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ROTTERDAM

Published originally as *Le Miroir de la Production*.  
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ISBN: 0-914386-06-9

Library of Congress: 74-82994

Manufactured in the United States of America.

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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

For some time now many of us have harbored the knowledge or at least the suspicion that Marxism is an inadequate perspective for the critical analysis of advanced society. We have toyed with syntheses, those of the Frankfurt School, of the Italian phenomenological Marxists, of the Freudo-Marxists, of the French existential Marxists without completely satisfying results. Radicals who prefer action to theory also bear witness to the impasse of Marxism by their frantic flight from advanced society under the changing banner of some Hero of the colonized peoples, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevarra, Mao and now Stalin himself. In this conjuncture Jean Baudrillard, in *The Mirror of Production*, has attempted a radical deconstruction of Marxism along with an alternative standpoint for today's radicalism.

In *The Mirror of Production* (1973), Baudrillard marshalls his earlier analyses from *Le systèm des objets* (1968), *La société de consommation* (1970) and *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) for a systematic critique of Marxism. His compelling conclusion is that Marx's theory of historical materialism, whether it is attributed to the *1844 Manuscripts*, to the *German Ideology*, to *Capital*, or to the entire corpus, is too conservative, too rooted in the assumptions of political economy, too dependent on the system of ideas that it seeks to

## PREFACE

A specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical theory of the *mode* of production does not touch the *principle* of production. All the concepts it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the *contents* of production, leaving production as a *form* intact. This form reemerges, idealized, behind the critique of the capitalist mode of production. Through a strange contagion, this form of production only reinforces revolutionary discourse as a language of productivity. From the liberation of productive forces in the unlimited "textual productivity" of *Tel Quel* to Deleuze's factory-machine productivity of the unconscious (including the "labor" of the unconscious), no revolution can place itself under any other sign. The general formula is that of a productive Eros. Social wealth or language, meaning or value, sign or phantasm—everything is "produced" according to a "labor." If this is the truth of capital and of political economy, it is taken up whole by the revolution only to capital's benefit. The capitalist system of production is to be subverted in the name of an authentic and radical productivity. The capitalist law of value is to be abolished in the name of a de-alienated hyperproductivity, a productive hyperspace. Capital develops the

productive forces but also restrains them: they must be liberated. The exchange of signifieds has always hidden the "labor" of the signifier: let us liberate the signifier and the textual production of meaning! The unconscious is surrounded in social, linguistic, and Oedipal structures: let us give it back its brute energy; let us restore it as a productive machine! Everywhere productivist discourse reigns and, whether this productivity has objective ends or is deployed for itself, it is itself the form of value. It is the leitmotif both of the system and of a radical challenge—but such a consensus is suspect. If the discourse of production is only a revolutionary metaphor—the detour and return of a concept which, in essence, emanates from political economy and obeys its reality principle—then this metaphor is dangerous if it is to designate a radical alternative. Or if the alternative is not radical and its contamination by productivist discourse signifies more than a metaphoric infection, the virtual impossibility of thinking beyond or outside the general scheme of production, then it is in counter-dependence on the dominant scheme.<sup>1</sup>

But isn't this dominant scheme, which metaphorizes all azimuths, itself merely a metaphor? Is the reality principle it imposes anything but a code, a cipher, or a system of interpretation? Marx shattered the fiction of *homo economicus*, the myth which sums up the whole process of the naturalization of

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1. Evidently Marx played an essential role in the rooting of this productivist metaphor. It was he who definitively radicalized and rationalized the concept of production, who "dialectized" it and gave it its revolutionary title of nobility. And it is in large part by unconditional reference to Marx that this concept pursues its prodigious career.

the system of exchange value, the market, and surplus value and its forms. But he did so in the name of labor power's emergence in action, of man's own power to give rise to value by his labor (*pro-ducere*). Isn't this a similar fiction, a similar naturalization—another wholly arbitrary convention, a simulation model bound to *code* all human material and every contingency of desire and exchange in terms of value, finality, and production? If so, production would be nothing but a code imposing this type of decipherment, *the* decipherment, where there is properly neither finality, cipher, nor value. In rational terms, this gigantic secondary elaboration hallucinates man's predestination for the objective transformation of the world (or for the "production" of oneself: today's generalized humanist theme—it is no longer a question of "being" oneself but of "producing" oneself, from conscious activity to the primitive "productions" of desire. Everywhere man has learned to reflect on himself, to assume himself, to *posit himself* according to this scheme of production which is assigned to him as the ultimate dimension of value and meaning. At the level of all political economy there is something of what Lacan describes in the mirror stage: through this scheme of production, this *mirror* of production, the human species comes to consciousness [*la prise de conscience*] in the *imaginary*. Production, labor, value, everything through which an objective world emerges and through which man recognizes himself objectively—this is the *imaginary*. Here man is embarked on a continual deciphering of himself through his works, finalized by his shadow (his own end), reflected by this operational mirror, this sort of ideal of a productivist ego. This process occurs not

only in the materialized form of an economic obsession with efficiency determined by the *system* of exchange value, but more profoundly in this *overdetermination by the code*, by the mirror of political economy: in the identity that man dons with his own eyes when he can think of himself only as something to produce, to transform, or bring about as value. This remarkable phantasm is confused with that of representation, in which man becomes his own *signified* for himself and enjoys himself as the *content* of value and meaning in a process of self-expression and self-accumulation whose form escapes him.

It is further clarified (despite the exegetical prowess of structuralist Marxists) that the analysis of the form representation (the status of the sign, of the language that directs all Western thought)—the critical reduction of this form in its collusion with the order of production and political economy—escaped Marx. It is no longer worthwhile to make a radical critique of the order of representation in the name of production and of its revolutionary formula. These two orders are inseparable and, paradoxical though it may seem, Marx did not subject *the form production to a radical analysis any more than he did the form representation*. These are the two great unanalyzed forms of the imaginary<sup>2</sup> of political economy that imposed their limits on him. The discourse of production and the discourse of representation are the mirror by which the system of political economy comes to be reflected in the imaginary and reproduced there as the determinant instance.

2. A term developed by Jacques Lacan and later used by C. Castoriadis to denote collective values that provide for unitary meaning but are logically unprovable. [Translator's note]

## I. THE CONCEPT OF LABOR

In order to achieve a radical critique of political economy, it is not enough to unmask what is hidden behind the concept of consumption: the anthropology of needs and of use value. We must also unmask everything hidden behind the concepts of production, mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, etc. All the fundamental concepts of Marxist analysis must be questioned, starting from its own requirement of a radical critique and transcendence of political economy. What is axiomatic about productive forces or about the dialectical genesis of modes of production from which springs all revolutionary theory? What is axiomatic about the generic richness of man who is labor power, about the motor of history, or about history itself, which is only "the production by men of their material life?" "The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life."<sup>1</sup>

The liberation of productive forces is confused with the liberation of man: is this a revolutionary

1. *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 16.

formula or that of political economy itself? Almost no one has doubted such ultimate evidence, especially not Marx, for whom men "begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence..."<sup>2</sup> (Why must man's vocation always be to distinguish himself from animals? Humanism is an *idée fixe* which also comes from political economy—but we will leave that for now.) But is man's existence an end for which he must find the means? These innocent little phrases are already theoretical conclusions: the separation of the end from the means is the wildest and most naive postulate about the human race. Man has needs. Does he have needs? Is he pledged to satisfy them? Is he labor power (by which he separates himself as means from himself as his own end)? These prodigious metaphors of the system that dominates us are a fable of political economy retold to generations of revolutionaries infected even in their political radicalism by the conceptual viruses of this same political economy.

#### *Critique of Use Value and Labor Power*

In the distinction between exchange value and use value, Marxism shows its strength but also its weakness. The presupposition of use value—the hypothesis of a concrete value beyond the abstraction of exchange value, a human purpose of the commodity in the moment of its direct relation of utility for a subject—is only the effect of the system of exchange value, a concept produced and

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

developed by it.<sup>3</sup> Far from designating a realm beyond political economy, use value is only the horizon of exchange value. A radical questioning of the concept of consumption begins at the level of needs and products. *But this critique attains its full scope in its extension to that other commodity, labor power.* It is the concept of production, then, which is submitted to a radical critique.

We must not forget that according to Marx himself the revolutionary originality of his theory comes from releasing the concept of labor power from its status as an unusual commodity whose insertion in the cycle of production *under the name of use value* carries the X element, a differential extra-value that generates surplus value and the whole process of capital. (Bourgeois economics would think instead of simple "labor" as one factor of production among others in the economic process.)

The history of Marx's concept of the use value of labor power is complex. With the concept of labor, Adam Smith attacked the Physiocrats and the exchangists. In turn, Marx deconstructed labor into a double concept of labor power commodity: abstract social labor (exchange value) and concrete labor (use value). He insisted on the need to maintain these two aspects in all their force. Their articulation alone could help decipher objectively the process of capitalist labor. To A. Wagner, who reproached him for neglecting use value, Marx replied: "...the *vir obscurus* overlooks the fact that even in the analysis of the commodity I do not stop at the double manner in which it is represented, but

3. Cf. Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

immediately go on to say that in this double being of the commodity is represented *the two-fold character of the labor* whose product it is: *useful labor*, i.e., the concrete modes of the labors which create use values, and *abstract labor, labor as expenditure of labor power*, irrespective of whatever 'useful' way it is expended. . . . that in the development of the *value form of the commodity*, in the last instance of its money form and hence of *money*, the *value* of a commodity is represented in the *use value* of the other, i.e., in the natural form of the other commodity; that surplus value itself is derived from a '*specific*' *use value of labor power* exclusively pertaining to the latter, etc., etc., that thus for me use value plays a far more important part than it has in economics hitherto, however, that it is only ever taken into account where this springs from the analysis of a given economic constellations, not from arguing backwards and forwards about the concepts or words 'use value' and 'value' " (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

In this passage it is clear that the use value of labor, losing its "naturalness," takes on a correspondingly greater "specific" value in the *structural* functioning of exchange value. In maintaining a kind of dialectical equilibrium between concrete, qualitative labor and abstract, quantitative labor, Marx gives logical priority to exchange value (the given economic formation). But in so doing, he retains something of the *apparent movement of political economy*: the concrete positivity of use value, a kind of concrete antecedent within the structure of political economy. He does not radicalize the schema to the point of reversing

4. "Notes on Wagner," in *Theoretical Practice* 5 (Spring, 1972), pp. 51-52.

this appearance and revealing use value *as produced by the play of exchange value*. We have shown this regarding the products of consumption; it is the same for labor power. The definition of products as useful and as responding to needs is the most accomplished, most internalized expression of abstract economic exchange: it is its subjective closure. The definition of labor power as the source of "concrete" social wealth is the complete expression of the abstract manipulation of labor power: the truth of capital culminates in this "evidence" of man as producer of value. Such is the twist by which exchange value retrospectively originates and logically terminates in use value. In other words, the signified "use value" here is still a code effect, the final precipitate of the law of value. Hence it is not enough to analyze the operation of the quantitative abstraction of exchange value *starting from* use value, but it is also necessary to bring out the condition of the possibility of this operation: the production of the concept of the use value of labor power itself, of a specific rationality of productive man. Without this generic definition there is no political economy. In the last instance, this is the basis of political economy. This generic definition must be shattered in unmasking the "dialectic" of quantity and quality, behind which hides the definitive structural institution of the field of value.

*The Concrete Aspect of Labor: The "Dialectic" of Quality and Quantity*

"The quantitative aspect of labor could not emerge until it was universalized during the 18th century in Europe. . . . Until then, the different forms of activity were not fully comparable. . . labor

appeared then as diverse qualities."<sup>5</sup> During the historical epoch of the artisanal mode of production, qualitative labor was differentiated in relation to its process, to its product, and to the destination of the product. In the subsequent capitalist mode of production labor is analyzed under a double form: "While labor which creates exchange values is *abstract, universal and homogeneous*, labor which produces use values is concrete and special and is made up of an endless variety of kinds of labor according to the way in which and the material to which it is applied."<sup>6</sup> Here we rediscover the moment of use value: concrete, differentiated, and incommensurable. In contrast to the quantitative measure of labor power, labor use value, remains nothing more or less than a qualitative potentiality. It is specified by its own end, by the material it works on, or simply because it is the expenditure of energy by a given subject at a given time. The use value of labor power is the moment of its actualization, of man's relation to his useful expenditure of effort. Basically it is an act of (productive) *consumption*; and in the general process, this moment retains all its uniqueness. At this level labor power is incommensurable.

There is, moreover, a profound enigma throughout the articulation of Marx's theory: how is surplus value born? How can labor power, by definition qualitative, generate a measurable actualization? One would have to assume that the "dialectical" opposition of quantity and quality expresses only an

5. Pierre Naville, *Le nouveau léviathan* (Paris: Rivière, 1954), p. 371.

6. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1904), p. 33.

apparent movement.

In fact, the *effect* of quality and of incommensurability once again partakes of the *apparent* movement of political economy. What produces the universalization of labor in the eighteenth century and consequently reproduces it is not the reduction of concrete, qualitative labor by abstract, quantitative labor but, from the outset, the structural articulation of the two terms. Work is really universalized at the base of this "fork," not only as market value but as human value. Ideology always thus proceeds by a binary, structural scission, which works here to universalize the dimension of labor. By dividing (or redividing into the qualitative structural effect, a *code* effect), quantitative labor spreads throughout the field of possibility. Henceforth there can be only labor—qualitative or quantitative. The quantitative still signifies only the commensurability of all forms of labor in abstract value; the qualitative, under the pretext of incommensurability, goes much further. It signifies *the comparability of all human practice in terms of production and labor*. Or better: the abstract and formal universality of the commodity labor power is what supports the "concrete" universality of qualitative labor.

But this "concrete" is an abuse of the word. It seems opposed to the abstract at the base of the fork, but in fact the fork itself is what establishes the abstraction. The autonomization of labor is sealed in the play of the two—from the abstract to the concrete, from the qualitative to the quantitative, from the exchange value to the use value of labor. In this structuralized play of signifiers, the fetishism of labor and productivity crystallizes.<sup>7</sup>

7. There is a further great disjuncture through which the

And what is this concrete aspect of labor? Marx says: "The indifference as to the particular kind of labor implies the existence of a highly developed aggregate of different species of concrete labor, none of which is any longer the predominant one. So do the most general abstractions commonly arise only where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all."<sup>8</sup> But if one type of labor no longer dominates all others, it is because labor itself dominates all other realms. Labor is substituted for all other forms of wealth and exchange. Indifference to determined labor corresponds to a much more total determination of social wealth by labor. And what is the conception of this social wealth placed entirely under the sign of labor, if not use value? The "richest concrete development" is the qualitative and quantitative multiplication of use values. "The greater the extent to which historic needs—needs created by production itself, social needs—needs which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse, are posited as *necessary*, the higher the level to which real wealth has become developed. Regarded *materially*, wealth consists only in the manifold variety of needs." Is

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critique of political economy is articulated: the split between the technical and the social division of labor, which is subject to the same analysis. Transfiguring the technical division as both sides of the social division, it thus preserves the fiction of an ideal distribution of labor, of a concrete "non-alienated" productivity; and it universalizes the technical mode or technical reason. Thus the dialectic of productive forces-relations of production: everywhere the "dialectical" contradiction ends up as a Moebius band. But meanwhile this contradiction has circumscribed and universalized the field of production.

8. *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 298-299.

9. *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus (London: Pelican, 1973),

this not the program of advanced capitalist society? Failing to conceive of a mode of social wealth other than that founded on labor and production, Marxism no longer furnishes in the long run a real alternative to capitalism. Assuming the generic schema of production and needs involves an incredible simplification of social exchange by the law of value. Viewed correctly, this fantastic proposition is both arbitrary and strange with respect to man's status in society. The analysis of all primitive or archaic organizations contradicts it, as does the feudal symbolic order and even that of our societies, since all perspectives opened up by the contradictions of the mode of production drive us hopelessly into political economy.

The dialectic of production only intensifies the abstractness and separation of political economy. This leads us to the radical questioning of Marxist theoretical discourse. When in the last instance Marx defines the dialectical relation of abstract-concrete as the relation between "scientific representation and real movement" (what Althusser will analyze precisely as the *production* of a theoretical object), this theoretical production, itself taken in the abstraction of the representation, apparently only redoubles its object (in this case, the logic and movement of political economy). Between the theory and the object—and this is valid not only for Marxism—there is, in effect, a dialectical relation, in the bad sense: they are locked into a speculative dead end.<sup>10</sup> It becomes impossible to think outside the form production or the form representation.

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p. 527.

10. We will return to this reciprocal neutralization of the theory and the object when we deal with the relations between Marxist theory and the workers' movement.

*Man's Double "Generic" Face.*

In fact the use value of labor power does not exist any more than the use value of products or the autonomy of signified and referent. The same fiction reigns in the three orders of production, consumption, and signification. Exchange value is what makes the use value of products appear as its anthropological horizon. The exchange value of labor power is what makes its use value, the concrete origin and end of the act of labor, appear as its "generic" alibi. This is the logic of signifiers which produces the "evidence" of the "reality" of the signified and the referent. In every way, exchange value makes concrete production, concrete consumption, and concrete signification appear only in distorted, abstract forms. But it foments the concrete as its ideological ectoplasm, its phantasm of origin and transcendence [*dépassement*]. In this sense need, use value, and the referent "do not exist."<sup>11</sup> They are only concepts produced and projected into a generic dimension by the development of the very system of exchange value.

By the same token, the double potentiality of man as needs and labor power, this double "generic" face of universal man, is only man as produced by the system of political economy. And productivity is not primarily a generic dimension, a human and social kernel of all wealth to be extracted from the husk of capitalist relations of production (the eternal empiricist illusion). Instead, all this must be overturned to see that the abstract and generalized development of productivity (the developed form of political economy) is what makes the *concept of*

11. This does not mean *that they have never existed*. Hence we have another paradox that we must return to later.

*production* itself appear as man's movement and generic end (or better, as the concept of man as producer).

In other words, the system of political economy does not produce only the individual as labor power that is sold and exchanged: it produces the very conception of labor power as the fundamental human potential. More deeply than in the fiction of the individual freely selling his labor power in the market, the system is rooted in the identification of the individual with his labor power and with his act of "transforming nature according to human ends." In a work, man is not only quantitatively exploited as a productive force by the *system* of capitalist political economy, but is also metaphysically overdetermined as a producer by the *code* of political economy.<sup>12</sup> In the last instance, the system rationalizes its power here. *And in this Marxism assists the cunning of capital. It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power, thus censoring the much more radical hypothesis that they might be alienated as labor power, as the "inalienable" power of creating value by their labor.*

If on the one hand Marx is interested in the later fate of the labor power objectified in the production process as abstract social labor (labor as its exchange value), Marxist theory, on the other hand, never challenges human capacity of production (energetic, physical, and intellectual), this productive potential of every man in every society "of transforming his environment into ends useful for the individual or the society," this *Arbeitsvermögen*. Criticism and

12. Similarly for nature: there is not only the exploitation of nature as a productive force, but overdetermination of nature as referent, as "objective" reality, by the code of political economy.

history are strangely arrested before this anthropological postulate: a curious fate for a Marxist concept.

The same fate has befallen the concept of need in its present operation (the consumption of use value). It presents the same characteristics as the concrete aspect of labor: uniqueness, differentiation, and incommensurability—in short, “quality.” If the one can be defined as “a specific type of action that produces its own product,” the other is also defined as “a specific kind of tendency (or other psychological motivation, since all of this is only bad psychology) seeking its own satisfaction.” Need also “decomposes both matter and form . . . into infinitely varied types of consumption.” In concrete labor man gives a useful, objective end to nature; in need he gives a useful, subjective end to products. Needs and labor are man’s double potentiality or double generic quality. This is the same anthropological realm in which the concept of production is sketched as the “fundamental movement of human existence,” as defining a rationality and a sociality appropriate for man. Moreover, the two are logically united in a kind of ultimate perspective: “In a higher stage of community society . . . work will not be simply a means of living but will become the prime, vital need itself.”<sup>13</sup>

Radical in its *logical* analysis of capital, Marxist theory nonetheless maintains an *anthropological* consensus with the options of Western rationalism in its definitive form acquired in eighteenth century bourgeois thought. Science, technique, progress, history—in these ideas we have an entire civilization that comprehends itself as producing its own

13. *1844 Manuscripts*. [I have not been able to locate this quotation. Translator’s note]

development and takes its dialectical force toward completing humanity in terms of totality and happiness. Nor did Marx invent the concepts of genesis, development, and finality. He changed nothing basic: nothing regarding the *idea* of man *producing* himself in his infinite determination, and continually surpassing himself toward his own end.

Marx translated this concept into the logic of material production and the historical dialectic of modes of production. But differentiating modes of production renders unchallengeable the evidence of production as the determinant instance. It generalizes the economic mode of rationality over the entire expanse of human history, as the generic mode of human becoming. It circumscribes the entire history of man in a gigantic simulation model. It tries somehow to turn against the order of capital by using as an analytic instrument the most subtle ideological phantasm that capital has itself elaborated. Is this a “dialectical” reversal? Isn’t the system pursuing *its* dialectic of universal reproduction here? If one hypothesizes *that there has never been and will never be anything but the single mode of production ruled by capitalist political economy*—a concept that makes sense only in relation to the economic formation that produced it (indeed, to the theory that analyzes this economic formation)—then even the “dialectical” generalization of this concept is merely the *ideological* universalization of this system’s postulates.

#### *Ethic of Labor; Esthetic of Play*

This logic of material production, this dialectic of modes of production, always returns beyond history to a generic definition of man as a dialectical being; a notion intelligible only through the process of the

objectification of nature. This position is heavy with consequences to the extent that, even through the vicissitudes of his history, man (whose history is also his "product") will be ruled by this clear and definitive reason, this dialectical scheme that acts as an implicit philosophy. Marx develops it in the *1844 Manuscripts*; Marcuse revives it in his critique of the economic concept of labor: "...labor is an ontological concept of human existence as such." He cites Lorenz von Stein: "Labor is...in every way the actualization of one's infinite determinations through the self-positing of the individual personality [in which the personality itself] makes the content of the external world its own and in this way forces the world to become a part of its own internal world."<sup>14</sup> Marx: "Labor is *man's coming-to-be for himself* within *externalization* or as *externalized man*...[that is], the *self-creation* and self-objectification [of man]."<sup>15</sup> And even in *Capital*: "So far therefore as labor is a creator of use-value, is useful labor, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an external nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and nature, and therefore no life."<sup>16</sup> "Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and nature. He

14. "On the Concept of Labor," *Telos* 16 (Summer, 1973), pp. 11-12.

15. Easton and Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Anchor, 1969), pp. 322 and 332.

16. *Capital* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House), Vol. I, pp. 42-43.

opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants."<sup>17</sup> The dialectical culmination of all of this is the concept of nature as "the inorganic body of man:" the naturalization of man and the humanization of nature.<sup>18</sup>

On this dialectical base, Marxist philosophy unfolds in two directions: an ethic of labor and an esthetic of non-labor. The former traverses all bourgeois and socialist ideology. It exalts labor as value, as end in itself, as categorical imperative. Labor loses its negativity and is raised to an absolute value. But is the "materialist" thesis of man's generic productivity very far from this "idealist" sanctification of labor? In any case, it is dangerously vulnerable to this charge. In the same article, Marcuse says: "...insofar as they take the concept of 'needs' and its satisfaction in the world of goods as the starting point, all economic theories fail to recognize the full factual content of labor.... The essential factual content of labor is not grounded in the scarcity of goods, nor in a discontinuity between the world of disposable and utilizable goods and human needs, but, on the contrary, in an essential excess of human existence beyond every possible situation in which it finds itself and the world."<sup>19</sup> On this basis he separates off play as a secondary activity: "In the structural sense, within the totality of human existence, labor is necessarily and

17. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

18. Engels, always a naturalist, goes so far as to exalt the role played by work in the transition from ape to man.

19. Marcuse, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

eternally 'earlier' than play: it is the starting point, foundation, and principle of play insofar as play is precisely a breaking off *from* labor and a recuperation *for* labor."<sup>20</sup> Thus, labor alone founds the world as objective and man as historical. In short, labor alone founds a real dialectic of transcendence [*dépassement*] and fulfillment. Even metaphysically, it justifies the painful character of labor. "In the last analysis, the burdensome character of labor expresses nothing other than a negativity rooted in the very essence of human existence: man can achieve his own self only by passing through otherness: by passing through 'externalization' and 'alienation'."<sup>21</sup> I cite this long passage only to show how the Marxist dialectic can lead to the purest Christian ethic. (Or its opposite. Today there is a widespread contamination of the two positions on the basis of this transcendence of alienation and this intra-worldly asceticism of effort and overcoming where Weber located the radical germ of the capitalist spirit.) I have cited it also because this aberrant sanctification of work has been the secret vice of Marxist political and economic strategy from the beginning. It was violently attacked by Benjamin: "Nothing was more corrupting for the German workers' movement than the feeling of swimming with the current. It mistook technical development for the current, the direction it believed it was swimming in. From there, there was only one step to take in order to imagine that industrial labor represented a political performance. With German workers the old Protestant ethic of work celebrated, in a secular form, its resurrection.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The Gotha Program bore traces of this confusion. It defined work as 'the source of all wealth and culture.' To which Marx, even worse, objected that man possesses only his labor power, etc. However, the confusion spread more and more: and Joseph Dietzgen announced, 'Work is the Messiah of the modern world. In the amelioration of labor resides the wealth that can now bring what no redeemer has succeeded in.'<sup>22</sup> Is this "vulgar" Marxism, as Benjamin believes? It is no less "vulgar" than the "strange delusion" Lafargue denounced in *The Right to Be Lazy*: "A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway."<sup>23</sup> Apparently, "pure and uncompromising" Marxism itself preaches the liberation of productive forces under the auspices of the *negativity* of labor. But, confronted by the "vulgar" idealism of the gospel of work, isn't this an "aristocratic" idealism? The former is positivist and the latter calls itself "dialectical." But they share the hypothesis of man's productive vocation. If we admit that it raises anew the purest metaphysics,<sup>24</sup> then the only difference between "vulgar" Marxism and the "other" Marxism would be that between a religion of the masses and a philosophical theory—not a great deal of difference.

Confronted by the *absolute* idealism of labor, dialectical materialism is perhaps only a *dialectical* idealism of productive forces. We will return to this

22. Walter Benjamin, *Poésie et révolution* (Paris: Denoël, 1971), p. 283.

23. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, trans. C. Kerr (Chicago: Kerr, 1917), p. 9.

24. Such as conceiving man as the union of a soul and a body—which gave rise to an extraordinary "dialectical" efflorescence in the Christian Middle Ages.

to see if the dialectic of means and end at the heart of the principle of the transformation of nature does not already virtually imply the autonomization of means (the autonomization of science, technology, and labor; the autonomization of production as generic activity; the autonomization of the dialectic itself as the general scheme of development).<sup>25</sup>

The regressive character of this work ethic is evidently related to what it represses: Marx's chief discovery regarding the double nature of labor (his discovery of abstract and measurable social labor). In the fine points of Marxist thought, confronting the work ethic is an esthetic of non-work or play itself based on the dialectic of quantity and quality. Beyond the capitalist mode of production and the quantitative measure of labor, this is the perspective of a definitive qualitative mutation in communist society: the end of alienated labor and the free objectification of man's own powers. "In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. . . . Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that

25. But this autonomization is the key which turns Marxism toward Social Democracy, to its present revisionism, and to its total positivist decay (which includes bureaucratic Stalinism as well as Social Democratic liberalism).

development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis."<sup>26</sup> Even Marcuse, who returns to the less puritanical (less Hegelian) conceptions, which, however, are totally philosophical (Schiller's esthetic philosophy), says that "Play and display, as principles of civilization, imply not the transformation of labor but its complete subordination to the freely evolving potentialities of man and nature. The ideas of play and display now reveal their full distance from the values of productiveness and performance. Play is *unproductive* and *useless* precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure. . . ."<sup>27</sup>

This realm beyond political economy called play, non-work, or non-alienated labor, is defined as the reign of a finality without end. In this sense it is and remains an *esthetic*, in the extremely Kantian sense, with all the bourgeois ideological connotations which that implies. Although Marx's thought settled accounts with bourgeois morality, it remains defenseless before its esthetic, whose ambiguity is more subtle but whose complicity with the general system of political economy is just as profound. Once again, at the heart of its strategy, in its analytic distinction between quantity and quality, Marxist thought inherits the esthetic and humanistic virus of bourgeois thought, since the concept of quality is burdened with all the finalities—whether those concrete finalities of use value, or those endless ideal and transcendent finalities. Here stands the defect of

26. *Capital, op. cit.*, III, pp. 799-800.

27. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 178.

all notions of play, freedom, transference, or dis-alienation: it is the defect of the *revolutionary imagination* since, in the ideal types of play and the free play of human faculties, we are still in a process of repressive desublimation. In effect, the sphere of play is defined as the fulfillment of human rationality, the dialectical culmination of man's activity of incessant objectification of nature and control of his exchanges with it. It presupposes the full development of productive forces; it "follows in the footsteps" of the reality principle and the transformation of nature. Marx clearly states that it can flourish only when founded on the reign of necessity. Wishing itself beyond labor but *in its continuation*, the sphere of play is always merely the esthetic sublimation of labor's constraints. With this concept we remain rooted in the problematic of necessity and freedom, a typically bourgeois problematic whose double ideological expression has always been the institution of a reality principle (repression and sublimation, the principle of labor) and its formal overcoming in an ideal transcendence.

Work and non-work: here is a "revolutionary" theme. It is undoubtedly the most subtle form of the type of binary, structural opposition discussed above. The end of the end of exploitation by work is this reverse fascination with non-work, this reverse mirage of free time (forced time-free time, full time-empty time: another paradigm that fixes the hegemony of a temporal order which is always merely that of production). Non-work is still only the repressive desublimation of labor power, the antithesis which acts as the alternative. Such is the sphere of non-work: even if it is not immediately conflated with leisure and its present bureaucratic

organization, where the desire for death and mortification and its management by social institutions are as powerful as in the sphere of work; even if it is viewed in a radical way which *represents it* as other than the mode of "total disposability" or "freedom" for the individual to "produce" himself as value, to "express himself," to "liberate himself" as a (conscious or unconscious) authentic *content*, in short, as the ideality of time and of the individual as an empty form to be filled finally by his freedom. The finality of value is always there. It is no longer inscribed in *determined* contents as in the sphere of productive activity; henceforth it is a *pure form*, though no less determining. Exactly as the pure institutional form of painting, art, and theater shines forth in anti-painting, anti-art, and anti-theater, which are emptied of their contents, the pure form of labor shines forth in non-labor. Although the concept of non-labor can thus be fantasized as the abolition of political economy, it is bound to fall back into the sphere of political economy as the sign, and only the sign, of its abolition. It already escapes revolutionaries to enter into the programmatic field of the "new society."

#### *Marx and the Hieroglyph of Value*

Julia Kristeva writes in *Semiotica*: "From the viewpoint of social distribution and consumption (of communication), labor is always a value of use or exchange. . . . Labor is measurable according to the value which it is, and not in any other way. Value is measured by the quantity of time socially necessary for production. But Marx clearly outlined another possibility: *work could be apprehended outside value*, on the side of the commodity produced and circulating in the chain of communication. Here

labor no longer represents any value, meaning, or signification. It is a question only of a *body* and a *discharge* . . ."28

Marx writes, "The use values, coat, linen, etc., i.e., the bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements—matter and labor . . . We see, then, that labor is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labor, as William Petty puts it, labor is its father and the earth its mother . . . Productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz., the useful character of the labor, is nothing but the expenditure of human labor-power."29

Is there a conception of labor in Marx different from that of the production of useful ends (the canonical definition of labor as value in the framework of political economy and the anthropological definition of labor as human finality)? Kristeva attributes to Marx a radically different vision centered on the body, discharge, play, anti-value, non-utility, non-finality, etc. She would have him read Bataille before he wrote—but also forget him when it is convenient. If there was one thing Marx did not think about, it was discharge, waste, sacrifice, prodigality, play, and symbolism. Marx thought about *production* (not a bad thing), and he thought of it in terms of value.

There is no way of getting around this. Marxist labor is defined in the absolute order of a natural necessity and its dialectical overcoming as rational activity producing value. The social wealth produced is *material*; it has nothing to do with

28. Julia Kristeva, "La sémiotique et la production," *Semiotica* 2. [I have not been able to complete this reference. Translator's note]

29. *Capital, op.cit.*, I, pp. 43-44.

*symbolic* wealth which, mocking natural necessity, comes conversely from destruction, the deconstruction of value, transgression, or discharge. These two notions of wealth are irreconcilable, perhaps even mutually exclusive; it is useless to attempt acrobatic transfers. According to Bataille, "sacrificial economy or symbolic exchange is exclusive of political economy (and of its critique, which is only its completion). But this is just to render to political economy what belongs to it: the concept of labor is consubstantial with it and therefore cannot be switched to any other analytical field. Above all, it cannot become the object of a science that pretends to surpass political economy. "The labor of the sign," "productive inter-textual space," etc., are thus ambiguous metaphors. There is a choice to be made between value and non-value. Labor is definitely within the sphere of value. This is why Marx's concept of labor (like that of production, productive force, etc.) must be submitted to a radical critique as an *ideological* concept. Thus, with all its ambiguities, this is not the time to generalize it as a *revolutionary* concept.

The quotations from Marx to which Kristeva refers do not at all carry the meaning she gives them. The genesis of wealth by the genital combination of labor-father and earth-mother certainly reinstates a "normal" productive reproductive scheme—one makes love to have children but not for pleasure. The metaphor is that of genital, reproductive sexuality, not of a discharge of the body in enjoyment! But this is only a trifle. The "discharge" of human power Marx speaks of is not a discharge with a pure waste, a symbolic discharge in Bataille's sense (pulsating, libidinal): it is still an economic, productive, finalized discharge precisely because, in

its mating with the other, it begets a productive force called the earth (or matter). It is a useful discharge, an investment, not a gratuitous and festive energizing of the body's powers, a game with death, or the acting out of a desire. Moreover, this "discharge of the body" does not, as in play (sexual or otherwise), have its response in other bodies, its echo in a nature that plays and discharges in exchange. It does not establish a symbolic exchange. What man gives of his body in labor is never *given* or *lost* or *rendered* by nature in a reciprocal way. Labor only aims to "make" nature "yield." This discharge is thus immediately an investment of value, a *putting into value* opposed to all symbolic *putting into play* as in the gift or the discharge.

Kristeva poses the problem of redefining labor beyond value. In fact, as Goux has shown, for Marx the demarcation line of value cuts between use value and exchange value. "If we proceed further, and compare the process of producing value with the labor-process, pure and simple, we find that the latter consists of the useful labor, the work, that produces use-values. Here we contemplate the labor as producing a particular article; we view it under its qualitative aspect alone, with regard to its end and aim. But viewed as a value creating process, the same labor-process presents itself under its quantitative aspect alone. Here it is a question merely of the time occupied by the laborer in doing the work;—of the period during which the labor-power is usefully expended."<sup>30</sup> Hence the abstraction of value begins only in the second stage of exchange value. Thus use value is separated from the sphere of the production of value: or the realm

30. *Ibid.*, I, p. 195.

beyond value is confounded with the sphere of use value (this is Goux's interpretation, in which he extends this proposition to the use value of the sign). As we have seen, this is a very serious idealization of the process of concrete, qualitative labor and, ultimately, a compromise with political economy to the extent that the entire theoretical investment and strategy crystallizes on this line of demarcation within the sphere of value, leaving the "external" line of closure of this sphere of political economy in the shadows. By positing use value as the realm beyond exchange value, all transcendence is locked into this single alternative within the field of value. Qualitative production is already the realm of rational, positive finality; the transformation of nature is the occasion of its objectification as a productive force under the sign of utility (the same is true simultaneously of human labor). Even before the stage of exchange value and the equivalence through time of abstract social labor, labor and production constitute an abstraction, a reduction, and an extraordinary rationalization in relation to the richness of symbolic exchange. This "concrete" labor carries all the values of repression, sublimation, objective finality, "conformity to an end," and rational domestication of sexuality and nature. In relation to symbolic exchange, this *productive Eros* represents the real rupture which Marx displaces and situates between abstract quantitative labor and concrete qualitative labor. The process of "valorization" begins with the process of the useful transformation of nature, the instauration of labor as generic finality, and the stage of use value. The real rupture is not between "abstract" labor and "concrete" labor, but between symbolic exchange and work (production, economics). The abstract

social form of labor and exchange is only the completed form, overdetermined by capitalist political economy, of a scheme of rational valorization and production inaugurated long before which breaks with every symbolic organization of exchange.<sup>31</sup>

Kristeva would gladly be rid of value, but neither labor nor Marx. One must choose. Labor is defined (anthropologically and historically) as what disinvests the body and social exchange of all ambivalent and symbolic qualities, reducing them to a rational, positive, unilateral investment. The productive Eros represses all the alternative qualities of meaning and exchange in symbolic discharge toward a process of production, accumulation, and appropriation. In order to question the process which submits us to the destiny of political economy and the terrorism of value, and to rethink discharge and symbolic exchange, the concepts of production and labor developed by Marx (not to mention political economy) must be resolved and analyzed as

31. For example, look at this passage from Marx on the social hieroglyph: "Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later one, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language" (*Capital, op.cit.*, I, p. 74). This entire analysis of the mystery of value remains fundamental. But rather than being valid only for the product of labor in distribution and exchange, it is valid even for the product of labor (and for labor itself) taken as a "useful object." Utility (including labor's) is already a socially produced and determined hieroglyphic abstraction. The whole anthropology of "primitive" exchange compels us to break with the natural evidence of utility and to reconceive the social and historical genesis of use value as Marx did with exchange value. Only then will the hieroglyph be totally deciphered and the spell of value radically exorcized.

ideological concepts interconnected with the general system of value. And in order to find a realm beyond economic value (which is in fact the only revolutionary perspective), then the *mirror of production* in which all Western metaphysics is reflected, must be broken.

#### Epistemology I:

##### *In the Shadow of Marxist Concepts*

Historical materialism, dialectics, modes of production, labor power—through these concepts Marxist theory has sought to shatter the abstract universality of the concepts of bourgeois thought (Nature and Progress, Man and Reason, formal Logic, Work, Exchange, etc.). Yet Marxism in turn universalizes them with a "critical" imperialism as ferocious as the other's.

The proposition that a concept is not merely an interpretive hypothesis but a translation of universal movement depends upon pure metaphysics. Marxist concepts do not escape this lapse. Thus, to be logical, the concept of history must itself be regarded as historical, turn back upon itself, and only illuminate the context that produced it by abolishing itself. Instead, in Marxism history is transhistoricized: it redoubles on itself and thus is universalized. To be rigorous the dialectic must dialectically surpass and annul itself. By radicalizing the concepts of production and mode of production at a given moment, Marx made a break in the social mystery of exchange value. The concept thus takes all its strategic power from its irruption, by which it dispossesses political economy of its imaginary universality. But, from the time of Marx, it lost this advantage when taken as a principle of explication.

It thus cancelled its "difference" by universalizing itself, regressing to the dominant form of the code (universality) and to the strategy of political economy. It is not tautological that the concept of history is historical, that the concept of dialectic is dialectical, and that the concept of production is itself produced (that is, it is to be judged by a kind of self-analysis). Rather, this simply indicates the explosive, mortal, present form of critical concepts. As soon as they are constituted as universal they cease to be analytical and the religion of meaning begins. They become canonical and enter the general system's mode of theoretical representation. Not accidentally, at this moment they also take on their scientific cast (as in the scientific canonization of concepts from Engels to Althusser). They set themselves up as expressing an "objective reality." They become signs: signifiers of a "real" signified. And although at the best of times these concepts have been practiced as concepts without taking themselves for reality, they have nonetheless subsequently fallen into the *imaginary of the sign*, or the *sphere of truth*. They are no longer in the sphere of interpretation but enter that of *repressive simulation*.

From this point on they only evoke themselves in an indefinite metonymic process which goes as follows: man is historical; history is dialectical; the dialectic is the process of (material) production; production is the very movement of human existence; history is the history of modes of production, etc. This scientific and universalist discourse (code) immediately becomes imperialistic. All possible societies are called on to respond. That is, consult Marxist thought to see if societies "without history" are something other than "pre"-historical, other than a chrysalis or larva. The dialectic of the

world of production is not yet well developed, but nothing is lost by waiting—the Marxist egg is ready to hatch. Moreover, the psychoanalytic egg is in a similar condition. What we have said about the Marxist concepts holds for the unconscious, repression, Oedipal complex, etc., as well. Yet here, it is even better: the Bororos<sup>32</sup> are closer to primitive processes than we are.

This constitutes a most astonishing theoretical aberration—and a most reactionary one. There is *neither a mode of production nor production* in primitive societies. There is *no dialectic* and *no unconscious* in primitive societies. These concepts analyze only our own societies, which are ruled by political economy. Hence they have only a kind of boomerang value. If psychoanalysis speaks of the unconscious in primitive societies, we should ask about what represses psychoanalysis or about the repression that has produced psychoanalysis itself. When Marxism speaks of the mode of production in primitive societies, we ask to what extent this concept fails to account even for our own historical societies (the reason it is exported). And where all our ideologues seek to finalize and rationalize primitive societies according to their own concepts—to encode the primitives—we ask what obsession makes them see this finality, this rationality, and this code blowing up in their faces. Instead of exporting Marxism and psychoanalysis (not to mention bourgeois ideology, although at this level there is no difference), we bring all the force and questioning of primitive societies to bear on Marxism and psychoanalysis. Perhaps then we will break this fascination,

32. The Bororos are a South American society studied by Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*. [Translator's note]

this self-fetishization of Western thought. Perhaps we will be finished with a Marxism that has become more of a specialist in the impasses of capitalism than in the roads to revolution, finished with a psychoanalysis that has become more of a specialist in the impasses of libidinal economy than in the paths of desire.

*The Critique of Political Economy  
Is Basically Completed*

Comprehending itself as a form of the rationality of production superior to that of bourgeois political economy, the weapon Marx created turns against him and turns his theory into the dialectical apotheosis of political economy. At a much higher level, his critique falters under his own objection to Feuerbach of making a radical critique of the *contents* of religion but in a completely religious *form*. Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but still in the form of political economy. These are the ruses of the dialectic, undoubtedly the limit of all "critique." The concept of critique emerged in the West at the same time as political economy and, as the quintessence of Enlightenment rationality, is perhaps only the subtle, long-term expression of the system's expanded reproduction. The dialectic does not avoid the fate of every critique. Perhaps the inversion of the idealist dialectic into a materialist dialectic was only a metamorphosis; perhaps the very logic of political economy, capital, and the commodity is dialectical; and perhaps, under the guise of producing its fatal internal contradiction, Marx basically only rendered a descriptive theory. The logic of representation—of the duplication of its object—haunts all rational discursiveness. Every critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious

religion, this desire bound up with the construction of its object, this negativity subtly haunted by the very form that it negates.

This is why Marx said that after Feuerbach the critique of religion was basically completed (cf. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) and that, to overcome the ambiguous limit beyond which it can no longer go (the reinversion of the religious form beneath the critique), it is necessary to move resolutely to a different level: precisely to the critique of political economy, which alone is radical and which can definitively resolve the problem of religion by bringing out the true contradictions. *Today we are exactly at the same point with respect to Marx.* For us, *the critique of political economy is basically completed.* The materialist dialectic has exhausted its content in reproducing its form. At this level, the situation is no longer that of a critique: it is inextricable. And following the same revolutionary movement as Marx did, we must move to a radically different level that, beyond its critique, permits the definitive resolution of political economy. This level is that of symbolic exchange and its theory. And just as Marx thought it necessary to clear the path to the critique of political economy with a critique of the philosophy of law, the preliminary to this radical change of terrain is the critique of the metaphysics of the signifier and the code, in all its current ideological extent. For lack of a better term, we call this the critique of the political economy of the sign.