

Marx on Productive Labor: Valorization, Subjectivity and Temporality in *Capital*

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History and African Studies Seminar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, August 10, 2005

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Introduction

In the unfinished conclusion to the first volume of *Capital*, Marx offers an evocative passage:

“[L]abor with the same content may be productive or unproductive. For example, Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, the writer who turns out factory made stuff for his publisher is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silk worm produces silk, as the activity of his own nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who fabricates books under the direction of his publisher is a productive worker, for his production is subordinated to capital in advance and takes places only because it increases that capital. A singer who sells her song on her own is an unproductive worker. But the same singer, commissioned by an entrepreneur to sing in order to make money for him, is a productive worker. For she produces capital.”¹

At issue is the notion of ‘productive labor’, which immediately appears in a different light to the conventional contemporary understanding; namely that productive labor is an affirmative category. This paper seeks to decipher this concept, and consider its implications in a moment where much of academic scholarship and the socio-economic world seem to have cast Marx (at least in its traditional interpretations) as anachronistic or irrelevant.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, Marx has conventionally been understood from the standpoint of (living) labor, rather than as a theorist of the social totality, where the object of critique is labor itself. From these perspectives, Marx’s discussions of exploitation, distribution and private property have been privileged as analytical tools from which interpret society. Drawn especially from *The German Ideology* and *The 1844 Manuscripts*, these readings have taken a distinctly humanist and ontological character, where ‘man’ is alienated from his essential ‘species being’ in capitalism, as the partial functions necessary for livelihood eclipse the possibility of man in his ‘full’ humanity: as hunter in the morning,

¹ Karl Marx. “Appendix: Results of Immediate Processes of Production” in *Capital: A critique of political economy. Vol. 1* (Penguin, 1976) p. 1044 and *Theories of Surplus Value*. Selections edited by Bonner and Burns. (International Publishers, 1953). p. 186.

fisherman in the afternoon, etc. These perspectives are often tinged with an almost Rousseauian romanticism, of a past before private property and present that is increasingly destroyed as capitalism ‘develops’. Alternatively, those uncomfortable with such romanticism have suggested, inspired by *The Communist Manifesto*, that class exists as a trans-historically valid category, at the root of inequality in all societies.

These perspectives seem increasingly incapable of grasping a contemporary world where finance and speculative capitalism generate substantial wealth and class is increasingly splintered into thousands of fragments, such that even politically radical trade unions invest in the market and advance the interests of workers, often against the unemployed.² Those considered in structurally privileged positions to create revolution, whether in the tradition of Lukacs or Gramsci, themselves participate in a logic of accumulation that is seem so generalized as to render any argument around the “falsity” of their consciousness entirely implausible.³ Moreover, the character of contemporary labor processes have altered to such an extent that framing a theory on the pre-supposition of full-time industrial employment has itself been rendered untenable. In describing these neo-liberal changes, some commentators have implicitly or even explicitly theorized these currents as constituting an entirely novel order, where Marx’s theory is no longer analytically sufficient.⁴ Of course, there is an ongoing debate as to the validity of traditional readings of Marx. Discussions of distribution and class, however conceived, are critically important in political engagement.

² A provocative recent attempt to theorize the social foundations of the dominant role of speculative capital in the contemporary world is offered by Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee. They demonstrate how a rationalized mathematical model of risk has become a critical feature of the contemporary world economy that, since 1973, has produced enormous amounts of wealth, almost autonomously from production. William Cronon suggested the beginnings of the risk economy in his seminal study of the growth of Chicago. See Lipuma and Lee. *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*. (Duke, 2004) and Cronon. “Pricing the Future: Grain” in *Nature’s Metropolis*. (Norton, 1991)

³ The third and final section of Lukacs’s essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” in some senses devalues the analytical potential of the first two, in which he imaginatively interrogates the relationships between rationalization and commodification, drawing from Weber and Marx, in order to offer a powerful discussion of social conditions of the philosophical tradition from Descartes through Kant and Hegel. Georg Lukacs. *History and Class Consciousness*.

⁴ Among a myriad of vastly different positions, Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* is quite explicit about the need to go beyond Marxian categories. He compares Marx to Newton, and his project to Einstein’s (?) Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* is a powerfully thought- through attempt at critique of “presentism”, recognizing the power of Marx’s analysis whilst critiquing traditional Marxism. The need to theorize the subject, a continual problem for traditional Marxism, is clearly at the basis of some of the most important post-structuralist writing, esp. Foucault’s work, and I aim here to consider a theory of the subject in *Capital*. Some of the more empirically grounded, labor process based discussions advancing this position, will be considered below. For review on Specters of Marx that takes seriously its critiques of traditional Marxism and presentism see Moishe Postone. “Deconstruction as Social Critique: Derrida on Marx and the New World Order” in *History and Theory*. (1998, 37, 3). pp. 370-387.

Indeed, a politics from the standpoint of rights and humanism more generally has deployed the spirit of Marx in order to combat various forms of social inequality, especially those around race, gender and sexuality.

Yet for all the social importance of these political interventions, it does seem that traditional Marxism has not offered a theory adequate to challenges of the contemporary social totality. Marx's project in *Capital* was centrally to offer a critique of political economy; a consideration of the conditions of possibility of the economy becoming the primary feature of all life. In other words, following Moishe Postone's reading, Marx sought to unpack the historically specific implications of capitalism and trace how capitalism comes to mould and mediate all activity.⁵ It was not that he emphasized the importance of the economy, as Smith and Ricardo had, but rather asked how the social aspects intrinsic to the economy were elided and reshaped according to capitalism. What follows from here is Marx's attempt to de-naturalize and show the historical specificity of an entire conceptual apparatus.

In this paper, then, I will consider Marx's discussion of valorization, as it appears in the third section of *Capital*, as a means of reconstructing his theory of temporality and the subject. As in any philosophical work, abstracting elements of the discussion for the purposes of argument is often the source of misreading, and I will therefore begin with the presumption that the form in which *Capital* itself is presented is crucial for understanding the argument as a whole. I will frame the discussion with a brief excursion into the first section. Following this, I will endeavor to interpret what Marx notion of 'productive labor'. This allows a consideration of some of the more recent investigations of the labor process and an inquiry into the extent of commodification on life in general and aesthetic activity in particular, as exemplified by Marx's discussion of Milton as a genius.

Commodities and Domination: Capitalism as abstract social mediation

The subject of the first chapter of *Capital*, of course, is the commodity as the measure of wealth in specifically capitalist social formations. In order for goods to be commodities, they must possess a use and exchange value. From ancient times, goods were traded for money, but they never became commodities in the sense that Marx speaks about

⁵ Moishe Postone. *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Re-interpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1994).

in this chapter. The condition of the commodity *qua* commodity lies in its determination by a generalized system of exchange value. Qualitatively different commodities can thus be measured and exchanged against one another. Money regulates these exchanges as a master signifier, a universal equivalent that is able to represent all commodities.

Money, in itself, is not sufficient to stand as universal equivalent except when it becomes socially general. In order to do this money has to become a fetish, that is, it has to both express and mask the labor in the commodities it represents. In so doing, particular labors themselves must be abstracted to a homogenous mass, such that all labor time is equivalent and can be exchanged. Marx makes the point that this is entirely historically specific through his discussion of Aristotle.⁶ While Aristotle came close to formulating a theory of value, the latter could not grasp the character of abstract equivalence, where the work necessary for creating a bed and the toil entailed in building a house could be expressed in commensurable terms. Marx argues that the inability of Aristotle to express the equivalence of the labors that created these objects was fundamentally a product of his living in non-capitalist society, where value did not accrue from labor and slaves were driven to do most of the work.

What emerges from this discussion is that abstract categories come to shape the empirical world. Use-value and exchange-values are the two dimensions to the commodity, but because exchange value counts as a measure of social value, any notion of use is moulded by exchange value. Put less opaquely, our needs and desires for useful things are not autonomous, but social value and economic value become increasingly bound up.⁷ This is not to deny that differences exist at the concrete level, or that capitalism is not productive of a vast array of newly useful and powerful things, but rather that capitalism reshapes the character of need itself, and becomes a system of abstract social mediation.

Marx's discussion of Aristotle already provided clues towards understanding the character of this mediation, in the sense that concrete thoughts of the equivalence of unlike things is only possible in capitalism. This is further illuminated in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx's analysis of the individual suggests that the individual *qua* individual, meaning the

⁶ Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. pp. 150-151.

⁷ "For the use-value of labor power to the capitalist as a capitalist does not consist in actual use value, in the usefulness of this particular concrete labor.... He is no more concerned with this than he is concerned with the use value of the product of this labor in itself; inasmuch as for the capitalist the product is a commodity, and in fact before its first metamorphosis is not an article of consumption. What interests him in the commodity is that possesses more exchange value than he paid for it." Karl Marx. *Theories of Surplus Value*. pp. 152-53

notion of a self-sufficient, rights-bearing individual only appears as a product of an abstract logic that is specific to the social formation of capitalism.⁸ While Adam Smith (and far less sophisticated theorists) offer ‘Robinson-Crusoe’ stories in order to explain ‘the natural individual’, Marx argues that it is only in capitalism where the social character of work is elided to the extent that the autonomous individual can appear.⁹ Following Hegel, Marx shows that any empirical facts have their basis in, are mediated by, a (social) system of thought.¹⁰

The character of capitalism as a system of social mediation is thus one that shapes the very modes of thought that structure practice.¹¹ Thus far Marx has suggested the role that labor plays as a central pivot of this system, although this requires further explication. Nevertheless, it is clear, even at this initial stage, that the character of this mediation is not reducible to analysis of exploitation and seems to penetrate more deeply into social life and thought itself, as a system of social domination.

Valorization, the production of surplus value and the division of labor

Commodities, including labor power, are exchanged in the market, where two owners possess equal rights. While the exchange of the commodities in general may create wealth, if they are sold for more or less than their value, or if, in the case of speculative capital, people invest in their future price, their exchange alone does not create new value. In order to create what Marx calls surplus value, the substance of commodities themselves must

⁸ Marx. *Grundrisse*. pp. 83-85.

⁹ Marilyn Stathern’s discussion of the making of gender domination and identity in Melanesia has a curious affinity to this argument. In analyzing a non-capitalist society, she argues that identity formation has a wholly different character such that assuming individuality as a starting point projects a western ontological framework that is adequate to explain gender difference. Marilyn Strathern. *The Gender of the Gift*. (Cambridge, 1988)

¹⁰ Against those who would argue, in positivist fashion, that certain concepts are merely simple notions that form the basis of empirical study, Marx offers the example that Malthus used to ground his analysis, namely that of population and overpopulation. While Malthus assumes that population is a concept without presupposition, that is, trans-historical, Marx argues that by dividing necessary from surplus population, and assuming particular means of survival, Malthus’ concept immediately entails a historically specific social formation. Furthermore, the concept of population itself suggests a definite group of people, a form of classification only conceivable in the particular historical epoch of capitalism. What is concrete, for Marx, is only concrete because of the many determinations imposed upon it. Without grasping these determinations, any empirical analysis will necessarily reproduce these determinations, in the form of fetish, which expresses the conditions of existence, but does so as if these conditions are “natural”, masking the determinations (the necessary conditions) of its production. Processes of thought, as conceptual apparatuses, are moulded by determinations of the historical epoch. Marx. *Grundrisse*. pp. 101, 606-608

¹¹ This conceptual apparatus is probably an inheritance from the Kantian “synthetic a priori”. Durkheim, in a very different investigation of mediation, acknowledges the Kantian influence but demands that the concept, at base, is a socially produced one.

be altered, such that M-C(-C')-M'. The only way to achieve this is through the use of a special commodity, namely labor power. Bought on the market at a mutually agreed fair price, labor power is pressed into the service of transforming commodities, such as changing silk into linen. While labor-power is remunerated at a “fair price”, a trick is performed in the process of adding labor to the commodity, such that it can be sold for greater than the value, that is, the labor-time, invested in its production.¹² This is the very process of the creation of surplus value, which occurs beyond the realm of the market and the law. Marx outlines how this is achieved in its most basic form during the course of any working day;

“During [a portion] of the labor process, that in which his labor is no longer necessary labor, the worker does indeed expend labor power, he does work, but his labor is no longer necessary labor and he creates no labor for himself. He creates a surplus value, which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of something created out of nothing.... It is just as important for a correct understanding of surplus value to conceive it as merely a congealed quantity of surplus labor time, as nothing but objectified labor, as it is for proper comprehension of value in general to conceive it merely a congealed quantity of so many hours of labor, as nothing but objectified labor”.¹³

Necessary Labor, then, is the labor time needed to reproduce the amount of wages paid for any given day. The excess time, that the worker spends working, is surplus, from which the capitalist creates additional products to sell on the market. In the initial stages of capitalist production, it is conceptually easy to draw a distinction between necessary and surplus labor time. In this scheme, the capitalist sought to lengthen the working day as much as possible, in order to extract the maximum possible surplus. Workers were forced to work longer and longer hours in order to receive their daily wages.¹⁴ Eventually many organized themselves,

¹² Part of the point here, of course, is that the notion of a fair price, which grounds the market, the law and the public sphere is based on an exchange of equivalent values. Outside this domain, of what Marx calls “Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” in reference to the fixation on a rights based discourses, unequal exchange happens through the exploitation of labor power. It is not this sphere of production is outside the public sphere of rights, on the contrary, it grounds it and is the very condition of its possibility. Marx. *Capital* vol. 1. pp. 277-280.

¹³ Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 325.

¹⁴ In the course of struggles over the length of the working day, in which workers were held to their agreement “to toil for a complete day”, and thus pushed beyond their limits, with many dying in these new factories, Marx voices Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* as the capitalist who firmly holds the worker to his bond. Discussions of Anti-Semitism aside, while Shylock was denied his tragedy in mercantilist Venice of the sixteenth century, he returns in the nineteenth, with a significantly changed productive apparatus behind him, to claim not oppression or tragedy, but domination. See Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 399-400. On the misrecognition generative of anti-Semitism within Capital, See Moishe Postone. “The Holocaust and the trajectory of the twentieth century” in Postone and Eric Santner (ed). *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth century*. Chicago.

and sought to define the length of the working day.¹⁵ Long struggles culminated in the legislation governing of the working day.

This mode of achieving surplus value from the labor process is known as “absolute surplus value”. Once the limits for the working day were more or less set, another mechanism to achieve surplus value had to be found. In the drive toward what Marx calls “relative surplus value”, adjustments are made to make the labor process itself more productive. Instead of a concept of workers laboring independently for long hours, a portion of which reproduces the cost of their labor, and the rest is surplus, work itself begins to change its character, and it becomes increasingly conceptually difficult to separate the necessary from the surplus portion.

How is this re-moulding of the labor process in the service of creating greater surplus value achieved? In his chapters on “Co-operation” and “The Division of Labor in Manufacture”, Marx suggests that, collective work was always, through various historical periods, a mechanism to produce more. As it develops in capitalism, however, it takes a very specific form, such that increasingly workers are pushed away from handicrafts into specialized functions. Instead of being able to produce an entire product independently, workers become part of a production line, whether in the making of Swiss watches or pins.

Intelligence in production expands in one direction, because it vanishes in many others. What is lost by the specialized workers is concentrated in the capital that confronts them. It is a result of the division of labor in manufactures that the worker is brought face to face with the intellectual potencies of the material process of production, as the property of another, and as a ruling power. This separation begins in simple co-operation, where the capitalist represents to the single workman, the oneness and the will of the associated worker. It is developed in manufacture which mutilates the workers, turning him into a fragment of himself.¹⁶

The “free gift” of greater productivity that collective workers offer to capital is accompanied by radical specialization, to the extent that it becomes impossible, on an individual basis, to

¹⁵ Of course, these struggles did not to challenge capital, as such. “We see that, leaving aside certain elastic restrictions, the nature of commodity exchange itself imposes no limits to the working day, no limits to surplus labor. The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when tries to make the working day as long as possible, and where possible, make two working days out of one. On the other hand... the worker maintains his right as a seller to reduce the working day to a particular normal length. There is here therefore an antimony, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides. Hence in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day.”; “The establishment of a normal working-day is the result of centuries of struggle between capitalist and worker”; “The struggles over wages within the manufacturing system presuppose manufacture, and are in no way directed against them” Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 344, 382, 555.

¹⁶ Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 482.

separate necessary and surplus labor time. This is only possible at the level of society as a whole. The attainment of relative surplus value thus necessitates revolutionizing the entire basis of work, and moulding it according to the demands of achieving value.

It is important to realize that this process is necessarily continuous. The socially necessary labor time to produce any item shapes the amount of surplus value that can possibly be extracted from it. When any individual firm is able to produce commodities using less labor-power, they are able to extract more from that commodity than any other firm. Yet once that shorter labor time becomes socially general, firms will once again search for a manner to increase productivity. In the early eighteenth century England, this involved companies continually attempting to lengthen the working day and introducing double shifts. Once laws fixing the working day came into effect, the search to produce more value became solely a matter of refining techniques of the labor process to increase productivity, that is, it became a matter of finding new mechanisms for the achievement of relative surplus value.

The very basis of capitalist production therefore entails, simultaneously, two dimensions, namely “the anarchy of the market and the despotism of the factory”.¹⁷ While the law and trade unions struggle to control the anarchic character of the market, they cannot regulate the basic character of valorization, a necessary feature of all capitalist production. Critiques of capitalism based on distribution can offer a mechanism to alter the respective wealth of various commodity owners, but the need to create new value is intrinsically a despotic process and untouched by critiques of distribution.

Further, as the actual process of labor becomes moulded by the division of labor in order to create new value, we begin to see the loss of any autonomy by workers over the techniques of production. On one hand, this is a degradation of their skills over time, such that the artisan is stripped by her knowledge of the process of producing an entire product. But this also enables a vastly increased productive apparatus, where many more commodities are available. From the standpoint of individual laborers, this process is often devastating. And yet, it is important to see that all labor in capitalism is necessarily constrained and confined to the production of surplus value. While Marx does recognize the social costs involved in the drive to realize greater quantities of surplus value, to understand the motion of capital, it is not sufficient to simply mourn the loss of the past. Instead, Marx’s analysis,

¹⁷ Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 477.

aimed toward understanding the contradictory social totality, now moves to understand the character of machinery and large scale production.

Mill, Machines and Overwork: Absolute and Relative Surplus Value converge

The division of labor in manufacturing constitutes a seminal moment in the unfolding of the dynamic of capitalism. It reformulated the labor process in a fundamental manner, turning workers from independent craftsmen capable of producing a finished product, into mere cogs of an engine of production.¹⁸ Yet the metaphor becomes realized outside the form of the human body as machines themselves come to dominate production. Marx's remarks on the development of large scale industry have a profound resonance in the popular mythology of the contemporary world:

“The great production of surplus-value in these branches of labor, and the progressive cheapening of their articles... was in fact by the cheapness of the human sweat and the human blood, which were converted into commodities... that the markets were constantly being extended... At last the critical point was reached. The basis of the old method, sheer brutality in the exploitation of the workers, accompanied more or less by a systematic division of labor, no longer sufficed for the extending markets and for the still more rapidly extending competition of the capitalists. *The hour of the machine has struck*”.¹⁹ [my emphasis]

With machinery, Marx argues, the most developed form of capitalist production is achieved. Science and technology lose their “autonomy” and are gradually pressed into the service of creating more efficient means of production. Tools that were formerly used by workers to develop new commodities, are replaced by the machine, which, far from being a mere sophisticated tool, comes to reshape the character of production, turning the worker into a mere appendage, as opposed to a central part, of the labor process.²⁰ Yet, despite these developments resulting in much of production begin undertaken by machines, they did not result in shorter work days for people. While political economists and liberal theorists, mostly notably John Stuart Mill, were puzzled that this did not occur, Marx's theorization of machinery and the creation of surplus value lucidly explains this apparent paradox.²¹

¹⁸ “Manufactures, accordingly, prosper most where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may... be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men”. Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1*. p. 483.

¹⁹ Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1*. p. 601.

²⁰ “in handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him...”. Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1*. p. 548.

²¹ “John Stuart Mill says in his “Principles of Political Economy”: “It is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being.” That is, however, by no means the aim of the capitalistic application of machinery. Like every other instrument for increasing the productivity of

As means of production, machines are forms of what Marx calls *constant capital*. By constant, he means that machines will always produce the same amount (assuming that they are used optimally), and can never produce new, or excess forms of value. New machines will always increase the abilities of production, but they are unable to exceed the capacity that they were built to produce. As forms of social life, they represent the labor of the past, dead labor. The dynamic of capitalism demands continual increases in the capacities of production. These increases in value can only be achieved by the *variable capital*, meaning human labor. Machines are mere means of production, and need to be thrown into motion by people, even if part of this work will necessarily be the invention of new machines.²² It is important to move beyond a physical dimension of manual labor, as in the image of Adam Smith's pin factory. If science can be pressed into the service of capital, then it becomes possible for scientists themselves, as in the case of contemporary pharmaceutical companies, to become productive labor. In Marx's metaphor, capitalist production is vampire-like, living only by means of sucking the life from living labor, and subsuming greater elements of human activity into the productive process.²³

As machinery comes to dominate the labor process, co-operation now develops as a feature of machines rather than among workers, as it had been during the period of manufacturing. Among the many consequences of domination of production by large scale industry, women and children are employed, and dexterity is naturalized as a desirable feature of the labor process. In addition, the struggles undertaken by predominately male workers over several centuries, surrounding the length of the working day, is finally defeated.²⁴ This allows capital, in its relentless search for new forms of productive labor, to not only seek relative surplus value, but also re-activate the drive for absolute surplus value.²⁵

labour, machinery is intended to cheapen commodities, and, by shortening that portion of the working-day, in which the worker works for himself, to lengthen the other portion, the part he gives [without an equivalent] to the capitalist for nothing. The machine is a means for producing surplus-value". Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1* p. 492.

²² "The technical conditions of the labor process may be revolutionized to such an extent that where formerly ten men using ten implements of small value worked up to a relatively small quantity of raw material, one may now, with the aid of one expensive machine, work up one hundred times as much raw material. In the latter case we have an enormous increase in constant capital, ie the total value of the means of production employed, and at the same time a great reduction in the variable part of the capital, which has been laid out in labor-power. This change however alters the quantitative relation between the constant and variable capital, or the proportion by which total capital is split up into its constant and variable constituents; it has not in the least degree affected the essential difference between the two". Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1*. p. 319

²³ Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1*. p. 342.

²⁴ This, to some extent, could contribute to an explanation of the contemporary fragmentation of the 'working class'.... "Machinery, by the excessive addition of women and children to the working personal, at last breaks

The “overwork” generated by the unfolding of machinery also throws many people out of work. As should be clear, these are two sides of the same dynamic. This cannot in any way be seen to lighten labor. The “freeing” of a mass of workers from their places in the division of labor makes them available to do new forms of toil.²⁶ Initially some of this labor may be unproductive, of mere service. Marx observes that an entirely new servant class is created as a result of machinery.²⁷ Yet it is clear that in the movement of capital, new forms of the valorization of labor must be found, and thus continually strive to turn these unproductive workers into “productive labor”.

The birth of the subject: Ontology, Temporality and ‘Species Becoming’

The sections on “The Division of Labor in Manufacturing” and “Machinery and Large Scale Industry” that appear to describe the ‘objective’ motion of capitalism also offers a clear theory of the subject. In the initial stages of his chapter on “The labor process and the valorization process”, Marx offers an account of labor, in a trans-historical guise, which echoes Hegel:

“Labor is first of all... a process by which man, through his actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature... He sets in motion natural forces which belong to his own body in order to appropriate the materials of nature to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature and subjects the play of forces to his own sovereign power”.²⁸

down the resistance which the male workers had continued to oppose to the despotism of capital in the period of manufacturing.” Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1.* p. 526.

²⁵ “There is an immanent contradiction in the application of machinery to the production of surplus value, since, of the two factors of the surplus value created by a given amount of capital, one the rate of surplus value, cannot be increased except by diminishing the other, the number of workers. This contradiction comes to light as soon as machinery has come into general use in a given industry, for then the value of the machine produced commodity regulates the social value of all commodities of the same kind; and it is this contradiction that drives the capitalist, without his being aware of the fact, to the most ruthless and excessive prolongation of the working day, in order that he may secure compensation for the decrease in the relative number of workers exploited by increasing not only relative but absolute surplus labor”. Karl Marx. *Capital Vol. 1.* p. 531.

²⁶ In fact, the apologists for capitalism do not have in mind some sort of liberation from capital. They have in their minds the means of subsistence of the workers who have been “set free”... The simple and by no means new fact that machinery sets the workers free from their means of subsistence is expressed in economic language by saying that machinery sets free means of subsistence for the workers, or converts those means into capital for his employment. The mode of expression, you see, is everything. *Nominibus mollire licet mala.* [It is proper to lighten evil with words—Ovid]. Marx. *Capital Vol. 1.* p. 566

²⁷ On the creation of a new servant class, see Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1.* p. 574.

²⁸ Marx. *Capital. Vol. 1.* p. 284

Therefore, not only are new objects produced, but labor is fundamentally about the altering of the subject. Here, at the beginning of his discussion of valorization, the subject appears be autonomously producing objects and herself through her own activity. She appears to be defined by her creative action in the world. If we read this passage trans-historically, it would be conceivable to even create an ontology; such that labor is the means of the realization of her being, as the silk-worm produces silk. Such a picture can no long stand once her labor comes under the historically specific sign of capital. At first glance, this might allow us to speak about the ontological condition of being a worker in capital.

In tracing the movement of capital's relentless search for surplus value, however, from the division of labor in manufacturing through the development of machinery and large scale industry, this position becomes untenable. Marx's discussion of this motion reveals not only an alteration in the productive apparatus of capital, but a fundamental change in the character of subjectivity. First in manufacturing:

"The one-sidedness and the deficiencies of the specialized worker become perfections when he is a part of the collective worker. The habit of doing only one thing converts him into a never failing instrument, while his connection with the whole mechanism compels him to work with the regularity of the parts of a machine... the individual workers are appropriated and annexed for life by a limited function; on the other hand, the various operations of the hierarchy are parceled out among the workers according to both their natural and their acquired capabilities".²⁹

And then in machinery, where Marx observes one hundred years before *Discipline and Punish* that "the overseers book of penalties replaces the slave driver's lash"³⁰, the subject is pushed even further;

"In machinery, the motion and activity of the instruments of labor asserts its independence vis-à-vis the worker. The instruments of labor become an industrial form of perpetual motion. It would go on producing forever, if did it not meet with certain natural obstructions in the weak bodies and the strong wills of its human attendants. The automaton, as capital, and because it is capital, the automatic mechanism is endowed, in the person of the capitalist, with consciousness and a will. As capital, therefore, it is animated by the drive to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by man, that obstinate yet elastic natural barrier."³¹

Remembering that our contemporary notion of the individual is herself produced within capitalism, it is now possible to consider the character of that individuality. The 'obstinate, yet elastic natural barrier' suggests that she herself is moulded in terms of changing

²⁹ Marx. *Capital*. vol. 1. p. 469

³⁰ Marx. *Capital*. vol. 1. p. 550.

³¹ Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 526.

productive apparatuses. Instead of an idea of her essential ‘species being’ destroyed by capitalism, her capacity, her very being is created in the very unfolding of capitalism. As a subject, she is produced within this logic. Marx suggests that her ‘being’ is precisely elastic rather than essential. Instead of ‘species being’, Marx now uses the notion of species capacity, of the ever renewed possibilities for human beings.³² This is neither deployed affirmatively, nor from a standpoint of the loss of a romantically conceived autonomous past. Rather ‘species becoming’ is a critical concept that attempts to account simultaneously for the new generative possibilities of human beings accompanied by new forms of constraint.

The accounts of manufacture and machinery thus demonstrate that, as capitalism unfolds, it moves, and its social character, the subjectivities it produces, march along with it. This unfolding is directional, towards ever greater possibilities of achieving surplus value. This is not teleological, for *telos* entails a fixed end point, an end of history. Rather this vampire continues to require new forms of productive labor, and as these forms of life are integrated into the apparatus of capital, as they become dead labor, so the goal becomes to find new forms of productive labor. There is no end to this process, for the end becomes a means, and new ends must be constantly sought. The conceptual apparatus that drives this process is not separate from this process. It is also not a mere reflection. Instead it structures the new drive for surplus value, and once that surplus value is achieved, becomes structured by the new conditions of production. It is hardly surprising that the common parlance of the contemporary world asks of all activity: ‘what is your added value?’

Considering Productive Labor: An Affirmative Category?

Armed with this conceptual vocabulary, we now return to the discussion of ‘productive labor’;

“[L]abor with the same content may be productive or unproductive. For example, Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, the writer who turns out factory made stuff for his publisher is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silk worm produces silk, as the activity of his own nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who fabricates books under the direction of his publisher is a productive worker, for his production is subordinated to capital in advance and takes places only

³² “When the worker cooperates in a planned way with others... he develops the capacities of his species.” Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 447

because it increases that capital. A singer who sells her song on her own is an unproductive worker. But the same singer, commissioned by an entrepreneur to sing in order to make money for him, is a productive worker. For she produces capital.”³³

It is clear immediately that Marx has no special love reserved for productive labor. In the 1970s, some second-wave feminists suggested that because women undertake productive labor, which generally goes unrecognized, there needs to be a social system in place that offers ‘wages for housework’.³⁴ Without denying the relevance of understanding how gender inequality is produced in relation to capitalism, it is clear that giving recognition for women’s work through the coin would not simply be an affirmative act. Indeed, the debate within which Marx is situated is precisely around the standpoint from which we view productive labor. For both the Physiocrats and Adam Smith, the notion of ‘productive’ was taken as an affirmative category and labor was presupposed to carry a ‘physicalist’ dimension, in the sense of producing useful goods. The valences that these concepts carried accompanied social and moral discourses that arose in relation to the development of bourgeois thought against aristocratic “unproductive” labors and out of crudely material understanding of the philosophical separation between subject and object.

The Physiocrats had argued that the basis for productive labor lay in its ability to produce a surplus of “useful” goods, whether more wheat or cloth, for the capitalist. Relating this to his discussion of the commodity, Marx suggests that this perspective posits a trans-historical notion of ‘use’ that misses the manner in which production itself can only be conceived in terms of exchange-value. Adam Smith recognizes the importance of exchange in determining productive labor, and thus argues that productive labor depends on the exchange of labor for wages, and that it is only wage labor that is productive. In addition, Smith, in his polemic against aristocratic and bureaucratic forms of ‘service work’, suggests that productive labor is only that labor that is able to generate a product that can be exchanged for money.³⁵

³³ Karl Marx. *Theories of Surplus Value*. Selections edited by Bonner and Burns. (International Publishers, 1953). p. 186; *Capital: A critique of political economy. Vol. 1* (Penguin, 1976) p. 1044

³⁴ See for example, the collection edited by Malos. *The Politics of Housework*. (Clarion, 1980)

³⁵ “The labor of some of the most respectable orders in society, such as menial servants, [are] unproductive of any value... the sovereign, for example, with all the officers both of justice and war... are unproductive laborers. They are servants of the public... in the same class must be ranked: churchmen, lawyers, physicians, buffoons, musicians, etc.”; “The labor of a menial servant adds nothing to the value... the maintenance of a menial servant is never restored. A man grows rich by employing a multitude of manufacturers, he grows poor by employing a multitude of servants.” Adam Smith *The Wealth of Nations*, Book II, Chapter 3, quoted in Marx. *Theories of Surplus Value*. pp. 156-158.

This is one dimension of Marx's definition of productive labor, but it is not sufficient. Because Smith emphasizes exchange, the labor undertaken by merchants can be productive labor. Behind this presupposition, Marx suggests, lies a notion that labor must produce physical objects for exchange. Instead, Marx argues, that the physical form of the labor is irrelevant to its character as 'productive'. The sole condition of productive labor lies in its possibility of producing capital rather than simply money. The condition for the production of capital is valorization, that is, the creation of surplus value. In order to this, abstract labor (or concrete labor-power) must be pressed into the service of capitalism. Cleaning, writing and singing alone may be productive or unproductive, but this cannot be determined merely by viewing the activity alone. Neither it is sufficient that these activities receive waged remuneration. To meet the condition of 'productive labor', they necessarily need to produce capital. To illustrate, in the case of cleaning, a single domestic worker in a private home is 'unproductive labor'. But once that labor becomes outsourced, and produces surplus value for a cleaning agency, it becomes productive labor.

One of the most interesting parts of Marx's discussion revolves around the character of *Paradise Lost*. For Smith, in principle, the fact that Milton could sell the work and become a merchant, made this activity necessarily productive. However, in Marx's understanding, such a work of genius was not productive of capital, because it was produced outside the compulsion to create new value. This raises a more general theoretical problem: if the overall movement of capitalism, its directional dynamic, is towards the valorization of an increasing range of activities, then under what conditions can any 'aesthetic' or 'affective' activity, in principle, remain unproductive?

New 'Productive Subjectivities': Lost paradises and the dynamic of commodification

There are really two discrete questions in operation. The first relates to the character of capitalism as a system of abstract social mediation that moulds all thought and activity according to a categorical logic. We have already discussed how labor and the individual are themselves created in this assemblage. To this we could add the category of time, which, far from being a 'natural' concept, gains a historically specific character with capitalism, as E.P. Thompson's famous historical essay illustrates.³⁶ From here it follows as to whether any activity can be outside the structuring categories of capitalism. Secondly, through the lens of

³⁶ E.P. Thompson. "Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism" in *Past and Present* (1971)

productive labor, I have suggested that capitalism contains a dynamic that involves a movement of capitalism as a social system, simultaneously reshaping the objective and subjective conditions of life. Because the physical character of labor is irrelevant to whether it becomes productive, all activity is potentially productive of surplus value.

This theoretical question, and Marx's inquiry itself, may feel far removed from the contemporary world. Labor processes appear to have changed dramatically. In the twentieth century alone, two vastly different images are discernable. Machine driven production, supplemented by intensive labor regimes, utilized a range of techniques for increasing production, such as the machine designed to feed workers while at work classically captured in Chaplin's *Modern Times* to Taylor's more successful (productively speaking) attempts at deskilling workers and Ford's mass production of automobiles. More recently, since approximately the mid 1970s, technological revolutions in information and transport have dramatically reduced the production time and exponentially increased the availability of commodities. Production on a global scale has become possible and many, employed for generations in factories following Ford's legacy, have found themselves unemployed, displaced by the abilities of these production plants to relocate to the third world in search of cheaper labor. Within the labor process, innovations have made possible significantly more efficient production. Even time has taken on a new valence in the form of the so-called "Toyota hour", which resulted in the measurement of the amount of idle time by workers in their plants, and created a new production regime that forces them to spend significantly more time working per hour. In addition, in certain service sectors, "affect" has been appropriated by capitalism, to the extent what might be considered unproductive in Marx's time is now intrinsic to the value of the product itself.

Numerous commentaries have attempted to grasp these changes in production. One of the most popular accounts, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, suggests that a new moment of "informationalization" characterizes the contemporary world, which they argue is quite distinct from industrialization, in an analogous manner to the differences between industrial production and feudalism.³⁷ What differentiates this "new" phase is simply that these new technologies create new subjects and new forms of work, which they call "immaterial labor". Immaterial labor is expected to be flexible and "multi-skilled", able to perform a number of different minute tasks without every having knowledge of the entire

³⁷ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Harvard, 2000). pp. 280-303.

process. Moreover workers are expected to have familiarity with simple symbolic coding, which are intrinsic to many workplaces. Nested within immaterial labor, Hardt and Negri argue that a special brand of work, which they call “affective labor” has developed insofar as new modes of affection, through somatic means, in care work for example, epitomizes this new epoch. Finally they argue that, because valorization has become immanent to the labor process itself, workers are able to make their own creative power valuable.

The most recent discussion by French theorist Andre Gorz, *Reclaiming work*, responds to similar changes in the labor process in a somewhat different way. He shares the observation with Hardt and Negri that labor appears to have become dematerialized, and that “image, novelty and symbolic value” have now become necessary to sell products.³⁸ Yet Gorz’s overriding concern is that labor has now become so bound up in the product that subject and object becomes inseparable, and consequently that the creative act that Hegel understood work to be is so subsumed into the logic of capital that the subject-forming act of work is entirely destroyed as an autonomous creative act. Gorz suggests:

Never has the ideology of work as value been proclaimed, flaunted, reiterated so unashamedly and never has capital’s—business’s— domination over the condition of the price of labor been so undisputed... The society is which everybody could hope for a place and a future marked out for him/her—the ‘work-based society’, in which she could hope to have security and usefulness—is dead. Work now retains merely a phantom centrality: phantom in the sense of a phantom limb from which an amputee might continue to feel pain”.³⁹

Gorz’s political project is to reclaim work from the domination of capitalist labor, and thus it is important for him to suggest that work is a phantom. Perhaps he should have said, work as creative activity is a phantom, since it seems that people work harder than ever. Juliet Schor suggests as much in her *The Overworked American*. Drawing evidence from the late 1980s, she argues that while the growth of productivity has created new consumptive desires, it has not lessened the amount of work.⁴⁰ Instead she observes that people work longer hours and suffer more social dislocation and health problems than in the 1950s and 1960s. She maps how time is squeezed from workers in a range of professions and remarks the women in particular are working much more than before. Echoing Mill with far less sophistication, she suggests that technologies that could potentially ease the amount of work

³⁸ Andre Gorz. *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage based society*. (Polity, 1999) pp. 27-43.

³⁹ Andre Gorz. *Reclaiming Work*. p. 57

⁴⁰ Juliet Schor. *The Overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. (Basic, 1992)

have not done so, and calls for people to modify their consumptive desires, in order to reclaim time.

These three discussions, in their own manner, claim that there is something distinctive, perhaps even epochal, about the conditions they outline. Yet as we have seen with Marx's discussion of Mill in reference to machinery, the lengthening of the working day is, in itself, nothing new. The inversion that takes place with machinery increases rather than decreases the amount of labor time. In addition, the advent of machinery makes it possible for an increasing number of activities and forms of work to be turned into the conditions for the realization of surplus value.⁴¹ This is not to suggest merely that nothing has changed. A less ambitious and more sophisticated analysis of the new production regime undertaken by Leslie Salzinger in maquiladora factories in Northern Mexico provides an important ethnographic account of the ways that production has valorized, and in so doing, naturalized particular characteristics of femininity in order to force (predominately women workers) to work longer hours for cheaper wages.⁴² Even this however, as a passage from *Capital* demonstrates, is not particularly new.

In so far as machinery dispenses with muscular power, it becomes a means of employing workers of slight muscular strength, or whose bodily development is incomplete, but whose limbs are all the more supple. The labor of women and children was, therefore, the first result of the capitalist application of machinery.⁴³

But whether or not any of these recent changes are especially novel is not the main point. To stress this alone, would be to concentrate only on the form of appearance, instead of the conditions out of which they are produced.

In this light, Hardt and Negri's discussion seems to take "information" as a social object that is entirely autonomous from capital, rather than seeing it as part of a regime of

⁴¹ "Hence that remarkable phenomenon in the history of modern industry, that machinery sweeps away every moral and natural restriction on the length of the working day. Hence too the economic paradox that the most powerful instrument for reducing labor time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labor-time at capital's disposal for its own valorization." Karl Marx. *Capital*. Vol 1. p. 532.

⁴² In Salzinger's account of the making of "productivity femininity", she is explicitly careful not to claim, as Hardt and Negri do (and to some extent Gorz also) that the use of communication as a means for valorizing labor is something new. Instead, by using Braverman's classic study of Taylorist time-motion techniques for increasing production in the 1920s, she suggests that new mechanisms of communication are producing new feminized subjects adequate for work. Salzinger demonstrates that within these workplaces, an image of a naturalized, dexterous women is created, that comes to stand as the only adequate subject for maximum profitability. Leslie Salzinger. *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories*. (California, 2003).

⁴³ Marx. *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 517.

science and technology subsumed to the needs of capitalist production.⁴⁴ In part this seems to arise from an understanding of productive labor that they and Gorz both share, that is, the notion that labor in industrializing capital is necessarily physical labor, in the sense that a material object is produced by workers in manufacture. Apart from Marx's discussion of productive labor, which to re-iterate, is not productive by virtue of either the actual labor involved or the products produced, but only in relation to whether that activity is able to produce surplus value, Marx's discussion of science and technology being pressed into the service of capital pushes us away from any notion that labor must necessarily produce tangible objects separable from their maker. In Gorz's case, this is a little more complicated, because he is hesitant to proclaim that these forms of production belong to an entirely new epoch. But then the problem arises as to whether it was ever possible, after machinery, or even after the division of labor, to produce an object that was not alienated.

By looking at capitalism as a system of abstract social mediation, as a historically specific form of social domination, we thus move beyond an investigation of exploitation. Reading Marx from this standpoint, it becomes very difficult to conceive of any space 'outside' the specific notions of time, labor and the individual from which our subjectivity is produced. It follows that thought, affect and activity are all mediated by these categories. Lukacs, in his famous "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" followed this operation in his discussion of Western philosophy.⁴⁵ In this context, evoking Milton is interesting. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* in 1667, well before the Shylock is converted by Marx from a figure denied a tragedy in Venice to the voice of a new form of social domination in the English factory (see note 14 above). While Milton may have not been mediated at the time of his writing by the specific categories that mediate existence in capitalism, Marx does seem to be pointing towards the lack of any autonomous activity, even in the work of a genius.

There is more to consider here: As Marx's analysis of the moulding of the character of labor by the process of valorization, of the continual remaking of objectivity and

⁴⁴"In machinery, the appropriation of living labor by capital achieves a direct reality... it is firstly, the analysis and application of mechanical and chemical laws, arising directly out of science, which enables the machine to perform the same labor that the worker previously performed... [This] occurs only when all the sciences have been pressed into the service of capital... Invention then becomes a branch of business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes a prospect that determines and solicits it." Marx. *Grundrisse*. pp. 703-704

⁴⁵ Lukacs. "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" in *History and Class Consciousness*.

subjectivity according to the directional dynamic of capitalism, suggests, these categories are precisely not trans-historically fixed or stable. As capitalism unfolds, so it creates new demands on subjectivity, and produces a quasi-objective social reality. Moreover, as the discussions of affect above have illustrated, capitalism intrinsically searches for new sites for production of surplus value. It hardly needs an exposition of Marx to understand, in contemporary world, that all activity is potentially geared towards this. The question thus becomes one of the conditions of possibility of producing genius, and what its relationship might be to capitalism: the “geniuses” of our time, after all, whether Bill Gates or Milton Friedman, seem bound up not just in the abstract categories of capitalism but directly implicated as productive workers. Perhaps we might re-phrase the question, and ask how genius itself is made by capitalism.

Conclusion

Through an exegesis of predominately section III of volume 1 of *Capital*, this paper has sought to provide a theoretical grounding sufficient to understand the changing character of productive labor. Alongside this, I have sought to move beyond traditional Marxism’s central analytics of exploitation and distribution and considered capitalism as a system of social mediation, which I think provides a ‘rich’ and salient for understanding the contemporary world. Somewhat implicitly, part of my argument has been a twofold move in seeking to understand the historical dynamic of technological change and the precise novelty of the present. In the first place, I have attempted to illustrate how Marx’s analysis of machinery and large scale industry contains important tools for theorizing the present. But, secondly, I have emphasized that a linear, or ‘developmentalist’ model of the unfolding of capitalist production inadequately comprehends the relationship between the structuring force of capital and its directional dynamic. That many of the features that Marx describes about machinery seem so salient in the contemporary world is not because, in real historical time, they were predictions of a future rather than analysis of the world he lived in. Instead it seems that, despite the very different appearances of the production regimes that Marx describes and those in our own time, the theoretical tools that he provides are incredibly durable in grasping the character of the present.

In order to make this argument I have elaborated both the specifically directional movement of the technical conditions of production and the changing character of

subjectivity that Marx offers. These, I suggest, for Marx, are inseparable dimensions of capitalism. To assume, in a one-dimensional way, that thought is determined by “the material conditions of production” is to repeat the fetish of the 19th century political economists, who presupposed that everything was really about the economic. Instead, understanding the dialectic movement that Marx proposes in *Capital* allows us to consider the conditions under which the sign of the economy came to predominate in our society. This argument has been implicit throughout my discussion, and is illustrated most clearly in my consideration of the problem of assuming an ontological condition of labor in capitalism. If work is posited as a stable object in capitalism, then there might be some grounds from suggests the primacy of “the material”. But instead, Marx’s analysis admits no such ontology: capital moves, and any idea of “being” is replaced with a notion of “becoming”, of the potential to convert more and more activity into a means for valorization.

Finally, the question arises as to whether any form of human activity is potentially beyond the scope of valorization. I have sought to interrogate this question by evoking Marx’s discussion of productive labor in relation to Gorz’s call for work to be reclaimed, for it to once again be meaningful, freed from the domination of capitalist labor. Of course, following Hegel, work, even its most immaterial form does remake its authors. Yet this remaking cannot be conceived of autonomously, at a categorical level. And it cannot be simply thought of in terms of waged work in the factory. Instead, Marx’s analytic makes possible an interpretation of the social totality of the contemporary world in an imaginative and compelling manner.