

# The self-overcoming of labor: beyond capitalism

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*Presented at the symposium Architecture as a Political Practice, Archeworks, Chicago, October 29, 2016; published in After the Revolution III Labor (2017), 807–17.*

Like all great thinkers, Marx ends up being saddled with responsibility for the very category that he is taking under critical consideration. So he is mistaken to be an *advocate*, whereas in fact he is a *critic*, regarding the so-called “labor theory of value”. Marx doesn’t have a labor theory of value, but he’s rather a critic of it—and not merely a critic, rather, he is mounting a *critique* of it, i.e. how labor as value might point beyond itself. An analogy would be Friedrich Nietzsche. If you ask most people about Nietzsche as a philosopher, they would say he’s a nihilist—whereas actually what he was doing was not advocating nihilism, but trying to diagnose nihilism as a symptom, specifically one that needed a self-overcoming, a *Selbstaufhebung*, a self-fulfillment in self-negation. I think that turn of phrase from Nietzsche, which both is and is not in the tradition of German Idealism that Marx is in, is helpful for thinking about Marx’s approach to labor as value: He looks forward to the self-overcoming of labor as value. So, with respect to this, we’re talking about not a positive theory of labor as value, but a critical theory of labor as value, and specifically labor, as value, is in crisis in capitalism, for Marx. In other words, there’s a crisis of labor as value in capitalism, which Marx regards as a symptom of a possible and necessary change. So let me say something about labor, and then I’ll say something about value. I know we’re going to have a presentation on Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (or *Vita Activa*, as it was titled in German) and a distinction that Arendt makes is helpful in this regard. She distinguishes between: (1) *activity*; (2) *work*, which is transformative activity, as not all activity is transformative, but work is transformative activity, not only of the object that’s being worked on, but indeed transformative of the subject; and then there’s (3) *labor*, which is work, it’s transformative activity, in society. In other words, it’s the value of work. Not all work is labor, just as not all activity is work.

A famous formulation of Marx’s with respect to this is “the emancipation of labor”, what he’s inheriting from the greater socialist and communist tradition, the idea that the emancipation of society demands the emancipation of labor. But in fact, for Marx, this is a fulfillment of what is already the *desideratum* of bourgeois society—i.e. bourgeois society is itself understood as the emancipation of labor, the emancipation of the transformative activity of work, and its valuation in society. Just to point out the history for this: John Locke, the theorist of the Glorious Revolution in England, really the consolidation of the bourgeois revolution in England in the late 17th century, had formulated that the right to property was grounded in labor; in other words, that the actual right to property was not a right of might, but a right of labor: it’s something that needs to be recognized in society. And in the Great French Revolution of 1789, the most prevalent revolutionary pamphlet was the Abbé Sieyès’s *What is the Third Estate?*, in which he talked about the estates in the Estates-General that were being called in the crisis of the Ancien Régime. The First Estate, what does it do? It prays, because it is the Church. The Second Estate, the aristocracy, what does it do? It fights. The Third Estate, however, the commoners (which is at least 95 percent of the population), what do they do? They *work*. He said that under the old regime, the Third Estate was nothing, but now it shall be everything. In other words, the value of

work, which was negligible in terms of the organization of society in Medievalism, in Christianity, the activity of the commoners counted for nothing, but now it will count for everything, it will be the principle of society. So indeed, the bourgeois revolution was announced in terms of the rights of labor and the social recognition of work.

Now I want to turn to Marx's passage from the *Grundrisse*, just to put this issue of bourgeois society and labor on the table:<sup>1</sup>

Thus the ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national, religious, or political a definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production.

What he's doing here is engaging in a reversal of means and ends. He thought that in the ancient conception—meaning everything that came before the modern— a definite form of humanity, or definite forms of humanity in the caste system, was the aim of the activity of society. In other words, everything was geared towards producing a definite way of life. Whereas now, production is not a means towards a definite end, but rather production has become an end in itself, the very aim is production itself. He says:

In fact, however, when the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth, if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange?

I want to highlight there that production and exchange are inextricable for Marx, in other words, production is in this sense a *social* form, and exchange is the form of this social production.

What, if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature — those of his own nature as well as those of so-called “nature”? What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which make the totality of this evolution — i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any previously established yardstick — an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois political economy — and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds — this complete elaboration of what lies within man, appears as the total alienation, and the destruction of all fixed, one-sided purposes as the sacrifice of the end in itself to a wholly external compulsion. Hence in one way the childlike world of the ancients appears to be superior; and this is so, insofar as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the modern world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied, with itself, is vulgar and mean.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen, New York: International Publishers, (pp. 84-85); also in *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1973, (pp. 487-488).

I want to unpack that a little bit, in order to get at what I'm trying to address, namely production for the sake of production. This is the bourgeois epoch's conception—not only theoretically, but in practice—of *freedom*. Freedom is production for the sake of production, in this open-ended manner, the “absolute movement of becoming.” But what we have, according to Marx, in the era of capitalism, is that this production for the sake of production has seemed to appear “satisfied with itself,” and thus has become “vulgar and mean.”

The distinction that I'd like to make is between the idea of society as a society of production for production's sake, and what we have in capitalism, which is not production for the sake of production, but rather production for the sake of *value*. This brings us back to the issue of labor as value—does Marx have a labor theory of value, or rather does he have a critique of labor as value? In other words, has a society that is pursuing production for the sake of production actually outgrown labor as value? In a way, the bourgeois conception is this kind of Promethean notion of human labor as productive. So I wanted to invoke there the classic definition that Marx has of capitalism, namely that the capitalist mode of production is a contradiction—as a mode of production it's a contradiction in itself—between “bourgeois social relations” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the “industrial forces of production.” The industrial forces of production are outstripping and pointing beyond the bourgeois social relations. These bourgeois social relations have usually been understood as private property and the market: private property in the means of production, and the market form of the exchange of goods and the realization of value in capital. What I'd like to offer is that in fact the bourgeois social relations are not essentially private property in the means of production by the capitalists, but the value of labor, in other words, wage-labor as a social relation. That's what's holding back the industrial forces of production, for Marx. Again, this is the distinction between production for the sake of production, in which case, for instance for someone like Adam Smith, labor as value is a means to the end—if you want to maximize production for the sake of production, you can use labor as value to mediate a society effectively to emancipate production. What Smith could not have foreseen, but which is Marx's concern, is what happens with the Industrial Revolution, when labor as value ceases to be an adequate means for emancipating production, and thus ceases to be adequate to the task of freeing production in the unlimited way he calls for here.

In that respect, the issue is how labor as value has itself generated and continues to generate these industrial forces of production, in other words, continues to generate a crisis, a situation pointing beyond itself, how labor in its own activity in society points beyond itself, and points beyond the bourgeois conception of humanity as *homo faber* and *homo economicus*. The bourgeois conception is that there has been this long history of human development from the Paleolithic hunter-gatherers, up through settled, subsistence agriculture, and now into bourgeois production, in which humans are the producing animal—they make things, *homo faber*—and they produce with increasing efficiency—*homo economicus*. The history of humanity as the history of *homo faber* and *homo economicus* is of course not actually true of past forms of humanity, but is the way that bourgeois society appropriates all of human history to itself, so, e.g. it appears that the so-called “hunter-gatherers” had a “division of labor.” Did they have a division of labor? No, they actually just had a gendered way of relating to the totemic species, in which the men hunted and the women gathered. It's not a division of labor, a mode of production. Did peasants, in the long history of traditional civilization practicing subsistence agriculture, constitute a mode of production? Can we say that agriculture was their mode of “absolute movement of becoming”? Not really. But from the bourgeois standpoint this looks as if

this is the case, it looks as if what humans have always been doing is perfecting production, perfecting their production with respect to nature, and with respect to themselves. That has not always been the case, it has rather been the case specifically in the emancipation of society in the bourgeois era, and it will not always be the case. So, for Marx, the crisis of capitalism is actually marking, as he puts it, the potential end of “pre-history,” and the beginning of “true” human history. What that would mean is that in fact we would cast the history of the human species that is projected back from bourgeois society as the history of production, as the history in a sense of human labor, into pre-history, if socialism and communism were attained. In other words, we would transcend this conception of human nature that is specific to the bourgeois epoch.

Marx thinks this has happened precisely through the demand, in the industrial era, of workers for the value of their labor. What came up earlier was the distinction between “formal” and “real subsumption,” and the related but not identical distinction between “relative” and “absolute surplus value.” Of course, these are not discrete periods in time, but are both constitutive, and reproduce a contradiction in capitalism, meaning that we always have an interaction of formal and real subsumption, we always have an interaction of absolute and relative surplus value. We always have the paradox of overwork and unemployment, we always have sweatshops and robots, and in a sense, we’ve always had that since the very beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Now Marx thought that this has come about precisely because of the political crisis caused by the Industrial Revolution, and by the workers’ own class struggle against the capitalists in the Industrial Revolution, for example, with the Chartists in England, or the rising of the weavers in Lyon in France—this period of the early 19th century, at the close of the first phase of the Industrial Revolution. In fact, things like wage levels, subsistence levels, norms for all kinds of aspects of social reproduction, the reproduction of the workforce in society, according to Marx in “The Working Day” chapter of *Das Kapital*, are extremely variable, they’re the product of political struggle, of cultural-social norms, legal reforms, etc. For instance, it became ‘un-Christian’ to exploit people, so it was Christian pastors in England who led the fight to get the workers to have at least one day off, Sunday, because it’s un-Christian to work them on the Sabbath. And it became un-Christian to work women and children in the factory era. These are all not part of the strictly *economic* logic of labor as value, but are actually extrinsic to it—they are external constraints imposed for political, cultural, social reasons, and it’s this that in fact motivates and impels the introduction of machines into the factory process.

I can come around to my end-point, then, quickly. I want to conclude on a paradoxical formulation that Marx has, with respect to a world beyond labor. He says that work will go from “life’s prime need,” to becoming “life’s prime want.”<sup>2</sup> We will no longer work because we need to, out of the false necessity of the social valorization-process of capital—in other words, capital itself has to justify itself with respect to labor as value. We will no longer work because we *need* to; in that respect, we will overcome the *social* necessity for work. We will work because we *want* to. In other words, the degree to which humans engage in transformative activity, activity that transforms nature and transforms ourselves, it is because we want to, not because we need to. Therefore, we will have transcended the value of work in society, as we now experience it: we will transcend labor as value. So we will not necessarily transcend *work*, but we will transcend *labor*, labor as a *social* principle, beyond capitalism. | §

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<sup>2</sup> “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works, Vol. 24*, New York: International Publishers, 1989, (p. 87).