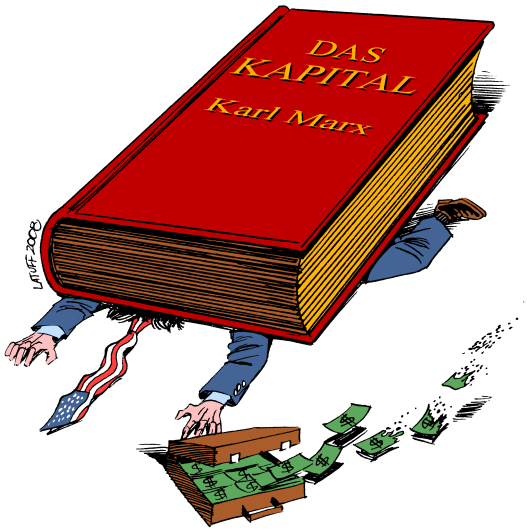
The Vision of the New Society in Marx's "Capital"

written by Peter Hudis | May 27, 2018

Marx's *Capital* has been heralded for many things, but providing an exhaustive account of a future socialist society isn't one of them.



And for good reason, since it is exclusively concerned with delineating the law of motion of *capitalism*. Nevertheless, Marx's univocal focus on the critique of capital is precisely what enables him to develop vital insights about the nature of post-capitalist society. This is because *critique* in the dialectical tradition does not merely disclose the limits of a phenomenon but also intimates what lies beyond it.

This is pivotal to understanding what Marx's *Capital* is truly about. It is often called a theory of capitalist development—but this is inaccurate. *Capital* delineates the process of capitalism's *dissolution*, which, in fact, ultimately *thwarts* its development. Its analysis of capitalism's law of motion shows that "under penalty of death"[1] the system must give way to a higher form of social organization—socialism or communism (these terms are completely interchangeable in Marx's work and do not denote distinct historical stages). It should therefore come as no surprise that important discussion of the nature of a post-capitalist society appears in *Capital* itself.

Capital, of course, does not and cannot provide a detailed outline of post-capitalist society. Since a positive alternative becomes knowable only through a negative critique, it can offer no more than *intimations*of the future. However, these intimations—derived from a rigorous analysis and critique of the logic of capital—are of tremendous importance, since they reveal a conception of communism that is radically different from what followers as well as critics of Marx have upheld for many years. In light of the profound impasse facing social movements and radical theorists when it comes to spelling out what a viable alternative to capitalism means in the twenty-first century, it is time to re-examine these intimations with new eyes.

As should be clear from a serious reading of Marx's *Capital*, capitalism is defined neither by the existence of markets nor private property. Its distinguishing feature is rather a specific form of production relations that subjects human activity to the accumulation of wealth in monetary form, in which the augmentation of value is an end in itself. What drives this process is the peculiar social form assumed by labor in modern society. Strictly speaking, "labor" as such is *not* the source of all

value. The value of a commodity is determined not by the *actual* amount of time in which it is produced but by the *socially necessary labor time* required to do so on a global level. This social average varies continuously, due to technological innovations that increase the productivity of labor (see Dunayevskaya 2000: 105). The average is communicated to the agents of social production *post festum*, through the laws of competition.[2] Workers are thereby compelled to produce in accordance with an abstract social average that operates behind their backs. Once this process is set into motion, it becomes impossible for anyone—whether workers or social planners—to exert long-term control of capital. Concrete labor (the varied kinds of labor employed in making discrete products) becomes increasingly dominated by labor that conforms to an abstract average —termed by Marx "abstract labor."

The preponderance of abstract over concrete labor transforms the nature of work, by making it more routinized, machine-like, and abstracted from the sensuousness of the individual. It transforms our relation to nature, since it becomes increasingly viewed as a mere externality that must serve the dictates of capital accumulation. Nature ceases to be seen as having intrinsic value (in the moral sense); natural contingency and human creativity count only insofar as they augment *economic* value—and if they do not, they are ignored or cast aside. And capital's drive for self-expansion transforms the meaning of time, since both workers and capitalists become governed by an abstract, quantitative, and invariable time-determination over which they have no control. The more abstract labor becomes, the greater the amount of value produced. And the more value produced, the more that capitalism is driven to augment value (and profit) ever more. In capitalism, "Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at most, time's carcass. Quality no longer matters. Quantity decides everything; hour for hour, day by day" (Marx 1976, 127). *Capital* is an endless quest for an infinite magnitude in a finite world.

None of this may seem to have anything to do with a post-capitalist society. However, *Capital's* emphasis on the domination of human activity by abstract universal labor time intimates what must be done to transcend capitalism. It is not enough to simply abolish private property and unregulated markets, since stopping there leave production relations intact. This is no discovery of *Capital*, of course; Marx had already arrived at this insight in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in critiquing "crude communism" for presuming that the mere abolition of private property constitutes the transcendence of capitalism. *Capital*, in its entirety, is the fullest concretization of this critique.[3] And in doing so it poses a far more radical and expansive vision than those who define socialism as the abolition of market anarchy and unorganized exchange. In fact, *Capital* suggests that the alternative to capitalism necessarily *seems* to center on organizing exchange because of the nature of value production itself. The value of a commodity can never be known immediately, by looking at it in isolation; its value becomes manifest only in the exchange relation between discrete commodities. Value is therefore a "social hieroglyphic" (Marx 1977, 167) that is deep, dark, and difficult to understand. It is immediately knowable only on the level of its phenomenal expression—exchange-value. It therefore appears—virtually inevitably—that "rationally" organizing relations of exchange is the *sine qua non* for ending capitalism.[4] Those who remain on the surface of things—which is a great many of us—never get further than this, making it hard to grasp the radical implications of Marx's critique of capital.[5]

Once the proper object of critique is identified, the alternative to it becomes readily visible. Value production renders human relations *indirectly* social, since they are shaped and dominated by abstract forms such as money. Labor assumes a social or general character not through the self-conscious acts of the producers, but by exchange relations that are imposed upon them from without, *post festum*. The negation of this state of affairs necessitates that labor assume a social character *prior* to the exchange of products, on the basis of the communal character of production. Exchange value—which is the phenomenal expression of value production based on abstract

labor—is eliminated once human relations are no longer governed by the drive to augment value. For that to happen, *freely* associated and non-alienated conditions of labor must come into being. Self-determined individuals distribute the elements of production according to their needs instead of being governed by forms that operate independently of them—such as by the state or the market. The labor employed in making products no longer takes on a material quality that is independent of the self-activity of the laborers. This is not simply a matter of forming small, self-contained communities that operate in a world market dominated by value production; it instead requires a communal network of associations in which value production is superseded on a *global* level.

Remarkably, the fullest discussion of Marx's concept of communism is found in the most famous section of Volume One of *Capital*—"The Fetishism of Commodities and its Secret." The fetishism of commodities is dispelled neither by the discovery of labor as the source of value nor the proletariat as the revolutionary class. This is because "the social relations between private labors appears as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but as material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx 1977: 165-6). Since fetishism is adequate to the concept of capital, it can be dissolved, Marx writes, only by examining the present from the vantage point of "other forms of production." He writes, "Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common." In this post-capitalist society, products are "directly objects of utility" and do not assume a value form. Exchange value and universalized commodity production come to an end. Producers decide how to make, distribute, and consume the total social product. One part is used to renew the means of production; the other "is consumed by members of the association as means of subsistence" (Marx 1977: 171-2). Marx invokes neither the market the state as the instrumentality through which this distribution of the elements of production is achieved. It is purely a matter of the self-deliberative acts of the producers. It is a planned distribution of labor time by those who are no longer subjected to socially necessary labor time. This *form* of organizing *time* is the cardinal principle of Marx's concept of communism.

Marx says that the same principle applies here as in commodity production *to the extent that* there is an equal exchange, insofar as "the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labor time" (Marx 1977: 172). But the content of this exchange is radically different than in capitalism, since it is not governed by *socially necessary* labor time. Socially necessary labor time imposes itself as a person apart, irrespective of the sensuous needs of individuals, whereas actual labor time is the sensuous activity of individuals mediating their relations with nature. There is a parallel with commodity production *only in that there is* an exchange of equivalents, since one contributes a given hour of labor to the community and receives from it goods produced in that same amount of time (a given hour of labor). But since there is no social average that governs the exchange, generalized commodity production comes to an end.

Many have argued that the abolition of capitalism entails the abolition of labor. This is true, insofar as we are speaking of labor that has the dual character of abstract vs. concrete labor.
The *Grundrisse* specifies this by speaking of the abolition of *productive* labor—for which capitalism itself prepares the way. As living labor is progressively replaced by labor saving technologies, the worker "steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor" (Marx 1973: 705). But does the end of productive, industrial labor signal the abolition of *all* forms of labor? What about kinds of labor that are not productive of surplus value in capitalism, such as labor involved in caring, nurturing, teaching, and facilitating—which some refer to as "affective labor"?

In approaching this, it is important to note that *Capital* critiques capitalism on the basis of its own criteria (rather than from some external standpoint, as is true of romantics and idealists). Marx follows the procedure of Hegel, whose *Phenomenology of Spirit* holds that the standpoint for critiquing any given stage of consciousness is established by the criterion of consciousness itself.

But critiquing a phenomenon on the basis of its criterion is not the same as normatively endorsing any particular expression of it.

Marx's critics often overlook this when it comes to the distinction between "productive" and "unproductive" labor. Silvia Frederici, for one, has argued that Marx "idealized industrial labor as the normative form of social production" (Federici 2017: 80). However, Marx does not say that industrial or productive labor—which he defines as labor that produces surplus value—is "better" than unproductive labor. On the contrary, he states in *Capital* "to be a productive laborer is a misfortune" (Marx 1977: 644). Nor does he suggest that unproductive labor is *unnecessary* (surely, labor power cannot augment surplus value if it is not reproduced in the domestic sphere). Marx is pursuing a different question—namely, *what social relations are necessary for the production of surplus value*? He does so in order to pinpoint how to abolish value production. With the end of capitalism, the very distinction between necessary and surplus labor, as well between productive and unproductive labor, becomes completely superfluous.

As Rosa Luxemburg argued, for capitalism "only that work is productive which produces surplus value…while all the toil of the women and mothers of the proletariat within the four walls of the home is considered unproductive work. This sounds crude and crazy, but it is an accurate expression of the crudeness and craziness of today's capitalist economic order." She added, "Millions of proletarian women produce capitalist profit just like men, in homework industries" (Luxemburg 2006: 241). It is possible to produce profit without producing surplus value. That doesn't make one less important.[6]

So can labor that is not productive of surplus value play a critical role in a post-capitalist society? Marx thinks so, as seen both from *Capital* and his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*. In discussing the initial phase of socialism or communism, he writes that the producers "do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the product appear here *as the value* of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labor no longer exists in an *indirect* fashion but *directly* as a component part of the total labor" (Marx 1989: 86). Generalized commodity exchange is possible only if there is a social substance—abstract labor—that makes it possible for products of labor to be universally exchanged. But with democratic, freely associated control of the means of production, abstract labor comes to an end. And since abstract labor is the substance of value, value production also comes to an end—not only in the higher but also in the "lower," *initial* phase of communism.

But labor itself does not come to end. Instead, *actual* labor time serves as the measure for distributing the elements of production. Marx writes, "The individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual *quantum* of labor." Individuals receive from society a voucher or token that they have "furnished such and such an amount of labor (after deducting his labor for the common funds)" and from it obtains "the social stock of means of consumption as much as the amount of labor costs" (Marx 1989: 86). As in *Capital*, Marx is *not* suggesting that the worker's labor is computed on the basis of a social *average* of labor time. Here, labor time simply refers to the actual amount of hours of work performed by the individual in a given cooperative.

These passages should not be read, in my view, as a normative projection of how a socialist society emerging from the womb of capitalism *ought* to be organized. Marx is not writing blueprints for the future. It may be that a voucher system is unviable given certain circumstances, just the relative weight assigned to labor may be different today compared with when Marx wrote 150 years ago (the same is true of the length of any initial phase). Marx is instead trying to think out how a fundamental break can be made from value production even when labor as a socially constitutive activity that mediates our relations with nature remains integral to social existence.[7]

Nevertheless, Marx's discussion in the 1875 *Critique* is widely misread—including by many independent Marxists. An essay in a recent issue of *Endnotes*, for instance, takes Marx's discussion of distribution according to actual labor time as signifying that "For Marx, it is only in the higher phase that domination is actually overcome" (Endnotes 2015, 186). This is clearly not so, since in the lower phase there are no classes, no alienated labor, no commodity exchange, and no value production. Nor does Marx suggest that in the lower phase "the same principle will apply as in bourgeois society." He instead writes that "the same principle prevails as in the exchange of commodities" (Marx 1989, 86)—and that in a *formal* sense alone, in that a *quid pro quo*prevails in which one labors so many hours and receives goods and services made in that many hours. But the form of this exchange (which is superseded in a higher phase) is a world removed from the exchange of *abstract* equivalents in capitalism, which of course takes place behind the backs of the producers. Far from "universalizing" domination as "the precursor to the end of domination" (Endnotes 2015, p. 185), Marx's discussion of distribution according to *actual* (not abstract!) labor time posits the liberating conditions that make it possible to ultimately reach "From each according to their ability, to each according to their need."

While *Endnotes* gets tied up in knots when it comes to the lower phase, it does not critique Marx's discussion of a higher phase, in which labor no longer serves as the measure for distributing the elements of production. But it runs into a problem here as well, since Marx explicitly holds that labor is not abolished in a higher phase of communism either! In a *higher* phase, "labor has become not only a means of life but the prime necessity of life" (Marx 1989: 87). To be sure, labor as a means toward an end, as an instrumental activity defining industrial capitalism, is abolished long before this. However, Marx's discussion of distribution according to actual labor time in *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program* does not refer to productive labor that augments value, since the value-form is abolished by the time of the lower phase. He does not conflate all kinds of labor with instrumental labor. "Labor" also includes *affective* activities, such as caring, nurturing, and sharing, as ends-in-themselves. As he writes in *Capital*, "labor is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore…common to all forms of society in which humans live" (Marx 1976: 290).

Many feminist theorists have criticized Marx—rightly in my view—for saying little about women's domestic labor in *Capital*.[8] This limitation may be explained by Marx's effort to emphasize the deleterious impact of labor performed for the sake of augmenting surplus value. But it is still an unfortunate limitation, since it has made it easier for some to read *Capital* in a narrow, productivist manner—such as by defining communism as the realm in which the power of industrial labor is fully actualized. However, it does not follow from this that Marx's "concept of *communism* ignores the largest activity on this planet" (Federici 2017: 90)—the affective labor often carried out by women. The opposite is in fact the case. *Capital* focuses on productive, instrumental labor because that is the kind of labor that can and must be dispensed with in a new society—after all, where there is no value production, there can be no labor that augments surplus value. But he does not suggest that all forms of labor, including affective ones, come to an end. Since his concept of communism envisions a wider and more enriched scope for the affective labor that is de-valued in capitalism, it is consistent with efforts to conceive of social relations based on caring, nurturing, and loving.

I am not suggesting that affective labor as it exists today can by itself constitute the alternative to instrumental, alienated labor. Affective labor is clearly shaped by class relations and has become increasingly commodified—as anyone who works in health care and education can attest. However, there is a big difference between affective and productive labor even in capitalism: The later can be automated very nearly out of existence whereas jobs that require "uniquely human characteristics such as empathy, creativity, judgment, or critical thinking will never succumb to widespread automation" (Smith 2014). There is an even bigger difference between them when it comes to

socialism, since productive labor that augments surplus value *must* be abolished for there to be any chance to exit from capitalism, whereas affective labor that is freed from class domination and commodification can become the basis of totally new human relations.

Contrary to the claim that Marx's distinction of productive and unproductive labor devalues the contributions of those working outside the factory, I argue that this very distinction enables a Marxian critique to value that which capitalism devalues—affective forms of labor that are not a mere means to an end, but function as ends in themselves. If he had treated affective labor as value creating, then the abolition of value production would also entail the demise—and ultimately, the devaluation—of affective labor itself. This would rob us of access to the source from which totally new human relations can be developed as the alternative to the all-dominating power of capital.

The objective conditions facing us today are very different from those prevailing when Marx wrote *Capital*—even if the logic of his argument anticipates them. Foremost among these is that the displacement of living labor by machines and automated devices has proceeded so far that it seems naïve to presume that that the expropriators will be expropriated simply by obtaining public ownership of the existing productive apparatus. Given the nature of today's capitalism, it appears that a radical supersession of the very distinction between productive and unproductive labor, as well as between labor and other forms of human interaction, is a necessary condition for a post-capitalist future. This does not mean that the working class has eased to be the subject of its own emancipation; the industrial working class was never more than 35% of the wage earners of a given nation, and at no time in history has there been more wage earners than today (there are several *billion* of them). But it does mean that the logic of capital is generating a world defined by underemployment, unemployment and precariousness, in which racism, sexism, and environmental destruction are increasingly pivotal. A *humanist* response to the crisis of capital, as against a class-reductionist one, is called for.[9]

Of course, many today refrain from envisioning the transcendence of capitalism now that the industrial proletariat is a shrinking percentage of the workforce, and focus instead on capital's all-pervasive dominance. Some have even tried to read such a standpoint back into Marx, by distinguishing between the "esoteric" Marx who coldly analyzed the logic of capital versus the "exoteric" Marx who supported workers' struggles and proletarian revolution. But such a separation between subjective and objective is alien to dialectics—and Marx was, if nothing else, a dialectician. He never made a secret that *Capital* was written to and for the dispossessed. That sets the standard for what needs to be done in light of the radically different realities of our era.

Notes

[1] Marx writes in *Capital*, Vol. I, chapter 15, "Modern Industry, indeed, compels society, under penalty of death, to replace the detail-worker of today, grappled by life-long repetition of one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to the mere fragment of a man, by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labors, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers" (Marx 1977, 618)

[2] It is important to note (contra to the neo-classical theory of competition, which even some Marxists tend to follow) that it is not competition that drives value production; rather, the drive to level the playing field by having discrete units of capital adhere to socially necessary labor time *expresses* itself on the surface level of society, in competition.

[3] See for instance *Capital*, Vol. III: "Capital…now receives the form the social capital…in contrast to private capital, and its enterprises appear as social enterprises as opposed to private ones. This is

the abolition of capital as private property within the confines of the capitalist mode of production itself" (Marx 1981, 567).

[4] While the most obvious form of organizing exchange is the statist command economies of Soviet-type societies, Marx's critique of Proudhon, who opposed the state in favor decentralized producer cooperatives, indicates that there are other varieties as well.

[5] This is especially expressed in the tendency of many commentators on Marx to emphasize the distinction between the use-value and exchange-value of a commodity (a notion that was no discovery of Marx's), while neglecting the all-important distinction between value and exchange-value.

[6] It is no secret that without unproductive labor within the domestic sphere, productive labor in the public sphere cannot be maintained and reproduced. But that is a separate issue from whether the former is productive of surplus value. By analogy, laboring activity cannot be maintained without breathing; but that does not mean that breathing is the source of a commodity's value. I need not add that this does not make breathing any less important or "necessary."

[7] For more on this, see Hudis 2013.

[8] For an excellent survey of these debates, see Brown 2013.

[9] For more on this, see Hudis 2015.

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