfer their social relationships in a world of objects, which dictates its laws on their own activity and makes them believe that those objects have the power to regulate society and even to produce profit, interest, rent, etc. themselves. I agree that this may be Marx's position. In his views on the abolition of value, the plan is equivalent to value becoming self-aware. The production envisaged by Marx for the society of free men doesn't differ essentially from what we have in capitalism, except for the plan controlling ex-ante what value controls ex-post. By doing away with commodity fetishism, the proletariat abolishes the alienation characteristic of commodity production.

If this interpretation of Marx's thinking is true, and whatever we may think of it, the question remains of why Marx put those considerations in the first chapter, instead of somewhere more suited to highlighting the historical role of the proletariat? My hypothesis is that Marx chose the end of the first chapter because, in conformity with the dialectics of communist theory, he had to accompany his theory of value by a presentation of his point of view on it, namely value abolished.

The section on commodity fetishism explains over and over men's lack of conscious control over production in a commodity society, the lack of personal relationships between them, the opacity of their reified social relationships. We cannot miss the message: the communist revolution will place social relationships under the control of conscience, make them transparent. The message would have been clear even if Marx hadn't written developments comparing the commodity society to other modes of production. But he made those comparisons. He showed that social forms exist where the relationships between men are personal and transparent, even when these relationships are based on exploitation (as in the case of the feudal system). And, above all, he offered a very

significant passage on communism, on

*"a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community."*

Marx concludes his description of communism by saying that, thanks to the "concerted plan" (a significant formula, absent from the first edition, but present in the Roy translation)

*"the social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution."*

This may be the most detailed and explicit passage on communism in the whole of Capital. Again, we may ask why Marx didn't put it elsewhere, in Chapter 32 for example, on the historical tendency of capital. The fact that it has been placed here, at the beginning of the book, seems to confirm my hypothesis about the *raison d'être* of commodity fetishism in the first chapter. This section, which Marx devotes to the reification of the social relationships, tells us another story, that of liberty and conscience in communism. Marx denounces the society of value and, at the same time, situates the standpoint from which he speaks. He considers that it is impossible to fully understand value without broaching its overcoming. Whatever the exact content of the overcoming suggested by Marx, one cannot but agree with this way of proceeding. The fact that we don't have the same view on the definition of communism is not relevant here. Marx thinks that the revolution must restore to labour the control over its activity. This not my point of view, which is that proletarian activity must be abolished in all its aspects. But that doesn't matter here. It suffices to see that the question of fetishism is developed here in the first chapter because this chapter is devoted to the definition of value, and this definition isn't complete without considering its overcoming. Whatever Marx's ideas on that, what needs to be followed is the reasoning as a whole: to examine the categories of capital from the point of view of their overcoming.

## Chapter 3 – Marx's theory of value revisited

This chapter is devoted to my proposition for casting Marx's theory of value in the concrete.

### 3.1 - The starting point: capital resting on its own basis

Without saying so explicitly, Marx places his analysis of value in a framework closely resembling simple commodity production. Rubin proceeds explicitly in the same way and explains that it is for simplicity's sake. As for us, who consider the anatomy of man to be the key to the anatomy of the monkey, we place our analysis in the framework of a fully developed capitalist society. The forms of value are totally developed in this kind of society. Moreover, we now know how difficult it is to define value, and especially abstract labour, when starting from the market. Therefore, our starting point is capitalist production resting on its own basis. What do we see?

To the naive observer, capitalist society looks like an ant-hill working without respite to produce goods of doubtful usefulness to those involved in production. But what at first sight appears as production for production is actually production for profit. In the CMP, nothing but profit can justify the effort involved in producing something. Besides, this profit, so important, so sought after by the capitalist, is not destined for enjoyment, but for reinvestment in further production, which again is solely motivated by profit. Compared with their aristocratic predecessors, capitalists are not good at enjoying their wealth. The comfort and luxury of their life are but the tip of their true wealth, not the real motive behind their endeavours. Their true wealth is the value of their capital.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, to explain what value is, Marx relies on a social model in which "producers" produce and exchange their products. We rely on another model, that of a developed capitalist society. It is composed of numerous social categories, of various more or less well paid trades, of unemployed and employed people, of workers, technicians, executives, etc. For our analysis, it suffices to consider that capitalist society is composed of two classes: capitalists, who own the means of production and organize the labour valorizing their capital, and proletarians, who labour under the constraint of their lack of reserves resulting from the capitalists' monopoly over the means of their livelihood. Such is the logic of capitalist production: proletarians who labour without respite for wages that only allow them to go on working, and capitalists accumulating the wealth they extract from the workers without enjoying it fully for fear of losing in the competitive jungle that surrounds them.

This simplified view of classes in the CMP evacuates the question of the middle classes, which account for a substantial share of final consumption. It is not possible here to explain in detail this simplification, which was previously assumed - in another context - by Gorter arguing against Lenin. We can only suggest that the huge prosperity of the middle classes is an exception, from a historical point of view (the 30 years after WWII) and from a geographical point of view (Japan and the West). The middle classes in the emerging markets are not as affluent as their ostentatious consumption may lead to believe. This helps explain the vigour of capital accumulation in those countries.

To return to our simplified model, capitalists and proletarians live without really enjoying the wealth they produce, because this wealth exists as value to be valorized. But what, then, do they produce? They produce on the one hand subsistence for the proletarians so that they can go on working and, on the other hand, means of production so that proletarians in increasing numbers can work for capitals which keep growing and accumulating. To say that the CMP is characterized as production for production is another way of saying that this mode of production produces only means of production (raw material, machines, software, etc.) to put proletarians to work, and subsistence to feed them (this is not different from Marx's producers producing for one another and exchanging among themselves). "Subsistence" stays here for the basket of commodities necessary

for the labour force's reproduction. Capitalists too must reproduce themselves. The system of production thus comprises an additional segment producing for the latter's consumption. This must be examined separately, along with the question of productive labour. It goes beyond the scope of this article to develop the issue, but the reader can look at <http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/valeur/chapitre-5-lechange-et-la-sphere-improductive> (in French).

### **3.2 Interdependence and multiplication of capitals.**

Marx on several occasions raises the issue of the introduction of the independent private producer into the general production of society, but more often than not only incidentally. The "total labour power of society" and its divisions are not at the heart of his analysis of value. Let's go back to the passage already quoted from Chapter 3 of *Capital*. There, Marx shows how a particular operation splits off from a unit of production and becomes an independent branch of labour, producing an independent commodity (§ 2.4.2 above).

This passage is interesting as much for what it says as for what it doesn't say. It tells us: That a new trade is created either by splitting off from an older trade more "complete" or by inventing new needs. It shows how the division of labour is at the same time a division of property. An existing production splits into two new ones, each of them putting a specific commodity on the market. In the same way, the capital of society as a whole continuously produces offshoots – either new capitals putting "partial" commodities on the market, in the sense that they are subsets of what was formerly a single product or new commodities corresponding to new needs. Capitalist production developed as a multiplication of new capitals, as an endless division of capitalist property. Marx's "independent private producers" are born every day.

Marx also tells us that the producer has to legitimize his position in the social division of labour. His labour must be expended in a useful form. As we have seen, basically, capitalist production is the production of means of production and subsistence. Before considering the time devoted to the production of a new product, the first condition of the producer's legitimacy is that he produces an object serving either as a means of production for another capital or as part of the proletarians' subsistence (capitalists' consumption is left out of consideration in this article). This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. We will see that other conditions are required. But we can already state that producing value is producing means of production (incl. subsistence) for another capital. Marx often says that the precise nature of the want that the commodity satisfies is not relevant and that we shouldn't pass judgments on its legitimacy. If there is a market for useless gadgets that proletarians buy, it means that these gadgets are part of the basket of subsistence necessary for their reproduction, whether physically, chemically, physiologically or symbolically.

Besides, this aspect of producing "symbolic" and useless subsistences is marginal in the section II of *capital*, which is essentially devoted to the production of food, housing, clothing and transport. Finally, a major part of capitalist production is devoted to means of production for section I, where the need that has to be satisfied is certainly more explicit, less subject to whim than in section II.

Let's now move on to what Marx doesn't say in the passage. He doesn't tell us, or at least not completely, how the new producer finds his place in the social division of labour. For his introduction into total production to be successful, we have already noted a necessary condition, namely that the new product be useful to other capitals as either a means of production or a subsistence. This is the fundamental rule of the conservation and growth of value: the new products must be capable of functioning as capital. We will look later at the other conditions under which our new producer can assert his legitimacy in the community of capitalists.

And Marx doesn't tell us why a producer splits from the former unit of production and becomes an independent private producer. The answer to that question is that the multiplication of capitals is

motivated by the pursuit of a higher productivity and profitability compared to that of the established capitals. And, as profitability is in the last analysis another term for the exploitation of labour, the logical conclusion is that the generalisation of value exists as a deepening of the exploitation of labour (see below § 3.3.1): the true *raison d'être* of value is the exploitation of labour.

So far, the development of value appears to us as a multiplication of individual capitals seeking to satisfy each other's needs, as well as those of the workers, by means of their commodities. At this stage, value appears as the mechanism by which the conditions of every capital are set by another capital, which doesn't know the former. And all these capitals seek to convince one another (and the proletarians) that their commodities are the most adequate for their reproduction. This mechanism defines the interdependence of capitals with one another. Marx mostly insists on the independence of the private producers. Their interdependence is just as important to analyse value.

Historically, value imposed its rule by supplying more or less autarchic communities with commodities which could better satisfy a need previously met by a domestic product. Or this is at least the way the origins of value are commonly presented: an unusable surplus arises in a community, which therefore seeks to exchange it for a product which it doesn't produce, or in insufficient quantity.

*"The first step made by an object of utility towards acquiring exchange-value is when it forms a non-use-value for its owner, and that happens when it forms a superfluous portion of some article required for his immediate wants. Objects in themselves are external to man, and consequently alienable by him." (Capital, chapter 2)*

This presentation neglects the question of the process by which a surplus appears in the community in the first place. Now, apart from accidental explanations (climate for example), the renewed formation of a surplus is explained by an increase in labour's productivity for a given product in a given community. Whether this surplus is appropriated individually or collectively doesn't change the fact that what we see here is increased exploitation of labour by non-labour, the latter of which, as such, will proceed to exchange the surplus. Hence, it is not accidental exchanges which, as they become widespread, bring about commodity production in the community, but rather the exploitation of labour within the community that leads to exchange of the surplus in order to diversify it. The benefits obtained through exchange of the surplus outside of the community are then a powerful incentive to increase productivity within it. That entails a more intensive exploitation of labour within the community. The pursuit of productivity leads in turn to the fragmentation of the community under the twofold impact of the division of labour and of property; in other words it leads to the rise of new independent private producers and the enlargement of the value sphere.

Once value production has taken its adequate form of capital, its growing prevalence translates primarily into the multiplication of individual capitals. Throughout the process, there is a necessary and continuous division and subdivision of property, a never-ending creation of new "independent private producers", who are the fundamental condition of the value-form (we will see below (§ 3.3.1.2) that this necessity of continuous multiplication of new capitals is always accompanied by an opposite trend, their merger/concentration).

In Marx's developments on value, there is a marked dichotomy between the independent private producer's solitude in production and his socialisation when he reaches the market to sell his product. By ignoring the fact that the producers are just as much buyers as sellers, Marx insists on their independence and neglects their interdependence. All the products converge on the market to be sold in response to a demand that is not specified. True, Marx says that producers exchange among themselves, but without drawing all the consequences, and he evades the question entirely when he shows the weaver buying a bible with the money from his linen (see above chapter 2.4.2).

Being interdependent, the private producers have to prove their legitimacy in social production as a whole. Their products must therefore abide by certain conditions imposed by "the market". But these conditions are those which the producers impose to their suppliers as well. With Marx (and Rubin, too), the impact of the market on the producer's labour is only seen as mental feedback from the market, as imagined prices. We will see that it is actually much more than that.

Individual capitals multiplying and producing for one another - such is the form taken by the production of wealth in the capitalist mode of production. These capitals relate to each other through exchange, and the goods they exchange take the form of commodities. It is this latter point (commodities) which defines the starting point of Marx. As for us, by taking as our starting point production rather than the market, we have in a way situated ourselves one chapter upstream of Capital's chapter one, at chapter zero. Before exchanging among themselves, producers work for each other.

### **3.3 - Valorizing labour (abstract labour?)**

The aim is here to explain that the labour which produces value is concretely formed for that, whatever its particular process. In other words, abstract labour is not all that abstract. It is possible to describe it concretely. The market remains the ultimate test for the realization of value, but it is not an instance that producers discover at the end of a day of labour during which they would only have 'thought' about the market. In their labour, whatever they produce, all of them have taken the same concrete measures in order to ensure their insertion in the society's global production, in order to guarantee, as much as possible, that their separation as independent private producers is at the same time their socialization as suppliers to the other production processes around them.

When Marx speaks of abstract labour, his point is that all the useful concrete determinations of a work process must be left aside in order to highlight what that process has in common with all the other ones. However, as we have seen, the main definition of that abstraction is unsatisfactory, because it concerns, not a directly social form, but a physiological process which then has to be placed in the conditions of commodity production for it to become abstract, value-producing labour.

For our part, we want to show that, if we leave aside all the particular determinations of the work processes that produce commodities, common features appear which are practical and social (not physiological) on the basis of which we can define the labour that produces value in general. We will then consider whether this labour has to be called abstract or otherwise. To do so, we start from what Marx frequently suggests but doesn't fully use: the independent private producer must prove his legitimacy, must prove that he effectively participates in the labour of society as a whole. We said earlier that the first condition is for him to produce means of production (incl. subsistence) for other production processes. We will now see that this necessary condition translates, for any particular production process, into two constraints on production, whatever the use value produced. Marx says that any labour is an expenditure of human labour force. We say that any process of commodity production is always a process of productivity enhancement and a process of standardization. These two features are not something that the producer imagines later on, in order to increase his market penetration. They are an integral part of the activity of any commodity producer, as a private producer who is separated from the labour of society as a whole and at the same time one of its components.

For the producer, who seeks productivity and standardization, the market is not "in his mind" but in his hands, in his factory. As we will see, this definition of what remains when all the particulars of a specific concrete labour are left aside offers the advantage of bringing to light a content that is specifically and directly social. Conversely, the expenditure of human force, of nerves and muscles, is a physiological feature not specific to any particular social form of production, or even to production per se, since it can be found in any human activity which is not strictly motionless and

unconscious.

This implies that we have to reconsider two points in Marx's analyses: the notion of socially necessary labour time and the notion of use value.

### **3.3.1 – Productivity**

#### *3.3.1.1 - Productivity and socially necessary labour time.*

Productivity and value are two related notions. One might say that value was "invented" to increase the productivity of labour. As for the reasons why productivity must be increased, the answer must obviously be sought in the increase of the surplus, of labour exploitation. The mechanism of relative surplus-value is the perfect form of this process, but it is present in other forms throughout the historical development of value, before and under capitalism. As for the exploitation of labour, it doesn't need to be explained here.

Let's come back to Marx and the legitimacy of the independent private producer. Marx first says that the producer's labour has to be useful – we will return to that later. Marx also says that for the "useful" commodity to be accepted by the other producers, it must have been produced in the average socially necessary labour time. As we have seen above (chapter 2.3), competition is not one of the "normal conditions" of production. Yet competition underlies the status of independent private producers. It is an aspect of their socialisation as entities separated from each other. It is impossible to speak of a "private producer" in the singular, but as soon as it is put in the plural, we have "competition" just as we have "exchange". As we saw, each independent producer necessarily and constantly seeks his maximum productivity. In view of the basic social conditions of value as a form, we must talk of the average of the producers' minimum times.

This constant tension is indissociable from value production and transforms any production process in a perceptible and practical way. The intensity of living labour, always striving not to lose time, is not the only element to be considered. There are also the production processes. Whatever its concrete content, any labour-producing value is constantly compelled to check that the methods used are the most efficient and to question the production processes applied. Value-producing labour includes the labour exerted on labour itself (R&D). Developing of the productive forces is included in the very notion of value.

When seeking to define the labour that produces value, the concrete historical ways in which producers increased their productivity are irrelevant. What is important is that this continual pursuit of productivity is at the heart of commodity-producing labour. In Marx's analyses, the concrete side of labour appears only as skills, technical specificity, and is specific to each particular work process. But there is something concrete that is also common to all commodity producers – the fight against time. Producing a commodity-chair is something concretely different from producing a chair in general. When speaking of Robinson Crusoe, Marx describes the way Robinson allocates his labour time according to his needs and resources. Robinson notes the labour time devoted to each product of his labour, and "those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value" (ch 1, sect. 4). Actually, Robinson's life lacks one thing essential to value - competition. Robinson is the master of his time, to the extent that anybody can be. The commodity producer doesn't enjoy that comfort. Time doesn't belong to him. He is constantly under the spell of increasing his productivity. This is a concrete part of his concrete daily labour. If the average socially necessary labour time is defined as the average of the minimum times of each of the producers, labour can no longer be defined simply as organic exchanges with nature. It must include labour exerted on labour itself and thus the constant modifications of methods, of raw materials, and of the products themselves, with the sole aim of saving time and thus legitimating one's position in overall social production.

### 3.3.1.2 - *Competition and monopoly.*

Value production as a form presupposes that social labour is divided up among independent private producers who relate to each other through exchange. As far as his theory of value is concerned, Marx stops here: his private producers have no other relationship than exchange. Exchange takes place between different sectors of production since the commodities exchanged must have differing use values. However, producers also have a competitive relationship within a given sector. Let's take a closer look at this second type of relationship.

Two opposing trends are in action in the CMP. First, profit seeking continuously leads to the formation of new enterprises, which find in a new product or in a new way of producing an existing one the means to establish their legitimacy in the overall labour of society. This ceaseless profit-seeking, the condition for the survival of individual capitals, explains how value progressively extends its rule on production. In the process, the surplus value produced by the various capitals accumulates in the form of new capitals rather than in the form of continuous growth of the same capitals. Knowing the financial mechanism through which the surplus-value of capital A becomes a new capital B does not matter here. What counts is the multiplication of independent private producers which lends a value form to products which until then didn't have that form.

Second, every individual capital naturally seeks to attain a size giving it an oligopolistic or monopolistic position on its market. While favourable to the valorisation of individual capitals, this is contrary to the interests of capital in general. By pricing its products higher than the production price, a monopolistic capital extorts from other capitalists a larger share of the social surplus-value, exceeding the normal average rate of profit. The former's gain slows down the accumulation of the latter. Is this a problem for the capitalists in general? After all, surplus-value accumulates somewhere, if not in one capital, then in another. Is that not the main point? Actually, no. The legitimacy of the new capitals entering the production of society as a whole also rests on their higher productivity, which they pass on to their clients, other capitalists, through lower prices. A monopolistic capital, on the other hand, strives to keep such productivity gains for itself, within its own sphere, so that the other capitals cannot benefit from that competitive advantage. To exist, monopolies and oligopolies erect barriers to prevent other capital from entering their sector. This is obviously an obstacle to the multiplication of individual capitals, to a global increase in social productivity and, thereby to the extension of the rule of value. In other words, there is a complete linkage between the development of value as a form, the multiplication of independent capitals and increased productivity.

Capitalists aren't concerned with the value-form, but are very sensitive about the issue of the general productivity of capital. Fundamentally, this is because increased productivity generates relative surplus-value. We are back to the link between the exploitation of labour and the development of value. That's why States, which are in principle friendly towards monopolies and oligopolies, continually monitor the level of competition among capitals and make sure that it plays its role. The point is to see that the rules of the club, which ensure value expansion and increased productivity, are respected.

### **3.3.2 – Standardization**

#### *3.3.2.1 - Usefulness of objects and utility value of commodities*

In order to understand the standardization of objects and activities under the rule of value, let's start with the difference between usefulness and use value. This difference is not dealt with in Marx's chapter 1, as we noted above. Marx and Engels limit themselves to stating that the product must be useful to someone else. But its usefulness to that other doesn't affect the object in and of itself. All that counts is that the producer produces an object satisfying someone else's. However, the producer wanting to satisfy that other's need has only an imperfect knowledge of what it is exactly. Only the actual sale will confirm that the producer's gamble was correct. Standardization, as we will see, is

part of that gamble, which is inherent to commodity production. Like the pursuit of productivity, it is the sign, within production, of the separation among independent private producers. In that sense, standardization imprints a clearly social mark on the object's usefulness. I use the phrase utility value to underline the fact that the commodity's usefulness is not natural. The thing being produced is fundamentally a commodity. The phrase use value has been employed too often as the usefulness of the thing, the mere medium for exchange value, or as something good as opposed to the evil of exchange value, for it to serve our purpose. Utility value, in contrast, must be construed as an entirely social category, and an integral part of the theory of value. Let's have a closer look at this.

In pre-capitalist modes of production, when the division of labour materializes as the division of property, this leads to the disintegration of a form of community and to the enlargement of the rule of value. In his *Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy* and, even more so, in the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx takes value as a given. Aside from brief allusions, he is not interested in how it arose historically. For example, Marx simply notes that "as a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other" (chapter 1, sect. 4). That is precisely what has to be examined.

When a labour process becomes specialized and splits off from the community in which it was based and where it found its outlet, it loses that community's particular features. It must then achieve a sufficient degree of generality to allow its integration into the social interdependence of the labour processes in formation, with little knowledge of what the parameters may be. We saw earlier that this has consequences in terms of productivity and impacts the newly independent private producer. But there is more. The labourer produces a table for his family makes the kind of table that the family needs using the means available to the family. Once the labourer becomes an independent cabinet-maker, he has to make tables that will cover various expressions of the demand for a table, even though he has little or no knowledge of what they might be since he is a private and independent producer. This concretely modifies the object table. Normally, commodities are not produced on demand but for a market, with all of the uncertainty that implies. To be sure that he can meet the demand and thus sell his tables, the private producer has to conceive of a table that can be used as a table under various (unknown) conditions, which differ from those of our cabinet-maker's former community. The same is true for a capitalist who has a product that sells well on his domestic market and wants to sell it on export markets. The table must be neither too large nor too small, neither too heavy nor too light, it should be usable not only in kitchens but elsewhere as well, etc. And a cabinet-maker specializing in kitchen tables faces the same necessity of determining a standard for how people cook in neighbouring villages/countries, the size of the room used for cooking, etc. In short, the actual table he manufactures must in a way approximate the table as "concept".

It is in this sense that the table as "useful object" has to become a table as "utility value". Therein lies one of the conditions of its exchangeability. Marx says that the commodity being produced is already "mentally" exchanged. We now understand that more than that is involved. Exchange is already present within the producer's activity. The commodity's exchangeability depends not only on its exchange value, on the socially necessary time required to produce it, but also on the material form it takes in order to meet a large range of particular needs not known in their details. A peasant on his autarchic farm may sit on a log when eating his dinner. For the independent cabinet-maker, meeting the need to sit down entails manufacturing "general", or "average" chairs. Let's call standardization this process whereby usefulness becomes utility value.

Due to that standardization process, the commodity satisfying a particular need has a more general concrete form, or utility value than this particularity because, given the producer's separation from the expression of the need, it must be able to cover several particular expressions of the need (think for example to the difference between a suit made at home by a taylor and a ready to wear suit,

etc.). This pursuit of standardization has greater importance even than the advantages it affords in terms of productivity (see below). It is cosubstantial to the emergence of our independent private producer. In the process of the social division of labour, the independent producer doesn't wait until he reaches the marketplace to announce that he wants to be part of the global production. This occurs right from the beginning of his endeavour, not only in the choice of the object he is about to produce, but also in the utility value form it takes, which is subject to general standards designed to meet imperfectly known needs. The producer doesn't know the nature of the need in its particularity, due not to ignorance, but to his position in society. Everyone knows that even the best market studies don't guarantee a product's success. It is impossible to posit value and commodity without at the same time positing the concept of standardization, which derives from the private producer's conditions of production. And it ensues from these conditions that, like the pursuit of productivity, the standard can never be taken for granted. Standardization, too, is a constant effort to match a product with imperfectly known needs. The producer is separated from other producers' needs, and there is no reason that the latter remain unchanged. In fact, the opposite prevails under conditions of value production, implying constantly changing methods, products, etc. Standardization is thus a permanent, systemic process, regardless of the specific utility value involved.

When a new capital form, based on a new product, it aims both at particularity to find a niche in the general division of labour and at generality to gear supply to a broad spectrum of the need to be covered. Particularity may be illusory, consisting of, for example, a minor change in a common product, (e.g. a new mobile phone function). Or it may be very real, like the first mobile phones introduced. In the former, the standard has already been established by competitors, which our capitalist tries to modify slightly. In the latter, the capitalist's task is to impose his utility value as the standard on the new emerging market. This may lead to raging competitive battles.

Utility value is a category of value, it is a social, not a natural, category. For Marx, use value is only the "material depository" of exchange value. For us, utility value is part and parcel of the commodity as social form. And when the time comes to abolish value, utility value won't be maintained for the sake of the object's usefulness. The distinction between usefulness and utility value suggests that under communism a form of productive activity in which the particularity of needs and of the objects meeting those needs – and indeed the particularity of the activities producing them – will come fully into play.

#### *3.3.2.2 - Labour standardization.*

Standardization of the product goes hand in hand with that of the activity which produces it. Commodity-producing labour is not labour in general. We saw that for Marx, labour that produces a commodity does not differ substantially from labour not producing it, as for example in Marxian communism or in pre-value societies. Now, the way the autarchic peasant makes his table is concretely different from the activity producing a commodity-table. No room there for do-it-yourself. From the standardization of the product ensues that of the labour producing it. This has precedence even over consideration of the productivity gains resulting from standardization. It conditions the exchangeability of the commodity. Just as the object table is standardized as the table-utility value, so the labour producing it cannot retain the particularities of the autarchic activity.

Let's suppose that the current standard for a table is a rectangular plane board, a drawer and four feet. Any table producer must know how to organize and perform the labour required for such a table. Surfacing a board, assembling boards, etc. become the sole operations through which a table can come into existence in the world of commodities. The only alternative for the producer is to invent and impose a new standard: round, three feet tables...

In the case of wage labour, production workers don't participate in the definition of utility value and are unconcerned about it. The ones who determine the exact utility value of the commodity to be

produced and the methods applied by the labour to do the job are the workers in the research department. The production worker isn't told, "Make a table", but "Here is a board, cut a rectangle of such and such size; here are nails and glue, etc." Just as the utility value of the table has been defined in a normative way for the people who actually need a table, so the worker producing it has no choice about the way the table is produced. He has to leave any personal ideas he may have on the matter at the factory door. Once again, there is no place for imagination or improvisation. Every gesture by the table producer is predefined for him by the standardization of the product, and not only by the capitalist's pressure to increase productivity.

As the CMP develops and imposes its own conditions on each and every detail of production, labour standardization becomes even more essential insofar as product standardization paves the way for mass production and mechanization. The latter breaks down the worker's labour into simple, more or less identical gestures, whatever the utility value involved. Tightening bolts, serving a machine, etc., represent the same kind of labour for the worker, whether he makes cars or electrical appliances. A few "trades" probably remain, such as metalwork, construction, etc. But on the whole, labour in all its diversity has been transformed by capitalism into a limited number of relatively simple gestures. True, the deskilling of labour also results from the class struggle between workers and bosses. But the outcome of the struggle as it is imposed by the bosses, is nevertheless consistent with the general framework of value production: the process of labour deskilling is its extreme standardization.

By taking out of consideration the particular concrete content of all the varieties of labour, one sees that all the commodity-producing labours have in common a standardization effort. That said, the question remains as to who proceeds to the standardization. The factory worker, emblematic figure of the value-producing subject, does not seem to have much initiative there. On the contrary, he endures it against his own will. His job is to manufacture, according to more and more strictly defined methods, whereas the research department establishes the standard. Hence, if standardization is part and parcel of value production, where does the latter take place? Is it in the workshop or in the research department? The answer is that the subject of value creation is the collective worker. In capitalist reality, Marx's "producer" is divided into several functions. To define the utility value of the commodity envisaged, the capitalist has the research department, which specifies its characteristics and organizes the standardization of labour accordingly. Though frequently antagonistic, the research department and the workshop participate in the creation of value. For the capital concerned, the effort to enter into the general division of labour is assumed by a fraction of the workforce which is more skilled, active and better paid (the research department, even though its work becomes more and more standardized and deskilled), and by a fraction which is less skilled, passive and paid less (the workshop, where modern rules of total quality and zero defects tend nevertheless to impose some degree of standardizing initiative on unskilled labour).

Value-producing labour is not just any labour. Whatever its concrete nature, it is subject to a standardization process directly flowing from the fact that social production rests on independent private producers. Every commodity producer must envisage the usefulness of his product in terms of utility value. This means he must continuously standardize his activity. He cannot say, "Today I fancy making a three-legged table", when the current standard is four legs. Under capitalistic conditions, standardization is extreme. Whatever the case, however, this second feature of value-producing labour is not abstract, but rather defines labour practically, as does the pursuit of productivity. It is part of the labour on labour that is indissociable from commodity production.

### **3.3.3 - Valorizing labour**

From what precedes, value-producing labour doesn't seem very abstract we can assign it practical features, specificities of content which determine its social and material reality. Having considered the labour of the independent private producers and having, like Marx, left out of consideration the concrete particularities of their labour, what did we find in common among them? The continual drive to raise productivity, and standardization, which is also a continuous process. Thus abstract labour - if we momentarily keep the term - is actually a concrete practical process producing any objects, and it is defined as value-producing by the continual tension towards productivity and standardization. Far from being simply "in the mind" of the producer, this practice gives form to every working gesture. Neither the pursuit of productivity nor standardization are required to produce tables. But they are necessary from the moment the table becomes a commodity. Value-producing labour doesn't produce the object in its nature of table, but in its reality of commodity-object. It is that moment of the process which, through the practical, material pursuit of productivity and through standardization, creates the conditions of exchangeability. Whereas Marx says that, after leaving out of consideration the particularities of the different labours, there is only physiological expenditure of human force, we now have to say that what remains is the pursuit of productivity and standardization - which is not abstract.

Labour keeps its twofold character. It is production of useful objects and production of value. Yet both sides are in fact concrete. This is why it seems ultimately preferable to drop "abstract" in identifying value-producing labour. All the more so because it is an adjective profoundly marked by the numerous analyses, among them Rubin's (cf chapter 2.1), which tried in vain to give a clear meaning to the concept of "abstract labour". For us, "valorizing labour" therefore seems a better phrase to designate the labour which produces value.

So we now have the waged productive labour as the twofold process of concrete labour and valorizing labour. Some readers may think that this re-definition of abstract labour is a break with Marx. This is not the case. Let's only remark that our times allow us to reformulate the abstractions which Marx deduced from the equality of commodities in exchange. We started from Marx and we only had to push his analyses to their logical conclusion to move from the average socially necessary labour time to the average of minimum labour times, and to move from a labour useful to someone else to the notion of utility value as standardized usefulness. However, we cannot do so as long as labour in general, and particularly industrial labour and the development of productive forces - which Marx retains in his vision of communist production (cf. chapter 1) - are considered the sole possible forms of organic exchange with nature. Our times allow us to go beyond this limit.

### **3.4 - Substance and magnitude of value. Value realization**

We now have to clarify the role of exchange after production in the formation of value. The producer, separated from but inter-related with the other producers, produced a commodity that is to be exchanged. Exchange realizes the value produced in the sphere of production. How are we to understand "realize"? In order to answer that question, we first have to understand what the substance and the magnitude of value are.

Value as a form arises when the division of labour is also the division of property. That is what makes private producers appear in their independence and what, at the same time, creates the market. The development of the market is a consequence of the progress of the social division of labour, not the reverse. As we saw, the development of the social division of labour can be understood as the result of an increase in productivity. We also saw that this increased productivity is not simply an acceleration of a pre-existing labour, but a formal-material transformation of the labour process. Valorizing labour is not pre-value labour immersed in market conditions, but a specific form of labour, which is defined by the continual pursuit of productivity and

standardization.

Let's now turn to the content of this form in order to understand how exchange is regulated by the measurement of value.

### **3.4.1 - Time, the substance of value**

We have seen (chapter 2) the difficulty Marx and Rubin have in defining the substance of value. First, their definition of abstract labour is full of hesitations and second they introduce dead abstract labour, which is supposed to be the substance of value, without any explanation. The "crystallization" of living labour, value-producing activity, in dead labour, the substance of value, isn't examined specifically. It may be appropriate here to begin by exploring the *raison d'être* of this notion of the substance of value. Why should value have a substance? There are several answers to this question.

#### *3.4.1.1 - Embodiment of valorizing labour in the commodity*

On the one hand, the notion of a value substance that is embodied in the commodity serves as "proof" that labour is indeed the source of value. Labour crystallized as dead labour is proof that living labour is the source of value. To say that dead labour is the substance of labour aims essentially at affirming that the source of value is labour. By defining a substance of value as crystallized labour and by implanting it in the product of labour, the Marxian analysis ensures that this labour, although an undifferentiated form of exchange between man and nature, is the real source of the value that is obviously embodied in the product (as seen at the moment of exchange of commodities). But with Marx and Rubin, this is verified only once labour has been defined as abstract labour.

The question of the link between labour and value appears in a different light now that we have defined value as a specific, concrete social form of the products of labour that has in turn been described as different from pre-commodity labour. The products produced by valorizing labour bear the concrete mark of their status as value, just as the labour which produces them can only be valorizing labour, the source of value, because it is obviously formatted to ensure exchangeability. So here the notion of the substance of value is not useful to us. Value gives a concrete form to the means of subsistence and of production, a form which is obviously related to valorizing labour. And the latter is not abstract, but materially defined by the pursuit of productivity and standardization.

#### *3.4.1.2 - The substance of value, that which circulates*

On the other hand, the substance of value is what circulates in the commodity society. If a given quantity of value moves from one producer to another, what is transferred certainly has a substance. Let's take a closer look at that. In what situations is value transferred? We can first eliminate the case of an equal exchange between two exchangers. There, no value has been transferred. Two forms of value, such as money and commodity, have simply been permuted.

Secondly, can we talk of value transfer between the means of production and the product? A machine, when operating, progressively transfers its value to the products. This point of view is common in Marxist literature. It posits that the machine is a crystallization of labour and that as it wears out, it somehow transfers those crystals to the product. This is a complicated way of speaking of capital depreciation, which is usually calculated in money terms. If a machine costs 1000 and helps produce 1000 units during its life, 1 is added to the cost of each individual commodity as part of the cost of the machine. These monetary calculations are the expression of the calculations in labour time which the GIK claims are beyond value, whereas they are in fact just the latter's utopian truth. All this means that the transfer of the machine's value to that of the commodity is only a redistribution of the total social labour time over two groups of products: the proportion of the time that was necessary to produce the machine is added to the other times that were required to produce that commodity.

Finally, we must consider the case of value transfers in unequal exchanges. These are normally the result of the diversity of production conditions within a branch. Let's consider a given branch producing a given commodity. The value to be paid by the other branches to buy this commodity is equal to the average of the individual values of each producer in the branch. In other words, most of the producers make an equal exchange with their buyer because they are about average, whereas others who are more, or less, productive than the average, make unequal exchanges. In the first case, we have a simple permutation of value forms. In the second, the permutation is accompanied by a value transfer. Let's have a closer look at what is transferred.

Let P be a commodity whose value on the market is represented by a sum of money M. The average formula representing the branch gives the value of the product as:

$$C+V+S = M$$

The value of P is equal to the sum of the constant capital C used to produce it plus the new value added by the living labour (V+S). All buyers in the other branches pay that sum, socially accepted as the value of the commodity. They thus appear to enter into a simple exchange, a permutation of two forms of value, P vs M. However, the productivity of some producers in the branch is either above or below the average. When selling their product for M, which is the money equivalent of its value, that sale corresponds to a different formula, namely:

$$C+V+S+\Delta = M$$

This means that their particular commodity has a value which is either below or above average, depending on whether  $\Delta$  is positive or negative. In other words, the exchange is unequal. In one way or another, more value is exchanged against less value. The more productive capitalist brings a commodity to the market which embodies less labour than the average, but he nonetheless receives M when he sells it. Obviously, he has made an extraprofit. And conversely, the commodity of the less productive producer embodies more labour than the average, but that producer will only receive M. Is what we are seeing here a transfer of value between exchangers? Yes.

In the chapter on the equalization of the rate of profit, Marx writes that under normal conditions of equilibrium,

*the commodities whose individual value is below the market-value realise an extra surplus-value, or surplus-profit, while those whose individual value exceeds the market-value, are unable to realise a portion of the surplus-value contained in them. (Capital, book III, section 2, Chapter 10. Equalisation of the General Rate of Profit Through Competition. Market-Prices and Market-Values. Surplus-Profit)*

For our purposes, this means that when the producer is more productive than the average, i.e. when  $\Delta$  is positive, the difference corresponds to an extra surplus-value. It is as if the workers of the more productive capital had worked longer than they actually did. Conversely, for the less productive producer, i.e. when  $\Delta$  is negative, it is as if the workers had worked less than in reality. In the first case, the capitalist exchanged less value for more value. Which is equivalent to saying that the rest of society, represented by the buyers, worked  $\Delta$  hours for him free of charge. Conversely, for the less productive capitalist,  $\Delta$  is negative. This producer worked  $\Delta$  hours free of charge, but in this case, nobody benefited from that: by paying M for the commodity he buys, the buyer indicates to the less productive capitalist that the  $\Delta$  hours he worked above average have no place in the social division of labour. These dissymmetrical situations stem from the systematic link existing between value and productivity. Society pays a bonus for productivity gains, whereas less productive labour is disregarded.

In the end, what was it that circulated within this mechanism of the average value of a branch? Labour time, if time can circulate. The only real value transfer happened when the more productive

capitalist sold his product to another capitalist. In that case, the transfer meant that without noticing it, the buyer worked  $\Delta$  hours for the seller free of charge, and the latter counted those hours as extra profit.

These considerations lead us to conclude that there is no need to define the substance of value as a hardly understandable crystallization of living labour in dead labour. Counting the hours of labour is enough to understand how value circulates and is transferred. If value has to have a substance, then we will call it time. Marx says somewhere that any economy is a time economy. This is a very profound remark, but Marx didn't exploit all of its potential, i.e. didn't go to the ultimate consequence, which is that a true abolition of value means the end of the time constraint on productive activity, i.e. the abolition of productivity.

Time is the only substance of value, if the notion of substance must be kept. And this time does not crystallize. It does, however, impose its rhythms and minute subdivisions, something no value producer can ignore if he wants to successfully enter into the general social division of labour.

#### *3.4.1.3 - The substance of value, that which is measured.*

We began looking for what the substance of value is, first, because the link between labour and value had necessarily to be marked by the embodiment of something in the product of labour which proves that labour is in fact the source of value. And we saw that this approach is no longer necessary under the new conditions in which we consider the question of value. Then we explored the substance of value as what circulates in the commodity society. We found that, if anything is circulating, it is simply (labour) time.

As in the GIK project, time thus appears as both what counts and what is counted. Each independent private producer relates to the labour of society as a whole and counts, in one way or another, how much time this costs him and how much time this saves him. Therefore, we can say that time is the substance of value as long as we understand that the time we are talking about is the time of the members of the commodity society, i.e. the producers' time, or in other words, labour time. Marx reaches similar formulations in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (part 1) :

*« The labour-time materialised in the use-values of commodities is both the substance that turns them into exchange-values and therefore into commodities, and the standard by which the precise magnitude of their value is measured... Regarded as exchange-values all commodities are merely definite quantities of congealed labour-time. »*

Time is both substance and measurement of value. Why did Marx add that this time is "coagulated" in the labour product? Is it, as we suggested above, to ensure that living labour leaves something in the commodity that "proves" it is the source of value? For us, things are simpler. If time is the substance of value, the measurement of value is quite normally assumed as the measurement of time, in days, hours, etc. And, as in the first chapter of *Capital*, the value of a commodity is measured as the average of the (minimum) individual values within a branch.

#### **3.4.2 - Exchange of commodities, realization of value**

Let's come back to the realization of value. May we say that value needs to be realized because the labour that produced it is abstract? There is no need to go this far to find a role for exchange. As we already said, exchange is the only moment when the insertion of the private producer into the labour of the society as a whole is confirmed. This doesn't mean that no value was produced prior to exchange. However, as we recall, Rubin is unable to get rid of that notion (see above. § 2). For him, it is in exchange that concrete labour

*"acquires social properties... which characterize it as social, abstract, simple and socially-necessary labour" (op. cit. p. 128),*

but the footnote that follows immediately to the effect that these properties are "potential" or "latent" at the production level shows only Rubin's inability to decide clearly where the source of value is.

As for us, we don't need a detour via the market to understand what value-producing labour is. Even before exchange, we identified it as labour specifically and practically formatted by the conditions affecting independent private producers. On this basis, exchange realizes value, but in a far less radical, and much simpler, sense than with Rubin.

First, exchange confirms the exchangeability of the labour product. As we already said, until exchange occurs, there is absolutely no certainty of the private producer's success in his bid to enter the social division of labour. The first way of winning that bid is, naturally, to sell. And the second is to sell for the right price.

This is where the second role of exchange comes into play. The socially accepted value of a commodity is the average of the numerous exchanges of the same commodity occurring at the same time. It is only at that moment that the society of private producers will find out what the socially necessary labour time for this commodity is. The multiplicity of exchanges continuously sets the norm of productivity required to produce a given commodity. Here again, value realization doesn't mean that exchange creates value. But it reduces all the individual values to a social average, and we saw (chapter 3.2.2) that this implies gains for some producers and losses for others.

And third, from this point of view, exchange is one of the moments in which devalorization, value destruction, takes place. When an attempted exchange fails, or occurs only at a value below the individual value of the commodity, value realization is in effect total or partial value destruction.

Such is the status that exchange must be given in the definition of value: confirmation of exchangeability, averaging of individual values, and devalorization. On this basis, exchange play its role in the law of value by distributing social labour among the different branches of production. But that is another story.

### **3.5 - Provisional conclusion**

In order to try and understand value, we started, not from the commodity as did Marx in the first chapter of *Capital*, but from capitalist production resting on its own basis. Value first appeared to us as a large-scale system of interdependence among capitals, which continually grow, divide and multiply. The secret of value lies in the division of labour in the form of division of property, engendering private independent producers. The division of property in turn results from the need to increase productivity. The latter doesn't flow from some abstract requirement to develop the productive forces, but results from the need for more efficient exploitation of labour. Labour exploitation, finally, doesn't require an explanation. It is the normal and necessary status of labour (see B. Astarian, *Le Travail et son Dépassement*, Senonevero 2001, Part 1).

We saw that value production may be analyzed as did Marx in *Capital*, namely by leaving the specific qualities of concrete labour out of consideration. But in the process, we reached the conclusion that abstract labour is, as it were, concrete, practical. The twofold character of labour now consists of concrete labour and valorizing labour, both of them contributing to the form of exchangeability of the product. What we called valorizing labour is actually the pursuit of productivity and standardization as a moment of labour, as the labour on labour that all private producers necessarily have to develop within their concrete activity, for the simple reason that they are independent private producers.

In this way, value can be defined directly at the level of production. And value-producing labour is specified concretely, not abstractly. It ensues that the abolition of value won't merely liberate that labour, those productive forces, but completely revolutionize the way men consider their immediate relationships among themselves, with nature and with social production. How else can we envision a system of production that rejects productivity and takes into account the particularity of needs and productive gestures?

## Chapter 4 - What is at stake in casting the theory of value concretely?

Does our redefinition of value call into question Capital as a whole? I don't think so. The theory of value is only one element of the communist theory of revolution and, in the general outline of Capital, this element is clearly distinct from the rest. Marx himself suggested that the first part of the book could be skipped. The first two sections of Capital examine value and money in order to focus on a contradiction in the terms, which capital seems to validate: money engenders more money, despite the assumed equality of all exchanges (cf. Roger Establet, *Presentation du Plan du Capital*, in *Lire le Capital*, PUF 1996 - lacking in the abridged English version, *Reading Capital*). Thus capital appears to be an automatic subject. Marx exposes this illusion by solving the apparent contradiction in the following sections, where he develops the theory of surplus value. His theory of value plays no role in these developments. Likewise for us: positing value production as a practical moment of labour doesn't modify the rest. The theory of surplus value, capital accumulation, reproduction and circulation, the process of capitalist production as a whole, all of this is still valid. What, then, is at stake in our reconsideration of the theory of value?

### 4.1 - Doing away with abstract labour.

In the preceding chapters, one of our result has been to get rid of the notion of abstract labour. Considering the mass of useless complications induced by abstract labour, this is not insignificant. We have clearly separated value production from exchange (see above § 3.4) and explained the role of exchange in the relationships among independent private producers. On that basis, value, its definition as a form, its production and its realisation, all these issues are greatly simplified. Value is formed exclusively in the sphere of production, where producing value simply means producing the form of exchangeability: productivity, standardization. We have seen how ambiguous Rubin is when he tries to reconcile a definition of value in production and in exchange (see above § 2.1.3). Another kind of complication can be found in Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge UP, 1993). This is how he defines abstract labour:

*"One's labor has a dual function: On the one hand, it is a specific sort of labor that produces particular goods for others, yet, on the other hand, labor, independent of its specific content, serves the producer as a means by which the products of others are acquired. Labor, in other words, becomes a particular means of acquiring goods ... The specificity of the producers' labor is abstracted from the products they acquire with their labor. There is no intrinsic relation between the specific nature of labor expended and the specific nature of the products acquired by means of that labor" (p. 149, Postone's emphasis)*

This variation on the theme of abstract labour introduces the notion of self-mediating labour:

*"Rather than being mediated by overtly or "recognizably" social relations, commodity-determined labor is mediated by a set of structures that it itself constitutes. Labor and its products mediate themselves in capitalism; they are self-mediating socially... The function of labor as a socially mediating activity is what Marx terms 'abstract labor'." (p. 150).*

One understands that self-mediation of labour constitutes the social relation specific to capitalism. This is incorrect, because the fundamental social relation in capitalism is of course capital's exploitation of labour, not exchange between owners of commodities. This objection doesn't bother Postone because he reduces the exchange of labour against capital to an ordinary exchange, similar to all other exchanges of commodities. This is not true. The exchange of labour power for capital is an exchange only in a formal sense. The proletariat doesn't have the choice of selling his labour power or not, and moreover he produces the value of his wage himself, before it's paid. Likewise,

Postone reduces the confrontation between proletariat and capital for the determination of wage levels to a mere functionality of the labour market. And he takes this as class struggle in its totality, paying hardly any attention to the insurrectional phases in the proletariat's history. On that basis, Postone concludes that abstract labour generates value as a "quasi objective social sphere" (p. 157) which, although constituted by people, dominates them. This is "abstract domination" (p. 126). Abstract domination dominates everything, including class struggle, which is only a part in a closed system.

Postone derives the totality of capitalist society from his concept of abstract labour. The result is that for him the overcoming of the CMP has only a vague kind of revolt for subject.

*"My concern here is... the level of possibility, that is to say, the more fundamental formulation of an approach to the problem of the social constitution of subjectivity, including the possibility of critical or oppositional consciousness". (p. 37)*

While the automatic subject takes care of people's practical reproduction, their subjectivity is satisfied with just criticizing and opposing. The proletariat plays no role here, since

*"such [social and political] actions, and what is usually referred to as working class consciousness, remain within the bounds of the capitalist social formation - and not because workers have been materially and spiritually corrupted, but because proletarian labour does not fundamentally contradict capital" (p. 371)*

On that basis, the overcoming of capitalism relies on various unconnected aspects of the "critical and oppositional consciousness" such as "different sorts of workers' dissatisfaction or lack of identification with their work" (p. 371). Postone also observes "the increasing importance of consumption to self-identity" (p. 370) and seems to rely on the critique of consumption for the formation of the revolutionary subject. Despite a vague allusion to anti-work, Postone's vision doesn't go beyond the conventional components of the proletarian program: reduction of labour time, meaningful labour, use-value economy, automation, production and (frugal) consumption facing each other, an end to excessive inequality of wealth and power, and renewed democracy to manage it all. Quite a list to conclude a thick volume that began with a lengthy critique of traditional Marxism!

This example from Postone confirms that the purpose of the concept of abstract labour is to keep work and the economy in place after a so-called abolition of value. In actual fact, work cannot exist without exploitation and, as we have seen, value has its roots in exploitation. Hence, our quick overview of TLSD allows us to understand that a theory of capital based on abstract labour cannot lead to a vision of the communist revolution. The reason for this is that the theory of value is not concerned with the fundamental social relation in the CMP. Value is nothing more than the social form of the means of production (incl. subsistence) to which both classes relate jointly. But this joint relation of the classes to the means of production is constituted by the contradictory relation between necessary- and surplus-labour and not than by the exchange of commodities, even if that commodity is labour.

#### **4.2 - The false threat of life's commoditization**

By doing away with abstract labour and abstract domination, we can also reconsider the so-called danger of life's commoditization. For example:

*"While the transition to real domination is a long historical process that continues to our day, its theoretical endpoint, a world in which the law of value penetrates all parts of the planet, all aspects of civil society, transforms every object, every activity into a commodity, absorbs every emanation of social, political and cultural life into the fabric*

*of the market, comes creepily close to what we are living." (Sander, Crisis of value, Internationalist Perspective no 51-52, Fall 2009)*

This problem is not in fact among the proletariat's central concerns. Its wage is always calculated to be minimal. And its life is limited to spending that wage, another way of saying that proletarians never attain the conditions of their private life otherwise than through the mediation of money, because they have neither reserves nor property. This is to say that value's 'creepy' invasion of social and cultural life is not the primary concern of the mass of the global proletariat. The proletarians' life is not under the threat of invasion by exchange and value: it has been their daily fare since the origin.

However, undeniably, even in proletarian families, some activities formerly assumed (mainly) by mothers for free are replaced by services that must be exchanged for money. Still, there is no need to invoke the immanent logic of value to explain this "commoditization". In various periods, capital has either brought women (and children) into or pushed them out of its working population. The subsistence basket is adjusted accordingly. And causality here must not be inverted: it is not the need to find a new fraction of population to which something can be sold that "commoditizes" the proletarians' life; on the contrary, it is the changed conditions of capital's accumulation that generate the need for a new type of workforce (e.g. women) and, in turn generate an extension or modification of the commodity basket required for its reproduction. It is not the abstract domination of the law of value as a concept that turns a family's private activities into commodities. It is the quest for a cheaper kind of manpower that leads capital to produce new commodities in section 2 in order to facilitate women's participation in the labour force. That said, it is only normal that capitalists jump on the opportunity to make a profit by selling dishwashers.

Healthcare is another example (mainly in Europe) of how a critique of commoditization is on the wrong track. In the context of strong post-war demand for manpower, healthcare was required to maintain a workforce damaged more and more quickly by Fordist labour. The notion that healthcare is a right, not a commodity, is nothing but ideological window-dressing fabricated around the post-war Fordist compromise. In reality, it was an item in the commodity basket considered necessary at the time for the proletariat's reproduction. More specifically, it was not the actual care that was part of the basket, but the insurance premiums paid into the social security system. These premiums are paid as part of the worker's indirect wage. The individual proletarian who receives care in a hospital considers that medical service a right, but it is actually the reimbursement of a cost within the framework of an insurance system into which he has paid premiums. He is thus involved in a normal (albeit collective and mandatory) exchange of commodities. The only instance in which we could speak of a "right" is if the system ran a deficit covered by state funding, which would then represent a supplementary indirect wage paid to the healthcare recipient. The end of the Fordist period put that right, as well as the general state of health of the proletariat, into question. In order to reduce the deficit, the level of insurance coverage is lowered, meaning that those rich enough have to pay part or all of their healthcare directly. Should we conclude that the law of value, which supposedly did not apply in the healthcare industry, now invades it because more and more treatments are privatized? I don't think so. What we have here is a simultaneous decrease in and modification of the subsistence basket. Formerly, medical insurance was a collective commodity paid for by indirect wages. Now it is an individual commodity paid for from direct wages. Were the sum of the direct and indirect wage to stay the same, the level of health coverage wouldn't change; there would just be a shift from one to the other. But this has obviously not been the case. The apparent transformation of healthcare into a commodity is thus a moment in the strategy of capital against the proletariat, and not the triumphal invasion of life by value. Now that there is a glut of manpower, capital can afford to have a less healthy workforce.

My purpose is to show that the law of value doesn't do anything except distribute total social production between sectors. What changes the lives of proletarians and capitalists is the

contradiction between the classes – the law of capital and the exploitation of labour. Fundamentally, this commoditization is not caused by an irrepressible expansion of value but by an increasing shortage of surplus value, by a slowed production of new value. This shortage of new value not only brought women into wage labour but led to the dismantling of public services, formerly financed out of overall new value (indirect wages and taxes), as well as their replacement by private services, for whoever is able to afford them. Public services didn't escape the law of value; they were subject to it indirectly. Today they've been replaced by private services for the rich and reduced public services for everyone else. Privatizations do not signal the triumph of value, but rather the crisis of valorisation, the shortage of surplus-value. The privatization of certain public services does not expand value but rather reduces the share of new value (indirect wages and taxes) that goes toward public services. Life's commoditization is not the triumph of value, but a redefinition of its circuits in a context of ever-slower accumulation. This process especially affects the lower middle class, whose members lose the advantage of a standard of living exceeding the "objective" value of their labour power (university tuition fees are a typical example).

### **4.3 - Is the proletariat's struggle against value or against capital?**

Does value impose a domination on the proletariat that could be considered the source of its misery and its revolts? It is true that the proletariat has an intimate knowledge of value. It is important, however, to understand that the proletariat encounters value solely in the form of capital. This is verified in the three moments of its reproduction: labour market, production, and private life.

#### **4.3.1 - Labour market**

Speaking of a labour market may lead one to think that the commodity 'labour power' is subject to the same mechanisms of the law of value as other commodities. This appearance is misleading. What determines wage variations?

The market is the place where independent producers bring their commodities in order to realize the value they contain. This value is determined by the labour time required to produce them. For the individual producer, the market and the selling of his product are the moment when he checks whether or not his production time is close to the social average. The labour market operates differently, because the production of labour power by the proletariat isn't comparable to that of an ordinary commodity. The value of labour power is determined by the value of the commodities produced in section 2 for the workers' subsistence. In other words, the value of a worker's "own" commodity is set beyond his control. He is separated from the determinants of the value of his commodity just as he is separated from the rest of his life.

The only way a worker can modify the value of his labour power is in the struggle against capital. According to the ups and downs of the struggle, wages oscillate around a level determined by the value of what is considered a normal basket of commodities under specific circumstances. But neither the value of the labour power (namely that of the subsistence basket) nor its price (the actual wage) is determined by the mechanism of a labour market regulated by the law of value. The value of labour power is determined outside of the labour market, by the productivity in section 2 and by the negotiation of wages – ultimately class struggle in both cases.

#### **4.3.2 – Production**

In the production sphere, the law of value imposes its rule on workers solely as the law of valorisation, that is, the law of capital. This can be understood in two ways.

First of all, a wage-earner is not, as in small-scale commodity production, an independent producer who goes to the market to sell his own wares. That is the capitalist's position, and he doesn't work himself. He passes on the constraints of value production (productivity, standardization) to the workers in the form of the constraint to surplus-labour. Value imposes its law on workers in an indirect way, through the mediation of labour's subsumption under capital. The capitalist is subject to the law of value (as translated by production prices). He secures his place in the social division of

labour by achieving the average rate of profit, but this is never guaranteed. The only way he can beat the odds is to push his workers to produce as much surplus-value as possible. Capital has a monopoly over the means of production, ensuring that the law of value, to which the capitalist is subject, is passed along to the workers inside the factory as the law of capital. It is this law, not value, that is the agent of domination. And this domination is not at all abstract.

Second, workers in production have a relationship of cooperation. The fact that cooperation belongs, up to a point, to capital implies a form of fetishism: fixed capital appears to be working and producing value. Marx calls this the "transposition of the social productive powers of labour into material attributes of capital" (Draft chapter 6, Mystification of Capital). Simply raising the issue of fetishism points to the idea of abstract domination. As if the fetishization of fixed capital as an independent productive power flowed from abstract domination. But in reality, this notion of capital fetishism is quite different from commodity fetishism. What makes the relations among workers in cooperation appear to be relations among components in a system of machines is not value, but valorisation. It is not value (of machines? of the commodities produced? of the raw material processed?) that distributes workers along the various points in the productive system, but mechanization, fixed capital. And the accumulation of fixed capital is, in the final analysis, a form taken by the capitalists' war against the workers' resistance to exploitation. Fixed capital is a form of the constraint to surplus labour. The law of capital affects workers in the workshop in the form of the constraint to produce surplus labour. The workers perceive their own cooperation as a foreign and hostile power, although not as a commodity but rather as capital. Again, the proletariat knows the law of value as the law of capital.

#### **4.3.3 - Private life**

The third moment in a proletarian's reproduction comes when he spends his wage in order to reproduce himself as labour power. For that, he enters the retail market, where section 2 capitalists sell him the various commodities making up his subsistence basket. Here, it would seem, we are in a pure market where the law of value rules freely. Well, not quite.

It is true, from the capitalists' point of view, that the law of value regulates the distribution of their general activity. They compete to sell their commodities in exchange for the mass of wages. The most competitive are those on the market who produce, at the highest productivity, the utility values best adapted to the proletariat's life. And quite logically, they direct their investments and sales towards the regions or countries where wages are highest.

Things look different from the proletariat's perspective. If the law of value played freely, proletarians would "naturally" go to regions where subsistence is cheaper. This is not what actually happens. While they do live in suburbs rather than downtown because housing there is less expensive (not in North America), this is strictly limited by the need for proximity to their workplace. Proletarians cannot live all in Africa, though it's very cheap over there. This example shows that the subsistence market is not as free as consumer-society ideology would like us to believe. The so-called consumer society is a middle class phenomenon. For the vast majority of the world's proletarians, spending one's wage only ensures the most immediate and basic reproduction. The subsistence market isn't a free market where the law of value abstractly dominates the circulation of section 2 commodities. It is a very particular market. On that market, the proletarian is subjected to a double constraint. On the one hand, he has very little money to spend and cannot buy many commodities. On the other, what little he can buy must first and foremost serve to reproduce him as saleable labour power. The life of the proletarian between two production cycles is entirely determined by the necessity of returning to work once the wage has been spent. The worker is not allowed to spend his wage on commodities that don't reproduce him as saleable labour power. If he drinks it, spends it on games or on a fabulous trip, he will soon be thrown out of the

labour force for not spending his wage on priority commodities like food, housing, or a car, which condition his ability to exist as labour power. This dual constraint is not the law of value, but the law of capital. It stems from the separation of workers from the means of production. The proletariat's life is subjected, not to value's abstract domination, but to the concrete modalities of labour's subordination to capital.

To conclude, throughout the cycle of its reproduction, the proletariat is face-to-face with value. But he knows it only as capital, and confronts it in that guise. This leads us to the predictable conclusion that the proletariat rises up, not because as labour power, it would be one among many commodities subjected to value's abstract domination, but rather because, being without reserves and therefore constrained to surplus labour, it is totally separated from the conditions of its life, which confront it as capital.

#### **4.4 - Value and class struggle**

We have said that the proletariat knows value only as capital. Now we need to look at how the contradictory class relationship impacts, or not, value as the social form of the means of production and as a mass of capital to be valorised. The class relationship is constantly contradictory, but we have to distinguish the phases during which the contradiction recurs more or less smoothly from those when it explodes violently.

##### **4.4.1 - Daily struggles and devalorisation**

Let's start with the situations of smooth reproduction . This is when class struggles follow their daily course without endangering capital as a whole but at most some individual capitals. What happens to value in this daily class struggle? Capital is a mass of value to be valorised by living labour. If labour goes on strike, for example, the capitalist naturally suffers a loss (as do, generally, the workers!). Any stoppage of production reduces the mass of surplus value delivered per hour, day, etc. For a capitalist confronted with a strike, it is as though his capital dropped in value relatively to the prevailing average rate of profit. There is a loss of value in terms of both reduced output and capital devalorisation. Further losses may also be incurred due to damage, plundering, sabotage, etc.

To avoid the costs of class struggle arising from the existence of protesting workers, capitalists try to replace them with machines. On the surface, the accumulation of fixed capital may appear to result from competition among capitalists. But if we look deeper, we see that the resistance of workers to exploitation is the fundamental cause. True, each capitalist seeks to produce his commodity at minimum costs to win more market share. He therefore tries to increase productivity. Competition, however, doesn't lead automatically to investment in more modern machinery, to the accumulation of fixed capital. The first, and least expensive, way to increase productivity is to step up the pace of work, which doesn't necessitate investing in new machines. But that cheap solution is no longer feasible when the intensified exploitation comes up against the workers' resistance. That is exactly what happened in the western world at the end of the 1960's, and what has been underway in China since the mid-2000's. The costs of class struggle become too high. Workers' resistance or even open revolt cause such great losses that the capitalists try to eliminate part of the workforce and discipline the rest by shifting to a higher level of automation. The quest for productivity leads to the accumulation of fixed capital only because of the workers' resistance to their intensified exploitation. The impact of the daily class struggle is thus devalorisation. This is another way of saying that devalorisation is inherent to the normal functioning of the CMP. The loss of value is due either to the costs of class struggle when it blocks production or to the constraint that the class struggle imposes on capital, pushing it to raise its organic composition.

Throughout the process, neither the reciprocal presupposition of classes nor value as a social form are put into question. And as long as the reciprocal presupposition of classes is operative, the daily

class struggle, even violent clashes between the classes are merely adjustment mechanisms which imply loss of value but do not call into question value as a social form or capital as a social relationship. This changes when the class relation becomes pure confrontation, namely insurrection.

#### **4.4.2 - Insurrection and 'devalorization': changing the social form of nature**

In times of crisis, the class antagonism grows more acute and the proletariat's resistance multiplies the struggles. At some point, a rupture occurs: the proletariat rises up massively, and the insurrection modifies the model and impact of class struggle. The subjectivity of the exploited class changes in form and content, and this is what makes the way for a communist overcoming possible (if not certain).

Insurrections have occurred throughout the history of the CMP: some phases of the Luddite movement (1812-1819), the Canuts in Lyon, June 1848 in Paris, the Paris Commune, the uprising of German sailors and workers in November 1918, the East-German workers' revolt in 1953 or that of the Iranian proletariat in 1979. Not to mention many other, less well known or unheard of; it is impossible to list them all. In each, the proletariat rises up suddenly and violently against the conditions imposed by capital. Generally, the uprising follows a period of agitation, of multiple struggles, of political discussions. However, and this is crucial, there is a qualitative break between the daily course of the class struggle, even in an intensified form, and the explosion of a potentially revolutionary insurrection. The defining feature of this rupture is that the insurgent proletarians form their own social relation, among themselves, by taking possession of elements of capitalist property. In its uprising, the proletariat responds to the impossibility it faces of socialization within capital through its labour. The conditions offered by the capitalists, under the circumstances determined by the moment, are considered unacceptable. In their unwillingness to accept these conditions, the proletarians enter into the "deadly isolation" (Marx) of the pure subject. They are brought face-to-face with the whole of society as capital. The insurrection re-socializes the proletariat in and through its struggle against capital. It attacks by taking possession of specific elements that belong to capital. Whether by unpaving the streets of Paris, taking control of vessels in Kiel harbour, occupying factories or plundering Los Angeles shops, proletarians initially attack capital with bare hands. Before rising up, they are deprived of everything. So they have to seize from the capitalists' property the material means of their physical and social existence, namely of their struggle and their immediate reproduction. Their activity of reproduction, the very life of the insurrection, can only exist by what they can snatch from capital (buildings, means of production, weapons, food...). By taking possession of elements of capital, they invent the social relation specific to insurrection. The fact that the insurrection is a social relation among proletarians is what makes the communist overcoming possible.

Like any social relation (in the fundamental sense of human self-production as opposed to just that of a group of individuals), the insurrection gives that part of nature that it incorporates a specific social form. For a relation between men to be social in the fundamental sense, it has to include a reproductive relationship with nature, which gives the latter a specific social form. The same is true for the social relationship that the proletariat forms within itself to fight capital. And for the proletariat, nature exists as capital, as property it is excluded from. By seizing elements of capitalist property, the proletariat re-socializes and re-naturalizes itself. It takes possession the streets and factories, takes over buildings, loots shops, etc., and gives them a social form specific to the insurrectional social relationship. But don't all these elements already have a social form, namely value? Yes they have, but in the insurrection, their social form changes. Having been seized from capital and integrated into the insurrectional social relation, they no longer function as utility value or exchange value. Let's take a closer look at this.

Insurgents never work: they take hold of buildings, equipment, vehicles, etc. Not only do they divert the utility value of such elements (bolts may serve as munitions, meeting rooms as

dormitories, etc.), but it is up to them to determine exactly how they will be diverted. In periods of prosperity, the capitalist social relation automatically gives the machines, raw materials, buildings, etc. the form of means of production and constant capital to be valorized. In an insurrection, on the contrary, nothing is decided in advance, everything is discussed and determined according to the changing initiatives in the struggle. During an insurrection, cars are not necessarily used solely to build barricades. It is up to the insurgents, in their interactive relations, to reach a decision: barricades, means of transportation, incendiary rams... When they seize elements of constant capital, the insurgents give them a particular, non-standardized use, invented on the spot by the insurrection.

We can readily understand why insurgents seize means of subsistence. But we have to see this as more than an act of basic survival. As opposed to what happens when capital buys labour power, the consumption of subsistence doesn't have its usual function of producing fresh labour power (see § 4.3.3). The rationality of insurrectional sociality is completely different, as can be seen in the way the seized subsistence is consumed. Labour power does not have to be reconstituted, since work itself has ceased, and the insurgents use the seized objects with a liberty unthinkable in the normal course of capitalist reproduction. Playing, sharing, destroying are possible uses for the wares looted in a supermarket. There is free access to these means, and the modes of consumption change (collective kitchen). Furthermore, many of the items of subsistence are not found in supermarkets, such as housing or means of collective transportation. Here, too, many sorts of detournement are conceivable.

By seizing elements of capital, the insurrection negates their utility value. Those objects don't function as commodities in an insurrectional social relation. They don't enter the social relation to be exchanged. Their former value doesn't count anymore, and the time expended on their seizure, on their detournement, is not measured. In other words, due to the insurrectional way the insurgents come into contact with them, they cease to function as value or capital. The insurgents' activity is neither standardized nor productivist. Value is the social form that the means of production (including subsistence) take in a system where producers are independent and private. This formulation cannot be applied to the means of production and consumption seized by the insurrection. The insurrectional social relation invents a new social form for them. For lack of a better term, let's call that form non-value. Such a neologism is necessary to clearly define the social form of the fractions of capital to which insurgents relate. Their activity with regard to them is neither standardized nor productivist. They thus cease to be value for them. They nonetheless consist of objects that capital produced as part of its valorisation process. This origin of the objects partially limits their potential uses. A supermarket is not a "normal" or "natural" way of providing food for the population. It is a specific way for capital to sell commodities. When the insurrection takes a supermarket, it negates its social form of capital (for the building) and of commodities (for the content), but their physical form remains. "Non-value" conveys this duality better than a formula like "critique of the commodity", which doesn't show the specific social form of the elements seized by the specific social relation among the insurgent proletarians.

Let's call devaluation this metamorphosis from value to non-value. The devaluation of the means seized by the insurgents for their struggle is to be distinguished from the devaluation of capital. The former indicates that what an insurrection generates is more than just a loss of value. It doesn't give the form of exchangeability to the means it seizes. It gives a new social form to the material basis of a new social relation, which is historically unprecedented because it is inter-individual and without work.

The insurrectional social relation could be considered the absolute non-fetishism. The relations among insurgents have a material base, but they never appear as the relations of the objects they have seized. The (relative) freedom that proletarians conquer when they rise up consists first of all in the manifestation of their individuality (as opposed to class contingency). Individuals constantly

interact. Everything is debated, called into question. Lots of time is "lost" in countless general meetings (unlike the discipline and time measurement existing at work). And this social relation gives to the fraction of seized capital it encompasses the appropriate social form, i.e. devoid of standardization, with multiple potential uses for the seized objects. Non-value also implies that the seized objects are used but not exchanged.

The non-value social form corresponds to the degree of freedom and consciousness which the insurrection's social activity attains compared to the daily course of capitalist reproduction, since the proletarians' activity is then neither productivist nor standardized. The possibility of a communist overcoming is grounded in this gained freedom and consciousness. They are won, not by struggling against the abstract domination of value, but by the insurrection in its struggle against capital, against the separation and the deadly isolation of proletarians without reserves.

#### **4.5 - Value abolished: abolishing labour**

Value is essentially a form: the form of exchangeability that the valorizing labour of the proletariat gives to the products. But the proletariat knows value only as capital. Value is what has to be valorized, and this only happens through the contradictory relationship of the classes. Therefore, the theory of value cannot be a theory of revolution. It is only a part of it – and probably not the most decisive. That does not mean, however, that we should simply dismiss it. Within the framework of the abstractive effort that communist theory has to understand the relation between capitalism and communism, the theory of value plays a double function. First, the theory of value asserts the link between labour and the ghostlike forms taken by its products in the CMP, namely value and money. This link posits labour and its exploitation, i.e. the contradictory relation between the classes, as the real subject of the apparently automatic development of an apparently reified society. Second, the definition of value as the social form of the means of production and of value production as a historically specific, standardizing and productivist activity gives a key to understanding the overcoming of the CMP. Each successive form of communist theory relied on its implicit or explicit understanding of value to project its negation and give a more or less precise definition of value abolished. And this definition contributes in turn to the critique of political economy and the revolutionary project by assigning it its goal. Although logically the definition of value seems to come first, it is always formulated with an implicit or explicit idea in mind, grounded in the struggles at the time, of what value abolished could mean. We saw this with Marx (chapters 1 and 2). The redefinition of value that I offer is no exception to the rule. It proceeds from the specific conditions of crisis in the years around 1968 and its anti-work content. That phase of not really insurrectional crisis<sup>1</sup> occurred years ago. But the changes in the class relation since then have in no way brought that content into question (see above Crisis activity and communisation). I discussed above the two defining features of value-producing labour: the permanent quest for productivity gains and the necessity of standardization (see chapter 3.3). What definition could we give of the negation of these two features, negation which would define value abolished?

##### **4.5.1 - Negation of productivity**

If we consider a productive activity that does not seek productivity, the first thing that strikes us is a completely different relationship to time. The fact that time is no longer measured doesn't mean it no longer exists. However, when it is negated as the criterion for evaluating the productive activity, time's inexorable flow ceases to be a constraint on production. The commodity-based society accepts or rejects the participation of a producer by evaluating the time he spent producing his commodities. The resulting constraint on the producer is to constantly check that he produces at maximum productivity. Failure to observe this rule leads to his exclusion from the society of producers by excluding his commodities from the market. The negation of productivity replaces this quantitative time-based appreciation of the legitimacy of a productive activity with a qualitative evaluation. We lack words to describe the relationship that humans will have with their production

in a valueless society. "Appreciation" derives from price, "evaluation", from value. These are words of the commodity world, of quantity. Neither is suitable to define the qualitative satisfaction which, in communism, is generated (or not) by a productive activity, for those who produce or who use the product. One of the reasons is that the activity we are considering won't only be productive.

In class societies, production of the material conditions of life and enjoyment are separated, each defining one of the two classes, labour and property. "Enjoyment", as opposed to immediate work, designates here the activity of the class of property. The surplus that the latter derives from exploiting labour enables it to establish a self-relationship that labour is unable to develop. This self-relationship concerns not only the owner's management of his property but, by extension, the exploitation of labour and the management of society as a whole, as well as so-called superior activities like art and thought. Enjoyment refers here to much more than the pleasures of luxury and leisure.

In work per se, the activity's object consists of the means of production (tools, raw material, etc.). Limiting ourselves to that framework, the activity is objectified in a result (the product) which, by definition, is not a subject but a thing. The worker's subjectivity seems to have been lost in the thing (which cannot react). This explains why objectivation is in this sense frequently equated with alienation. In fact, neither the worker nor the owner are subjects in and of themselves. In a fundamental sense, to say that humans are subjects means that they produce themselves, that they are their own object in social relations which change under the impact of their activity. In this sense, the objectivation of work is not so much the product as the social relationship which results from work and its exploitation. Work and property, their relation, is what constitutes the subject. It is only at that level that we can grasp man producing himself as history. In a class society, the subject of human self-production is structured by the relation of the two classes to the same means of production, one as a means of work and the other as a means of enjoyment. The objectivation of this divided subject is a contradictory social relation. Neither of the poles can on its own posit society as its exclusive object and act on it according to its class-determined being. Each of them is prevented from relating directly to that object by the contradictory relationship necessarily linking it to the other class. In other words, each class is separated from the social totality, which develops independently of either class' will.

Production which has time, as opposed to labour, can enjoy its own activity immediately. It can be a self-relationship. The negation of productivity incorporates enjoyment into the activity, which thereby becomes not-only-productive. Here again, enjoyment must be understood in the broad sense of the term. Effort and fatigue are not excluded. The mind and body can enjoy them in an activity freed from the constraint of time, because it is possible to stop, to discuss, to do something else, to make changes, to adapt the activity to the participants' possibilities and requirements, etc. No word exists for this kind of activity. Let's call this totalizing activity – in which humans do not have to give up enjoying their relationship because they produce something – a not-only-productive-activity (NOPA). This formulation conveys the same idea of overcoming separations as Marx's in *The German Ideology* when he discusses the appropriation of a totality of instruments of production as the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves. But, unlike Marx, we attempt to go beyond the limits of the productive sphere. For us, the "totality of capacities" exceeds the sphere of production and subverts the very concept of an economy by rejecting time accounting and by directly incorporating self-enjoyment into what was formerly "production". For Marx, what defines a totalizing activity is the acquisition of multiple skills by communist workers. For us, it is simply individuals doing more than just producing as they move through the places of life/production in search of the company of others.

The negation of productivity that we posit here as our hypothesis naturally presupposes the abolition of property. Only then (when exploitation is ended) can productive activity cease to be subject to time accounting. Then, not-only-productive-activity is man's real conscious goal, and not

just the thing produced. This is objectivation without alienation, i.e. objectivation in the relationships that men establish among themselves, in which production and enjoyment are no longer mutually exclusive and become the true object of their activity. NOPA is a comprehensive relation among men and with nature. Individuals incorporate the sources and manifestations of their pleasure at being together into that also-productive relationship, because they have the time, and thus no reason not to do so. And they put the means of their immediate reproduction in that also-enjoying relationship, which is now possible because the new relation to time opens the way for a totalizing activity. In that sense, their activity requires no further justification, either external or subsequent. To be, not to have.

#### **4.5.2 - Negation of standardization**

As we said above (§ 3.3.2), product standardization is a consequence of the separation characterizing the situation of the independent private producer in relation to the needs he has to satisfy. To understand what overcoming standardization implies, we have to envisage what the abolition of separations that we perceive as totally normal could mean. The separation that concerns us most here lies between the need and the object satisfying that need and, even more so, between the need and the activity producing that object. Due to this separation, the commodity must take the form of a standardized utility value so that it can encompass the particularity of everyone's needs and at the same time occult that particularity. If, according to our hypothesis, we posit property as positively abolished, the certainty of finding satisfaction defines need as need-without-want (NWW). This need at peace can assert its particularity not as an individual whim (I want strawberries immediately), but as discussion, interaction, as a project which is not simply consumption. We have to redefine the notion of need.

A redefinition of productive activity as NOPA will no doubt raise protest among those who, as realists, argue that the needs will be massive and, of course, won't disappear. Communist production, they will surely claim, will have to mobilize all available resources to satisfy those needs. And they will draw up economic plans to organize the aftermath of the revolution. Instead of giving in to overly reasonable realism, we should question the categories we use. We have to examine the problem of resources and needs from a non-economic perspective and question the very notion of need. In communism, should we continue positing needs as "demand", a quasi-natural variable, to be met by productive activity as a "supply" subjected to necessity? The answer is no. It is always possible to argue, on the basis of the obvious, apparently natural fact, that six billion people need 2000 calories per day, entailing the production of  $x$  wheat +  $y$  meat +  $z$  milk... As realistic common sense would say, communism won't overcome hunger any more than it could get rid of gravity. Hunger reminds us continuously that we are part of nature and that no revolution can abolish the laws of nature. That is true. But hunger in its present form, as we know it today, also reminds us that we are separated by capital not only from the object of its satisfaction but also from the activity producing that object. Hunger reminds us simultaneously that we are part of nature and that we are separated from it by capital. So our hunger isn't only natural. We know hunger, a natural phenomenon par excellence, solely as it has been perverted by property and exploitation into suffering, fear of want, domination of capital on the object which can satisfy it. Under such conditions, how can we tell whether hunger as we feel it is purely natural or determined socially? Doesn't it appear at intervals dictated by the workday and the rhythm of exploitation? Conversely, once it is devoid of anxiety and assured of satisfaction, why shouldn't hunger be enjoyment as well, like desire during the preliminaries to lovemaking, which is actively involved in the satisfaction of the lovers' need? The basic need (2000 calories) remains the same but, as need-without-want, becomes an integral part of the not-only-productive-activity (gastronomy?) which simultaneously reveals and satisfies it. These general considerations are only a first approach to what the non-economy could be in the communisation process.

Need-without-want enters into not-only-productive-activity to ensure that the productive activity

remains particular to the individuals who engage in it, and not general and abstract, meeting a separate demand. This is totally anti-productive, because considerable time will be "lost" in formulating the need in its particularity, taking in consideration both the nature of the object to be produced and the possibilities for producing it. A common objection is that certain needs can only be satisfied by 'dirty jobs'. Will the need for coal enter into coalmines to turn mining into a totalizing activity and enjoyment? Yes. The participation of need-without-want in not-only-productive-activity doesn't mean that the individuals concerned should consciously admit coal has to be mined and set themselves to the task. This would be ultra-democratic planning, assumed by militant workers. What it means is that coal will be mined in such a way that it becomes a relationship among "miners" which is satisfying per se. Producing not immediately consumable goods or goods for others will not entail any sacrifice. This likewise applies to immediately consumable goods. Realists say: "there will always be dirty tasks, they will have to be done". I consider it essential to clearly affirm that there won't be dirty jobs anymore. Tasks that are presently dirty, degrading, boring, etc. will be either abandoned or transformed. The alternative is to take turns, thereby introducing managers and privileges. Unless one accepts the notion of communist men and women as militants.

In short, there will be no time "lost". The continuous interaction between NOPA and NWW is materialized as social activity and enjoyment of the individuals. Since a need is not determined by pressing want, it emerges concretely and actively within NOPA, where it is readily discussed because there is time and the activity is, by definition, not just productive. The activity is more important than what it produces in the sense that the fundamental need is to exist socially, to enjoy the society of others. This does not contradict (momentary) needs for solitude. Marx says that work will be the first need because he sees work as man's fundamental subjective (generic) activity. This proposition must be broadened: social activity, i.e. enjoying being free and conscious, social and natural, active and passive, will be the first need. The notion of need-without-want tries to convey the possibility of need as interaction among individuals, as conscious project, rather than as a natural limit imposing economic realism and planification on the part of revolutionaries. If work and property are posited as positively overcome, then need has to be envisaged as without want, which in the final analysis is part of not-only-productive-activity.

### **Conclusion**

Of course, this "if" is a major shortcut, and the above doesn't fill the gap satisfactorily. The theory of value is not a theory of revolution. The theory of revolution assumes an understanding of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society. That contradiction takes place within the class relation, which alone holds potential for overcoming capital and abolishing classes, work, exploitation and value. As we have seen, the prerequisite is the insurrectional social relation. Here much remains to be done to understand why and how communisation will get production under way again without productivist measures. These questions go beyond the scope of this text.

Ultimately, our revision of the Marxian theory of value has been useful mainly in disposing of the non-problem of abstract labour. In value theory, abstract labour is the sign of a programmatic vision of communist theory in general: revolution is projected as the self-affirmation of the working class and its substitution for the capitalist class. On that basis, communism is defined as the hegemonic rule of labour ("one who doesn't work doesn't eat"), economic planning by "associated workers". In this program, work is practically the same before and after the revolution. Value-producing labour is termed "abstract" to mask this identity.

As for us, we have concretely defined value-producing labour as the quest for productivity gains and standardization. By defining valorising labour concretely, we made it easier to understand what a valueless productive activity could be. We showed that it is necessarily a not-only-productive activity, which overcomes labour. The relation to time is radically transformed, as is the notion of need. Man's freedom and consciousness are realized in a non-economic activity, which is no longer

subject to the pressure of time and to the separation between needs and the resources to meet them. Like many others concepts, those of "production" and "consumption" are then obsolete.

B.A.  
October  
2015