

The aporia of Marx's concept of labour: a chronological analysis¹

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Abstract

Labour probably represents the most contradictory of all Marxian concepts. In his earlier works, Marx defines labour negatively; as an inevitably alienated form of activity, which is peculiar to capitalist modernity. This stance then begins to change in the *Grundrisse* in which labour is understood ambiguously, sometimes as a capitalist category and sometimes as a transhistorical category. Finally, from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* onwards, Marx adopts a twofold concept of labour: concrete labour and abstract labour; in this context, only the time-bound character of abstract labour is acknowledged, whereas concrete labour is equated with the material form of (re)production of *all* human societies. In this article, the evolution of the Marxian notion of labour undergoes chronological analysis with the ultimate goal of transcending the aporias embedded in Marx's work and proposing a coherent understanding of labour as a historically specific form of activity.

Key-words: Marx, concrete labour, abstract labour, (re)production, alienation

1 – Introduction

Labour is probably the most ambiguous, and even contradictory, concept in the Marxian theoretical edifice. In his early works, Marx defines labour negatively as an inevitably alienated form of activity specific to capitalist modernity. This stance first begins to change in the *Grundrisse*, in which labour is portrayed ambiguously, sometimes as a capitalist category and other occasions as a transhistorical category. Finally, following the publication of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx adopts a twofold concept of labour: concrete labour and abstract labour. In this context, only the time-bound character of abstract labour gets acknowledged, whereas concrete labour is equated with the material form of (re)production of *all* human societies.

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As Moishe Postone has observed, most Marxist authors overlook the antinomies of Marx's concept and instead understand labour as a transhistorical, *ontological* category (cf. Postone, 2003). The case of the late Lukács proves paradigmatic in this respect (cf. Lukács, 1980). Other authors, while attempting to critique labour, end up themselves maintaining an eminently aporetic relationship with this category. The crassest example probably stems from that of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, whose theory proposes the motto *Ne travaillez jamais* as coexisting with the demand for "all power to the workers" (cf. Debord, 2014; Vaneigem, 2001).

Only in the early 1980s did a critical understanding of labour as an exclusively bourgeois category begin finally to arise in the Marxist field. This theoretical stance, which nonetheless continues to be upheld by just an obstinate minority, traces its roots back to the pioneering works of André Gorz (cf. 1982) and, for its most recent developments, Jean-Marie Vincent (cf. 1987), Moishe Postone (cf. 2003), the Krisis Group (cf. 1999), Robert Kurz (cf. 2016), Anselm Jappe (cf. 2006) and John Holloway (cf. 2010).

This article takes a chronological approach to analysing the evolution of the Marxian notion of labour. Thereby, I correspondingly seek, by way of an immanent, exegetical analysis, to present textual evidence that lends support to the thesis of a changing concept of labour throughout Marx's life. It nevertheless goes without saying that "even an immanent reconstruction cannot be but interpretative" (Reuten, 2004: 118).

The ultimate goal involves superseding the aporias that penetrate Marx's work and proposing a coherent understanding of labour as a *historically specific* form of activity. I thus seek to rescue the most radical core of Marx's reflections on labour; thus, in other words, I aim to proceed with Marx beyond Marx towards a critique of labour.

2 – Labour in Marx's early writings

In his early works, Marx still does not apply a twofold concept of labour – concrete/abstract labour – to classify productive activities under capitalism. This dual concept only becomes definitively adopted in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859.

Thus, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, written in 1844, when Marx was only 26 years old, labour gets described:

- a) As an *inherently alienated* activity which eludes the control of human beings.

In Marx's view, "*labour* is only an expression of human activity within

alienation, an expression of life as alienation of life” (Marx, 1992b: 369, emphasis in original).

- b) As the essence of *private property*. Marx stresses that “the *subjective essence* of private property, *private property* as activity for itself, as *subject*, as *person*, is *labour*” (Marx, 1992b: 341, emphasis in original).

Marx therefore argues that it is possible to deduce all the other economic categories – money, capital, competition, etcetera – from these two basic categories: labour and private property (Marx, 1992b: 333). Furthermore, in capitalist society, alienation “is understood to gravitate around the estrangement of labour” (Arthur, 1986: 3), that is, all other forms of manifestation of alienation result from the alienation of labour (Ibid.).

The concept of labour is thus eminently *negative*. Labour is an “unfree activity” (Marx, 1992b: 331), “the denial of man carried through to its logical conclusion” (Marx, 1992b: 342). Marx deplores how the individual exists “not as a human being but as a worker” (Marx, 1992b: 287). In his role as a worker, he sees himself “depressed (...) both intellectually and physically to the level of a machine”, he is a man reduced to pure “abstract activity” (Marx, 1992b: 285). Marx characterizes labour, as an alienated activity, in the following way:

“[L]abour is *external* to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; (...) he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labour is therefore not voluntary but forced, it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need but a mere *means* to satisfy needs outside itself. Its alien character is clearly demonstrated by the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists it is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. (...) Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, the human brain and the human heart detaches itself from the individual and reappears as the alien activity of a god or a devil, so the activity of the worker is not his own spontaneous activity. (...) [I]t is a loss of his self.”² (Marx, 1992b: 326-327, emphasis in original)

² Marx also upholds this idea in “Excerpts from James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy*”, written in the same year: “In the framework of private property”, labour “is the *alienation of* [my, NM] *life* since I work *in order to live*, in order to procure for myself the *means* of life. My labour is *not* [my, NM] life. (...) I loathe this activity, it is a torture to me” (Marx, 1992c: 278, emphasis in original). Marx restates this position in “Wage Labour and Capital”, a text written in 1847: “And the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc.—does he consider this twelve hours’ weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his

Marx adds that the “act of estrangement of practical human activity, of labour” (Marx, 1992b: 327) must be considered in the light of two aspects:

“(1) the relationship of the worker to the *product of labour* as an alien object that has power over him. This relationship is at the same time the relationship to the sensuous external world, to natural objects, as an alien world confronting him in hostile opposition. (2) the relationship of labour to the *act of production* within *labour*. This relationship is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something which is alien (...), activity as passivity, power as impotence, procreation as emasculation, the worker’s *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life (...) as an activity directed against himself, which is independent of him and does not belong to him.” (Ibid., emphasis in original)

In addition to being an inescapably alienated activity, labour is not presented as an ontological category. Arthur remarks that, generally speaking, in the *Manuscripts*, it is the category of “productive activity” that seems to take on an “ontological significance for Marx” (Arthur, 1986: 10). Thus, labour is understood as a form of “second-order mediation” (Arthur, 1986: 11), i.e., as a *historically specific* form taken by “productive activity”.

If in *Capital* – and, in fact, as soon as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – (concrete) labour becomes a timeless category, i.e., equated to productive activity as such, the same cannot be said about Marx’s early writings (Arthur, 1986: 12). Even though Marx is not “absolutely consistent” (Arthur, 1986: 13), it is safe to say that in the *Manuscripts* – as well as in the “Comments on Friedrich List” and in *The German Ideology*³ – the term “labour” is restrictively defined as “*productive activity carried on under the rule of private property*” (Arthur, 1986: 12, emphasis in original), in other words, as the productive activity peculiar to capitalist modernity.

In short, labour is not an ontological category that mediates the material interchange with nature in *all* human societies (Ibid.). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Marx calls for its abolition: *the elimination of alienation demands the abolition of labour*. Furthermore, should labour be the cause of private property then the latter cannot be abolished without the simultaneous abolition of labour itself (Zilbersheid, 2004: 130). This is exactly what Marx suggests in his “Comments on Friedrich List”:

life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed” (Marx, 1977: 203).

³ Some passages that substantiate this assertion are presented below.

“«*Labour*» is the living basis of private property, it is private property as the creative source of itself. Private property is nothing but *objectified* labour. If it is desired to strike a mortal blow at private property, one must attack it not only as a *material state of affairs*, but also as *activity*, as *labour*. It is one of the greatest misapprehensions to speak of free, human, social labour, of labour without private property. «Labour» by its very nature is unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. Hence the abolition of private property will become a reality only when it is conceived as the abolition of «*labour*» (...). An «organization of labour», therefore, is a contradiction. *The best organisation that labour can be given is the present organisation, free competition, the dissolution of all its previous apparently «social» organisation.*” (Marx, 1975: 278-279, emphasis in original)

In *The German Ideology*, Marx restates on several occasions this idea that labour will be abolished under communism:

- 1) “In all previous revolutions the mode of activity always remained unchanged and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity (...), whilst the communist revolution is directed against the hitherto existing *mode* of activity, does away with *labour*” (Marx & Engels, 1975: 52, emphasis in original).
- 2) Thus, “the proletarians, if they are to assert themselves as individuals, have to abolish the hitherto prevailing condition of their existence (...), namely, labour” (Marx & Engels, 1975: 80).
- 3) “The *modern* state, the rule of the bourgeoisie, is based on *freedom of labour*. (...) Freedom of labour is free competition of the workers among themselves. (...) Labour *is* free in all civilised countries; it is not a matter of freeing labour but of abolishing it” (Marx & Engels, 1975: 205, emphasis in original).
- 4) “If (...) communism wants to abolish both the «worry» of the burgher and the poverty of the proletarian, it goes without saying that it cannot do this without abolishing the cause of both, i.e., «labour»” (Marx & Engels, 1975: 219).

Arthur draws attention to the (obvious) fact that when Marx “speaks (...) of the abolition of labour he certainly does not mean the abolition of material productive activity itself” (Arthur, 1986: 137). Indeed, Zilbersheid shares this opinion: “the abolition of labour is not an abolition of production itself but a transformation of the prevailing mode of production into a new mode that can no longer be termed «labour»” (Zilbersheid, 2004: 117), since this is to shed its instrumental nature (Zilbersheid, 2004: 120). The abolition

of labour means that, in a communist society, labour becomes superseded by a form of “spontaneous and free activity” (Marx, 1992b: 329).

One is therefore allowed to conclude that, according to the young Marx,

“the (...) communist form of productive activity cannot be understood as the most free form of labour, that is, labour that is democratically organized by the workers. Communism would not be based on labour, but rather on a new mode of productive activity, which would break the continuity of human history” (Zilbersheid, 2004: 119).

In particular, communism would suppress specialization, which, under capitalism, presents itself in the form of the division of labour. Marx is peremptory: the division of labour cripples individuals (Marx & Engels, 1975: 292, 437). Labour prevents the free development of individuality, the multifaceted blooming of human capabilities (Marx & Engels, 1975: 400-401) as “each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape” (Marx & Engels, 1975: 47).

In communism, conversely, the role of the specialist, of the *worker*, disappears altogether:

“[I]n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.” (Ibid.)

3 – Labour in the *Grundrisse*

3.1 – Historical or transhistorical category?

The *Grundrisse*, written during the years of 1857 and 1858, form the first draft of *Capital*. The book is the result of a decade in which Marx devoted himself to a profound study of the canon of political economy. In this work, the Marxian concept of labour becomes eminently aporetic. Marx begins with the following observation:

“Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form – as labour as such – is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, «labour» is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction” (Marx, 1993: 103).

Marx adds that labour may be understood as “the abstract expression for the simplest and most ancient relation in which human beings – in whatever form of society – play the role of producers. *This is correct in one respect. Not in another*” (Marx, 1993: 104, emphasis added), for only after the historical appearance of “the abstract universality of wealth-creating activity” (Ibid.) does it become possible to speak of “labour in general” (Ibid.) and wealth in general, i.e., of value.

Marx emphasises that “this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product” – or mental generalization – “of a concrete totality of labours” (Ibid.), because “not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form” (Ibid.). In other words, labour became a *real abstraction*. Marx concludes that:

“the abstraction of the category «labour», «labour as such», labour pure and simple, (...) the simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society. (...) This example of labour shows strikingly how 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” (Marx, 1993: 105).

These passages from the *Grundrisse* throw up a series of apparent contradictions. On the one hand, labour is defined as an antediluvian, transhistorical category, which is present in “all forms of society”. On the other hand, Marx stresses that one can speak *really* of labour – i.e., that labour only becomes an *actuality* – in capitalist modernity. As the Anglo-Saxon saying goes: you can’t have your cake and eat it. In contradistinction to his early works, Marx seems incapable of determining unequivocally whether labour does constitute an ontological category.

I would like to suggest that the solution to this riddle may stem from recalling a famous Marxian aphorism: “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” (Ibid.). Indeed, it is well-nigh impossible not to catch a glimpse, in these theoretical false starts, of the reasoning that leads Marx to adopt a twofold concept of labour – concrete labour and abstract labour –, although the German philosopher still does not yet deploy this terminology in the *Grundrisse*. Thus, Marx seems to be saying that labour,

understood as a concrete activity, as the generic *material production* of certain goods,⁴ amounts to a very ancient category, quasi-ontological. However, abstractly *social* labour – *really abstract* labour – which creates “wealth in general”, i.e., economic value, is a category pertaining only to the capitalist mode of production.

3.2 – Positive vs. negative understandings of labour

In several passages of the *Grundrisse*, the negative conception of labour, present in the early works, is replaced by a positive understanding: labour “is a *positive, creative activity*” (Marx, 1973: 614, emphasis in original). Consequently, the goal no longer involves the abolition of labour, that is, its supersession by a higher form of activity, *but the transformation of labour into a supposedly free labour*.

Marx criticises Adam Smith’s exclusively *negative* view of labour (Marx, 1973: 611). In Marx’s perspective, labour can be “a liberating activity” whose “aims” are posited by the individuals themselves (Ibid.); therefore, labour can embody the “self-realisation, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom” (Ibid.). To this day, “in its historic forms as slave-labour, serf-labour, and wage-labour, labour always appears as repulsive, always as *external forced labour*; and not-labour, by contrast, as «freedom, and happiness»” (Ibid., emphasis in original). This remains so because there were not yet created “the subjective and objective conditions” which are necessary for labour to become “attractive work, the individual's self-realisation” (Ibid.).

However, in other excerpts, material, industrial labour is presented explicitly as an unfree activity belonging to the realm of necessity that should be reduced by as much as possible. It is free time, erected over and above labour time, which thus appears as the realm of freedom: the most important feature of the development of productive forces thereby becoming the (potential) reduction of the “labour time necessary to meet absolute needs” and the resulting creation of “*free time*” for other kinds of activities (Marx, 1973: 612, emphasis in original). This is a crucial aspect, since “labour time as the measure of wealth posits (...) an individual’s entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, subsumption under labour” (Marx, 1975: 708, translation amended).

There is, thus, a fundamental aporia in the *Grundrisse*. On the one hand, labour is defined as a *potentially* free form of activity. On the other hand, the communism that

⁴ Section 5 conveys how the very notion of “concrete labour”, of material labour *in general*, itself constitutes a historically specific type of abstraction.

Marx envisages is substantiated in the reduction of labour time to its very minimum and in the maximization of the individual's free time.

4 – Labour after *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

4.1 – Adoption of a twofold concept of labour: concrete labour and abstract labour

As just seen above, it does still prove possible to discern in the *Grundrisse*, at least in some passages, an understanding – even if somewhat contradictory – of labour as a historically specific category. However, in the following year, as soon as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is published, Marx *definitively* adopts an ontological concept of labour (Zilbersheid, 2004: 136).

Marx writes that it is extremely important “to grasp the difference between labour as a producer of something useful, a use value, and labour as a producer of exchange value, a specific social form of wealth” (Marx, 1987: 278). On the one hand, “labour which creates exchange value is a specifically bourgeois feature” (Marx, 1987: 298). On the other hand, “as useful activity directed to the appropriation of natural factors in one form or another, *labour is a natural condition of human existence, a condition of material interchange between man and nature, quite independent of the form of society*” (Marx, 1978: 278, emphasis added).

Marx introduces, thus, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the dual concept of labour – concrete labour and abstract labour – that will inform his later economic work. In Volume 1 of *Capital*, published in 1867, Marx deduces this twofold character of labour from the dual nature of the commodity, the “elementary form” (Marx, 1992a: 125) of capitalist wealth. The commodity is the contradictory unity of use-value and value.

Now, according to Marx, labour in capitalism also displays a twofold nature. To the extent that labour produces use-values, it is *concrete*. Distinct use-values (bread, chairs, etc.) require “qualitatively different” labour (Marx, 1992a: 132). Concrete labour produces, therefore, “material wealth” (Marx, 1992a: 134), i.e., concrete wealth. One should also note that this materialistic and ontological definition of concrete labour is already to be found in several drafts of *Capital*, in particular in the *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*:

“The production process of capital, looked at from its material side, the production of use values, is, first of all, a *labour process* in general, and as such it displays the general factors which pertain to this process as such under the most varied forms of social production. These factors are determined, namely, by the nature of labour as labour.” (Marx, 1988: 92, emphasis in original)

In short, the later writings of Marx stress that concrete 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, 1992a: 133).⁵

Regarding the value of the commodity, Marx argues that this bears no relation to its sensuous attributes as a use-value; thus, value cannot be produced by concrete labour. The exchange of commodities presupposes precisely that which its natural features are abstracted from. Now, should an abstraction be made from its distinct physical proprieties, then there only remains one common underlying feature to all commodities – “that of being products of labour” (Marx, 1992a: 128), but of an *undifferentiated* labour.

“If we consider *commodities as values*, we consider them exclusively under the single aspect of *realised, fixed*, or, if you like, *crystallized social labour*. In this respect they can *differ* only by representing greater or smaller quantities of labour (...). We arrive, therefore, at this conclusion. A commodity has a *value*, because it is a *crystallisation of social labour*.” (Marx, 1985: 122, emphasis in original)

This social labour is not, however, specific labour (carpenter’s labour, weaver’s labour, etc.). As values, all the “sensuous characteristics” of the commodities and all the “concrete forms” of the labours that produced them are erased (Marx, 1992a: 128). Therefore, in order for the commodities to acquire the quality of values – and, as such, be exchanged – the qualitatively distinct labours expended in their production must be “reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract” (Ibid.).

⁵ Examples of the ontological understanding of concrete labour abound in the preparatory drafts of *Capital*. Here are some additional passages of the *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*: “labour is the appropriation of nature for the satisfaction of human needs, the activity through which the metabolism between man and nature is mediated” (Marx, 1988: 40). “But whatever its changed shape may be, as a labour process in general, i.e. as a labour process viewed in abstraction from its historical determinateness, it always contains the general moments of the labour process as such” (Marx, 1988: 92-93). We may find identical statements in the *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*: “Work is the eternal natural condition of human existence. (...) Hence the universal features of the labour process are independent of every specific social development” (Marx, 1992d: 998). Marx is conclusive: “Looking at the process of production from its real side, i.e. as a process which creates new use-values by performing useful labour with existing use-values, we find it to be a *real labour process*. As such its elements, its conceptually specific components, are those of the labour process itself, of any labour process, irrespective of the mode of production or the stage of economic development in which they find themselves” (Marx, 1992d: 981, emphasis in original).

Consequently, the labour that produces values proves an *abstract labour*. Abstract labour “is the common *social substance* of all commodities” (Marx, 1985: 121, emphasis in original); or, in other words, abstract labour is the *substance* of value. In abstract labour, all particular determinations of “productive activity” are effaced; labour counts only as mere “productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc.” (Marx, 1992a: 134).

According to Marx, in their quality as values, the commodities represent a:

“phantom-like objectivity; they are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour, i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure. All these things now tell us is that human labour-power has been expended to produce them, human labour is accumulated in them. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values” (Marx, 1992a: 128).

We may therefore conclude that, in *Capital*, labour, similarly to the commodity, contains a twofold nature. On the one hand, it is *concrete labour*, i.e., a specific activity which produces a certain use-value. On the other hand, it is abstract labour, i.e., undifferentiated human labour which produces value. One should keep in mind, however, that this does not account for two different labour processes: labour is *simultaneously* concrete and abstract: “the *same* labour is specified in differing and even contradictory manner” (Marx, 1976a: 8-9, emphasis in original).⁶

4.2 – The labour process and the valorisation process

As is well known Marx, through detailed analysis of the immediate process of production, unveils the origin of surplus-value in the exploitation of labour-power, i.e., in the *unpaid* labour time provided by the worker to the capitalist. This analysis thus develops the dual character of labour as contained in the commodity: “The commodity, from which we proceeded as something already given, is viewed here in the process of its becoming” (Marx, 1988: 68).

In Marx’s view, capitalist production – as the productive consumption of means of production and of labour-power – is simultaneously a *labour process*, which creates

⁶ “Labour does not start with being concrete, and then becomes abstract. (...) According to the Marxian theory of duplication, in commodity production *all* labour is *at the same time* abstract and concrete (...). Any commodity-producing labour is always inevitably abstract *and* concrete” (Jappe, 2006: 42-43, emphasis in original).

use-values, and a *valorisation process*, which creates surplus-value. Its result is a commodity with a certain use-value and impregnated with surplus-value.

Marx restates that we thereby need, “in the first place, (...) to consider the labour process independently of any specific social formation” (Marx, 1992a: 283), thus, as the process whereby human beings appropriate and transform natural matter, endow it with a useful form within the aim of satisfying their needs (Ibid.).

Generally speaking, there are three types of inputs in the process of production: the objects of labour (raw and auxiliary materials), the means of labour (tools, machinery, buildings, etc.) and labour-power (Marx, 1992a: 284). From the viewpoint of the labour process, these various inputs get combined – materially and technically – to produce a certain use-value. Therefore, the worker “makes use of the mechanical, physical and chemical properties” of the things at his/her disposal so as to transform matter “in accordance with his purposes” (Marx, 1992a: 285). This *concrete* labour process “is extinguished in the product” (Marx, 1992a: 287): it instead becomes objectified in a particular use-value (Ibid.).

However, as we already know, under capitalism, workers do not only produce mere use-values, but commodities, which amount to the unity of use-value and value. Thus, use-values are produced only insofar as they are the “material substratum” (Marx, 1992a: 293) of value; use-values are sheer “bearers” of value (Ibid.). The purpose of *all* capitalist companies is to produce commodities whose value is *higher* than the sum total value of the inputs required for production – i.e., greater than the combined value of the objects of labour, of the means of labour and of labour-power (Ibid.).

We may thus state that the purpose of commodity production encapsulates “not just value, but also surplus-value” (Ibid.). Now, while only human labour adds *new value* to a certain commodity, surplus-value creating labour must be considered as playing a completely *different* role than that played in the *concrete* labour process. Value-generating labour is a qualitatively homogeneous labour that can display only *quantitative* differences. In short, *the valorisation process corresponds to an abstract labour process in which the specific contents of the various labours expended are effaced.*

From the valorisation point of view, the productive consumption of the inputs previously mentioned – objects of labour, means of labour and labour-power – must yield surplus-value. We thus face a specific *social* feature of capitalist production in which living labour plays a crucial role: the expenditure of abstract labour allows for the creation of enough value to replace the value of labour-power (wages) and, beyond that, creates

excess value – surplus-value. In summary, the productive inputs are considered in terms of the *economic value* they add to the final commodity. It is important to note that the objects and the means of labour simply *transfer*, whether totally or partially, their value to the commodities produced.⁷

To the extent that it creates surplus-value, the capitalist process of production proves itself to be a valorisation process, a process of augmenting the capital invested. In this sense, “just as the commodity itself is a unity formed of use-value and value, so the process of production must be a unity, composed of the labour process and the process of creating value” (Ibid.). Marx clarifies, once more, that “it is not (...) two distinct real processes, but *the same* process, viewed at one time in terms of its content, at the other time according to its [social, NM] form” (Marx, 1988: 140, emphasis in original). Well, “capital as a form consists not of objects of labour and labour, but rather of *values*” (Marx, 1993: 312, emphasis in original).

This therefore strongly emphasises how, “within capitalist production, the relationship between the labour process and the valorisation process is that the latter appears as the purpose, the former only as the means. The former is therefore stopped when the latter is no longer possible or not yet possible” (Marx, 1988: 96). Whenever, for instance, the production of a certain good does not return a profit, then that labour process will simply cease being carried out.

4.3 – The problems of a materialistic definition of labour

Marx’s proposal of a dual concept of labour – concrete/abstract labour – would seem a logically coherent theoretical development. Marx intended to show that value creation is not a property accruing from the particular, *sensuous* character of labour, but from its general, abstract, *social* character. However, the transhistorical status bestowed upon concrete labour is, in turn, highly questionable.

After *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the concept of labour in the early works, clearly understood as historically specific, gives way to a twofold concept that itself turns out problematic insofar as the historicity of concrete labour is denied, that is, only abstract labour is acknowledged as a specificity of capitalist modernity:

⁷ In other words, the value of these inputs simply *reappears* in the value of the commodities produced. Thus, surplus-value is produced exclusively by (unpaid) human labour.

“In so far as (...) labour creates use values, is appropriation of the natural world for human needs, (...) it is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between nature and man, and as such a natural condition of human life it is independent of, equally common to, all particular social forms of human life. The same is true of the labour process in its general forms (...). The labour process itself appears in its general form, hence still in *no specific economic determinateness*. This form does not express any particular historical (social) *relation of production* entered into by human beings in the production of their social life”. (Marx, 1988: 63, emphasis in original)

Here, Marx falls prey to a basic mistake and to the kind of reasoning that he himself constantly reproaches the political economists of his time for making:

“If, then, the specific form of capital is abstracted away, and only the [material, NM] content [of production, NM] is emphasized, (...) *then of course nothing is easier than to demonstrate that capital is a necessary condition for all human production*. The proof of this proceeds precisely by abstraction from the specific aspects which make it the moment of a specifically developed historic stage of human production.” (Marx, 1993: 258, emphasis in original)

It is striking how the procedure Marx reproaches economists for, in addressing the capital category, constitutes the very same methodological procedure that he himself adopts regarding (concrete) labour: all the specific – *social* and *technical* – features of the production process are abstracted away in an action subsumed under the transhistorical category of “labour process”. Should one follow this same misleading point of view, nothing becomes easier than equating and subsuming the activities of Bushman hunters, Athenian slaves, medieval peasants or factory workers *under the same timeless concept* of concrete, material labour.

Marx commits an error symmetrical to the one done by the economists. While these equate the means of production in its material dimension to capital as such, Marx suggests, in several excerpts quoted above, that the material content of modern (re)production (what he calls the technical-material “labour process”) and the material content of wealth (understood as “use value”) remain untainted, untouched by the social form of self-valorising value – by capital. Thus, material (re)production in technical, technological and organizational terms would be (supposedly) a trans-historical category. Well, *both* the material content and the social form are always *historically specific*; and the latter has precedence over the former, shrouding it in a particular way and, by doing so, imprinting it with certain specific qualities.

Consequently, one cannot help but feel astonished by the fact that Marx strives to avoid using ontological categories at all cost, always pointing out the *time-bound* character of the categories in his critique of political economy, before then, without noticing this, abandoning this methodological principle when approaching the concept of (concrete) labour, unreservedly bestowing it with the status of a transhistorical category. While true that Marx sometimes refers to this category as nothing more than a platitude, a commonplace with very little analytical usefulness,⁸ the fact of the matter remains that the labour process concept *as a material substratum of all forms of social production* is inherently problematic and blatantly contradicts the Marxian notion of real subsumption (cf. 5.3).⁹

This aporetic conception is dismissed by Marx himself in other passages. Marx argues, for example, in contrast to the theoretical stance we have just criticised, that “material production” must be grasped in its “*definite historical form*” (Marx, 1989b: 182, emphasis in original). Marx censures political economy for not conceiving “material production itself *historically*”, conceiving it, instead, “as production of material goods in general, not as a definite historically developed and specific form of this production” (Ibid., emphasis in original). *We have come a full circle*: we are faced with a Marx critical of Marx, a Marx that addresses the aporias of his own thinking.

The *ontological* notion of the labour process does not stand up to confrontation with the basic principles of the Marxian critique of political economy, which argues that “all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual *within and through a specific form of society*” (Marx, 1993: 43, emphasis added). Marx stresses that, in capitalism, there is “a relation of the worker to his own activity, which is by no means the *«natural»* one, but which itself already contains a specific *economic character*” (Marx, 1993: 243, emphasis in original). Well, if the relation of the individual with labour is not a “natural relation” and instead reflects a “specific” – *capitalist* – “economic character”, then labour simply cannot be considered an anthropological constant.

Moreover, in the *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, Marx denounces the ills of capitalist industrial society, reproaching

⁸ Marx tells us that “it is entirely certain that human production possesses definite *laws or relations* which remain the same in all forms of production. These identical characteristics are quite simple and can be summarised in a very small number of commonplace phrases” (Marx, 1994: 236, emphasis in original). Marx argues, however, that these “general forms” of the labour process return very “little” knowledge about their empirically distinct *historical features* (Marx, 1988: 63).

⁹ The real subsumption of labour under capital refers to the historical establishment of a material production process – in technical, technological and organisational terms – *specifically capitalist*.

“the *apologists of the factory system* (...), the apologists of this complete de-individualisation of labour, confinement in barrack-like factories, military discipline, subjugation to the machinery, regulation by the stroke of the clock, surveillance by overseers, complete destruction of any development in mental or physical activity”. (Marx, 1991: 490-491, emphasis in original)

It seems clear that Marx opposes the industrial labour that dehumanizes individuals. Thus, not only is abstract labour but also concrete labour is subject to Marx’s critique: those concrete forms taken by productive activities under capitalism. Industrial production is thus not taken for granted in some *positive* way, and so this extends beyond being simply a matter of removing the obstacles posed by capital to the “development of the productive forces” and rather involves *transforming* those productive forces. Marx’s mature theory, when taken to its logical conclusion, does not limit itself to a critique of abstract labour but instead also takes aim at concrete labour. Concrete labour and abstract labour are therefore the two poles of a fetishist and historically specific category: labour.

5 – Towards a radical critique of labour

5.1 – Marx’s contradictions

The Marxian concept of labour thus zigzags and proves prone to aporias. According to Botelho, “it is possible to ascertain a series of advances, setbacks, contradictions and lapses in Marx’s thinking about labour”, which reflect “an obstinate conceptual struggle with a problematic subject” (Botelho, 2009: 43). Lamas reinforces this idea in observing how Marx finds himself “in a theoretical dilemma (...) which leads him in several places in his works to innumerable contradictory statements about the supposedly ontological grounding of labour as the basis of human emancipation” (Lamas, 2007: 33).

“Critique of the Gotha Programme”, a late work of Marx, written in 1875, illustrates perfectly this contradictory understanding of labour. On the one hand, we may find the Marx critical of labour, arguing that “the system of wage labour is a system of slavery, and indeed of a slavery which becomes more severe in proportion as the social productive forces of labour develop, whether the worker receives better or worse payment” (Marx, 1989a: 92).

On the other hand, there is the Marx apologetic of labour, including child labour: “A *general prohibition* of child labour is incompatible with the existence of large-scale

industry and hence an empty, pious wish. Its implementation – if it were possible – would be reactionary [sic.]” (Marx, 1989a: 98, emphasis in original).¹⁰ Marx furthermore adds that one should not deprive “ordinary criminals (...) of their sole means of betterment, productive labour” (Marx, 1989a: 99).

The Marxian aporia around the concept of labour seems undeniable. Nevertheless, it does still remain possible to distil a *coherent* critique of labour from the most radical core of Marxian reflections presented in several of his writings. I would like to propose that this critical understanding of labour is that most consistent with the spirit – although not always with the letter – of Marx’s critique of political economy. Marxian theory possesses a clearly delimited object of study: the capitalist mode of production. In this sense, *all* its categories attain validity only in the context of capitalist society and are, furthermore, understood *negatively*, that is, as fetishist categories which must be practically superseded. Labour cannot be exempted from this rule and escape through some back door.

5.2 – The unbearable lightness of concrete labour

Let us try then to systematize the Marxian critique of labour. In *The German Ideology*, Marx warns about the harms of a transhistorical notion of labour: “Labour is constructed from the mere abstract idea of Man and nature; it is thereby defined in a way which is equally appropriate and inappropriate to all stages” of socio-historical development (Marx & Engels, 1975: 481). Marx argues in the same vein in Volume 3 of *Capital*, critiquing the notion of the “the productive activity of human beings in general, (...) divested (...) of every social form and well-defined [historical, NM] character”, and as such “independent of society, removed from all societies” (Marx, 1998: 802). Marx calls this “a mere ghost — «the» Labour, which is no more than an abstraction and taken by itself does not exist at all” (Ibid.).

In these passages, labour, understood as *transhistorical, material production in general*, is presented by Marx as a perfect absurdity as the differentiating features of the various types of *social* and *technical* organisation of the material (re)production of mankind, throughout history, are erased in the homogenising concept of labour. Most

¹⁰ In the Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx had already written that “the germ of the education of the future is present in the factory system; this education will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour [sic.] with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production [sic.], but as the only method [sic.] of producing fully developed human beings” (Marx, 1992a: 614).

importantly, the absolute historical exceptionality of capitalist productive activity, when compared with pre-capitalist societies, is irremediably lost. Thus, no matter how different the social mediations of its metabolism with nature are, the transhistorical notion of labour allows one to reach the ridiculous conclusion that both the Trobriand islander and the stock market broker *work*.

However, we have also shown that, in his later, mature works, Marx introduces the twofold concept of labour: concrete labour and abstract labour. Now, it should be emphasised that “abstract labour is not a strange element to concrete labour, which seizes it from the outside, but they both form antagonistic poles of one and the same contradictory logic” (Silva Júnior, 2010: 50). Concrete labour and abstract labour are the two *inseparable* poles of labour, that *modern* form of activity. It is therefore not possible to speak of concrete labour in the absence of abstract labour and vice-versa. One should thus be able to avoid the error of “Mr. Proudhon”, for whom “every economic category has two sides – one good, the other bad” (Marx, 1976b: 167) and whose aim is “to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad” (Ibid.).

As also seen here, this stance is upheld by Marx himself on several occasions when analysing the labour category and replicated in the meantime by numerous Marxists: with abstract labour perceived as the “bad side” of labour, the specifically capitalist form of labour, while concrete labour is understood as its “good side”, as the ahistorical material substratum requiring freeing from the *external* yoke of abstract labour. In this sense, a radical critique of labour, in order to be coherent, *must acknowledge the equally modern character of concrete labour*. Bruno Lamas writes as follows in this respect:

“[I]f pre-modern societies are carefully observed, although the production of goods for consumption is to be found naturally in all of them, it is not exactly right to say that these societies possessed «labour», just as it is not possible to say that they had «free time»; this is a specifically modern distinction. (...) [T]o subsume under the category «labour» a myriad of concrete activities such as fishing, sowing, harvesting, etc., is something simply unthinkable in many pre-modern societies. (...) Even more important is the fact that these societies did not conceive the set of productive activities as a sphere separated from the remaining moments of reproduction of social life. In this sense, the very concrete [productive, NM] activities (...) were not always rigidly demarcated from other human activities such as play, rituals, child rearing, social conviviality, etc.¹¹ Marx’s concept of «concrete labour» implies,

¹¹ Cláudio Duarte writes similarly that, in pre-capitalist societies, “the modern separation of spheres («labour», «free time», «art», «religion», etc.) is not really or totally posited. (...) [P]roduction is significantly enmeshed in all the group’s moments and activities and not in an autonomous [economic, NM] sphere” (Duarte, 2009: 42). One can speak, in these societies, of a “primacy (...) of reproduction”, i.e., “those [social, NM] formations are less «modes of production» than *modes of social reproduction of individuals* (...) or *organic members of the community*” (Duarte, 2009: 44, emphasis in original). Pre-

therefore, an abstraction from all social context of human relations; and that is already a specifically capitalist abstraction which makes sense only in the historical framework of separated spheres. Thus, *even though the concept of «concrete labour» aims only to separate analytically the necessarily material side of «labour», it already presupposes a real social separation of human practices which is historically determined*”- (Lamas, 2007: 35, emphasis in original).

Therefore, concrete labour paradoxically embodies an *abstraction*: the material (re)production of mankind is *really* an autonomous sphere under the form of an economy. Labour may be defined as the economic activity *abstracted*, disconnected and clearly demarcated from the remaining domains of life – religion, culture, art, etc. – in temporal and spatial terms as well as regarding its cultural and symbolic meaning. Karl Polanyi speaks wisely of an economy *disembedded* from society (cf. Machado, 2011).

Botelho also suggests that the notion of material production in general – of “concrete labour” – is itself a historical outcome of the capitalist mode of production:

“The idea of production in general (...) is no mere logical result rather also being a historical outcome in that only a specific social circumstance could provide the method suited to isolating its categorical determinations from the totality to which they belong. Only in a society where the meaning, functioning and purpose of production are able to detach themselves from any concrete specific features does it become possible to formulate this generic idea of production. Only with the emergence of (...) labour could an abstract idea of production and, thus, an abstract understanding of the relation between man and nature that does away with any historical specificities, make sense” (Botelho, 2009: 54, emphasis in original).

These remarks are extremely important: it is only the *historical* advent of labour – in its double nature as abstract-concrete labour – that makes it possible to depict *material production in general*, detached from any social or historical conditions, and to speak of an *ontological concrete labour* equated to the human metabolism with nature as such. *The indifference of capitalist productive activity in relation to all sensuous content is projected retrospectively onto pre-capitalist societies as production in general, i.e., as concrete labour.*¹² The crux of the matter thus stems from – to once again repeat – how the disembeddedness of material production, under the form of an “economy”, from all the other social, cultural, symbolic, etcetera contexts, is a phenomenon exclusive to capitalist modernity.

capitalist social formations “do not ascribe to production a central role in human life as a *social* mediation” (Duarte, 2009: 48, emphasis in original).

¹² Cf. Bischoff (1995) and Homs (2012) for a detailed critique of the “materialistic” ontological concept of labour.

5.3 – Concrete labour and real subsumption

The *real* inversion between concrete/abstract and subject/object is one of the dimensions underlying the Marxian concept of fetishism.¹³ In this sense, concrete labour is a mere form of appearance of abstract labour, that is, “concrete labour appears as a sensible expressive moment of the generality of productive processes, as an empirical manifestation of abstract labour” (Botelho, 2009: 61). Concrete labour thus constitutes the form of realisation of abstract labour in sensuous reality. Therefore, *the capitalist mode of production must create a material process of production – the concrete labour process – adequate to the pursuit of the endless valorisation of value.*

Marx deploys the real subsumption of labour under capital concept to describe this specifically capitalist material (re)production of society. Real subsumption consists of a “material transformation of the process of production” (Botelho, 2009: 70); it implies profound technological changes, in particular the dissemination of machinery and of applied sciences (Marx, 1994: 106). In short, “the capitalist social form engraves itself in matter, it creates a technique adequate to its purpose (...) of valorising value” (Botelho, 2009: 70).

While in pre-capitalist societies technical progress was very slow, or even stationary, the capitalist mode of production relies on continuous innovation. This difference, in turn, stems from how only in capitalism does the systemic compulsion of an objective standard of material productivity emerge – socially necessary labour time – disseminated by competition among the many capitals. The technical configuration of labour mirrors the compulsion of “producing an object” employing “only the [social, NM] *labour time necessary* under the general social conditions of production” (Marx, 1988: 197, emphasis in original).

While in pre-capitalist societies the time required for producing a good was not taken into account, in capitalist society, in contrast, the intensity and the rhythm of the various productive activities attain extremely high levels (Ibid.). Uninterrupted labour precisely proves a “peculiar” aspect of capitalism (Marx, 1988: 259). For the first time in history, the length of time of the productive process converts itself into “the only criterion for evaluating and comparing the different activities” (Jappe, 2006: 48) as what is at stake

¹³ Besides the dimension mentioned, fetishism in Marx also encompasses: i) the attribution of real powers to inanimate objects; ii) the reification of human relations under the money-form; iii) a negative social totality characterised by the impersonal domination of real abstractions.

is, first and foremost, the creation of value. Marx writes the following in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

“If the mere quantity of labour functions as a measure of value regardless of quality, it presupposes (...) that men are effaced by their labour; that the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives. Therefore, we should not say that one man's hour is worth another man's hour, but rather that one man during an hour is worth just as much as another man during an hour. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcass. Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone decides everything; hour for hour, day for day” (Marx, 1976b: 127).

Time becomes the major oppressor of human beings. Socially necessary labour time turns out to be the most powerful of overseers, coercing individuals into performing their daily *concrete* activities as fast as possible. Indeed, this also helps drive the recurring transformation of the *technical, technological and organisational* modalities of the various concrete labours.

In this respect, it becomes helpful to consider examples of activities inherently harmful to human beings, such as night work (which disturbs the circadian cycle) and working on an assembly line (which atrophies the human body because of the repeated performance of a small set of predetermined movements) or, still furthermore, those activities harmful to the natural environment, such as the extractive industries that bring about massive deforestation and soil desertification in addition to extremely polluting and/or greenhouse gas emitting manufacturing industries.

In capitalism, all these activities are concrete labours performed solely as modes of realising abstract labour, i.e. of producing economic value. These concrete labours are mere phenomenal forms or forms of appearance of abstract labour. However, as may be easily understood, these concrete labours – night work, work on an assembly line, polluting labour processes, etc. – are not *positive, innocuous*, transhistorical categories that only need extirpating from their “negative” pole, that is, which need only to shed their character as abstract labour.

Real subsumption means that the very (concrete) process of material production is revolutionised in taking on a specifically capitalist form and, thus, correspondingly unprecedented in human history. The apparently harmless concrete labour was entirely shaped to meet the dictates of valorisation and the criteria of profitability. Therefore, it becomes completely impossible to speak of supposedly supra-historical concrete labour, *materially identical* in all societies.

We are then allowed to infer that the “concrete” side of labour does not remain unscathed by the “the presupposed form of socialisation” (Trenkle, 2014: 9): “concrete labour only represents the paradox of [being, NM] the concrete aspect of an abstraction — namely of the form-abstraction «labour»” (Ibid.). Thereby, it is concrete “in the very narrow and restricted sense that the different commodities require materially different production processes”, but whose behaviour, however, “is in no way indifferent, technically or organisationally, to the presupposed goal of valorisation” (Ibid.). Capitalist production is organised according to the following principle:

“producing the greatest possible number of products in the shortest possible time. This is then called the economic efficiency of a business. The concrete, material side of labour is thus nothing other than the tangible form in which abstract labour’s diktat of time confronts the workers and forces them under its rhythm.” (Trenkle, 2014: 10)

Accordingly, the technological, technical and scientific modes of organisation of capitalist *material* production do not reflect some *neutral* category susceptible to “appropriation” without any major problems within a communist society (which does not of course mean that the technologies developed under capitalism should be rejected altogether, i.e., that some of them are susceptible to utilisation in different ways in other modes of production).¹⁴

In conclusion, the challenge that mankind faces is not that of freeing an *ontological* material substratum – concrete labour – from a supposedly *external* domination imposed upon it by abstract labour but that of superseding the binomial abstract-concrete labour as such. Should abstract labour be a historically specific category, then concrete labour – the material support of that abstraction – is a time-bound category as well. Consequently, it is not only abstract labour that requires abolition but also concrete labour. This entails a set of drastic transformations, especially of industrial technology, of the relationship between science and production, of the relationship between material production and nature and of the relationship between human beings and their productive activities.

5.4 – The critique of use-value: some brief remarks

With concrete labour thus becoming a specifically capitalist category, then its result, use-value, must also represent a bourgeois feature. Use-value and value are the two

¹⁴ One can speak of a partial “non-identity” (Adorno, 2004) of technology, i.e., modern technology does not coincide *entirely* with its capitalist form.

inseparable poles of the commodity-form, the basic form of capitalist wealth. There is correspondingly no sense in speaking of an allegedly non-capitalist use-value, i.e., outside the context of commodity production. The concrete side of the commodity – just as the concrete side of labour – is “determined by the historical dynamic” of capitalist society (Vela, 2011: 61).

First of all, it should be emphasised that the sensuous/material aspect of the commodity – its use-value – does not reflect the purpose of capitalist production; it is merely an “inevitable side effect” as “value cannot go without a material bearer” (Trenkle, 2014: 9). Thus, “use-value (...) is not simply a material substratum with given and constant proprieties”, but the “transformation of things with the purpose of creating value” (Vela, 2011: 59).

Secondly, it should also be noted that use-value conveys an *abstract* utility and not the conscious production of certain goods in order to satisfy specific needs. The content of use-value is purely incidental:

“For capital *what* is produced makes no difference – aspirin or ecstasy, spring chickens or mad cows, copies of *Anna Karenina* or biographies of Sarah Ferguson, delicious marmalades or napalm bombs. All product-commodities are equivalent. What counts is that they be usefully sellable, and that the sales make profits for the capital that produced them.” (Basso, 2003: 197, emphasis in original).

This notion of a *generic* useful thing is simply absent in pre-capitalist societies. Botelho warns about the:

“formal difference of the relationship with matter that all non-capitalist societies possessed: for the medieval peasant, the ancient citizen or the native American a certain object is never regarded as a utility in general, but as an axe, a basket, wheat, potatoes, etcetera. The idea of use-value as such, of a generic use-value, is (...) essentially connected to an abstract productive relationship” (Botelho, 2009: 60).

In pre-capitalist societies, objects were produced for *domestic consumption* or in order to be *directly* appropriated by the dominant class. The category of utility in general, of use-value, remained entirely unknown as this constitutes a peculiarity of goods produced under the form of commodities. In capitalism, commodities are *use-values*, *indirectly social* useful things, that is, objects produced with the sole purpose of being *exchanged* and afterwards consumed by *somebody else*.

It is important to recall that its status as a value proves the true essence of the commodity; its use-value only endowing its phenomenal form. Thus, use-value – in its

abstraction – refers merely to the fact that a given good – *any* good – is the bearer of value. The abstract form of value must then realise itself in sensuous reality, that is, in need of some kind of material support. Since use-value results from a *specifically capitalist* process of material production, it constitutes the incarnation, the embodiment of the irrationalities of that mode of production.

Marx’s reasoning about use-value is also aporetical. On the one hand, Marx grants use-value with the status of a transhistorical category, arguing that use-value is a “neutral result” of the concrete labour process (Marx, 1988: 59), the content of wealth in all human societies (Marx, 1988: 40). On the other hand, in his “Notes on Wagner”, Marx writes that “in order to produce a commodity”, one “*must not only produce use-value, but use-value for others, social use-value. (...) So use-value itself – as the use-value of the «commodity» – possesses an historically specific character*” (Marx, 2002: 242, emphasis in original).

Therefore, Marx reaches the conclusion that “social use-value”, i.e. the “use-value of the commodity”, is a historically specific category. He was not able however to take the next logical step: in this case, why should the same ahistorical concept of use-value continue being used to designate the goods produced in pre-capitalist societies? In much the same way as the concept of concrete labour, the supposedly ontological category of use-value contradicts the ethos of the Marxian critique of political economy, which postulates the *historicity* of all its categories.

In the capitalist mode of production, all goods are produced as commodities, wherefore possessing a deeply contradictory nature: the indifference of form (value) regarding content (use-value) means that content itself very often takes on a destructive and irrational character. It suffices to consider the example of planned obsolescence. In capitalism, many commodities are produced *beforehand* with certain *inferior* physical, bodily features that ensure their rapid wear and tear and the recurring need for their replacement with new commodities. Furthermore, a vast array of the products supplied is inherently harmful to human beings, whether military equipment, food containing cancerous substances or the individual automobile running on fossil fuels.¹⁵ In this sense,

¹⁵ The automobile provides one of the most extreme examples of a harmful “use-value”. Such vehicles are highly polluting and a greenhouse gas emitting technology. Its historical rise as the main means of transportation entailed an unprecedented destruction of natural landscapes (the construction of millions of miles of paved roads) and urban landscapes (streets became the natural habitat of the automobile, while human beings became unwanted intruders). Furthermore, the automobile also ultimately fails to fulfil its primordial task – allowing individuals to move quickly –, since its proliferation is counterproductive: the greater the number of automobiles, the greater the traffic jams and the lower the average speed of circulation

we may indeed conclude that use-value is not a neutral category that lends itself to being simply extirpated from the value-form or appropriated in any straightforward manner.¹⁶

6 – Conclusion: from labour time to free time

This article has demonstrated that the young Marx rules out any notion of labour as the “essence of man” (Marx & Engels, 1975: 482). Furthermore traces of this stance linger on right through to the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx claims, for example, that “the positing of the individual as a *worker*, in this nakedness, is itself a product of *history*” (Marx, 1993: 472, emphasis in original). Moreover, in Marx’s view, as a *specifically capitalist* form of activity, labour should be abolished without further ado (cf. section 2).

However, from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* onwards, Marx completely abandons the idea of abolishing labour (Zilbersheid, 2004: 135). We would note however that Marx nevertheless continues to conceive of non-labour time as the greatest expression of the freedom of human beings:

“Time is the room of human development. A man who has no free time to dispose of, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions by sleep, meals, and so forth, is absorbed by his labour (...) is less than a beast of burden. He is a mere machine for producing Foreign Wealth, broken in body and brutalised in mind.” (Marx, 1985: 142)

Nevertheless, Marx no longer seems to believe that the material (re)production of society can be organised in a non-instrumental way (Zilbersheid, 2004: 138). Thus, in Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx revives the idea, introduced in the *Grundrisse* (cf. 3.2), of *building the realm of freedom over and above the realm of necessity*, with the latter understood as the locus of labour. Marx states that the purpose of a “higher form of society” should be the greatest possible limitation of the “time devoted to material labour” (Marx, 1998: 806), for “the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production” (Marx, 1998: 807).

in major contemporary cities, which, in some cases, is now equivalent to the average speed of animal-powered transportation.

¹⁶ However, it is possible to discern also a (partial) non-identity regarding use-value, that is, use-value does not coincide *totally* with the destructive logic of the commodity. There are, for sure, a vast array of goods and services, produced nowadays as commodities, which would be considered beneficial to human beings and would continue being produced in a non-capitalist form in a hypothetical future communist society. For instance, bread, as a basic foodstuff in the diet of almost every human culture, would certainly still be produced in a post-capitalist society, although its production process – both technically and materially – would no longer represent a “labour process”.

Social development brings with it an expansion to individual wants and needs,

“but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite” (Ibid.).

Despite this apparent theoretical regression, I believe there is scope for harmonising this stance with the radical idea of abolishing labour present in his early works. Whenever concrete labour gets understood as a historically specific category, inseparable from abstract labour, then the abolition of the latter – unquestionable in the mature Marx – implies the abolition of the former. In other words, mankind’s process of material (re)production in a post-capitalist society, i.e. the activities in the “realm of necessity” of Volume 3 of *Capital*, cannot under any circumstances be called labour.

Furthermore, what is at stake here is clearly not mere pedantry around the nomenclature of productive activities, but rather *the practical transformation of human metabolism with nature*, which will then lose all the *social* and *material* characteristics of *labour*. Communism thereby abolishes not only the valorisation process, but also the labour process. In the absence of capital, there will obviously be no *real subsumption* of material production, which will then take on a post-capitalist form otherwise unprecedented throughout human history.

Cláudio Duarte argues convincingly that “production may not only cease to be a labour process, *a place of coercion and necessity*” – contrary to what the late Marx suggests – “but also cease to be the central moment in life” (Duarte, 2009: 59, emphasis added). In this sense, “production becomes (...) a mere *material* presupposition”, losing its preponderance within the “new ordering of social space and time” (Duarte, 2009: 61, emphasis in original).

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