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PETER THOMAS

LABOUR-POWER
(ARBEITSKRAFT)

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Marx develops a number of concepts throughout his works in order to analyse the distinctive relationship between labour and capital in the capitalist mode of production: wage-labour (*Lohnarbeit*), living labour (*lebendige Arbeit*), concrete and abstract labour (*konkrete/abstrakte Arbeit*) and labour-capacity (*Arbeitsvermögen*), among many others. Perhaps more than any other, however, it is 'labour-power' (*Arbeitskraft*) that has a claim to being Marx's most 'successful' concept, exerting an influence well beyond the pages of *Capital* and Marxist theory. 'Labour-power' has entered into the everyday vocabulary of many modern languages. It is used to signify the human powers that are deployed in the production processes of modern societies, in the sense of a unit of measurement, or perhaps even a particular quantum of energy. It is also sometimes extended to include a more generic sense, as the composite body of men and women employed in particular enterprises (the 'labour-power' or 'labour force' of a firm or workplace). Such has been the diffusion of the term that readers coming to Volume One of *Capital* for the first time may even experience a sense of relief when they arrive at the chapter on 'The Buying and Selling of Labour-Power', at the end of Part Two. Finally, after the dizzying analyses in the first two sections of the

book of the value-form, the fetishism of commodities, money and the capital, replete with specialist terminology, complex formulations and arcane formulae, the appearance of a term whose meaning is already known to all seems to signal a 'refoundation' of Marx's project: a movement away from what some have thought were awkward attempts at philosophical abstraction in the opening chapters, and towards the historical and economic analyses that take on an increasing importance as *Capital* unfolds, with its numerous historical digressions, illustrations and supplementary footnotes.

Yet as Hegel knew, sometimes what is well known, precisely because it is so well known, has not necessarily been fully comprehended. At first glance, labour-power appears to be a simple concept, of little value for further philosophical reflection. As Paolo Virno notes, it has rarely attracted the attention of philosophers, particularly compared to the rivers of ink spent exploring the mysteries of the commodity-form and its fetishism.¹ And Marx's initial definition of the concept in the chapter dedicated to it seems to justify this disregard, for it presents labour-power in empirical and perhaps even sensuous terms: 'We mean by labour-power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form (*Leiblichkeit*), the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind' (270).² Shortly after, Marx argues that labour-power exists only in the 'living body (*lebendige Leiblichkeit*)' of the worker (272); it 'exists only as a capacity of the living individual' (274). Labour itself was previously defined, 'in the physiological sense', as 'expenditure of human labour-power' (137). Labour-power could thus be understood to indicate a generic capacity of the human, historically indeterminate with regard to its content (which subsists not at the level of any particular humans in determinate social relations, but of the human as such), and varying from one epoch to another only in terms of its form, or the conditions of its exercise. The Italian workerist tradition of Marxism (*operaismo*), arguably one of the most conceptually sophisticated and influential of contemporary readings of Marx, has understood labour-power in precisely this sense, as those human capabilities that await deployment in the world, as labour that has not yet been performed but may be in the future. Paolo Virno provides the most succinct definition of

labour-power for this tradition, as ‘pure potentiality’.³ As such, it is distinguished from the actuality of the labour that is performed in any act of production. Arguably, however, as we shall see, Virno and the workerists’ notion of potentiality is less related to the Aristotelian concept that exerted such an important influence on Marx’s thought, than it is implicitly posited as a pale shadow of an as yet unrealised actuality, an ‘absence’ defined as negative presence.

Understood in this sense, the concept of labour-power in *Capital* (and it is only in *Capital* that the concept of labour-power comes to play a pre-eminent, though still perhaps ambiguous, role) might appear to be the mature Marx’s reformulation of fundamental themes from his earlier work, or those of his predecessors. Antonio Negri, for instance, in a fundamental text of the workerist tradition’s interpretation, has provocatively and influentially suggested that it is only in the *Grundrisse*, the notebooks compiled a decade earlier than *Capital*, that we can find the ‘key’ with which to read the later work and its central categories, particularly by focusing on concepts such as ‘living labour’ and ‘labour as subjectivity’.⁴ Giuglielmo Carchedi, on the other hand, from a very different and in many respects diametrically opposed perspective, has argued that Marx’s analysis of labour and labour-power in *Capital* needs to be conceived in terms of the metabolic transformation of caloric energy. Compared to the workerist reading, this interpretation takes Marx much closer to themes in classical political economy, the Ricardian conception of labour in particular.⁵ In both cases, however, *Capital*’s concept of labour-power is understood by means of reference to other texts and conceptual paradigms.

On the other hand, for readers who have previously engaged with Marx’s reportedly more explicitly ‘philosophical’ texts from the 1840s, it might be suspected that Marx is here re-elaborating the notions of labour, productivity and species-being (*Gattungswesen*) that he began to develop in the collection of sketches and notes he compiled with Engels that were later published under the title of the *German Ideology*, or in his own notebooks from Parisian exile, sometimes known as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. In those ‘non-works’, these heretical young Hegelians famously outlined an ambitious philosophy of history

that sought to account for the entire development of human history on the basis of an analysis of the conditions of production and reproduction of social life, an analysis ultimately founded upon an anthropology of a productive human essence, awaiting its realisation in time via the elaboration of the division of labour and the progressive, quantitative growth of productive powers. Understood according to this narrative, labour-power (a concept that appears only marginally in the *German Ideology*) could thus be considered as the historically and socially indeterminate foundation of any particular concrete form of labour, the ‘merely’ natural substrate (conceived in an organic sense, as, ultimately, a quantum of energy, differentially expressed in various ‘mental and physical capabilities’) that permits the emergence of those ‘second natures’ of different human societies, the forms that comprehend and shape labour-power as their relatively invariant content. In Virno’s temporal terms, ‘labour-power incarnates the *illud tempus* that cannot be located in the calendar; that is, it is the prehistoric aspect of human praxis’.⁶ Rather than an historical phenomenon, labour-power would then be the condition of possibility of history itself, or in Virno’s terms, the concrete incarnation of ‘metahistory’.⁷

Once having posited labour in this sense, as the productive energy proper to the human as such, existing *in nuce* before each and every ‘time of the now’ in which this potential is realised, we could then go on to ‘deduce’ a classification of the multiplicity of the historical modes of production according to the different ways in which they permit such a generic potentiality to be realised. Slave societies would witness the violent appropriation of an overwhelming quantity of the slave’s productive energy by the master. Modern capitalist societies, on the other hand, founded upon formally free wage-labour, would represent a more ‘just’ distribution of the fruits of expended energy, via the mechanisms of equal exchange that govern all markets, including the labour market on which labour-power is traded for wages; ‘unjust’ distribution would then represent an anomaly, to be addressed by the bargaining of trade unions, the legislation of social democratic parties and the benevolent state institutions of a mature liberal democracy. Finally, the utopian project of a communist society, or free association of the producers, would consist in the attainment of a social equilibrium of the distribution and consumption of this ‘aggregate’

of human energy: from and to each according to their abilities, an immediate identification between potentiality and actuality.

Such a reading, however, would reduce the dialectical complexity of Marx's major work. *Capital* is not a text that dogmatically posits fixed concepts, subsequently 'applied' to inert subject matter. Rather, in a Brechtian fashion, *Capital's mise en scène (Darstellung)* forces those concepts to move under the pressure of the incessant movement of the reality they strive to grasp in thought, and of which they form an integral part. This is particularly the case in terms of the development of the concept of labour-power in *Capital*, which, on second glance, turns out to be a far more complex historical form of social and, ultimately, political organisation. Labour-power, Marx immediately specifies following his seemingly 'definitive definition', is not simply the aggregate of mental and physical capabilities exercised in the production of use-values. It is not merely a material property of the worker ('living labour', 'labour as subjectivity') appropriated by capital, that parasitical form of 'dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour', to use the graphic gothic image to which Marx recurs with increasing intensity throughout *Capital* (342). In the capitalist mode of production, labour-power is also a commodity - and a commodity of a very particular type.

The commodity, as Marx had argued earlier in *Capital*, 'is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind' (125). However, these use-values only become commodities under very specific historical conditions, and in particular social formations. In the capitalist mode of production, the 'plain, homely, natural form[s]' (138) of use-values are forced to become 'material bearers' (*Träger*) of exchange-value (126), the particular social form in which the equivalence of commodities is posited. The equivalence of these exchange-values is founded upon a reduction of the variation of acts of concrete labour to a common, 'abstract labour', measured in terms of socially necessary labour-time and embodied in varying quantities in different commodities. Contrary to its sensuous appearance as a use-value, 'not an atom of matter' (138) enters into the composition of the commodity when we consider it in terms of the value-form. The commodity leads a life between the sensuous (*sinnlich*) and what *Capital*

calls the 'sensuous-supersensuous' (*sinnlich übersinnlich*) (163; trans. modified). Echoing Nietzsche's scathing critique of the metaphysicians of his time as *Hinterweltler*, we could call commodities *Zwischenweltler*, constitutively caught between the realms of use-value and exchange-value. It is this twofold or 'dual' character that makes the commodity a 'very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (163), as Marx remarks in his tale of the everyday necromancy of the fetishism of commodities. Its objectivity is not that of any merely 'natural' object, comprehended according to an empiricist paradigm, but rather, as Johan Hartle points out, a very curious 'phantom-like objectivity' (*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*) (128). It can only be comprehended by means of a dialectical and relational reformulation of the fundamental questions of ontology; as the late Lukács argued, through the elaboration of the, at first sight, paradoxical notion of a distinctively *social* ontology.

Labour-power, also, is a commodity, and thus able to be exchanged for all other commodities, indifferently with regard to the particular use-values that are gained in such exchanges. The world of commodities is a world of formal equivalence, and all that matters on the market is the exchange of values of the same quantity, regardless of the particular material objects that are their bearers. Yet if there is something uncanny about all commodities, only at home when they wander, homeless, between those two worlds of use and exchange, there is something even more uncanny, or as Marx says, 'peculiar' (270), about that strange commodity called labour-power. For labour-power is the only commodity that is not exhausted in the consumption of its particular use-value following exchange. On the contrary, the consumption of the use-value of labour-power has the potential to give the capitalist *more* exchange-values than the seller of labour-power, the worker, received. This paradoxical event in no way places in doubt the law-abiding nature of the man with the bag of money who purchases the 'service' of labour-power, for he is simply obeying all the rules of fair and honest trading on the commodity market; nor does it imply that the sellers of labour-power have been 'short-changed', or that they have been given less than the value of the commodity they display on the marketplace. How, then, does this singular 'productive consumption' of labour-power occur?

The capitalist has fortuitously found on the market a commodity ‘whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value’ (270). Recognising a good bargain, he is willing to pay for it at its full value (though like any rational market actor, he would happily pay less). But labour-power is a vanishing mediator. Once purchased, it is not a generic labour-power as potentiality, but rather, the actuality of the workers who have sold this capacity to labour for a temporally determinate period, who are forced to descend into the infernal ‘hidden abode of production’ (279). They are set to work in the labour process and forced to deliver labour, effected as ‘concrete’, but measured as ‘abstract labour’. It is here, in the sphere of production, that these workers produce – but only under particular conditions that are not always fulfilled – more (exchange) values (in the form of commodities) than those that were deployed for the purchase of that strange commodity called labour-power, which is now nowhere to be seen until the following day, when the man with the bag of money once more goes down to the marketplace to buy another ‘goose that lays the golden egg’. He can be sure that the owners of this commodity, rather than keeping its mysterious autopoietic powers for themselves, will be constrained once more to offer it for sale, because, paradoxically, they are ‘free’. Once again, Marx emphasises the dialectical dual character of this freedom: as equal juridical subjects, they are free to sell their commodity on the market, like any other commodity owner; but they are also ‘free’ (in the sense of lacking) of control of the means of production that might permit them not to sell this special commodity, for they would then be able to secure their reproduction without the mediation of the wage contract. Here we descend further into the inferno of the capitalist mode of production, beneath the ‘hidden abode of production’ and down into the even more nefarious circles of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ (*die sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation*). As Sara Murawski has emphasised, this should not be conceived as a temporal phase now long past at the origins of capitalism, but, in an Hegelian sense, as a constitutive ‘moment’ of the capitalist totality, as the structurally necessary separation of the producers from the means of production that is continually reproduced in the capitalist mode of production, be it through exceptional acts of extra-judicial violence, occasional ‘politically’ legitimated ‘privatisations’ of the commons, or the

entirely quotidian juridically guaranteed right to private property of the means of production of the capitalist class.⁸

The importance of this distinction between the commodity of labour-power and labour, of this analysis of their constitutive dual characters, and of Marx’s emphasis upon not simply the compatibility of our modern forms of political freedom and equality and their juridical regulation with the capitalist mode of production, but their very *necessity* for it, cannot be overemphasised. For it is on the basis of this analysis that Marx is able to develop the central and often still misunderstood concept of his critique of political economy: surplus-value, an ‘extra’ that is not produced through a quantitative increase, but emerges due to the particular *social form* in which production ruled by capital occurs, split between the sphere of circulation and the central commodity of labour-power, on the one hand, and the sphere of production and effective labour, on the other. Marx’s concept of surplus-value, as the ‘secret’ of the value-form, thus points to the structural contradiction on which the capitalist mode of production is founded: socialised productive processes dominated by private ownership and control of their means and products. In its account of capital’s self-valorisation via the expropriation of labour, it also indicates some of the reasons for the capitalist mode of production’s systemic tendency towards crises, with the rise of the organic composition of capital reducing possibilities for further production of surplus-value and thus undermining the growth necessary for capital’s simple maintenance.

Thus, in the world of commodities, labour-power is *primus inter pares*. The capitalist lusts after its Midas touch, after its extraordinary capacity to exceed equivalence by means of equivalence, to produce quantitative growth where there should be only redistribution of an already given quantity of values that exchange indifferently, the one for the other. Viewed in this perspective, under the aspect of its commodity-form, labour-power is less the blood drained by the vampire from a mortal host, than the elixir of eternal life for the capitalist mode of production, seemingly as inexhaustible as capital is insatiable, the bridge between the two worlds of use and exchange, of the sensuous and the sensuous-supersensuous, the source of the surplus-value that drives the incessant

growth of the capitalist mode of production, its continuous revolutionising of the modern world and recurrent destructive crises.

Labour-power, however, is also a very peculiar commodity in another sense. As a commodity, it is an equivalent in a world of equivalents – but it is not equivalent to or identical with itself. For unlike other commodities, labour-power is divided not only between use-value and exchange-value. Rather, there is also an internal bifurcation of the determination of its exchange-value itself. The particular exchange-value of this commodity also possesses a twofold character: exchange-value as determined according to the temporality of the capitalist, and exchange-value as determined by the temporalities of the workers. For the capitalist, the temporality of labour-power is a temporality of the promise of an indeterminate future, whose image is constructed on the basis of rational deduction. The capitalist purchases the commodity of labour-power on the market on the basis of a calculation regarding the probable capacity of the acquired commodity – or rather, the labour of the workers that can be expected to be gained by means of the purchase of labour-power for a determinate period of time – to produce, under the prevailing conditions, a certain sum of exchange-values, which he has reason to believe will be in excess of those paid to the workers in the wage contract. For the workers, on the other hand, the temporality of labour-power is a temporality of a very determinate present, infused with the fullness of the past. The workers are willing to sell their labour-power for a certain sum of values (in the form of the money of the wage contract) on the basis of socially overdetermined expectations regarding the resources necessary for their reproduction, that is, the fulfilment of their needs and those ‘social needs’ known as desires. In part, they derive these expectations from the past, inductively extending them to the present and the future less by means of the calculation of probable utility (that is, as means for the attainment of an end, such as profit) than in the form of an immediate and concrete project that has the force of a categorical imperative: their continuing corporeal and spiritual existence. This is one of the reasons for which Marx argues that ‘in contrast (...) with the case of other commodities, the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element’ (275), for its value is determined in part by what the workers collectively accept – either actively, by struggling for self-

determination, or, more often, passively, when constrained by capital’s offer – as its ‘fair’ market value.

Promises, however, can be broken, and expectations disappointed. Marx’s concept of class struggle in production, conceived not as the opposition of equal juridical subjects in the sphere of circulation but as the clash between unequal social interests regarding the means and ends of the processes of social production and reproduction, is founded on this notion of the plural temporalities of labour-power. *Contra* the interpretation of the workerist tradition and of Virno in particular, however, Marx does not valorise labour-power under the aspect of potentiality, or of its indeterminacy. This remains within the perspective of the capitalist’s determination of the value of labour-power as commodity. Against the empty potentiality of the not-yet of the capitalists’ promise, Marx emphasises that the actuality of the workers’ determinate ‘nows’ must struggle to assert its claims, the concreteness of those expectations against the indeterminate utopia of the capitalists’ profits. In this perspective, labour-power appears less as a pre-given quantity to be subjected to a technical and neutral calculation, than as one of the *Kampfplätze* in the capitalist mode of production upon which fundamental social, political and moral values are contested and decided; in short, as a form of politically overdetermined social organisation. To decipher the ‘social hieroglyphic’ (167) of that strange commodity called labour-power therefore means much more than to lay bare the mechanisms of capitalist economic exploitation. It also means to reveal capital and its commodity-world as inadequate principles of socialisation and ethical life, and thus to reopen what Derrida incessantly reminded us will always remain the paradigmatic philosophical project: the search for a more just mode of human being-together in the polis.

Peter Thomas lectures in the history of political thought at Brunel University, London. He is a member of the editorial board of *Historical Materialism: research in critical Marxist theory*, and the author of *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Brill, 2009).

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¹ Paolo Virno (1999) *Il ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, p. 121.

² Karl Marx (1976) *Capital*, Volume I, translated by Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin. All references to *Capital* are provided in the text.

³ Virno, p. 121.

⁴ Cf. Antonio Negri (1991) *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Autonomedia, New York.

⁵ Cf. Giuglielmo Carchedi (2010) *Behind the Crisis: Marx's Dialectics of Value and Knowledge*, Leiden: Brill.

⁶ Virno, p.139.

⁷ Virno, p. 122.

⁸ Cf. also David Harvey (2005) *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: OUP, for an extension of the concept of 'primitive accumulation' in the notion of 'accumulation by dispossession'; for a discussion of the problematic English translation of the German *ursprünglich* as 'primitive', cf. Massimiliano Tomba (2009) 'Historical Temporalities of Capital: An Anti-Historicist Perspective', in: *Historical Materialism* 17.4.