

The Fundamental Relation of Capitalist Modernity is Labor as a Self-Mediation

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“[D]efinite social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc.” (Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*); in conditions of commodity production, these relations of production are their own self-mediation. Social relations as such do not accord labor significance — labor accords its own significance and social relations are constituted by this fact. The analysis of productive activity as the mover of history is essentially bourgeois; productive activity is “bound up with” social relations, but its unique and separable significance is a practical abstraction pertaining only to the bourgeois historical epoch.

“In order to attain a complete critique of the negative substantiality of the capitalist fetish relationship it is not Hegel’s objective idealism that must be stood on its feet instead of its head, it is rather that the head of real abstraction must be guillotined. Only that would be the liberatory, transcending praxis that no longer forcibly shapes the social and natural world, but itself destroys the essential principle of this destructive praxis” (Kurz, 22).

This is the real meaning of the “abstract” and “concrete” duality expressed by labor in capitalism: labor in this way produces not simply material goods, it produces a unique form of social mediation specific to capitalist

relations.

“[L]abor itself constitutes a new form of interdependence, where people do not consume what they produce, but where, nevertheless, their own labor or labor-products function as a quasi-objective means of obtaining the products of others. In serving as such a means, labor and its products in effect preempt that function on the part of manifest social relations; they mediate a new form of social interrelatedness” (Postone 44–5).

Labor as a self-mediation is an essentially material relation of domination, and as such it “secularizes” society and fetishizes its own relations. It could not be logically conceivable that these relations are in truth anything other than social ones, but as social relations *mediated* by material ones they appears identical to material ones themselves. This is how capitalist relations are veiled— the unique social character of labor appears as a simple material relation of the natural necessity of laboring activity; the unique social character of the product of labor appears as a self-evident relation of utility through material products. This logical process is extended into the notions of money, capital, exchange, etc., and are imposed upon the logic of pre-capitalist societies, because they appear to be simple material relations that are subsequently ontological and ahistorical.

Material relations of domination at once appear to facilitate “science,” “progress,” and wealth, but do so in a necessarily abstract way. Society is secularized, but its quasi-scientific façade exists only to facilitate the self-proliferation of its own logic. Production for its own sake appears tautologically “productive” and materially innocuous, but in fact constitutes the essential form of social domination characteristic of the epoch of capitalist modernity.