

On the treachery of productivity - Postliterate - Medium

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(Part 4 of a polemic on value)

Introduction

“It goes without saying that in the capitalist mode of production, it is not the case that products are innocently created and only arrive on the market a posteriori; rather, every process of production is from the outset oriented toward the valorization of capital and organized accordingly. That is to say, production occurs already in the context of a fetishized form of value, and products must fulfill a single purpose: to represent in the form of value the amount of labor time necessary for their production.”

This quote, from Norbert Trenkle’s work of *Wertkritik* entitled *Value and Crisis: Basic Questions*, sums up the argument to be made. Hitherto the emphasis of Marxologists and revolutionaries alike has remained on the *exchange* of commodities, and this emphasis has come to the detriment of proper analysis of *production* of commodities. Indeed, Marxism-Leninism would be null and void if there existed proper mainstream analysis of value-creation as a *productive* activity (which was, to its defense, espe-

cially lacking at the time of its birth, as Marx's *Grundrisse* and his various scrapped chapters of *Capital* were unavailable at the time), as opposed to merely the execution of a plan set by activities of exchange.

Bourgeois Interpretations

“The production and circulation processes are thus determined as moments of a unity: the capitalist production process. No single moment of this process is prior to the others — each presupposes the others.”

— Endnotes, [The Moving Contradiction](https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-moving-contradiction) → <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-moving-contradiction>

The traditional Marxist view still holds that the production of commodities is, up until the moment of actual exchange, nothing more than the production of use-values — thus making them not commodities at all until they are properly sold. The contradictions inherent in the commodity, and thus capitalist society as a whole, are understood as absent up until the moment of their exchange, whereby their exchange-value at all becomes relevant.

This then fed into the perspective emphasized by Lenin and gladly taken up by his derivatives — that socialism could be defined by the end of the anarchy of production. This over-emphasis on one serious, but certainly not foundational aspect of capitalism created the fetish for central planning that still plagues Marxism today. This view arose from an alienated and abstracted viewing of the capitalist mode of production, that of being defined by the set of little centralized plans that occur inside each firm and what factors influence such plans. The logic went that the replacement of such plans — which had previously constituted an anarchy of production — for a unified societal plan not based on exchange, could constitute the end of capitalism. This view allowed the central focus of Marxism to be the commodity-form instead of the value-form.

The shift that took place in Marxism from viewing socialism and communism as largely the same, to being worlds apart — which took place most acutely beginning with Stalin and Mao, but is well embryonic in Lenin — represents the formal application of this error to revolutionary theory. From Stalin onward (it continues to today), socialism became viewed as possible simply with the proper set of centralized national planning schemes, and with Stalin’s theory of socialism being possible in one country alone, and that socialism could retain commodity production as long as private property was abolished, this error became the most widely understood application of Marxian thought by Marxists and non-Marxists alike.

From the outset, the most obvious error here lies in the fact that the state is nothing more than a value-form machine, being as it is so it can mediate the extraction of value. The struggle against value thus cannot be conceived as able to be completed (or even begun) in simple political plans, meaning that the struggle against value is *anti*-political. As Robert Kurz put it, the value-form is

“...the historical determination of the essential content, the transience of which must establish itself both violently and objectively (that is to say, independently of all the political declarations of intent that refer to it)...” (*The Crisis of Exchange Value*)

However, the deeper issue lies in the fact this common analysis of capitalism from the view of exchange and not the productive process itself relies on a degree of abstraction from the fundamental mechanics of the capitalist firm. The capitalist firm is not simply an empty shell which executes productive commands — it in fact produced and reproduces the entire concept of mass productive commanding altogether. The development of industrial capital was not simply the development of a bad production model, but the development of large-scale productivism itself. In pre-capitalist societies, the idea of labor as a distinct and quantified activity was essentially absent, save for the surplus which had to be given to the feudal lord. When capital

emerged, it created the work day, the wage, labor as a separated sphere of life, and a seemingly endless fetish for productivity, “productive forces,” productive output, etc. The capitalist firm — with its assembly lines, hierarchy, strict plan execution, and need to precisely quantify and compensate labor — is, almost to the very core, *designed* for the purpose of value extraction.

There is a similar story to be told regarding the mainstream understanding of concrete vs. abstract labor. Marx, early in *Capital*, distinguished these two forms of labor which go into the production of commodities — abstract labor constituting the *substance* of labor, and concrete labor the *form* (i.e., abstract labor is the necessary common content of all the many forms of concrete labor under capital.) It was taken for granted that communism, in its abolition of the division of labor, would rid itself of abstract labor (that of labor-time quantification for value extraction) and leave only concrete labor (the various forms of labor themselves, now free from their necessity to produce value.) What this interpretation misses, however, is that the whole category of labor itself a product of capital; thus, proclaiming that the category of “labor” should exist in communist society would be bizarre. The category itself *is* the category of value extraction, and what gives labor its unique quality apart from other social activities is the very fact that it is designated for the sole purpose of value creation. By holding on to this bourgeois ontology in the face of the absence of the value-form reflects a philosophical failure to break free of capital’s productivist mindset.

“The doctrine of surplus-value is the corner-stone of Marx’s economic theory...

[W]orkers become bound together in a regular economic organism — but the product of this collective labour is appropriated by a handful of capitalists. Anarchy of production, crises, the furious chase after markets and the insecurity of existence of the mass of the population are intensified...

Capitalism has triumphed all over the world, but this triumph is only the prelude to the triumph of labour over capital.”

Such is what Lenin stated in his *Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, and it reflects the emphasis of Lenin’s study: that of being on the liberation of labor from exploitation, rather than the liberation of man from labor itself. It presupposes labor as natural and inevitable and only critiques appropriation of labor by capitalists. Even Marx himself, not being immune to criticism or hypocrisy, stated in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* that a feature of “higher-stage communism” (presumably a positive feature at that) was that “*labor [would] become not only a means of life but life’s prime want...*” How close is this to the hyper-productive mentality of an industrial capitalist such as Henry Ford:

“The basic moral principle is the right of the person to his work. [...] For me there is nothing more detestable than an idle life. None of us has a right to that. Civilisation has no room for idlers.”

Indeed, as Baudrillard set out to demonstrate in his crucial work *The Mirror of Production*, Marx’s reliance on these *a priori* categories of labor and value made his own doctrine unable to free itself from capital’s logic:

“...Marxism assists the ruse of capital. It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power; hence it censors the much more radical hypothesis that they do not have to be the labor power, the ‘unalienable’ power of creating value by their labor.”

In short, it was Marx’s placing of human society under the sign of “value” altogether that was the fault. He critiqued every aspect of capitalist society, but left its bare philosophical assumptions all untouched — about man being defined by his labor and being destined to labor and create value — even incorporating this mentality into his doctrine and making it a focal point.

“[I]t was political economy that erected that ‘phantasm’ [...] of labor as the human essence. To whatever extent Marx was able to demystify its liberal usage, to extract it from the hegemony of bourgeois rule, he still turned it over to the working class, imposed it on them, as their central means of self-comprehension.”

Application of Bourgeois Productive Practices

“But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”

To what extent can this quote from *Civil War in France* apply similarly to capitalist forces of production? This is not to say all technology produced by capital is incorrigibly bourgeois, but that enough of it is designed as such that the centrally planned models of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, etc. find themselves wholly unable to be free from the bourgeois nature of their machinery and productivist setup — in short, technological and productive development is *not* apolitical. Herein lies the true meaning of the epithet “*state capitalism*”: that it is not merely dependent on the continuation of the process of capital expansion, but on all generalized value-extracting activities. The desire to seize the means of production and utilize it in the bourgeois way will result in nothing but reproduced bourgeois relations.

“The general formula is that of a productive Eros. Social wealth or language, meaning or value, sign or phantasm — everything is ‘produced’ according to a ‘labor.’ If this is the truth of capital and of political economy, it is taken up whole by the revolution only to capital’s benefit. The capitalist system of production is to be subverted in the name of an authentic and radical productivity.” (*Mirror of Production*)

For Baudrillard, “*A specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production,*” which means that Marxism, despite being a critique of modernity, feeds into its logic. This goes down even into the basis of Marxism itself, feeding into capital’s productivism by being largely based on the historical analysis of *modes of production* (dialectical materialism), as heretical as that may sound. Labor defines the worldview of capital, but it also defines the worldview of Marxism; capital’s fetish for productivity, which represents the very alienation of man from his activities, is largely carried over into Marxism in this fashion — making Marxism, too, a product of its material environment.

However, despite Baudrillard parting with Marxism, I don’t believe that is entirely necessary nor desirable — as Fredric Jameson said, “Marxism must *necessarily* become true again” (my emphasis.) Indeed, it is possible to escape the hyper-productivist mentality that feeds the capitalist system of value-extraction whilst remaining a Marxist, but in order to do so we must part with our fetish for “releasing the forces of production.” Communism should be, then, parting with this urge to produce, accumulate abstract wealth, and innovate in an “objectively productive” manner. This is not to say these activities ever will or ever should cease, but rather that their place in society should become principally *social* activities, serving no distinctly *economic* cause. Moreover, merely because capital brought something new does not mean it must be destroyed in order to transcend capital — after all, communism relies on mature forces of production ripened by capital. More crucially, we are not reactionaries who want to return to the pre-capitalist mode of production, but rather we wish to go *beyond* it. To do so we must be cautious not to create systems, neither practical nor theoretical, which feed into its same logic. This is especially important in our current age as labor is in crisis, being all the more threatened by the prospect of automation rendering it useless. To continue to romanticize labor now is even more blatantly reactionary, if it wasn’t already.

Marx's *Capital*, then, should be understood in this way: *Capital*'s ontology of commodity exchange should not be read as being of purely Marx's own creation for the purpose of finding some good element in them. Rather, *Capital* is an ontology of capitalism itself, it is capitalism's own ontology. Marx's *Capital* is an *imminent criticism* of capitalism — a critique of it on its own terms and abiding by its own presupposed logic — and not critique from a position outside of it. Thus, our break from capital should be a break from its ontology as well, in an act which renders the study of use-values and labor-time quantification — in addition to the study of exchange-values and profit — wholly obsolete.