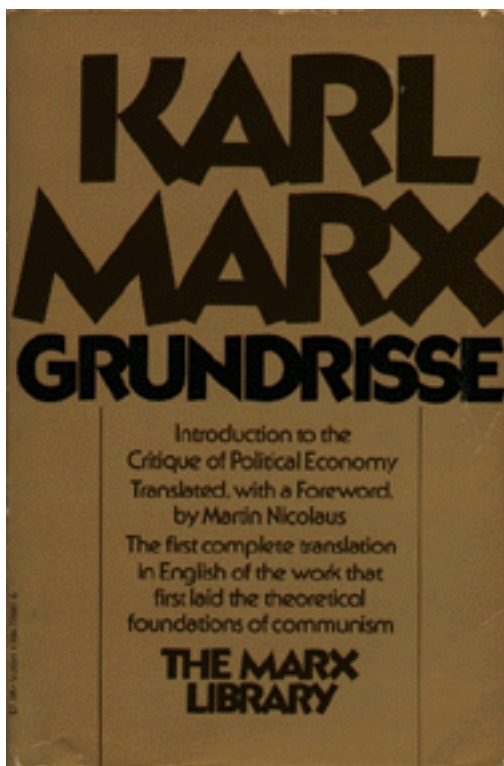


The Labor of Fire: On Time and Labor in the *Grundrisse*

Bruno Gullì

Labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time. -- Marx



1. The thisness of time and production

The *Grundrisse* is a work about time, and it is so in a fundamental sense. This means that time is the most fundamental category of the *Grundrisse*. Again, it means that time is the *subject* of Marx's critique of political economy -- subject in the double sense of subject-matter (or object) and of ground (or foundation). This becomes evident as soon as one opens the *Grundrisse*: "The object before us, to begin with, *material production*" (Marx, 1973, 83). This is how *Notebook M* starts. But *material production* is time, both as objectified and as subjective labor. The *tense* of this time which is immediately labor is alternatively the perfect or present tense: "The difference between previous, objectified labour and living, present labour here [i.e., in the accumulation

of capital] appears as a merely formal difference between the different tenses of labour, at one time in the perfect and at another in the present" (465-466; brackets added). Material production is, then, time both as *having been produced* and as *producing*, as *having become* and as *becoming*. The difference between these two modalities is the difference between the substantial form of capital and living labor, between the capitalist and the worker. It is a difference which presents itself immediately as antagonism and opposition. It is, in fact, the structural constitution of the class struggle.

But Marx also says: "Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself" (173). This means, again, that time is the irreducible subject of political economy as a science as well as of the critique of political economy. But time as being is also the subject of metaphysics. And if time itself, as Kant says, does not change while everything

else changes in time¹-- if, in other words, time remains (in substance) identical with itself -- yet, at the same time and in a certain respect, it changes, for *this* time is different from *that* time, and there is no time over and beyond each *this* of its individuation. This means that each moment contracts all time within itself, and that the present -- as Benjamin stressed -- is always in transition.² In terms of what Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, this means that, even though each mode of production is precisely only *a* mode, the individuating modality is not simply an external addition. If all time is contracted in *this* moment and all production in *this* mode of production, the modality itself, far from being extrinsic and general, is essential and singular.

The problem of production is then the problem of time, for production is time. Now, it is as absurd to speak of *time in general* as it is to speak of *production in general*. "Whenever we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development -- production by social individuals" (Marx, 1973, 85). The *principium individuationis* is here stated in all its meaningfulness. There is no production beyond the *this* of production. "Production is always a *particular* branch of production . . . or it is a *totality*" (86). Whether it is considered in its particularity or in its totality, production is a concrete whole, and this is what *material production* stands for: a sort of Aristotelian composite of matter (material) and form (production). Of course, "production in general" can be used as a "rational abstraction," for -- as Marx says -- "it really brings out and fixes the *common element* [of all production] and thus saves us repetition" (85; brackets and emphasis added). But that it saves us repetition does not mean that production in general or general production is actually found as either a concrete or abstract reality. As an abstraction, it is only rational, i.e., purely formal and empty. It is not the *determinate abstraction* (cf. Negri, 1991a, 47) Marx will speak about when he deals with abstract labor or with the question of method. In fact, in these latter two cases -- of which more will be said later -- the abstraction is still historically determined and it fully and exclusively belongs to the capitalist mode of production. But this is not the case with production in general or general production, where it is not yet a question of "the relationship between scientific presentation [*Darstellung*] and the real movement" (Marx, 1973, 86). Indeed, the aim of those economists who start with general production (with "the *general preconditions* of all production") is in actuality "to present production . . . as distinct from distribution etc., as encased in eternal natural laws independent of history, at which opportunity *bourgeois* relations are then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded" (87). An eminently political aim.

It is very important not to confuse the empty, merely formal and rational abstraction, which may nonetheless have a certain usefulness in discourse and method, with the determinate abstraction which has a massive socio-ontological status of its own. In other words, it is important not to confuse the empty formula of the thing with the thing's inner structure and power, the level of predication with that of reality.

All of the above does not cancel the truth that "all epochs of production have certain *common traits, common characteristics* [*Bestimmungen*]" (85; brackets and emphasis added). This commonality is certainly very important. However, even more important are

the different determinations, the *essential difference*, without which a mode of production would not be *this* mode. Indeed, the word "mode" in the expression "mode of production" is fundamental. If one spoke about production in general, one would be speaking about a *what* without knowing *which what* it was, without knowing the *how* of the *what*. But that would amount to speaking about something very indefinite and vague. Furthermore, the *how* that constitutes a *what* as *this what* is not an accidental one. Rather, it is essential. Yet, by being essential, it is not eternal, immutable, and common. It is essential, and yet it is a difference. It is, in fact, an *essential difference*: ". . . the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity -- which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature -- their *essential difference* is not forgotten" (85; emphasis added).

The importance of distinguishing between the *essential difference* and the *common element* of production cannot be stressed enough. In fact, by confusing the two, bourgeois political economy is able to prove, *logically*, that capital is a necessary and common element of production. The syllogism of political economy is as follows: Since no production is possible without an instrument of production or past labor and since capital is also an instrument of production and past labor, then capital is "a general, eternal relation of nature" (85-86). Of course, Marx adds, "that is, if I leave out just the *specific quality* which *alone* makes 'instrument of production' and 'stored-up labour' into 'capital'" (86; emphasis added). The logic of bourgeois political economy makes capital into a common element of all modes of production because it does not isolate the specific determinations from the common determinations of production. Both kinds of determinations are essential, but they are not essential in the same way. Of course, all epochs have both specific and common determinations, but whereas the latter are always the same, the former are each time different. That the specific determinations are also essential only means that production is not conceivable without a *mode* of production. That they are different means that this mode always changes (and yet *a* mode must be there). The capitalist mode of production is not production proper, i.e., production as immediate subjective creation, though the concept of production proper is subsumed within it. Fundamentally, the capitalist mode of production requires the conversion of use value into exchange value, the reduction of the labor capacity to a commodity, and the creation of surplus value. On the other hand, the common element of production is nothing but the "already" of "the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature" (85), namely, living labor. However, in the *already* of this identity, living labor is always useful labor.³ It is, of course, time, but time as quality not as quantity. With the coming of a commodity economy -- and particularly with capital -- living labor is split into two different aspects or properties: useful (or concrete) and abstract labor -- "different in their very essence" (Marx, 1977, 309). Abstract labor, which at first could seem as the common element, is, in reality, a specific quality of the logic of exchange value.⁴ In fact, abstract labor is the creator of value, which is the substance of exchange value and thus of money. However, this does not mean that abstract labor is a pure invention of capital. Rather, it is that aspect of living labor which capital is able to isolate and extract, to reproduce, and be produced by.⁵ The implication is not that abstract labor is in complete opposition to useful labor. In fact, there can be no expenditure of the

former without expenditure of the latter. Thus, even though capital's only interest is time as quantity, it cannot avoid the quality of time as a plurality of subjective practices.

Remark 1: Dialectic and Metaphysics

A. To speak about time is, in general, to speak about metaphysics or ontology. Now, this can seem strange, for Marx is certainly an anti-metaphysical thinker. Indeed, insofar as Marx's philosophy is based on dialectic, it is an anti-metaphysical philosophy. In fact, dialectical thinking represents one of the ways in which western philosophy has tried to overcome or get rid of metaphysics. Hence, dialectic and metaphysics have often been contrasted as opposite. The opposition between dialectic and metaphysics can be reduced to the opposition -- within presocratic philosophy -- between Heraclitus and Parmenides. Supposedly, the former says that everything constantly changes, everything is in flux; the latter that nothing ever changes, that everything remains the same. The former presents a philosophy of becoming; the latter a philosophy of permanence. However, this view is not necessarily correct. Both Hegel and Heidegger have shown the fundamental agreement between the philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Moreover, reality itself shows -as soon as one thinks a little about it -- that becoming and permanence cannot be in a position of mutual exclusion, but rather that the one cannot be without the other. The correct view would then be that things change and yet do not change. In other words, they change in certain respects and do not change in others.⁶

B. The question of dialectic raises the question of the relation of Marx to Hegel, as well as the question of the relation of the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*. According to Negri (1991a), these questions are resolved by denying anything which is more than a terminological and conceptual resemblance between Hegel and Marx and by establishing the *Grundrisse* as autonomous from *Capital*. For Negri, the *Grundrisse* is not a rough draft to be used for philological purposes, but a *political text* in its own right. Indeed, the *Grundrisse* is for him superior to *Capital*, for the *openness* of the former makes possible what the *objectified categories* of the latter impede: the action by revolutionary subjectivity (8-9).⁷ At the end of his book, Negri denies the dialectic, "that eternal formula of Judeo-Christian thought, that circumlocution for saying -- in the Western world -- rationality" (189).

Rosdolsky, on the other hand and before Negri, sees what he constantly calls the *Rough Draft* as "a massive reference to Hegel, in particular to his *Logic*" (1977, xiii) and considers superficial the view that Marx's relation to Hegel is only terminological and external. Furthermore, as the title of his book explicitly says, the *Grundrisse* is for Rosdolsky a preparation to *Capital*. However, he warns that one "should not . . . exaggerate the similarity of the two works" (51). And pointing to the transformation of money into capital as an important moment of this similarity, he concludes: "Both are the product of Marx's dialectical method . . . *The difference lies only in the method of presentation*" (189-190; emphasis added).

It is evident that the views of Rosdolsky and Negri are diametrically opposed, yet their opposition does not require that readers of the *Grundrisse* or of Marx in general take sides with either one or the other. As Rosdolsky's reference to Schumpeter shows,⁸ his interpretation tends toward an appraisal of the dialectic against a background which seems to reduce the hermeneutical options to either metaphysics⁹ or positive science. Rosdolsky's further references, to Lenin and Lukács, make it clear that the question of the dialectic and of its passage from Hegel to Marx -- notwithstanding the latter's radical and materialist inversion of it-- has to remain central within marxism, against both vulgar metaphysics and its offspring, positivism. "The publication of the *Grundrisse* means that academic critics of Marx will no longer be able to write without first having studied his method and its relation to Hegel" (Rosdolsky, 1977, xiii).

Negri, however, starts from different theoretical and practical premises. His reading, which stems out of the experience of the Autonomy Movement in Italy and is in accordance with the Althusserian and Deleuzian destruction of Hegelianism, is also an attack against the orthodoxy of marxism and of the traditional communist party. Furthermore, by abandoning the dialectic, Negri is not concerned with the question as to whether marxism is a metaphysics or a positive science. He has, in fact -- at the time of *Marx beyond Marx* and subsequently -- a different conception of metaphysics, namely, metaphysics as an antagonistic and alternative political ontology, or constitutive practice, which seems to have little or no use of the categories of traditional dialectic. In this sense, the dialectic also falls within the vulgar metaphysics it tried to combat.

The question of the relation of the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* and of Marx to Hegel becomes a hermeneutical and a political question. Of course, hermeneutics itself is always political, yet it is not so in a dogmatic way. I cannot elaborate on this problem here, but I will try to present a few suggestions. It is, I believe, fair to say that Rosdolsky's view is hermeneutically correct insofar as it considers the dialectic as intrinsic to the real movement *and* to the mode of presentation in the *Grundrisse*. In this sense, it is also fair to say that the *Grundrisse* can illuminate the reading of *Capital*. However, it is also important to recognize the *openness* of Marx's dialectic against the circularity of the dialectic of Hegel. Thus Hegel goes to pieces when the form of capital proves to be unable to return to itself, when what seemed to be a circle turns out to be a spiral. "Exchange value posited as the unity of commodity and money is *capital*, and this positing itself appears as the circulation of capital. (*Which is, however, a spiral, an expanding curve, not a simple circle*)" (Marx, 1973, 266; emphasis added). But circularity is, for Hegel, the *essential requirement* of dialectical logic: "The essential requirement for the science of logic is . . . that the whole of the science be within itself a circle in which the first is also the last and the last is also the first" (Hegel, 1989, 71). Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra to the dwarf who said that "time itself is a circle," Marx is saying to an ideal Hegel (for instance, to Proudhon): "do not make things too easy for yourself!" (Nietzsche, 1954, 270). However, the spiral movement is not a denial of the dialectic; it is rather a denial of the circularity which lies more in the movement of the concept than in the real movement.¹⁰ Indeed, the dialectic still remains as the motor of a movement which breaks free of the circle into a spiral. At this point, the question must be posed as to why the dialectic is unable to perform the circular movement prescribed by

Hegel and why what was supposed to be the end and coincide with the beginning is displaced and thrown into the open.

The answer to the above questions is to be looked for in the concepts and in *the reality* of crisis and catastrophe.¹¹ The dialectic is broken because reality is broken. The former remains open because openness characterizes the real movement. Thus, politically, Negri's reading of the *Grundrisse* is very convincing even though I do not see the reason for denying the dialectic *tout court*.¹²

Remark 2: Vulgar Metaphysics and Poietic Metaphysics

In the history of philosophy, it is possible to distinguish between a metaphysics of transcendence -- but not of the transcendental -- and a metaphysics of immanence. The former can also be called *vulgar* metaphysics. Its main tenet is the principle of "the ontotheological One" (Alliez, 1996, 200). The latter is a *poietic* (or *poietic*) metaphysics whose presupposition and result are ethical, practical and whose inner motor is political to the core. Marx's metaphysics of time is of the latter type, and it is, as Negri says, a "cursed" metaphysics (Negri, 1992, 151). It is a cursed metaphysics because it is a materialist one, and because it carries within its womb the tools for a radical transformation of the world.

Critical metaphysics, which starts with Kant, still falls within a vulgar type of metaphysics, even though, by denying access to the thing-in-itself, it keeps reason from deluding itself. But to criticize vulgar -- in Kant's case: dogmatic -- metaphysics without building a metaphysics of immanence is tantamount to remaining caught within it. This is also the case with Heidegger, the school of deconstruction, and analytic philosophy in general. It is not the case with Nietzsche and Marx.

It is true that today one cannot overlook Heidegger's fundamental contribution to the question of time. Yet, as Negri says, one does not need to compare Marx to Heidegger in order to understand the former's concept of time. In fact, "Marx has a metaphysics of time as, indeed, more radical than Heidegger's" (Negri, 1992, 41). With Marx, ". . . temporality can be rooted in man's productive capacity, in the ontology of his becoming - - an open temporality, absolutely constitutive, which does not reveal Being but produces beings" (*Ibid.*). The difference between "revealing" and "producing" is fundamental. The Heideggerian modality of revealing (and this is also true of the later Heidegger on language and technology) still retains something of the *beyond* typical of vulgar metaphysics. For Marx, on the other hand, the metaphysics of time does not reveal anything. If there is a hidden subject, it affirms itself in and through production. If there is a subterranean fire, it breaks itself open through its incessant labor. Negri continues: ". . . Marx liberates what Heidegger ties up; Marx lights up with praxis what Heidegger brings back to the mystical. The Heideggerian time is the form of Being, it is the indistinction of an absolute ground; the Marxian time is production of being, it is still a form, but the form of an absolute procedure. The Marxian temporality is the key through which a subject which is formally predisposed to the adequation with an absolute

procedure becomes materially able to enter such a process, to define itself as constituent power" (42).¹³ The substance of this constituent power is time. Marx's metaphysics of time is the open dialectic of living labor "set free" by the inability of capital to reconstitute its own identity.

Identical is only that concept which, without being a *one*, is contracted into an infinite series of possible differences. In the history of western metaphysics, this concept has been established by John Duns Scotus in an objective fashion. This means that the concept is not an empty abstraction but a real, objective being. The self-identity of this concept, namely, its neutral immediacy, which is also absolute difference, allows for its univocal expansion and inclusion into everything that is.¹⁴ This concept can be given different names: being, time, power (as *potentia*, i.e., not as *constituted* but as *constituent* power).¹⁵ It is the principle of that which can be and not be, which is and is not. In Marxian terms, moving from pure ontology to political ontology, this concept is living labor. It is then the principle which demystifies the view of bourgeois philosophy and political economy according to which the laws governing the capitalist mode of production are immutable and eternal. In fact, the capitalist mode of production is *this* repetition of an ongoing process, which is the process of becoming itself. It is *this essential difference* that, as long as it is, totalizes itself and works toward the subsumption of everything else under itself. But precisely by so doing, precisely by this act of subsuming and totalizing, of turning itself into a *positive whole*, of leaving *nothing* outside itself, it reaches its concept and vanishes and withers away. *The concept of the end, so much talked about in these recent years, is nothing but the coming to completion of an essential difference.* It is true that this essential difference (the capitalist mode of production) is such that it has subsumed everything under itself and has left (actually: created) *nothing* outside. Yet it would be useful to ask, in a Heideggerian fashion: is this nothing really nothing or is it something after all? The answer is that the nothing which lies outside the positive whole in which our essential difference has transformed itself is time as the constituent power of being, time which either becomes completely subsumed under capital and constitutes the substance of the latter's valorization or exceeds the capacity of capital and is seen by the latter as waste time.¹⁶ If it is nothing, that is only because capital has no use for it. Capital has in fact already become, it has accomplished - - through the appropriation without exchange of one part of its own negation: surplus labor -- its M-M' movement, it has tried to rejoin itself a step ahead of itself. Yet this nothing -- which is capital's own creation -- is caught within the spiral movement of capital as the force that breaks the circle open into a spiral, for, in its constant drive to go beyond itself, to expand and yet desperately try to maintain a stable identity, capital steps into the very nothing it needs to use or disregard (cf. Negri, 1991a, 91 and 100; and Marx, 1973, 462).¹⁷ Yet capital cannot avoid stepping outside itself, for this movement belongs to its concept. The nothing outside capital, the *not-capital* is *labor, living labor*, regardless of whether it is *productive* (i.e., actually employed by capital for its own valorization) or not. I will return to this point below.

2. The problem of method

In "The Method of Political Economy," Marx deals with the relationship between the method of presentation and the real movement. He says that "the method of raising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being" (1973, 101).

One will not be able to think the concrete as concrete if one does not grasp its internal structure. And one cannot grasp the latter on the basis of *Vorstellung*, representation. In thought, the concrete comes at the end of a process of analysis and synthesis, though in reality it comes at the beginning. In the process of thinking, the concrete appears "as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception" (101). If thought stops at the level of concretion, it will only reach a confused representation of reality and an abstraction; the latter, however, will not be a meaningful, determinate abstraction, but an empty one.

Of course, Marx's abstraction is not the empty abstraction of the logician, but it is a *determinate abstraction*, i.e., "the abstraction which seeks the real in the concrete" (Negri, 1991a, 48).¹⁸ It is the internal structure of the concrete divided into its constitutive elements: division of labor, money, value, commodity, etc. Ascending from these abstractions to the concrete makes it possible for the latter to be reconstituted in thought as it really is: a "concentration of many determinations," a "unity of the diverse" (Marx, 1973, 101), without having the obscurity and confusion of representational, pictorial thinking. As Marx himself says, making the example of labor, "even the most abstract categories, despite their validity -- precisely because of their abstractness -- for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations" (105). Which means that these abstractions are not timeless, but always rooted in time and in history.

The method that goes from the abstract to the concrete is the one which takes into consideration the common element of production and the specificity of each mode of production. The common element is not something determined *a priori*, on the basis of thinking alone: "As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all" (104). However, the most important determination is not the common element -- with which, however, one needs to start -- but the specificity of production: "In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others" (106-107). Marx continues with a poetic metaphor full of philosophical significance: "It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and *modifies their particularity*. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it" (107). Then, in a way that brings to mind the unpublished chapter of *Capital* on the formal and real subsumption,¹⁹ Marx says: "Capital is the all-dominating economic power of

bourgeois society" (*Ibid.*). The concept of capital is not, as it was for political economy, an abstraction of commonality and a general relation of nature, but it is the most fundamental of the categories "which make up the inner structure of bourgeois society" (108). At this level of analysis -- as well as in reality -- another fundamental category -- one without which capital would not be capital -- is wage labor. The end of this process of analysis, which brings to the reconstitution of the concrete in its totality and specificity, is the world market and the crisis of capital. The concept of crisis, however, is one that runs throughout the whole development of capital, and it becomes the concept of the class struggle or -- as far as capital is concerned -- of the history of bourgeois society. It is the concept of time itself, for, under capital, time is the time of crisis.

3. Money

22. The time of capital is the time of crisis. It is the difference between M and M'. This difference is a constitutive and thus a positive one. It is in fact the process of realization of capital and the condition of its development.²⁰ But that which constitutes it, living labor, is the negation of that which is constituted by it, capital. Living labor constitutes itself as its own negation: "It posits itself objectively, but it posits this, its objectivity, as its own not-being or as the being of its not-being -- of capital" (Marx, 1973, 454).

The time of difference is that which changes becoming into a having become.²¹ The latter moment is not simply the end of the process, but it is also the beginning of a new process. It is a repetition, but one which -- in the process of realization -- occurs in a time of difference. Money is the subject of this time: a subject which does not have a reality of its own. In fact, money is only the form of value, whose reality, or substance, is labor time which "exists only subjectively, only in the form of activity" (171). In this sense, labor, as the time of expenditure of its power, is the real subject. Yet, under capital, living labor is expended only if alienated by the worker to the capitalist in an act of *free* exchange whose vanishing mediation is money.²² Living labor is then wage labor. This means that money, in one of its various functions, appears as the link between the subjectivity of becoming, of living labor, and its objectification into a having become. But money is only the form of appearance of exchange value. Thus, the *Grundrisse*, in its aspect of being a huge pamphlet against Darimon and the Phroudonians, has as its main objective the necessity of abolishing not simply money but exchange value, i.e., the specificity of the capitalist mode of production: ". . . it is impossible to abolish money itself as long as exchange value remains the social form of product" (145).

Yet the having become of becoming is not fully capital if and until money has not changed into more money. In fact, the dialectic between becoming and having become is not proper of capital, but it belongs to the *already* of the identity of human beings and nature (85). This is why the concept of subsumption becomes fundamental. If money becomes the form of being²³ and being is time, money's transition to capital is accomplished by subsuming the whole being of the worker -- through the appropriation without exchange of a portion of the labor time and the reduction of the other portion to a

"consumption fund" (594) for the satisfaction of needs. However, even though the opposition between labor and capital becomes explicit only in a developed form of production (i.e, with the production of surplus value), it is already, though latently, contained in the "simple forms of exchange value and of money" (248), that is to say, in the commodity form.

4. The Form of the Thing

In section one of "The Chapter on Capital" of the *Grundrisse* -- "The Production Process of Capital" -- Marx goes from the phenomenology of the concept of capital to the production of surplus value and profit. It is not my intention to deal systematically with the whole section. Rather, I will try to underline passages of it which are important to the understanding of the concepts of labor and time.

Let me start with the concept of capital. The first thing I want to say is that capital is labor *and yet* it is not labor. It is not labor, for labor is the not-capital: "the real *not-capital is labour*" (274). What is meant here by labor is *living labor*, labor as subjectivity, activity, as the "form-giving fire" (361), which economically and philosophically constitutes a much more general, universal and fundamental category than capital. Capital, in fact, only pertains to the capitalist mode of production, but it pertains to it in an essential way, as its *essential difference* or specificity. Living labor, on the other hand, pertains to production as such; it is a *common element* of production. I am not talking here of productive or valorizing labor, which is the form in which labor is subsumed under capital, but of living labor as -- I repeat -- the fire which gives form to all beings that come out of the relationship between humans and nature or humans and technology. This living labor is, perhaps at times only as possibility, the horizon of capital. Even though capital tries -- out of a necessity inherent in its concept-- to subsume all labor under itself, living labor always exceeds the capacity of capital, and this is why a revolution is possible. The necessity inherent in the concept of capital is that which leads capital to employ and not employ as much living labor as it can; it is, in other words, the fundamental contradiction of capital which manifests itself in a special way in the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to decline.

It is also true that, however, capital is labor. But as such, it is only accumulated, objectified, dead labor. In this sense, capital is understood as a thing, not as a relation or process (258), and in so doing, the most important aspect of capital is lost. To say that capital is accumulated labor -- Marx argues against Adam Smith -- is to refer to "the simple material of capital, without regard to the formal character without which it is not capital" (257). Marx's argument here repeats what he has already said in the introduction when he was speaking of the difference between the element common to all production and the essential difference of each mode of production (85-86).²⁴ Since capital is an essential difference and not a common element, it cannot be understood simply as labor. However, this is not only true from the point of view of the most general abstraction, namely, the point of view which abstracts what is common out of the concrete and thus points to what in the concrete is essentially different. As I have noted, capital is not labor

because labor is the not-capital. The labor which is objectified as capital (in the means of production, for instance) needs to be *resurrected from the dead* by living labor (364). Furthermore, capital cannot be a thing because what characterizes it -- insofar as it is the representative of money as the general form of wealth -- is "the constant drive to go beyond its quantitative limit" (270; see also 334). However, as I have already noted, this drive also constitutes the source of capital's main contradiction, one which leads it into crises.

What this tells us is that capital is nothing but time (not time in general, not time *as time*, but a specific modality of time) striving continuously to go beyond itself. It is the time of production as the time of exploitation, the time of total subsumption; it is the urge to make value out of value, surplus value and profit.

It is because capital is not labor, or not labor *as labor*, that Marx says: "To develop the concept of capital it is necessary to begin not with labour but with value, and precisely, with exchange value in an already developed movement of circulation" (259). In fact, labor as such, not productive or valorizing labor, is, in the last analysis, -- i.e., notwithstanding the fact that labor is always socially determined -- a relation of nature. As Marx says in *Capital*, "[l]abour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (I, 283). But capital, on the other hand, is an exclusively social category. To go back to the *Grundrisse*, Marx adds: "It is just as impossible to make the transition directly from labour to capital as it is to go from the different human races directly to the banker, or from nature to the steam engine" (259).

Thus the beginning is made with value, exchange value. But what is value? Exchange value, "the substance of money" (221), is nothing but a given amount of labor time contained in a commodity. The substance of value is labor, but the form of appearance of this substance is exchange value and money. However, from the point of view of the genesis of capital, money is to be considered as the medium of circulation and at the same time, and in addition to that, as what suspends itself from circulation. In this sense, money *is and is not* in circulation, and this constitutes its transition to capital.²⁵ The full form of capital -- as productive capital -- is M-M'. However, the form of circulation M-C-C-M (which presupposes the simple form C-M-M-C) is the first appearance of capital, precisely, of commercial capital. "As soon as money is posited as an exchange value which not only becomes independent of circulation, but which also maintains itself through it, then it is no longer money, . . . but is *capital*" (259).²⁶

As we have seen, capital is *not a thing* but a *process*. This is so because money as capital is not a thing but a process. Even though the concept of capital cannot be developed from labor, it is labor which remains the substance of things and which also gives form to things. Even the transition from thing to process is something accomplished by labor. In fact, when money returns to itself from circulation and becomes capital (a return which can be seen as a broken identity), labor also returns to itself. "But the nature of the return is this, that the labour objectified in the exchange value posits living labor as a means of reproducing it, whereas, originally, exchange value appeared merely as a

product of labour" (263). What is here clearly indicated is the passage from value to surplus value, for living labor will be necessary and surplus labor. The return is a violent attempt at attaining an impossible identity, and it is in reality not a return, for *M has become M'*. But what is *M-M'*? In the words of Éric Alliez: "It is the convulsive movement of what does not come back to itself, the specter of what does not come back into itself, thereby breaking the natural motion of need that had bodied forth in the notion of reciprocity that led to exchange, and from exchange to the polis -- thereby drawing the entire astrologies of the Same into an abyss of dissimilarity" (2).²⁷ *M-M'* is this abyss. It is not time as time, but the specific modality of a time which is unable to return to itself. The question is here that of the separation between use value and exchange value and of the fetishism that comes with it. The impossibility of the return is not the positive one due to consumption, for in this case a return of sort would still obtain. Rather, it is the totally negative lack of return which, as Marx says, "becomes *madness*" (269) -a madness which, however, constitutes the inner logic of capital.

5. The Labor of Fire

If capital is not labor, or if it is (and this only from the point of view of substance) only objectified labor, then what is labor? Labor as the *not-capital* is fundamentally two things. It is living labor and productive labor. I believe it is very important to distinguish between these concepts, for productive labor is always living labor, but living labor is not necessarily productive labor.

Let me start with productive labor. This is value-preserving and value-increasing labor, and it is opposed to unproductive labor, which is however also living labor. Marx introduces the concept of productive labor as he analyzes the relation of capital to labor. Starting from the idea that the opposite of capital cannot be one particular commodity, for the substance of capital itself is the communal substance of all commodities, i.e., objectified labor, Marx says that the opposite of capital is then "labour which is still objectifying itself, *labour* as subjectivity" (272). The difference between objectified and subjective labor is also expressed by Marx as the difference between labor which is *present in space* and labor which is *present in time*. "If it is to be present in time, alive, then it can be present only as the *living subject*, in which it exists as capacity, as possibility; hence as *worker*" (272). Of course, this is living labor, which is also said to be productive insofar as it is used by capital for its expansion or valorization. But it seems to me that the difference between productive and unproductive labor cannot be made on the basis of the description of labor as subjectivity or as presence in time. Thus, productive labor is only that labor which produces surplus value, i.e., unpaid labor; it is a form of living labor, but not the only one.

It is then important to see living labor as a category, not of political economy or capital, but of ontology. In fact, living labor is the "creative power" which, however, under capital, "comes to confront the worker as an *alien power*" (307). It is the subjectivity of which the worker *divests* himself. But living labor -- and this needs to be stressed -- is not only and not necessarily productive labor. The two coincide only when,

as the result of the exchange between capital and labor, labor is transformed into capital (308). Marx also says: "The specific relationship between *objectified* and *living* labour that converts the former into capital also turns the latter into *productive* labour" (1977, 1043). Living labor is then called *productive* because it is in the production process that this transformation occurs. But labor becomes *productive* -- in capital's sense of the word -- only because, fundamentally, it *can* produce -- in the common sense of the word. In other words, labor is not an ontological, creative power because it is *productive*; rather, it becomes *productive* -- and this is the only reason capital wants it -- because it is an ontological, creative power. Without labor, capital would be nothing. But the opposite does not hold true. Without capital, labor would not be productive, and yet it would not be nothing, either. Then, what would it be?

For a logic (that of capital) which posits labor as either productive or unproductive, it seems that if it is not productive it must be unproductive. This is, at first sight, a logic of either/or which works quite well as far as the rhetoric of capital is concerned. However, at a closer examination, it reveals itself to be a logic of *both/and* generated by the contradictions of capital itself.²⁸ The logic which breaks that of capital is a logic of *neither/nor*, a logic of double negation, or, again, a logic of double resistance and absolute affirmation.²⁹ Through this logic, labor returns to itself, not posited by capital as valorizing labor, but posited by itself as *neither productive nor unproductive* labor: as living labor or form-giving fire.

Productive labor, in fact, in its double aspect of value-preserving and value-creating labor, only makes sense within the logic of exchange value and money. In its first aspect, productive labor reproduces use value. As a form of living labor, it still gives form to things. But in its second aspect -- that for which alone it is productive -- it only creates exchange value, and the only thing to which it gives form is capital.

The abolition of productive labor is not simply the abolition of its second aspect, surplus labor. Even its first aspect, necessary labor, would cease to have to be conceived of in the way established by the logic of exchange value. In the same way in which Nietzsche's abolition of the true world of ideas is also the abolition of this world as a world of appearances and thus the abolition of vulgar metaphysics as a whole, Marx's theory of revolution implies the abolition not only of valorizing labor but also of the necessity of necessary labor *as a necessity posited by capital*. It is, in other words, the abolition of the concept of productive labor as a whole and of its counterpart, unproductive labor. It is also the abolition of the concept of waste labor. Neither-productive-nor-unproductive labor is labor which returns to itself as to its "*immediate being*" (308).³⁰ It is however important to note that labor in its immediate being is not the *in itself* but the *for itself* of labor. The fact that under capital labor is not able to return to its immediacy is due to its being posited by capital as the essential moment in the mediation through which alone capital relates to its object. This object is, in the last analysis, the form of capital itself as more money and profit. It is the *for itself* of capital in search of independence, power, and identity. Yet the power of capital is labor, which however becomes a power *for* capital only by ceasing to be a power for itself. In this

sense labor too becomes the object of capital but only, of course, as labor alienated from the worker and confronting him as an alien power, indeed, as the power of capital itself.

The ability of capital to posit the necessity of labor as necessary labor, so that this positing is at the same time the positing of surplus labor, rests on its ability to create -- through the circularity of production and consumption -- a relentless system of need. Need is, in fact, "subsumable"³¹ and subsumed under capital. It is the vanishing mediation between production and consumption, that which posits both and is, in turn, posited by both. Living labor which returns to itself as to its *immediate being* is the exit from a system of need.³² In fact, the immediacy of labor is its freedom -- not its *double freedom*, that is, the freedom of the modern workers who, Marx says, "neither form part of the means of production themselves . . . , nor do they own the means of production" (1977, 874), but that which rests on the univocal disposition of its being. It is the freedom that destroys the *both/and* logic of capital to affirm itself as a new, absolute and radical essential difference.

Notes

¹ Cf. Kant (1929, for instance B225).

² Benjamin (1969, 262).

³ "Labour...as the creator of useful value, as useful labour, is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself" (Marx, 1977, 133).

⁴ I do not fully understand the real nature of abstract labor. My first persuasion was that abstract labor constituted the most common element of all useful labor. Indeed, this still seems to be correct from a logical and ontological point of view. However, this view would entail the presence of abstract labor before and beyond capital -- a view which would be the opposite of what Marx says, for capital would be, again, necessary and eternal. Both Rubin (1972, 131-158) and Lukács (1971, 83-110; but particularly 87-88), among other writers, see abstract labor as pertaining exclusively to capital. In fact, abstract labor is the value-creating or value-increasing property of labor. Yet, precisely because of this, the following can be said: As a creator of value, abstract labor becomes the middle term in the dialectic between human beings and nature. It becomes the vanishing mediation between the object of capital and capital, and it appears as a power of capital. Outside capital, abstract labor would vanish in the return of labor to its immediacy. This does not mean that abstract labor would completely disappear. It only means that, for it to appear, certain historical and social conditions must obtain. Of course, this is another logical difficulty, for the question now becomes: Is then capital

always possible? But I leave it at that for now. What I want to say is that, if abstract labor is -- in Harvey's apt expression -- "a *distillation* . . . out of a seemingly infinite variety of concrete labour activities" (Harvey, 1989, 15; emphasis added), then it must somehow be there from the beginning. The point is that, under non-commodity production (production of use values) there is simply no separation between the two aspects or properties of labor in question. The common element is then living labor before its division into useful and abstract labor. Consequently, the *essential difference* of capital is not simply abstract labor, but the separation of living labor into its two properties and the negation of its immediacy.

5 Capital reproduces abstract labor insofar as it "produces the worker as a wage-worker" (Marx, 1977, 716).

6 That permanence and becoming cannot exclude one another was already explained by Aristotle: "It is also evident that neither those who say that all things are at rest speak truly, nor those who say that all things are in motion. For if all things are at rest, whatever is true will always be true and whatever is false will always be false, yet there appears to be a change; . . . And if all things are in motion, nothing will be true, and so everything will be false; but this [is] . . . impossible" (1979, 1012b 23-28).

7 Even though I agree with Negri's characterization of the *Grundrisse* as an *open work*, I do not see why *Capital* -and this, of course, beyond the use that may have been made of it -- would necessarily "block" revolutionary subjective action.

8 In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Schumpeter says: "Marx retained his early love during the whole of his lifetime. He enjoyed certain formal analogies which may be found between his and Hegel's argument. He liked to testify to his Hegelianism and to use Hegelian terminology. But this is all. *Nowhere did he betray positive science to metaphysics*" (1950, 9-10; quoted in Rosdolsky, 1977, xii; emphasis mine).

9 Of course, "metaphysics" is here used only in its vulgar sense. See Remark 2, below.

10 It is true that, as Negri says, "Marx's score with Hegel was settled long before [at the time of the so-called *Early Writings*]; here [in the *Grundrisse*] it is only a question of going back to him in a critical and scientific manner" (1991a, 3; brackets added). Indeed, the critique of Hegel is not at all an aspect of the *Grundrisse*. Under attack here are the bourgeois political economists and the socialists, first of all Proudhon. It is the latter who appear as Hegelians. Now, if we ask what is the result of the concept of circularity, the answer is *identity*. And it is this concept of identity that Marx wants to smash. Speaking of the problem of production and consumption -- within the wider context of the concept of production as a Hegelian totality in which production, distribution, exchange and consumption are only members, "distinctions within a unity" (Marx, 1973, 99)- Marx says: "Thereupon, nothing simpler for a Hegelian than to posit production and consumption as identical. And this has been done not only by socialist belletrists but by prosaic economists themselves, e.g. Say; in the form that when one looks at an entire people, its production is its consumption. Or, indeed, at humanity in the abstract" (93-94).

[11](#) See Negri (1991a, 9 and 85-104).

[12](#) Notwithstanding Negri's denial of the dialectic in all its forms, he still retains -- both in *Marx beyond Marx* and in his later writings -- a dialectic of antagonism as the motor of his concept of a constitutive ontology.

[13](#) The translation of passages from Negri (1992) is mine.

[14](#) See Duns Scotus (1987) and Deleuze (1994).

[15](#) See Negri (1991b) and (1992).

[16](#) This latter case is explained by the law of the tendency of the profit rate to decline (cf. Negri, 1991a, 100).

[17](#) This is the question of the tendencies of capital. "It is its tendency, therefore, to create as much labour as possible; just as it is equally its tendency to reduce necessary labour to a minimum. It is therefore equally a tendency of capital to increase the labouring population, as well as constantly to posit a part of it as surplus population -- population which is useless until such time as capital can utilize it" (Marx, 1973, 399).

[18](#) On the other hand, Negri adds, "*the concrete . . . seeks in abstraction its determination*" (48; Negri's emphasis), and this constitutes the process of tendency.

[19](#) See Marx (1977, 1019-1038).

[20](#) "Marx's theory of crisis and its counteracting tendencies is the core of his critique of capitalist production. Contrary to the commonsense view that crisis may then sound the death-knell of capitalism, Marx held that crises were the condition of capitalist development" (Aronowitz, 1981, 184).

[21](#) The dialectic between becoming and having become is also treated by Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, in the section on the accumulation of capital (459-471). In this section, capital emerges into existence as the truth of being, namely, as the essence it has become (I am, of course, using Hegelian terminology). From this moment on, "it creates its own presuppositions, i.e. the possession of the real conditions of new values *without exchange*," which appear "*not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its presence*" (460; Marx's emphasis). Insofar as capital is establishing its ground, we are still within the Hegelian circle (cf. Book II of *The Science of Logic*, "The Doctrine of Essence"). Yet the spiral movement of productive capital does not cancel the dialectic between becoming and having become. Here becoming appears as living, abstract labor which changes capital from a thing to a process. "Labour is the yeast thrown into it, which starts it fermenting" (298). In this process, labor is not only consumed but also objectified, i.e., from *becoming* it itself changes to *a having become*. Labor, as subjectivity, acts upon an object and modifies it. In so doing, "as a modification of the object, it modifies its own form and changes *from activity to being*" (300; emphasis added). In *Capital*, I, Marx says

the same: "Labour has become bound up in its object: labour has been objectified, the object has been worked on. What on the side of the worker appeared in the form of unrest [*Unruhe*] now appears, on the side of the product, in the form of Being [*Sein*], as a fixed, immobile characteristic" (287; see also 296). The product is the coincidence and the neutral result of three moments: the material, the instrument, and labor. The whole process is one of *productive consumption*, indeed it is "consumption of consumption itself" (Marx, 1973, 301). The "*form-giving* activity consumes the object and consumes itself, but it consumes the given form of the object only in order to posit it in a new objective form, and it consumes itself only in its subjective form as activity" (301).

[22](#) Money is either identical with itself (M-M), or it is the form of a time of difference (M-M').

[23](#) "The philosophical significance of money is that it represents within the practical world the most certain image and the clearest embodiment of the formula of all being, according to which things receive their meaning through each other, and have their being determined by their mutual relations" (Simmel, 1990, 128-129).

[24](#) See section 1, above.

[25](#) Money is the *first concept* of capital and the *first form* in which it appears. Capital starts from money which *is and is not* in circulation (253). Like all other commodities, money has the ability to step outside circulation. But differently from all other commodities, which by stepping out of circulation are consumed and destroyed, money acquires thereby an independent existence as "the non-substantial general form of wealth" (254).

[26](#) This contradiction is also present in the exchange process between the capitalist and the worker. In *Capital* Marx says: "Capital cannot therefore arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation. It must have its origin both in circulation and not in circulation" (I, 268). And: "This whole course of events, the transformation of money into capital, both takes place and does not take place in the sphere of circulation. It takes place in circulation because it is conditioned by the purchase of the labour-power in the market; it does not take place in circulation because what happens there is only an introduction to the valorization process, which is entirely confined to the sphere of production" (I, 302).

[27](#) Éric Alliez, *Capital Times. Tales from the Conquest of Time*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

[28](#) For an example of this logic: "Capital, as the positing of surplus labour, is equally and in the same moment the positing and not-positing of necessary labour; it exists only in so far as necessary labour both exists and does not exist" (Marx, 1973, 401). But the positing and not-positing of necessary labor has nothing positive in it, for its positing is exploitation and its not-positing is annihilation. It is the *double freedom* which characterizes the worker's existence (see Marx, 1977, 272 and 874). Hence, contrary to

those writers who tend to resolve difficulties by means of this logic (for an example in philosophy, see Bernstein, 1992, particularly, 309-314), *both/and* is not an alternative. In reality, the *both/and* modality enjoyed by the few is the condition for the *neither/nor* modality of a growing majority. *Chiapas* is an example of this. The possibility of a change does not reside in the acceptance of the *both/and* mentality but in the creation, out of a double negation, of a new radicality, one in which the having become of becoming is resurrected again to return to the immediacy of its subject.

[29](#) It is, in Negri's words, the power of *self-valorization* (Negri, 1991a). However, Negri does not characterize it as a *neither/nor* logic.

[30](#) "*This transformation [of labor into capital] is posited only in the production process itself. Thus, the question whether capital is productive or not is absurd. Labour itself is productive only if absorbed into capital, where capital forms the basis of production, and where the capitalist is therefore in command of production.*" And: "Labour, such as it exists for itself in the worker in opposition to capital, that is, labour in its *immediate being*, separated from capital, is not productive" (308).

[31](#) "The apogee of critical science resides in specifying the non-subsumable" (Aronowitz, 1981, 249), namely, the *principle of hope* or desire against need. "The counterlogic is . . . to define desire as that which goes beyond need and is unrecuperable by the prevailing structure" (*Ibid.*).

[32](#) What is meant here is, of course, capital-commanded need.

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