

The Politics of Assumption, the Assumption of Politics

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I am very much honoured by this prize--- because of the commitment of its namesakes (especially Isaac Deutscher from I learned much in my early reading and whose appreciation of *Capital* on the BBC formed part of my first lecture every time I gave my Marx course). And also honoured because it links me to such a stellar group of previous recipients including Istvan Meszaros who, 35 years after delivering the first Deutscher Prize Lecture, continues to remind us what the point is. I hope that my own thoughts here can help.

Assume a perfectly competitive capitalist economy with costless freedom of entry and exit, and the attempt to raise taxes on capital in one jurisdiction will lead capital to exit for other jurisdictions. Accordingly, we conclude, there is no point in trying to tax capital.

Assume that a set of productive relations exists so long as it does not fetter the development of productive forces; therefore, we conclude that the reason capitalism persists is because it is 'optimal for the further development of productive power.'¹

Assume identical production functions in a credit market island and a labour market island, where the delivery of labour for the wage is 'as simple and enforceable a transaction as the delivery of an apple for a dime.'² We conclude from identical mathematical results in the two islands that capitalist exploitation does not require domination at the point of production but flows, simply, from unequal property endowments.

In each case, the conclusions are present in the premise. What is proven is what is already embedded in the assumptions. And, these examples point to the necessity always to interrogate conclusions to see whether they flow from our assumptions.

So, if we accept this simple point, a *very* simple point, what conclusions are latent in the assumption that 'in a given country at a given period' the quantity of the means of subsistence required by workers is given and 'can therefore be treated as a constant magnitude'?³ Does this assumption imply that productivity increases as such will not benefit workers?

The assumption introduced

I began to worry about Marx's assumption that the standard of necessity is given once I started the process of trying to understand the *Grundrisse*. For one, there was

¹ Cohen, 1978: 206.

² Roemer, 1986: 269; Lebowitz, 1988.

³ Marx, 1977: 275, 655.

Marx's stress in the *Grundrisse* about capital's tendency to create new needs for workers, on which, he noted, 'the contemporary power of capital rests.'⁴ There's no mention of this in *Capital*. How could such an important source of capital's power be reconciled with the assumption that the worker's necessary needs were constant? Clearly, this was a critical assumption to be removed, I concluded many years ago, in that book on Wage Labour that Marx had promised.⁵

But, there was another aspect of the *Grundrisse* that troubled me. That volume revealed the relation between Marx's discussion of capital in general, his inner analysis, and the necessary form of existence of capital as many capitals in competition. Over and over again, we see Marx stress that competition does not create the inner laws of capital, that competition merely lets them be seen.⁶ He said this often enough that it could not be dismissed as a casual comment. And, once you grasp that relation between the essence and appearance of capital, it's there to be seen clearly in *Capital*, where Marx explicitly indicates that 'the general and necessary tendencies of capital must be distinguished from their forms of appearance.'⁷

If the competition of capitals executes and manifests the inner laws of capital, however, we should be able to demonstrate the same results on both logical levels. And, sometimes this is very simple. For example, in his examination of capital in general Marx explains that capital's drive to expand leads it to attempt to lengthen and intensify the workday and to increase productivity. Look, then, at the struggle of individual capitals against each other--- we see that their attempt to expand leads them to do everything possible to reduce production costs and that they are driven by competition to precisely the same results. In short, here we can demonstrate that 'the immanent laws of capitalist production manifest themselves in the external movement of the individual capitals, assert themselves as the coercive laws of competition....'⁸

So, what happens at each level when there are productivity increases? At the level of many capitals competing in the real world, growing productivity means, all other things equal, rising output, falling prices and thus increased real wages. At the level of capital in general, however, rising productivity yields, not rising real wages but relative surplus value--- this is, of course, the story presented by Marx in Volume I, Chapter 12. But, if competition reveals the inner laws of capital, how is that in one case workers benefit from rising productivity and in the other case, capital benefits? *There* was the immediate puzzle.

Well, of course, the explanation is the assumption that Marx introduced at the level of capital in general--- the premise that the quantity of means of subsistence for workers can be treated as given for a given period in a given country. He *initially* defended this assumption by stressing the need for simplification—for holding some things constant at the outset and removing these assumptions subsequently. 'Only by this procedure,' Marx explained to Engels, 'is it possible to discuss one relation without discussing all the rest.' Similarly, at the same time in his *Grundrisse* manuscript, he indicated that making such fixed assumptions was necessary in order to avoid

⁴ Marx, 1973: 287.

⁵ Lebowitz, 1977-8.

⁶ Marx, 1973: 651, 751-2; cf. Lebowitz, 2006 forthcoming.

⁷ Marx, 1977: 433.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 433.

‘confounding everything.’⁹ But, was holding the standard of necessity constant the *only* option if you wanted to avoid confounding everything?

Within a few years, in his 1861-3 Economic Manuscripts, Marx offered an additional reason for the assumption. The Physiocrats, he noted, had begun with this assumption of subsistence as a fixed magnitude and thereby had correctly identified the sphere of production as the source of surplus value. This concept of a subsistence wage, Marx argued, was the foundation of modern political economy, and Adam Smith had followed their lead ‘like all economists worth speaking of.’¹⁰

Of course, the assumption had nothing to do with a natural or physiological subsistence (a mistake the Physiocrats were inclined to make). That subsistence wage could be high or low:

The only thing of importance is that it should be viewed as given, determinate. All questions relating to it as not a given but a variable magnitude belong to the investigation of wage labour in particular and do not touch its general relationship to capital.¹¹

Thus, what was critical was the particular insight that this assumption of a given standard of necessity provides about the nature of capital. It permits us to grasp the concepts of necessary labour and the value of labour-power (and, thus, the concepts of surplus labour and surplus value). And, being able to determine the basis of the value of labour-power, Marx insisted, was of ‘the highest importance for grasping the capital-relation.’ So, even though he was clear that the standard of necessity is a variable magnitude, Marx put that question aside until his study of wage labour in particular:

In our investigation, however, we shall everywhere assume the amount and quantity of the means of subsistence, and therefore also the extent of needs, at a given level of civilisation, is never pushed down, because this investigation of the rise and fall of the level itself (particularly its artificial lowering) does not alter anything in the consideration of the general relationship.¹²

It is not hard, then, to understand why Marx assumed the standard of necessity given--- (a) a simplifying assumption was desirable, (b) it was an assumption already familiar in classical political economy (distinguishing that school from vulgar economy), and (c) this particular assumption illuminated the nature of capital as the product of the exploitation of workers. While Marx was clear, too, that ‘the level of the necessities of life whose total value constitutes the value of labour-power can itself rise or fall,’ this was a matter that would be addressed later--- ‘the analysis of these variations, however, belongs not here but in the theory of wages.’¹³

But, was the assumption neutral? Did it illuminate some aspects of the nature of capital but leave others in the darkness? And, since we know that Marx never did get around to removing it, were there conclusions latent in that assumption?

⁹ Lebowitz, 2003: 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ Marx, 1988:44-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45-7).

¹³ Marx, 1977: 1068-9.

The non-neutrality of Marx's assumption

Think about the implications of assuming a constant standard of necessity. In such a case, the only way that necessary labour (and its value-form, the value of labour-power) can fall is through a fall in the value of a given set of the necessaries of life. 'In our investigation,' Marx indicated, 'wages are only reduced by the DEPRECIATION of that labour capacity, or what is the same thing, by the cheapening of the means of subsistence entering into the workers' consumption.'¹⁴

To understand the nature of capital, in short, the only change in the wage to be considered is that which results from changes in the conditions of production of the commodities consumed by workers. Explicitly excluded from purview is any change related to the market for labour-power. Marx was quite clear in stating this:

In so far as machinery brings about a direct reduction of wages for the workers employed by it, by e.g. using the demand of those rendered unemployed to force down the wages of those in employment, it is not part of our task to deal with this CASE. It belongs to the theory of wages.¹⁵

So, return to the concept of relative surplus value. Given Marx's assumption, 'a change in the magnitude of surplus value presupposes a movement in the value of labour-power, brought about by a change in the productivity of labour.' We have here the basic relationship first accurately formulated, according to Marx by Ricardo.¹⁶ Accordingly, the story of the growth of surplus value becomes simply a story of the development of productive forces. It is the point that Marx makes over and over again in his elaboration of 'the concept of relative surplus-value': capital has an 'immanent drive', a constant tendency 'towards increasing the productivity of labour, *in order to cheapen commodities and, by cheapening commodities, to cheapen the worker himself*.'¹⁷

So, what is important about cooperation of workers? Social productivity of combined labour exceeds the sum of individual productivities. Productivity rises but capital, rather than workers, is the beneficiary. What occurs in manufacturing? Increase in productivity, capital benefits. What occurs in machinofacture? Increase in productivity, capital benefits. The important story told is that the development of productive forces benefits capital because it yields relative surplus value by lowering necessary labour through the increase in productivity. 'It is only the shortening of the labour-time necessary for the production of a definite quantity of commodities that is aimed at.'¹⁸ True, individual capitalists may want to destroy unions, may want to use machinery to defeat strikes, but capital as a whole, capital in general, has its eye on the prize--- 'cheapening the means of subsistence entering into the workers' consumption'.

So, what drives the development of capitalism? Capital's desire for growth, its desire for surplus value--- and only that. Capital is the actor. Capital makes history

¹⁴ Marx, 1994:23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶ Marx, 1977: 658, 660.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 436-7. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 438.

(though not under conditions of its own choosing). The picture, in short, is one of capital propelling itself to develop the productive forces, one of a system that accordingly delivers better and better productive forces. And, when capital can *no longer* develop those productive forces, revolution is on the agenda. ‘The function of the revolutionary social change,’ Cohen inferred, ‘is to unlock the productive forces.’¹⁹ Accordingly, since capital has created better, more efficient (and, of course, neutral) productive forces, the task now is both to take these achievements and give *workers* the benefits of them--- the highest achievements of capitalism and soviet power--- and also to build upon these.

How much of this particular story flows from that assumption of a constant standard of necessity? If we made a *different* assumption--- a constant rate of surplus value (the Volume III, Chapter 13 assumption underlying a tendency of the rate of profit to fall), the effect of productivity increases which reduce the value of the means of subsistence would be real wages which increase at the same rate as productivity. ‘In this case, because the productivity of labour has risen,’ Marx explained in his 1861-63 manuscripts, ‘the quantity of use values he receives, his real wage, had risen, but its *value* has remained constant, since it continues to represent the same quantity of realised labour time as before.’²⁰

Under this alternative assumption of a constant rate of surplus value, in short, *workers* are the beneficiaries of productivity increases. The value of the worker’s money wage would be unchanged but, with a doubling of productivity, it would ‘represent twice as many use-values as before, and ... each use-value would be twice as cheap as it was before.’²¹ Of course, too, by assumption there would be no generation of relative surplus value. Thus, the direct link between productivity increase and relative surplus value would be severed.

Yet, it is essential to understand that we do not *need* to make an explicit assumption of a constant rate of surplus value to achieve this result in which real wages rise with productivity. All that is necessary is to drop the imposed assumption of the constant standard of necessity. Then, with a falling value of means of subsistence as the result of productivity increases, all other things equal, the real value of the worker’s money wage would rise. The doubling of productivity would lead to a halving of commodity values and, thus, a doubling of real wages. Once we no longer impose the requirement of ‘a definite quantity of commodities’ consumed by workers, the constant rate of surplus value, all other things equal, emerges as a *result* with productivity increases. This inference at the level of capital in general corresponds in this case to what occurs at the level of capitals in competition, all other things equal--- i.e., when productivity changes drop from the sky.

The basis, in short, for relative surplus value is *not* the growth of productivity (as presented in Chapter 12 of Volume I). We need to understand that Marx’s assumption is not neutral. That assumption leads us to make this specific connection between productivity increases and relative surplus value. However, if an increase in social productivity were to drop from the sky, all other things equal, it would be workers who benefit and there would be no relative surplus value. Something *additional* is required for

¹⁹ Cohen, 1978: 150.

²⁰ Marx, 1994: 65-6; Marx, 1977: 659; Lebowitz, 2003: 114-5.

²¹ Marx, 1977: 659.

relative surplus value. Something is missing from the story Marx told in Chapter 12. And, if it is missing here, the question is whether it is missing everywhere.

Another variable, another assumption

To capture what is missing, *Beyond Capital* introduces at the inner level of capitalism a specific concept and new variable--- the degree of separation among workers.

This concept reflects the fact that capitalism is not driven simply by the goals of capital. There are also the goals of workers. Capital has the explicit goal of the growth of surplus value. Workers, though, have their explicit goals, too--- they struggle for time for themselves (not only to rest and recuperate but also, Marx noted, ‘the worker needs time in which to satisfy his intellectual and social requirements’); they struggle to reduce the intensity of their workday in order to have energy for themselves; and, they struggle to secure the use-values which correspond at that point to their ‘social needs, the needs of socially developed human beings’. Underlying all these needs of workers is what Marx described in *Capital* as ‘the worker’s own need for development.’²²

There are, thus, two ‘oughts’ in capitalism: ‘the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction.’²³ What, then, determines ‘the respective powers of the combatants’?

I propose that we conceive of a variable (X), which represents the degree of separation among workers. ‘The workers’ power of resistance,’ Marx pointed out, ‘declines with their dispersal’; and, we can suggest that this X-factor will determine the strength of the ability of workers to struggle over wages, to struggle over the length and intensity of the work-day and to struggle against capital as a whole.²⁴

Come back to the case for the generation of relative surplus value. The necessary condition for relative surplus value is the decline in necessary labour, a condition which is satisfied if productivity (q) rises more than real wages (U). What, then, determines the course of real wages? We can represent the course of real wages as a function of the relation of productivity to the degree of separation (q/X). Then, we can set out the following cases:

- (a) if productivity rises and the degree of separation among workers is constant, then real wages rise at the same rate as productivity. In this case, necessary labour and the rate of surplus value are constant; the worker is beneficiary of productivity gains;
- (b) if productivity rises and the degree of separation increases at the same rate, then the real wage is constant. In this case, capital captures all the benefits of productivity increase as relative surplus value; and,
- (c) if productivity rises and the degree of separation of workers increases but at a lesser rate, then there is both relative surplus value and a rising rate of surplus value as well as increased real wages.

²² Lebowitz, 2003: 66-76.

²³ Marx, 1865: 146; Lebowitz, 2003: 73-4.

²⁴ Marx, 1977: 591, 638.

From this perspective, then, the necessary condition for relative surplus value is a rise in the degree of separation of workers (or, inversely, a fall in the degree of unity of workers). Productivity increases by themselves cannot explain the growth of relative surplus value. But how can we say this when we understand that capital, as the owner of the products of labour, is the immediate beneficiary of *any* increase in productivity (whatever its source)? The answer, simply, is that a rise in the X-factor is essential for the growth of relative surplus value because, if capital benefits immediately from productivity gains, the question would remain as to why the worker is not successful in capturing these benefits when he ‘measures his demands against the capitalist’s profit and demands a certain share of the surplus value created by him.’²⁵

Why is there confusion in the understanding of the necessary conditions for relative surplus value? Precisely because productivity gains are generally associated with the changes in the labour process initiated by capital, the effects of productivity changes and increases in the degree of separation among workers tend not to be disentangled. Take, for example, the substitution of machinery for workers, a case where use of the product of the social brain definitely fosters the development of social productivity. The begged question is why *workers* aren’t the beneficiaries, why they aren’t able to capture the gains in the form of real wages which rise at the same rate as the productivity gains. Chapter 12 of Volume I offers no answer to this.

Recall, though, that Marx excluded from his discussion of relative surplus value the case where ‘machinery brings about a direct reduction of wages for the workers employed by it, by e.g. using the demand of those rendered unemployed to force down the wages of those in employment.’ Here is precisely the missing explanation. All other things equal, the displacement of workers increases the degree of separation of workers. As a result, productivity rises more rapidly than real wages, and the resulting fall in necessary labour yields the increase in surplus value. We, further, can see this inner tendency manifested in competition, in that real world of many capitals and many wage-labourers. There, all other things equal, the weakened position of workers in the labour market produces the downward pressure on money wages that is the condition for real wages to rise less than productivity.

Of course, all other things are not necessarily equal. While capital attempts to raise the degree of separation to its maximum, the worker ‘constantly presses in the opposite direction.’ In short, we cannot exclude the possibility that workers, by organising and by uniting, can *counteract* capital’s tendency. The removal of the assumption of a given standard of necessity and the articulation of the variable X, the degree of separation among workers, in short, clearly bring class struggle to centre stage in the discussion of the development of capitalism.

The assumption of class struggle

Class struggle, of course, is not absent from *Capital*. When Marx put aside the question of changes in the ‘definite quantity’ of means of subsistence until the book on

²⁵ Lebowitz, 2003: 91; Marx, 1973: 597.

wage-labour, he did not put aside the question of class struggle. However, he froze the *worker's* side of class struggle. What other basis could there be for assuming real wages constant in the face of rising productivity? In *Capital*, workers do *not* press in the opposite direction to increase their wages; rather, the degree of separation of workers increases to prevent them from sharing the benefits of the advance of social productivity.²⁶

Once we recognise, however, that workers have their own goals and that they combine in order to struggle successfully, we can no longer assume that the link between productivity increase and surplus value is automatic; nor can we assume that capital proceeds *as if* productivity increases automatically translate into relative surplus value. Capital must negate its negation in order to posit itself--- it must divide and separate workers as its necessary condition of existence.

The X-factor immediately allows us to see that part of the essence of capital, indeed an *essential* aspect of the logic of capital, is the tendency to divide workers by turning their differences into antagonism and hostility. It is a point Marx recognised well in his comment about the antagonism between Irish and English workers--- this antagonism, he noted, is 'the *secret of the impotence of the English working class*, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.'²⁷ The use of racism and sexism, however, does not appear as part of the essence of capital in Marx's *Capital*; and, that is not an accident.

Similarly, once we recognise the importance to capital of dividing workers, then we can no longer look upon capital's tendency simply as one that inexorably yields an increasing scale of productive plant (and which has as its unintended consequence the centralising, uniting and organising of the working class). Capital's drive for surplus value can lead to specific alterations in the mode of production that *lower* productivity as such--- as long as they divide workers. For capital, what matters, after all, is not productivity but the relationship between productivity and the degree of separation (q/X).

Much of capitalist globalisation, indeed, may be driven by the desire to weaken workers--- by an attempt to *decentralise*, *disunite* and *disorganise* workers. Does the assumption of a given standard of necessity help us to understand the phenomenon of modern capitalist globalisation or capital's drive for contracting-out?

But, that raises the *whole* question of the nature of the changes in productive forces sponsored by capital. We know that capital has the tendency to stimulate cooperation in production among workers. In choosing the forms of cooperation, though, how likely is it for capital to introduce changes in the labour process that strengthen the unity and self-consciousness of workers? Capital encourages the development of the collective worker in itself but has no interest in the emergence of the collective worker *for itself*.

Given that capital's goal is valorisation rather than the development of productive forces as such, the relation of productivity to the degree of separation of workers is what capital must consider when initiating changes in the labour process. The logic of capital accordingly demands that the changes in the productive forces introduced by capital *cannot* be neutral. Those productive forces, at any given point, reflect capital's goal within capitalist productive relations; and, insofar as that goal is relative surplus value, in

²⁶ Lebowitz, 2003: 117-9, 89-91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

themselves, their nature must be such as to weaken workers.

And, this point about the non-neutrality of capital's achievements, which one would not grasp from a reading of Marx's Chapter 12, means that the society that would go beyond capitalism *cannot* simply take the achievements of capital and channel the benefits to workers instead of capital. As I proposed in *Beyond Capital*:

Precisely because capital's goal is not the development of productive forces for itself but is valorization, the character of instruments of production and of the organisation of the capitalist production process at any given point expresses capital's goals in the context of two-sided class struggle. In short, unless the behaviour of capital is considered in the context of wage-labour for itself rather than just wage-labour in itself, the clear tendency is to think in terms of the autonomous development of productive forces and the neutrality of technology. Both conceptions are characteristic of economism.²⁸

There is no better way to grasp the class character of the productive forces than to recall what Marx learned about the nature of the workers' state as the result of the actions of workers in struggle in the Paris Commune. The parallels are striking. Just as the working class cannot use the 'ready-made' state machinery for its own purposes, so also it cannot use the ready-made *productive* machinery for its own purposes. Just as in the case of the capitalist state, the existing productive forces introduced by capital are *infected*--- their very nature involves a 'systematic and hierarchic division of labour', and capitalist production assumes the character of 'a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.'²⁹ No one could deny that Marx recognised this despotism of the capitalist workplace--- with its 'barrack-like discipline.'³⁰ But, who would argue that this abomination flows *simply* from the drive to increase productive forces?

Understanding the importance of the X-factor, which is to say the pervasive character of class struggle, means that we recognise that building the society of associated producers necessarily requires us to go *beyond* seizing the capitalist state and *beyond* seizing capitalist productive enterprises. The associated producers inherit these but they must transform them to correspond to the essence of associated producers--- the self-government of the producers, that form which allows the producers to transform both circumstances and themselves and which stimulates, rather than truncates, the development of their capacities.

When we begin *without* Marx's assumption, without freezing class struggle from the side of workers, we not only understand capitalism better; we also gain insights into process of going beyond it.

The politics of assumptions and variables

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁰ Marx, 1977: 450, 549.

Can acceptance of assorted evils like economism, determinism and statism then all be traced to a simple assumption about the standard of necessity? We need to think about the importance of identifying variables and about the assumptions we make. As we should know from Marx, our variables, our assumptions, the way in which we express formulas, direct our attention to what is important to understand.

Consider the variable labour-power, the capacity to perform labour. By articulating this variable, Marx enabled us to distinguish explicitly between the labour necessary to reproduce the worker and the labour the worker performs. It shines a light on the importance of the reproduction of the working class, the necessary condition of existence for the reproduction of capital, a central concept that finds no place in vulgar (or neoclassical) economics. Similarly, there are the concepts that he saw as so important to articulate--- surplus value (independent of its various subdivisions) and abstract labour, which is the key to unlocking the riddle of money. What would Marx's *Capital* be without these new concepts and variables he introduces?

We can also see the importance Marx attached to *assumptions* about variables. Recall his point about treating the standard of necessity as given. The Physiocrats had made a great leap forward by making the subsistence wage, 'the equivalent of the necessary means of subsistence,' the pivotal point in their theory. Even though they were mistaken in treating this 'unchangeable magnitude' as determined entirely by nature, 'the Physiocrats transferred the inquiry into the origin of surplus value from the sphere of circulation into the sphere of direct production.' In this way, they 'thereby laid the foundation for the analysis of capitalist production' and deserved to be recognised as 'the true fathers of modern political economy.'³¹ And, we see that Marx retained this assumption in order to advance this 'inquiry into the origin of surplus value'. To understand the nature of capital, he stressed, 'the only thing that is important' about the standard of necessity is that 'it should be viewed as given, determinate.'

Finally, we know that Marx grasped that the way in which a formula presents a relation, in fact, can conceal the specific nature of the relation. Classical political economy, he noted, had worked out the formulas for the rate of exploitation and the rate of surplus value 'in substance, but not in a conscious form.' Yet, Marx was very critical of the way these formulas presented the relation. He argued that, by expressing surplus labour in relation to the entire workday and expressing surplus value as a fraction of the total value-product, classical political economy mystified the nature of the capital-relation as a relation of exploitation, presenting instead 'the false semblance of a relation of association.'³²

What was the problem? Clearly not that there was anything *false* about classical political economy's formulas. After all, their formulas were essentially the same--- they were simply 'derivative' formulas. However, the problem is that the permissiveness of their derivative formulas allowed erroneous conceptions to be smuggled in. Not simply by permitting the idea that 'worker and capitalist divide the product in proportion to the different elements which they respectively contribute towards its formation.'³³ There were also assumptions that could be introduced without conscious formulation. By relating surplus labour to the entire workday, Marx pointed out that:

³¹ Lebowitz, 2003: 32, 44-5.

³² Marx, 1977: 668-70.

³³ *Ibid.*, 671.

The political economists' favourite method of treating the working day as constant in magnitude became a fixed usage, because in those formulae surplus labour is always compared with a working day of a given length.³⁴

As we know, the treatment of the workday as a given (and, thus, its disappearance as variable) meant that, for classical political economy (and, unfortunately, for some late interpreters of Marx), the coercive nature of the capitalist workday disappeared. With the obscuring of the compulsion to perform surplus labour so apparent in absolute surplus value, the source of the surplus was mystified--- leaving the exploitation of workers no more compelling an explanation of the surplus than the exploitation of corn, steel or peanuts.

Assumptions and forms of expressing relations that open the door to mystification need to be challenged. And, this is not a purely academic or scientific question. There was a reason that Marx was very sensitive to the political implications of assumptions and formulas. Although definitely a man of science, he was (as Engels pointed out at his graveside) before all else a revolutionary, one whose 'real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society.'³⁵

So, what would this revolutionary (and, indeed, what should *all* revolutionaries) think about the retention of an assumption which treats the lowering of the value of commodities consumed by workers as an immanent tendency but obscures capital's tendency to divide workers? What should we think about an assumption that prevents us from seeing that the story of the growth of surplus value is not simply one of the growth of productive forces but, indeed, one of capital's continuing ability to divide workers in the face of the development of social productivity? What should we think of an assumption that portrays as neutral the productive forces introduced by capital? The economism that flows from the assumption that Marx intended to remove should be clear.

Theory and History

But, *when* should that assumption be removed? In *Beyond Capital*, I followed Marx in proposing that the removal of the assumption belonged in the Book on Wage-Labour. Yet, shouldn't the assumption of the given standard of necessity be removed *before* the historical illustration of the development of productive forces which occurs under capitalist relations of production? After all, that account of manufacturing and modern industry in *Capital* is meant to be a test of the theory of relative surplus value as set out in Chapter 12.

'Testing by facts or by practice respectively,' Lenin commented about *Capital*, 'is to be found here in *each* step of the analysis.'³⁶ We know, too, that the demonstration of the correctness of abstract thought was *critical* for Marx. As he wrote to Engels in 1867:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 670.

³⁵ Engels, 1883: 682.

³⁶ Lenin, 1961: 320.

As regards CHAPTER IV, it was a hard job finding *things themselves*, i.e., their *interconnection*. But with that once behind me, along came one BLUE BOOK after another just as I was composing the final *version*, and I was delighted to find my theoretical conclusions fully confirmed by the FACTS.³⁷

Indeed, Marx insisted that only after the inner connections have been discovered (through the ‘power of abstraction’) ‘can the real movement be appropriately presented.’³⁸ Yet, the argument that I have made is that Marx did *not* elaborate all the inner connections. In focusing only upon capital’s ‘immanent drive’ to cheapen commodities in order to cheapen the worker herself and in ignoring capital’s immanent drive to divide workers, Marx presented ‘the general and necessary tendencies of capital’ only in part, only one-sidedly. Shouldn’t the theory that is ‘tested’ be one which focuses explicitly upon *both* productivity and the X-factor? Upon the relation of productivity to the degree of separation among workers?

The answer, I suggest, is obvious. What kind of historical account of the development of capitalism can be based upon an assumption that effectively freezes the workers’ side of class struggle? The theory which should be tested by historical illustration is one which begins from two-sided class struggle, one which explicitly recognises the struggle over the degree of separation.

And, yet, think about that historical account. There is more in that account than just a description of productivity gains for the purpose of producing a definite quantity of commodities more cheaply. We also see, for example, how the competition of women and children in the factories breaks the resistance of male workers, how workers are forced to compete against machines, and we see the use of machines as weapons for ‘suppressing strikes’, as ‘weapons against working class revolt.’³⁹ Those historical observations, however, are sparse and scattered; and, most significantly, they are *not theorised*--- their premise has not been developed as part of the inner connections.

In this respect, the history presented is *not* simply a confirmation of the theory of relative surplus value by ‘the FACTS’, by the real movement. When it comes to testing the theory that Marx presented in Chapter 12, there are clearly ‘unexplained variations’ in the historical account of manufacturing and modern industry. These observations would not, however, be unexplained by a theory which includes capital’s goal of weakening workers and increasing the degree of separation of workers.

To demonstrate that capital is the product of surplus labour, Marx explicitly put aside critical questions until his ‘investigation of wage-labour in particular’. However, by choosing not to develop the side of wage-labour and the ensuing struggle over the degree of separation of workers theoretically *before* presenting the historical development of capitalism, Marx weakened both his own theory and how it was viewed by those who followed.

Did he recognise this? We know from Engels’ Preface to the Third Edition of Volume I of *Capital* that ‘it was Marx’s original intention to re-write a great part of the text of the first volume, to formulate many theoretical points more exactly, to insert new

³⁷ Marx and Engels, 1987, 407-8.

³⁸ Marx, 1977: 90, 102. Marx underlined this point when he commented about the concept of value that ‘Even if there were no chapter on “value” in my book, the analysis of the real relations which I give would contain the proof and demonstration of the real value relation.’ Marx and Engels, 1965: 209-10.

³⁹ Marx, 1977: 526, 557, 562-3.

ones, and to bring historical and statistical materials up to date.’⁴⁰ Would theoretical points raised here about the degree of separation of workers have been among those formulated more exactly or inserted in Volume I? Although we’ll never know Marx’s intention, how can we *ourselves* proceed without formulating and inserting them?

Theory and Politics

Do we need, however, specifically to articulate this X-factor? Could it not be said that all that is required is to be more explicit about the importance of class struggle and the balance of class forces? I suggest not. However salutary it is in the face of economism to repeat the phrase ‘class struggle’ over and over again, it is not enough.

We need to remember that identification of a variable can cast a particular light, that it can illuminate what has been in the shadows--- and this, I propose, is precisely true about the X-factor, the degree of separation among workers. This variable shouts that what matters is the unity of the working class; it insists that it is the division and separation of workers by capital that defeats them and that prevents workers from being the beneficiaries of the growth of the productivity of social labour. And, it demands that we ask at all times two questions--- (1) what divides us and (2) how can we break down those divisions?

Once you think about this variable, I suggest that there is no going back to the comfort of determinism or the scientism of the Marxist economists whose contribution to the overthrow of capitalist society would be the discovery of the correct solution to the ‘transformation problem’ (a puzzle whose assumptions, incidentally go unrecognised by these alchemists). When you focus upon the struggle over the degree of separation among workers and when you recognise how seemingly-well-grounded and objective economic variables (like the rate of profit) are affected by the results of this struggle, then (however threatening this may be to economists--- either by training or by inclination) what becomes obvious is *indeterminacy*. The indeterminacy inherent in struggle.

Articulating this variable for the degree of separation puts a searchlight on the need to go beyond the economism of the economists in another way. Obviously, the X-factor is not determined solely by the struggle over purely economic matters. There is the struggle against capital’s deployment of racism, sexism and its fostering of divisions and competition among workers in different countries. These are struggles to create vehicles that can bring workers together, struggles over the state and struggles in the sphere of ideology. Indeed, at the core of these struggles is the battle of ideas--- a struggle to demonstrate not only that capital is the result of exploitation but also that this exploitation is based upon the separation of workers.

In this respect, assertion of the need, firstly, to understand the inherent bias flowing from Marx’s assumption, secondly, to remove that assumption and, thirdly, to introduce the variable I have called the X-factor should be seen as part of the battle of ideas, as an attempt to redirect the activity of Marxist thinkers to the focus of the revolutionary Marx. By introducing this variable explicitly into our theoretical work, our theory assumes politics and political struggle. Indeed, we put politics in command.

I concluded Chapter 9 of *Beyond Capital* by stressing that the purpose of Marx’s

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

Capital was to give workers a weapon with which to go beyond capitalism. And, I asked, why didn't Marx get around to writing the book on Wage Labour? I answered that 'the completion of his epistemological project interested him less than his revolutionary project.'⁴¹ In these days when Hugo Chavez (inspired by Istvan Meszaros) has very clearly reminded us of the obvious point--- that the choice before us is socialism or barbarism, it is time to remember that revolutionary project. What else should we expect from anyone whose mission in life is to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society?

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⁴¹ Lebowitz, 2003: 177.