

## *Argument*

# Foundations of Post-capitalist Society in Marx's *Capital*

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## Introduction

According to Mr. Wagner, Marx's theory of value is the cornerstone of his socialist system. As I have never established a "socialist system," this is a fantasy of Wagner. (Notes on Adolph Wagner, 1881 Marx and Engels 1975 24, 533).

From a very young age Karl Marx had grasped that an *a priori* construction of a future society is a useless endeavour, which would bring no other result than dogmatic thinking and the nowhere-land of a nirvana. In 1843, in a letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx wrote that instead of constructing the future our task should be "ruthless critique of all that exists" (Marx and Engels 1975 3, 142). From *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* to *The Critique of Political Economy*, (the subtitle of *Capital*), both in theory and practice critique was always the foundation of Marx's thinking. But Marx's means of critique is a subject that has generated different interpretations among post-Marx-Marxists.

Many, especially in our age, reference the "Theses on Feuerbach" as having transcended philosophical critique. They take Marx's expression "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Marx and Engels 1975 5, 5) and transformed it into a revolutionary article of faith. As

if Marx, having written that, had wasted forty years of his life in writing *Capital*. At the same time, many other Marxists, who reference the same Theses and who single out *praxis*, often do not understand that Marx's critique of pure objectivism and the singling out of the active side or subjectivity was meant to unify the subject and object for a new beginning. The simultaneous emphasis on practical-critical activity does not mean that the revolutionary act is bereft of the theoretical dimension or that thought is bereft of the practical dimension.

Perhaps restating Marx's expression from his Doctoral Dissertation could help. There Marx states that in the history of philosophy there are nodal points when a philosophy that has been perfected in itself turns to the outside world: "But the *practice* of philosophy is itself *theoretical*. It is the *critique* that measures the individual existence by the essence, the particular reality by the Idea" (Marx and Engels 1975 1,85). Presenting such a concept of critique is an opening toward the critique of political economy in *Capital*. Here the dual movement of dialectical critique "in its rational form ... regards every historically developed form, as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does

not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary” (Marx 1977, 103).

The burden of this essay is to prove the claim that Marx’s *Capital* in its critique of the bourgeois science of political economy not only transcends (*aufhebung*) it, but also projects the theoretical foundation of post-capitalist society. After the publication of *Capital*, Marx says the positivist circles were attacking him because he was “on the one hand treating economics metaphysically, and, on the other hand – imagine this! – confining myself merely to the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes (Comtist ones?) for the cookshops of the future” (Marx 1977, 99). The truth is *Capital* is such a different and innovative work that its publication (1867) generated much chaos among economists. Their contradictory reaction demonstrated that one cannot measure such a work with empirical methods of classical political economy. How can one call such a work, at one and the same time, “inductive” and “analytic,” both “realistic” and “metaphysical,” both “idealistic” and “materialistic”? Marx asks: how can one criticize *Capital* for on the one hand lacking freedom in material and empirical matters and, on the other hand, being Hegelian sophistry?

Is there any other work besides *Capital* that has combined political economy with class struggle? What other work has treated every economic category in light of its impact on the working class and the peoples of the colonial world? Substantial parts of *Capital* are devoted to the struggle for the shortening of the working day, the battle of workers with the machine, the “despotic spirit” of the factory and contradictory processes. History (including the history of technology), anthropology, law and its historical development, revolution and economics have all been projected as a unity, a concrete totality, and critiqued. Marx himself said when this concrete totality has been investigated and presented, that is, when the life process of a subject has been critically analyzed and then theoretically expressed in the idea, then “it may appear as if we have before us an *apriori* construction” (Marx 1977, 102).

If we view *Capital* in this conceptual framework, we can echo Marx’s words that the age of political economy as a science has come to an end (Marx 1977, 97). What has replaced it is not a new science but a whole new continent of thought whose beginning and end

is the emancipation of human society from under the domination of an aimless and apparently autonomous dead material world.

### Where to Begin?

Beginnings are always the most difficult because the beginning is only truly new if within it contains and carries also the end. In my view, labour, its relationship with the origin, development and future of human society, is a critical category that forms the core of Marx’s continent of thought. Labour whether in its general form, which includes all human societies, or whether in its particular forms in various historical formations, specifically under capitalist relations, is the key to the solution of the mystery of “necessity and freedom.”

In the first place labour is a process between the human being and nature – the process in which humanity’s practice mediates and regulates its metabolism with nature. Human beings set in motion natural forces that belong to their organism, to their hand and head, in order to appropriate the materials of nature to satisfy their need. Through this activity, through this interaction with external nature, they change both nature and their own nature. They awaken the potentialities that are slumbering within nature and give them actuality (Marx 1977, 283).

Human relationship with labour is one that begins in the head. At the end of the labour process a conclusion is reached that was perceived from the beginning by the producer and therefore had “an ideal presence” (Marx 1977, 284). The human not only changes the forms of natural materials but also actualizes her own aims in that transformation. The human is aware, or is conscious of such an aim. This aim is the determinant of the form of the human’s activity. The human’s will, too, is determined with such an aim and idea. The entire labour process needs such a conscious will. As Marx himself put it: “The less he’s attracted by the nature of the work and the way it has to be accomplished, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as the free play of his own physical and mental powers, the closer his attention is forced to be” (Marx 1977, 284).

Marx divides the elements of the simple labour process into three parts: 1) purposeful activity or the labour itself; 2) the object or material of labour; 3) the

instruments of labour. In the labour process human action, mediated by instruments of labour, transforms the object of labour according to a predetermined idea. The result of this process is the product that satisfies a human need by changing the form of the object of labour. Labour and its object inter-merge – labour is objectified and the object is appropriated. Labour is the active side, the restless form or subjectivity, and the object is the passive and the constant, immobile dimension of the labour process. In this process of “becoming,” the object is the “being” and the product is the “determined being,” i.e. the negated form of its previous being. This “determinate being” contains a quality that is negated again through human productive consumption. This process of negation of the negation is an infinite movement that absorbs the finite object and results in human affirmation in her becoming for herself. As Marx puts it:

Living labour must seize on these things, awaken them from the dead, change them from merely possible into real and effective use-values. Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as part of its organism, and infused with vital energy for the performance of the functions appropriate to their concept and to their vocation in the process, they are indeed consumed, but to some purpose, as elements in the formation of new use-values, new products, which are capable of entering into individual consumption as means of subsistence or into a new labour process as means of production. [Marx 1977, 289-90]

When Marx states that human labour awakens the dead, he also means that labour transforms nothingness into a determinate being. Being and nothing are a unity of opposites that become determinant being through the process of becoming. It must be remembered that in order to prove that labour-power is the only factor or element that produces surplus value, Marx conceives constant capital as zero ( $C=0$ ). In other words, by abstracting from constant capital Marx transforms the material into immaterial. Marx assumes the dead labour that resides in the material and instruments of production as “naught” (Marx 1977, 525), because they transfer all of their value directly to the product without adding an iota of surplus value. Instead Marx focuses on variable capital or living, mobile and fluid

labour. It appears as though labour creates “something from nothing!” (Marx 1977, 525).

A concept of labour as the metabolism between humans and nature is a general concept applicable to all human societies. However, to grasp the capitalist relations of production one must go from identity to difference in order for its specificity to become transparent. Under capitalism the relation between labour and the object of labour undergoes a “dialectical inversion”:

It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production but the means of production which employ the worker. Instead of being consumed by him as material elements of his productive activity they consume him as the ferment of their own life-process. [Marx 1977, 425]

Here we have the domination of the past or dead labour over living labour. It is the empire of the dead! Instead of living labour affirming itself in the labour process, material and instruments of labour absorb it into their body and like a leech suck the life-blood of the living labourer. The domination of capital over living labour is the domination of the product over the producer. It is “the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*,” i.e., the domination of things over the human beings. The goal is the self-valorization of capital. “What we are confronted by here is the alienation of man from his own labour” (Marx 1977, 990).

The capitalist as the personification of capital is a slave to capitalist relationships, just as the worker is. The difference is that in the process of alienation the capitalist finds satisfaction whereas the worker is the victim and stands up to it like a rebel. Therefore, even though capital is not a thing, under capitalism “specific social relations of production between people appear as relations of things to people” (Marx 1977 166, 1005), which means “the personification of things and the reification of persons” (Marx 1977 209, 1056).

Clearly, the capitalist social relationship completely disrupts the metabolic reciprocity between humans and nature. At the same time it prevents the regeneration of vital elements of nature such as air, soil and water and does away with the physical and mental health and well-being of urban and rural workers. For Marx, the restoration of that metabolism as “a regulative law of social production, and in a form adequate to the full

development of the human race” (Marx 1977, 638) is one of the main foundations of post-capitalist society. But before we enter such a society it is necessary together with Marx to enter the production process in order to grasp the depth of his positive critique of labour in contemporary society.

### **Division of Labour, Machine-ism and Alienated Labour**

Marx does not consider the machine “in-and-for-itself.” What is of primary importance to him is the impact of the machine and technology on the human. In capitalist production the machine is the material manifestation of capital. The machine system in its capitalist form has an independent and alien relationship to the producer which then “develops into a complete and total antagonism” (Marx 1977, 558). The machine not only becomes a competitor to the worker and constantly makes the worker superfluous but is also a power inimical to the worker.

As opposed to Proudhon’s uncritical attitude towards the machine as a “synthesis of instruments of different partial operations for the benefit of the worker himself” (Marx 1977, 547), Marx was of the opinion that the entry of machines into the production process is the separation of the objective element from the “subjective principle” (Marx 1977, 502). The growth and expansion of the machine system establishes a spiritless cooperation. The means of production act like a huge “automaton” that is self-acting and has no need for human beings. They act like a “mechanical monster with demonic powers” (Marx 1977, 503). Inside the factory, a “mitigated jail,” there exists an inherent contradiction. Factory work exhausts the nervous system, negates the multi-faceted functions of muscles and transforms both the physical and mental activity into “labour-time personified.” The human’s body, which performs through the division of labour a specialized or monotonous activity, becomes the one-dimensional means of those independent operations as if the constant repetition of an activity confined in such a narrow way becomes the “life-long destiny” of the human being (Marx 1977, 459).

The continuous repetition of this kind of work disrupts the fluid movement of the human being’s vital energy precisely because it is in the diversity of activity

that the human being feels a sense of happiness and enjoyment. However, the fusion of specialization with the entire production mechanism forces the human being to adapt to the ceaseless and regular movement of the machine. Workers throughout their lives get appended to this kind of labour which results in distorted development of their muscles and bones. Such a narrow activity bars human beings from mutual interactions that have a deep content. Factory work “develops a one-sided specialty to perfection at the expense of a man’s working capacity” (Marx 1977, 470). By transforming the method of the individual’s work machine-ism mutilates the independent worker and transforms him into a motor of an automatic and well-regulated operation. The human being becomes an appendage to the machine, “a crippled monstrosity” (Marx 1977, 481). Citing David Urquhart, Marx then calls the sub-division of the human being the “assassination of a people” (Marx 1977, 485).

It is here that workers’ voices inter-merge with Marx’s critique in *Capital*. Marx declares that this kind of work is the “martyrology” of the worker. Workers scream out loud “stop the machines” at least during the meal period. Reduce labour-time and the working-day. Hence, “In the place of the pompous catalog of the ‘inalienable rights of man’ there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at last makes clear ‘when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins’” (Marx 1977, 416). After having gone through the process of confrontation and destruction of the machine the workers then reach “the theoretically quite correct assertion that the only remedy was to work short time” (Marx 1977, 561). This is the beginning of the period which Marx called a “protracted civil war.”

The paradox of machine-ism is a dialectical inversion: the greatest means for shortening of the working time becomes a means that turns the entire life of the worker into working time. By analyzing all the diverse spheres of production Marx proves that the aim of machinery is not to reduce the suffering of the human being. Quite the contrary, machine production becomes the most ruthless means of intensified exploitation and prolongation of the working day beyond the natural capability of a human being. Large-scale machine production creates within the factory an

organized and planned cooperation between the instruments of production – a complete or total productive organism that is outside the control of the producers. The name for this specific form is the “despotic” plan of capital (Marx 1977, 450). The idea that capital plans is not in question. The issue is that the movement is one-sided in a singular direction that does away with the multi-directional development of the producer. Accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production! This is an aimless process whose beginning and end is production, an absolute and infinite movement of valorization whose aim is within its own self (Marx 1977, 253).

This objective movement appears to be autonomous. Its “mode of existence become[s] adequate to its concept” (Marx 1977, 241). Its self-identity has attained an independent form. Marx emphasizes that the writings of ordinary economists’ “crude obsession with the material side, ignore all differences of form” (Marx 1977, 683). This form is a pure despotic form of organization. Hence even though all the means and materials of production are themselves the objectified result of past labour created by human beings, as soon as the workers enter the workplace they are confronted with an objectivity that is pre-constructed. So for the workers the mutual relationship between living and dead labour “confronts them in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and, in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them who subjects their activity to his purpose” (Marx 1977, 450).

But the capitalist is “capital personified” and capital is not property but command over labour-power: “capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things” (Marx 1977, 932). This process is despotic in form whose content is the enslavement and self-alienation of the worker in the production process. As Marx used to say the Roman slave was attached to his master with chains but the “wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads” (Marx 1977, 719). The sale of apparently free labour-power in the market and the pure lie of a legal contract conceals the real relationship of labour and capital. The master is not a single capital but the collective aggregation of the entire existing capital. Whether the workers’ wages are high or low before the worker

enters the production process his labour has become alienated from him, objectified during the production process and transformed into a product alien to him.

As Marx put it, “the social combination of labour processes appear as the organized suppression of his individual vitality, freedom and autonomy” (Marx 1977, 638). What now needs to be examined are the theoretic foundations Marx developed as an alternative. The context of such an alternative is implicit in the very critique of capitalist social relations, but *Capital* goes beyond the critique of these relations and presents a positive perspective of post-capitalist society.

### **Cooperation, Communal Labour and “Universal Labour”**

We saw that the capitalist mode of production is not without practical and conscious planning. At the same time we saw that the immediate process of production acts as a vast automaton with mechanical and mental organs. These organs carry uninterrupted and coordinated actions all of which are subordinated to a central prime moving mechanism that is automated and self-regulating. In such a process the role of subject and object has been inverted as if the subject is the automaton itself and the human beings are purely conscious organs that have adapted themselves to the unconscious organs of the automaton in such a way that both of those organs together obey the prime mover. Such is the specificity of the capitalist machine. Everything is centred on the machine. As Marx would say, this automaton is personified by the autocratic rule of the capitalist who executes its “purely despotic” plan (Marx 1977, 450).

Regulation and cooperation of the machines is necessary for such an automatic mechanism. The internal tendency of this autocracy is the equalization and levelling of all types of labour and its transformation into a general abstract labour. Abstraction from quality, abolition of inequality and negation of individuality is one of its characteristics (Marx 1977, 440). In such a context, cooperation is spiritless and alienated from the human being.

In general, cooperation is the necessary element of any production on a large scale which in and of itself does not define or represent a specific form or an epoch of production (such as historical ones in Egypt and the

Asiatic form). Nevertheless, cooperation is a fundamental form of capitalist production. Capitalism in fact is a form of collective or direct social production which at one and the same time generates competition between individuals and engenders “animal spirits” (Marx 1977, 447). Here organization and anarchy complement each other. Marx calls this an “animal kingdom” or the “war of all against all” and atomization of the individual (Marx 1977, 477).

At the same time, as indicated earlier, the communal form of capitalist labour carries within itself an antagonistic contradiction: in that the worker exists for the production process and not the production process for the worker. It has no need for the creativity and intelligence of the worker. Quite the contrary, capital becomes productive when the mind of the worker is the “least consulted” (Marx 1977, 483). Capitalist division of labour attacks the very mind of the worker and transforms thinking itself into a peculiar profession. In essence communal labour by itself is not at all a way to measure a free society. That is why when Marx analyses communal ownership within primitive societies his focus is on the lack of individual freedom. Here “the individual has as little torn himself free from the umbilical cord of his tribe or community as a bee has from his hive” (Marx 1977, 452).

Thus it is necessary to dispel the myth that for Marx transcendence of capitalist relations meant only the abolition of private property and the ushering of cooperative or communal labour. The same must be said about the illusion regarding technology and science. In Marx’s view, in post-capitalist society “the field of application of machinery would be entirely different” (Marx 1977, 515). Due to the division of labour “the knowledge, judgment and will ... are faculties that are now required only for the workshop as a whole” (Marx 1977, 482). Intellectual capacities of the material process of production are superior powers that belong to an other and rule over the worker. This separation of manual and mental labour appears as the unified will of an alien social organism which reaches its apex in automation. Science is “a potentiality for production which is distinct from labour and presses it into the service of capital” (Marx 1977, 482). The “thinkers” and productive workers become totally separated from each other and knowledge instead of being at the service of

workers everywhere, stands against the human being. “Knowledge” becomes a means that is an adversary of the worker.

Capital for its valorization process not only absorbs labour-power but the entire natural sciences (mechanics, physics, chemistry and mathematics). The “modern science of technology” is production for production’s sake without “looking first at the ability of the human hand to perform the new processes” (Marx 1977, 616). It is clear, that for Marx human emancipation impinges upon the total transformation of the very nature of labour. The head and the hand belong to the same organism and ending the division of labour between manual and mental labour, the foundation of a new society. When Marx critiques the Platonic Republic in *Capital* and not only calls it an “Athenian idealization of the Egyptian caste system” (Marx 1977, 489) but especially points out that with Plato even when the product of labour is not an exchange value but a useful commodity, it is the worker who must adapt to labour not the work to the labourer (Marx 1977, 487 fn 57). Not only Plato but most writers of antiquity including Homer and Xenophon had an uncritical attitude toward the division of labour while focusing on the quality of products and their use value (Marx 1977, 488).

The absolute contradiction within capitalist production generates a “revolutionary ferment” whose aim is the “abolition of the old division of labor” and the recreation “of society on a new basis” (Marx 1977, 619). The transformation of the relationship between labour and the means of production and its relationship in the metabolism between humans and nature and with the very form of labour during the production process becomes the beginning of a new human development. Therefore, a “higher form of society” is a society in which “the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle” (Marx 1977, 739). Nevertheless, the opening of such a whole new perspective does not end our problematic and does not dispel various and even contradictory interpretations of Marx. Perhaps what makes conceptualizing a post-capitalist society difficult is the need to clear from the mind the narrow confines of material production. Transcendence of material necessity and entrance into the sphere of true freedom requires a deeper exploration of Marx’s

continent of thought.

Marx divides social labour under capitalism into “necessary labour” and “surplus labour.” Necessary labour is labour for reproducing the workers’ means of subsistence. Surplus labour is the labour that generates surplus value. Surplus value is both for accumulation of capital as well as for limitless means of subsistence of a class that lives off of other people’s labour. Surplus labour creates “free time” for the unproductive section of society. Under capitalism the reduction of necessary labour to a minimum is not possible. “Only the abolition of the capitalist form of production would permit the reduction of the working day to the necessary labour-time” (Marx 1977, 667). In such a situation, “

the part of social working day necessarily taken up with material production is shorter, and as a consequence, the time at society’s disposal for the free intellectual and social activity of the individual is greater...The absolute minimum limit to the shortening of the working day is, from this point of view, the universality [*Allgemeinheit*] of labour. [Marx 1977, 667]

Marx stresses that “we must distinguish here between universal labor and communal labor” (Marx 1981, 199). Both communal and universal labour play their part in the process of production. Both get combined but at the same time are different from each other. “Universal labor is all scientific work, all discovery and invention ... communal labor, however, simply involves the direct cooperation of individuals” (Marx 1981, 199). As we’ve seen, the social division of labour under capitalism not only separates mental and manual labour but turns them against each other. All science, though the product of general development of human society, nevertheless becomes the means of exploitation of labour and is materialized as the productive power of capital. Capital has no need for knowledge, expertise and the intellect of the worker and directly suppresses it. The restoration of the metabolism between human nature and external nature necessitates the inversion of the existing inverted relationship.

The transcendence of capitalist social relations depends on grasping Marx’s concept of necessity and freedom. Necessity itself, which in part means necessary labour needs to be further explored. All human societies need to interact with nature to satisfy their

needs and produce and reproduce conditions of life. In Marx’s projection of the post-capitalist society not only the horizon and quality of needs expand but the very nature of necessary labour itself will be transformed. Labour for material production is not only undertaken in rational cooperation with others but especially must be undertaken by individuals who are “freely associated” (Marx 1977, 173). Such labour must be carried out “with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature” (Marx 1981, 959).

Even though such a sphere is no longer blind necessity it nevertheless remains within the sphere of necessity. “The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself begins beyond it” (Marx 1981, 959). The realm of freedom, therefore, according to its very essence “begins beyond” the realm of necessity, but only unfolds from such a foundation. To reach such a great transformation, what Marx calls the “universal labour of human spirit” (Marx 1981, 199), necessitates a period of transition. The fundamental precondition for such a transition is the “shortening of the working day” (Marx 1981, 959). With the reduction of necessary labour of material production to a minimum there appears free time for development of scientific, artistic, and other forms of labour. This is the free time for the total development of the individual. Free time is both leisure time and time for “higher activities.” Labour in its current form is replaced by the development of “self-activity.” In place of direct natural needs there arises needs that have been produced historically. The pure necessity of an external natural aim is removed from human aims and purposes. Humanity’s activity becomes self-actualization or objectification of inherent subjective capacities, or, real freedom. Then, as Marx would say, a whole new Subject enters history in whose “head resides the accumulated knowledge of society” (Marx 1973, 712).

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