

Time, labor, and social domination

A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory

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4. Abstract labor

Requirements of a categorial reinterpretation

The exposition thus far has laid the groundwork for a reconstruction of Marx's critical theory. As we have seen, the passages of the *Grundrisse* presented in Chapter One suggest a critique of capitalism whose assumptions are very different from those of the traditional critique. These passages do not represent utopian visions that later were excluded from Marx's more "sober" analysis in *Capital* but are a key to understanding that analysis; they provide the point of departure for a reinterpretation of the basic categories of Marx's mature critique that can overcome the limits of the traditional Marxist paradigm. My examination of the presuppositions of this paradigm has highlighted certain requirements such a reinterpretation must meet.

I have examined approaches that, proceeding from a transhistorical notion of "labor" as the standpoint of the critique, conceptualize the social relations characterizing capitalism in terms of the mode of distribution alone, and locate the system's fundamental contradiction between the modes of distribution and production. Central to this examination was the argument that the Marxian category of value should not be understood merely as expressing the market-mediated form of the distribution of wealth. A categorial reinterpretation, therefore, must focus on Marx's distinction between value and material wealth; it must show that value is not essentially a market category in his analysis, and that the "law of value" is not simply one of general economic equilibrium. Marx's statement that in capitalism "direct labor time [is the] decisive factor in the production of wealth,"¹ suggests that his category of value should be examined as a form of wealth whose specificity is related to its temporal determination. An adequate reinterpretation of value must demonstrate the significance of the temporal determination of value for Marx's critique and for the question of the historical dynamic of capitalism.

Related to the problem of value is that of labor. As I have shown, so long as one assumes that the category of value—hence, the capitalist relations of production—are adequately understood in terms of the market and private property,

1. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London, 1973), p. 704.

the meaning of labor seems to be clear. These relations, so conceived, supposedly are the means by which labor and its products are socially organized and distributed; they are, in other words, extrinsic to labor itself. Consequently, labor in capitalism can be taken to be labor as it is commonly understood: a purposive social activity involving the transformation of material in a determinate fashion which is an indispensable condition for the reproduction of human society. Labor is thus understood in a transhistorical fashion; what varies historically is the mode of its social distribution and administration. Accordingly, labor and, thus, the process of production are “forces of production,” embedded in varying sets of “relations of production” that purportedly remain extrinsic to labor and production.

A different approach would reformulate value as a historically specific form of wealth, different from material wealth. This implies that value-constituting labor cannot be understood in terms that are valid transhistorically for labor in all social formations; rather, such labor must be seen as possessing a socially determinate character specific to the capitalist social formation. I shall analyze that specific quality by elucidating Marx’s conception of the “double character” of labor in capitalism, referred to above, which will allow me to distinguish such labor from the traditional conception of “labor.” On that basis I shall be able adequately to determine value as a historically specific form of wealth and of social relations, and to show that the process of production incorporates both the “forces” and “relations” of production, and does not merely embody the forces of production alone. I shall do so by demonstrating that, according to Marx’s analysis, the mode of producing in capitalism is not simply a technical process, but is molded by the objectified forms of social relations (value, capital). From this it will become clear that the Marxian critique is a critique of labor in capitalism, rather than merely a critique of labor’s exploitation and mode of social distribution, and that the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist totality should be seen as intrinsic to the realm of production and distribution. In short, I intend to redetermine the Marxian categories in such a way that they do indeed grasp the core of the social totality as contradictory—and do not refer just to one of its dimensions, which then is opposed to, or is subsumed by, that of “labor.” By reinterpreting the Marxian contradiction in this way, the approach based on a critique of the notion of “labor” could avoid the dilemmas of Critical Theory, and could show that postliberal capitalism is not “one-dimensional.” The adequacy of concept to its object could thus remain critical; it would not have to be affirmative. Hence, social critique would not have to be grounded in the disjuncture between the concept and its object, as Horkheimer came to think, but could be grounded in the concept itself, in the categorical forms. This, in turn, could reestablish the self-reflexive epistemological consistency of the critique.

The categories of the adequate critique, as I have argued, must grasp not only

the contradictory character of the totality but also the basis of the sort of unfreedom that characterizes it. The historical abolition of the social forms expressed categorially must be shown to be a determinate possibility that implies the social basis of freedom. Capitalism’s characteristic form of social domination, according to Marx, relates to the form of social labor. In the *Grundrisse*, he outlines three basic historical social forms. The first, in its many variations, is based on “relations of personal dependence.”² It has been superseded historically by the “second great form” of society—capitalism, the social formation based on the commodity form,³ which is characterized by *personal independence* in the framework of a system of *objective* [*sachlicher*] *dependence*.⁴ What constitutes that “objective” dependence is social; it is “nothing more than social relations which have become independent and now enter into opposition to the seemingly independent individuals; i.e., the reciprocal relations of production separated from and autonomous of individuals.”⁵

A characteristic of capitalism is that its essential social relations are social in a peculiar manner. They exist not as overt interpersonal relations but as a quasi-independent set of structures that are opposed to individuals, a sphere of impersonal “objective” necessity and “objective dependence.” Consequently, the form of social domination characteristic of capitalism is not overtly social and personal: “These *objective* dependency relations also appear, . . . in such a way that individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another.”⁶ Capitalism is a system of abstract, impersonal domination. Relative to earlier social forms, people appear to be independent; but they actually are subject to a system of social domination that seems not social but “objective.”

The form of domination peculiar to capitalism is also described by Marx as the domination of people by production: “Individuals are subsumed under social production, which exists, like a fate, outside of them; but social production is not subsumed under the individuals and is not managed by them as their common power and wealth.”⁷ This passage is of central importance. To say that individuals are subsumed under production is to say that they are dominated by social labor. This suggests that social domination in capitalism cannot be apprehended sufficiently as the domination and control of the many and their labor by the few. In capitalism social labor is not only the *object* of domination and exploitation but is itself the essential *ground* of domination. The nonpersonal,

2. Ibid., p. 158.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. Marx characterizes the third great social form, capitalism’s possible supersession, in terms of “free individuality based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth” (ibid.).

5. Ibid., p. 164.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. (translation amended).

abstract, “objective” form of domination characteristic of capitalism apparently is related intrinsically to the domination of the individuals by their social labor.

Abstract domination, the form of domination that characterizes capitalism, cannot simply be equated with the workings of the market; it does not refer simply to the market-mediated way in which class domination is effected in capitalism. Such a market-centered interpretation assumes that the invariable ground of social domination is class domination, and that what varies is only the form in which it prevails (directly or via the market). This interpretation is closely related to those positions which assume “labor” to be the source of wealth and to constitute society transhistorically, and which examine critically only the mode in which “labor’s” distribution is effected.

According to the interpretation presented here, the notion of abstract domination breaks with such conceptions. It refers to the domination of people by abstract, quasi-independent structures of social relations, mediated by commodity-determined labor, which Marx tries to grasp with his categories of value and capital. In his mature works, these forms of social relations represent the fully elaborated sociohistorical concretization of alienation as self-generated domination. In analyzing Marx’s category of capital, I shall try to show that these social forms underlie a dynamic logic of historical development that is constraining and compelling for the individuals. Such relational forms cannot be grasped adequately in terms of the market; nor, because they are quasi-independent forms that exist above and in opposition to individuals and classes, can they be understood fully in terms of overt social relations (for example, class relations). As we shall see, although capitalism is, of course, a class society, class domination is not the ultimate ground of social domination in that society, according to Marx, but itself becomes a function of a superordinate, “abstract” form of domination.⁸

In discussing the trajectory of Critical Theory, I have already touched upon the question of abstract domination. Pollock, in postulating the primacy of the political, maintained, in effect, that the system of abstract domination grasped by Marx’s categories had been superseded by a new form of direct domination. Such a position assumes that every form of objective dependence and every

8. In *Legitimation Crisis* (trans. Thomas McCarthy [Boston, 1975]), Habermas deals with abstract domination but not as a form of domination, different from direct social domination, that entails the domination of people by abstract, quasi-independent social forms within which the relations among individuals and classes are structured. Instead, he treats it as a different *form of appearance* of direct social domination, as class domination that is veiled by the nonpolitical form of exchange (p. 52). The existence of this form of domination, according to Habermas, provided the basis for Marx’s attempt to grasp the crisis-prone development of the social system by means of an economic analysis of the laws of motion of capital. With the repoliticization of the social system in postliberal capitalism, domination once again becomes overt; the validity of Marx’s attempt, therefore, is limited implicitly to liberal capitalism (ibid.). Habermas’s notion of abstract domination, then, is that of traditional Marxism—class domination mediated by the self-regulating market.

nonconscious structure of abstract social necessity analyzed by Marx is rooted in the market. To question this is to question the assumption that, with the supersession of the market by the state, conscious control has not merely replaced nonconscious structures in particular spheres, but that it has overcome all such structures of abstract compulsion and, hence, the historical dialectic.

How abstract domination is understood, in other words, is closely tied to how the category of value is interpreted. I shall try to show that value, as a form of wealth, is at the core of structures of abstract domination whose significance extends beyond the market and the sphere of circulation (into that of production, for example). Such an analysis implies that when value remains the form of wealth planning itself is subject to the exigencies of abstract domination. That is, public planning does not, in and of itself, suffice to overcome the system of abstract domination—the impersonal, nonconscious, nonvolitional, mediate form of necessity characteristic of capitalism. Public planning, then, should not be abstractly opposed to the market, as the principle of socialism to that of capitalism.

This suggests that we should reconceptualize the fundamental social preconditions for the fullest possible realization of general human freedom. Such a realization would involve overcoming forms of overtly social, personal domination as well as structures of abstract domination. Analyzing the structures of abstract domination as the ultimate grounds of unfreedom in capitalism, and redetermining the Marxian categories as critical categories that grasp those structures, would be first steps in reestablishing the relationship between socialism and freedom, a relationship that has become problematic in traditional Marxism.

In this part of this work, I shall begin to reconstruct the Marxian theory on the initial and most abstract logical level of his critical presentation in *Capital*, that of his analysis of the commodity form. As opposed to the traditional interpretations examined in Chapter Two, I shall try to show that the categories with which Marx begins his analysis are indeed critical and do imply a historical dynamic.

The historically determinate character of the Marxian critique

Marx begins *Capital* with an analysis of the commodity as a good, a use value, that, at the same time, is a value.⁹ He then relates these two dimensions of the commodity to the double character of the labor it incorporates. As a particular use value, the commodity is the product of a particular concrete labor; as a value, it is the objectification of abstract human labor.¹⁰ Before proceeding with an investigation of these categories—especially that of the double character of commodity-producing labor, which Marx regards as “the crucial point . . . upon

9. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1976), pp. 125–29.

10. Ibid., pp. 128–37.

which an understanding of political economy is based"¹¹—it is important to emphasize their historical specificity.

Marx's analysis of the commodity is not an examination of a product that happens to be exchanged regardless of the society in which that takes place; it is not an investigation of the commodity torn from its social context or as it contingently may exist in many societies. Instead, Marx's analysis is of the "form of the commodity as the generally necessary social form of the product,"¹² and as the "general elementary form of wealth."¹³ According to Marx, though, the commodity is the general form of the product *only* in capitalism.¹⁴

Hence, Marx's analysis of the commodity is of the general form of the product and the most elementary form of wealth in capitalist society.¹⁵ If, in capitalism, "the dominant and determining characteristic of its product is that it is a commodity,"¹⁶ this necessarily implies that "the worker himself exists only as a seller of commodities, and thus as a free wage-labourer, that labour exists in general as wage-labour."¹⁷ In other words, a commodity as examined by Marx in *Capital* presupposes wage labor and, hence, capital. Thus, "commodity production in its universal, absolute form [is] capitalist commodity production."¹⁸

Roman Rosdolsky has pointed out that in Marx's critique of political economy the existence of capitalism is assumed from the very beginning of the unfolding of the categories; each category presupposes those which follow.¹⁹ I shall discuss the significance of this mode of presentation below, but should note here that if Marx's analysis of the commodity presupposes the category of capital, his determinations of the former category do not pertain to the commodity per se, but only to the commodity as a general social form, that is, as it exists in capitalism. Thus, the mere existence of exchange, for example, does not signify that the commodity exists as a structuring social category and that social labor has a double character. Only in capitalism does social labor have a twofold character²⁰ and value exist as a specific social form of human activity.²¹

Marx's mode of presentation in the first chapters of *Capital* has frequently been seen as historical, for it begins with the category of the commodity and proceeds to consider money and, then, capital. This progression, however, should not be interpreted as an analysis of an immanently logical historical

development leading from the first appearance of commodities to a fully developed capitalist system. Marx explicitly states that his categories express the social forms not as they first appear historically but as they exist, fully developed, in capitalism:

As in the theory the concept of value precedes that of capital, but requires for its pure development a mode of production founded on capital, so the same thing takes place in practice.²²

It would therefore be . . . wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that . . . which corresponds to historical development.²³

To the extent that a logical historical development leading toward capitalism is presented—as in the analysis of the value form in the first chapter of *Capital*²⁴—this logic must be understood as being *retrospectively apparent* rather than *immanently necessary*. The latter form of historical logic does exist, according to Marx, but, as we shall see, it is an attribute of the capitalist social formation alone.

The categorially grasped social forms of Marx's critique of political economy are thus historically *determinate* and cannot simply be applied to other societies. They are also historically *determining*. At the outset of his categorial analysis, Marx states explicitly that it must be understood as an investigation of the specificity of capitalism: "The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most general form of the bourgeois mode of production. This mode is thereby characterized as a particular sort of social production and, hence, as historically specific."²⁵

The analysis of the commodity with which Marx begins his critique, in other words, is an analysis of a historically specific social form. He goes on to treat the commodity as a structured and structuring form of practice that is the initial and most general determination of the social relations of the capitalist social formation. If the commodity, as a general and totalizing form, is the "elementary form" of the capitalist formation,²⁶ an investigation of it should reveal the essential determinations of Marx's analysis of capitalism and, in particular, the specific characteristics of the labor that underlies, and is determined by, the commodity form.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 132 (translation amended).

12. Marx, *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 949 (translation amended).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 951 (translation amended).

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 949.

16. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth, England, 1981), p. 1019.

17. *Ibid.* (translation amended).

18. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2, trans. David Fernbach (London, 1978), p. 217.

19. Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx's Capital*, trans. Pete Burgess (London, 1977), p. 46.

20. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 166.

21. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, part 1, trans. Emile Burns (Moscow, 1963), p. 46.

22. *Grundrisse*, p. 251.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

24. *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 138–63. The asymmetry of the value form (relative and equivalent forms), which is so important in Marx's development of the fetish of commodities, presupposes money and indicates that Marx's analysis of commodity exchange has nothing to do with direct barter.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 174n34 (translation amended).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Historical specificity: value and price

Marx, as we have seen, analyzes the commodity as a generalized social form at the core of capitalist society. It is not legitimate in terms of his self-understanding, then, to assume that the law of value and, hence, the generalization of the commodity form, pertain to a precapitalist situation. Yet Ronald Meek, for example, proceeds from the assumption that Marx's initial formulation of the theory of value entails postulating a model of a precapitalist society in which "although commodity production and free competition were assumed to reign more or less supreme, the labourers still owned the whole produce of their labour."²⁷ Unlike Oskar Lange, whose position was outlined in Chapter Two, Meek does not simply relegate the validity of the law of value to such a society. Nor does he maintain, as Rudolf Schlesinger does, that such a point of departure is the source of a fundamental error inasmuch as Marx seeks to develop laws valid for capitalism on the basis of those that apply to a simpler and historically earlier society.²⁸ Instead, Meek assumes that the precapitalist society that Marx presumably postulates was not intended to be an accurate representation of historical reality in anything more than the broadest sense. That model—which Meek sees as essentially similar to Adam Smith's "early and rude" society inhabited by deer and beaver hunters—is, rather, "clearly part of a quite complex analytical device."²⁹ By analyzing the way in which capitalism impinges on such a society, "Marx believed one would be well on the way to reveal the real essence of the capitalist mode of production."³⁰ In Volume 1 of *Capital*, according to Meek, Marx proceeds from the postulated precapitalist model,³¹ a system of "simple commodity production";³² in Volume 3 he "deals with commodity and value relations which have become 'capitalistically modified' in the fullest sense.

27. Ronald Meek, *Studies in the Labour Theory of Value* (2d ed., New York and London, 1956), p. 303.

28. For this argument, see Rudolf Schlesinger, *Marx: His Time and Ours* (London, 1950), pp. 96–97. George Lichtheim suggests a similar argument: "It is arguable that, in applying a labour-cost theory of value derived from primitive social conditions to an economic model belonging to a higher stage, the classics were guilty of confusing different levels of abstraction" (*Marxism* [2d ed., New York and Washington, 1963], pp. 174–75). In this section, Lichtheim does not distinguish between "the classics" and Marx. His own presentation brings together different, opposing, interpretations of the relationship between Volumes 1 and 3 of *Capital* without synthesizing them or overcoming their differences. In this passage, he implies that the law of value in Volume 1 is based on a precapitalist model, yet several pages later he follows Maurice Dobb's lead and describes that level of analysis as a "sensible qualification of a theoretical first approximation" (p. 15).

29. Meek, *Studies in the Labour Theory*, p. 303.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

32. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

His 'historical' starting point here is a fairly well developed capitalist system."³³

Marx's analysis of value, however, is much more historically specific than Meek's interpretation acknowledges. Marx seeks to grasp the core of capitalism with the categories of commodity and value. The very notion of a precapitalist stage of simple commodity circulation is spurious, within the framework of Marx's critique of political economy; as Hans Georg Backhaus has pointed out, this notion stems not from Marx but from Engels.³⁴ Marx explicitly and emphatically rejects the notion that the law of value was valid for, or derived from, a precapitalist society of commodity owners. Although Meek identifies the law of value used by Adam Smith with that used by Marx, Marx criticizes Smith precisely for relegating the validity of the law of value to precapitalist society:

Although Adam Smith determines the value of the commodity by the labour-time it embodies, he then transfers the real validity of this determination of value to pre-adamite times. In other words, what he regards as evident when considering the simple commodity becomes unclear to him as soon as he examines the higher and more complex forms of capital, wage-labour, rent, etc. This is expressed by him in the following way: the value of commodities was measured by labour-time in the paradise lost of the bourgeoisie, where people did not confront one another as capitalists, wage-labourers, land-owners, tenant farmers, usurers, and so on, but as simple producers and exchangers of commodities.³⁵

According to Marx, however, a society composed of independent commodity producers has never existed:

Original production is based on anciently arisen communal entities in which private exchange appears only as a completely superficial and secondary exception. With the historical dissolution of such communal entities, however, relations of domination and subjugation emerge at once. Such relations of violence stand in sharp contradiction to mild commodity circulation and its corresponding relations.³⁶

Marx neither postulates such a society as a hypothetical construct from which to derive the law of value nor seeks to analyze capitalism by investigating how it "impinges" upon a social model in which the law of value is presumed to operate in pure form. Rather, as Marx's critique of Robert Torrens and Adam Smith clearly indicates, he regards the law of value to be valid only for capitalism:

33. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

34. Hans Georg Backhaus, "Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie," *Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie* (Frankfurt), no. 1 (1974), p. 53.

35. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow, 1970), p. 59 (translation amended).

36. Marx, "Fragment des Urtextes von *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*," in Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin, 1953), p. 904.

Torrens . . . reverts to Adam Smith . . . according to whom the value of commodities was determined by the labor-time embodied in them 'in that early period' when people confronted one another only as owners and exchangers of commodities, but not when capital and property in land have been evolved. This would mean . . . that the law which is valid for commodities *qua* commodities, no longer is valid for them once they are regarded as capital, or as products of capital. . . . *On the other hand, the product wholly assumes the form of the commodity . . . only with the development and on the basis of capital production.* Thus the law of the commodity is supposed to be valid for a type of production which produces no commodities (or produces them only to a limited extent), and not to be valid for a type of production which is based on the existence of the product as a commodity.³⁷

The commodity form and, hence, the law of value, are fully developed only in capitalism and are fundamental determinations of that social formation, according to Marx. When they are considered valid for other societies the result is that, "*the truth of the law of appropriation of bourgeois society must be transposed to a time when this society itself did not yet exist.*"³⁸

For Marx, then, the theory of value grasps the "truth of the law of appropriation" of the capitalist social formation and does not apply to other societies. It is thus clear that the initial categories of *Capital* are intended as historically specific; they grasp the underlying social forms of capitalism. A complete discussion of the historical specificity of these basic categories should, of course, consider why they do not appear to be valid for the "higher and more complex forms of capital, wage-labor, rent, etc."³⁹ I shall outline Marx's attempt to address this problem by analyzing the relation of his investigation of value in Volume 1 of *Capital* to his investigation of price and, hence, of these "higher and more complex forms" in Volume 3. Although this problem cannot be fully analyzed in this work, a preliminary discussion of the issues involved is in order here.

The debate on the relation of Volume 3 to Volume 1 was initiated by Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk in 1896.⁴⁰ Böhm-Bawerk notes that, when analyzing capitalism in value-based terms in Volume 1, Marx assumed that the "organic composition of capital" (the ratio of living labor, expressed as "variable capital," to objectified labor, expressed as "constant capital") is equal in the various branches of production. This, however, is not the case—as Marx himself later recognized. This caused him, in Volume 3, to concede a divergence of prices

from values which, according to Böhm-Bawerk, directly contradicts the original labor theory of value and indicates its inadequacy. Since Böhm-Bawerk's critique, there has been considerable discussion of the "transformation problem" (of values into prices) in *Capital*,⁴¹ much of which, in my opinion, has suffered from the assumption that Marx intended to write a critical political economy.

As regards Böhm-Bawerk's argument, two initial points should be made. First, contrary to Böhm-Bawerk's assumption, Marx did not first complete Volume 1 of *Capital* and only later, while writing Volume 3, come to realize that prices diverge from values, thus undermining his point of departure. Marx wrote the manuscripts for Volume 3 in 1863–1867, that is, *before* Volume 1 was published.⁴²

Second, as noted in Chapter Two, far from being surprised or embarrassed by the divergence of prices from values, as early as 1859 Marx wrote in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that, at a later stage of his analysis, he would deal with objections to his labor theory of value which are based on the divergence of the market prices of commodities from their exchange values.⁴³ Indeed, Marx not only recognized this divergence, but insisted on its centrality to an understanding of capitalism and its mystifications. As he wrote to Engels: "As far as Herr Dühring's modest objections to the determination of value are concerned, he will be very surprised to see, in Volume II, how little the determination of value is 'immediately' valid in bourgeois society."⁴⁴

A difficulty with much of the discussion on the transformation problem is that it is generally assumed that Marx intended to operationalize the law of value in order to explain the workings of the market. It seems clear, however, that Marx's intention was different.⁴⁵ His treatment of the relation of value to price is not, as Dobb would have it, one of "successive approximations" to the reality of capitalism;⁴⁶ rather, it is part of a very complex argumentative strategy to render plausible his analysis of the commodity and capital as constituting the fundamental core of capitalist society, while accounting for the fact that the category of value does not seem to be empirically valid for capitalism (which is why Adam Smith relegated its validity to precapitalist society). In *Capital* Marx tries to solve this problem by showing that those phenomena (such as prices, profits, and rents) that contradict the validity of what he had postulated

37. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, part 3, trans. Jack Cohen and S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow, 1971), p. 74 (translation amended, emphasis added).

38. "Fragment des Urtextes," p. 904.

39. *A Contribution to the Critique*, p. 59.

40. Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, "Karl Marx and the Close of His System," in Paul M. Sweezy, ed., "Karl Marx and the Close of His System," by Eugen Böhm-Bawerk, and "Böhm-Bawerk's Criticism of Marx" by Rudolf Hilferding (New York, 1949). The article originally appeared as *Zum Abschluss des Marxschen Systems*, in Otto von Boenigk, ed., *Staatswissenschaftliche Arbeiten* (Berlin, 1896).

41. See Sweezy's summary of that discussion in *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (New York, 1969), pp. 109–33.

42. See Engels's introduction to Volume 3 of *Capital*, p. 93; see also *ibid.*, p. 278n27.

43. *A Contribution to the Critique*, p. 62.

44. Marx to Engels, January 8, 1868, in *Marx-Engels Werke* (hereafter *MEW*), vol. 32 (Berlin, 1956–1968), p. 12.

45. Joseph Schumpeter recognizes that to criticize Marx on the basis of the deviation of prices from values is to confuse Marx with Ricardo: see *History of Economic Analysis* (New York, 1954), pp. 596–97.

46. Dobb, *Political Economy and Capitalism* (London, 1940), p. 69.

as the fundamental determinations of the social formation (value and capital) are actually expressions of these determinations—to show, in other words, that the former both express and veil the latter. In this sense, the relation between what the categories of value and price grasp is presented by Marx as a relation between an essence and its form of appearance. One peculiarity of capitalist society, which makes its analysis so difficult, is that this society has an essence, objectified as value, which is veiled by its form of appearance:

The vulgar economist does not have the slightest idea that the real, daily relations of exchange and the magnitudes of value *cannot be immediately identical*. . . . The vulgar one then believes he has made a great discovery when he opposes the position which uncovers the *inner nexus of connections* by insisting that, on the manifest level, things appear differently. In fact he insists on holding onto the appearances and taking them to be ultimate.⁴⁷

The level of social reality expressed by prices represents, in Marx's analysis, a form of appearance of value which veils the underlying essence. The category of value is neither a rough, first approximation of capitalist reality nor a category valid for precapitalist societies; rather, it expresses the "inner nexus of connections" (*inneren Zusammenhang*) of the capitalist social formation.

The movement of Marx's presentation from the first to the third volume of *Capital* should, therefore, be understood not as a movement approaching the "reality" of capitalism but as one approaching its manifold forms of surface appearances. Marx does not preface the third volume with a statement that he will now examine a fully developed capitalist system, nor does he assert that he will now introduce a new set of approximations in order to grasp more adequately capitalist reality. He states, rather, that "the various forms of capital, as evolved in this book, thus approach step by step *the form which they assume on the surface of society*, in the action of different capitals upon one another, in competition, and in the ordinary consciousness of the agents of production themselves."⁴⁸ Whereas Marx's analysis of value in Volume 1 is the analysis of capitalism's essence, his analysis of price in Volume 3 is of how that essence appears on the "surface of society."

The divergence of prices from values should, then, be understood as integral to, rather than as a logical contradiction within, Marx's analysis: his intention is not to formulate a price theory but to show how value induces a level of appearance that disguises it. In Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx derives empirical categories such as cost price and profit from the categories of value and surplus value, and shows how the former appear to contradict the latter. Thus, in Volume 1, for example, he maintains that surplus value is created by labour alone; in Volume 3, however, he shows how the specificity of value as a form of wealth,

47. Marx to L. Kugelmann, July 11, 1868, in *MEW*, vol. 32, p. 553 (second emphasis added).

48. *Capital*, vol. 3, p. 25 (emphasis added).

and the specificity of the labor that constitutes it, are veiled. Marx begins by noting that the profit accruing to an individual capital unit is not, in fact, identical to the surplus value generated by the labor it commands. He attempts to explain this by arguing that surplus value is a category of the social whole which is distributed among individual capitals according to their relative shares of total social capital. This means that on the level of immediate experience, however, the profit of an individual capital unit indeed is a function not of labor alone ("variable capital") but of total capital forwarded;⁴⁹ hence, on an immediately empirical level, the unique features of value as a form of wealth and social mediation constituted by labor alone are hidden.

Marx's argument has many dimensions. I have mentioned the first already, namely, that the categories he develops in Volume 1 of *Capital*, such as the commodity, value, capital, and surplus value, are categories of the deep structure of capitalist society. On the basis of these categories, he seeks to elucidate the fundamental nature of that society and its "laws of motion," that is, the process of the constant transformation in capitalism of production and of all aspects of social life. Marx argues that this level of social reality cannot be elucidated by means of economic "surface" categories such as price and profit. He also unfolds his categories of the deep structure of capitalism in a way that indicates how the phenomena that contradict these structural categories are actually forms of their appearance. In this way, Marx tries to validate his analysis of the deep structure and, at the same time, to show how the "laws of motion" of the social formation are veiled on the level of immediate empirical reality.

The relation between what is grasped by the analytic level of value and that of price can be understood, moreover, as constituting a theory (never fully completed)⁵⁰ of the mutual constitution of deep social structures and everyday action and thought. This process is mediated by the forms of appearance of these deep structures, which constitute the context of such action and thought: Everyday action and thought are grounded in the manifest forms of the deep structures and, in turn, reconstitute those deep structures. Such a theory attempts to explain how the "laws of motion" of capitalism are constituted by individuals and prevail, even though those individuals are unaware of their existence.⁵¹

In elaborating this, Marx also seeks to indicate that theories of political econ-

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 157–59.

50. Engels edited for publication the manuscripts that became volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital*.

51. In this sense, the Marxian theory is similar to the sort of theory of practice outlined by Pierre Bourdieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice [Cambridge, 1977]), which deals with "the dialectical relationship between the objective structures and the cognitive and motivating structures which they produce and which tend to reproduce them" (p. 83), and attempts "to account for a practice objectively governed by rules unknown to the agents [in a way that] does not mask the question of the mechanisms producing this conformity in the absence of the intention to conform" (p. 29). The attempt to mediate that relationship by means of a socio-historical theory of knowledge and an analysis of the forms of appearance of the "objective structures" is consonant with, but not identical to, Bourdieu's approach.

omy as well as everyday “ordinary consciousness” remain bound to the level of appearances, that the objects of investigation of political economy are the mystified forms of appearance of value and capital. It is in Volume 3, in other words, that Marx completes his critique of Smith and Ricardo, his critique of political economy in the narrower sense. Ricardo, for example, begins his political economy as follows:

The produce of the earth—all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labor, machinery and capital—is divided among three classes of the community; namely, the proprietor of the land, the owner of the stock or capital necessary for its cultivation, and the laborers by whose industry it is cultivated. . . . [I]n different stages of society, the proportion of the whole produce of the earth which will be allotted to each of these classes under the names of rent, profit, wages, will be . . . different. . . . [T]o determine the laws which regulate this distribution, is the principal problem in Political Economy.⁵²

Ricardo’s point of departure, with its one-sided emphasis on distribution and its implicit identification of wealth with value, presupposes the transhistorical nature of wealth and labor. In Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx seeks to explain that presupposition by showing how the socially and historically specific structuring forms of social relations in capitalism appear on the surface in a naturalized and transhistorical form. Thus, as noted, Marx argues that the historically unique social role of labor in capitalism is hidden by virtue of the fact that the profit gained by individual capital units does not depend only upon labor, but is a function of total capital forwarded (the various “factors of production,” in other words). That value is created by labor alone is, according to Marx, further veiled by the wage form: wages seem to be compensation for the value of labor rather than for the value of labor power. This, in turn, renders opaque the category of surplus value as the difference between the amount of value created by labor and the value of labor power. Consequently, profit does not appear to be ultimately generated by labor. Marx then goes on to show how capital, in the form of interest, appears to be self-generating and independent of labor. Finally, he shows how rent, a form of revenue in which surplus value is distributed to landowners, appears to be related intrinsically to the land. In other words, the empirical categories upon which theories of political economy are based—profits, wages, interest, rents and so on—are forms of appearance of value and commodity-producing labor that belie the historical and social specificity of what they represent. Toward the end of Volume 3, after a long and complicated analysis that begins in Volume 1 with an examination of the reified “essence” of capitalism and moves to increasingly mystified levels of appearance, Marx sums up that analysis by examining what he terms the “trinity formula”:

52. Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, ed. P. Sraffa and M. Dobb (Cambridge, England, 1951), p. 5.

Capital—profit (or better still capital—interest), land—ground—rent, labor—wages, this economic trinity as the connection between the components of value and wealth in general and its sources, completes the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the reification of social relations, and the immediate coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social specificity.⁵³

Marx’s critique, then, ends with the derivation of Ricardo’s point of departure. Consistent with his immanent approach, Marx’s technique of criticizing theories such as Ricardo’s no longer has the form of a refutation; rather, he embeds those theories within his own, by rendering them plausible in terms of his own analytic categories. Put another way, he grounds in his own categories the fundamental assumptions that Smith and Ricardo make regarding labor, society, and nature, in a manner that explains the transhistorical character of these assumptions. And he shows, further, that those theories’ more specific arguments are based upon “data” that are the misleading manifestations of a deeper, historically specific structure. By proceeding from the “essence” to the “surface” of capitalist society, Marx tries to show how his own categorial analysis can account for both the problem and Ricardo’s formulation of it, thereby indicating the latter’s inadequacy as an attempt to grasp the essence of the social totality. By elucidating as forms of appearance that which served as the basis of Ricardo’s theory, Marx seeks to provide the adequate critique of Ricardo’s political economy.

According to Marx, then, the tendency of some political economists, such as Smith and Torrens, to transpose the validity of the law of value to models of precapitalist society is not merely a result of bad thinking. It is, rather, grounded in a peculiarity of the capitalist social formation: its essence appears *not* to be valid for the “higher and more complex forms of capital, wage-labor, and rent.” The failure to penetrate theoretically the level of appearance and to determine its relation to the historically specific social essence of the capitalist formation can lead to a transhistorical application of value to other societies, on the one hand, and to an analysis of capitalism only in terms of its “illusory appearance,” on the other.

One consequence of Marx’s turn to a reflexive and historically specific approach, then, is that the critique of theories that posit transhistorically what is historically determinate becomes central to his investigations. Once he claims to have discovered the historically specific core of the capitalist system, Marx has to explain why this historical determinateness is not evident. As we shall see, central to this epistemological dimension of his critique is the argument that social structures specific to capitalism appear in “fetishized” form—that is, they appear to be “objective” and transhistorical. To the degree that Marx shows that the historically specific structures he analyzes present themselves in transhistorical manifest forms, and that these manifest forms serve as the object of various theories—especially those of Hegel and Ricardo—he is able to ac-

53. *Capital*, vol. 3, pp. 968–69.

count for and criticize such theories in social and historical terms, as forms of thought that express, but do not fully apprehend, the determinate social forms at the heart of their context (capitalist society). The historically specific character of Marx's immanent social critique implies that what is "false" is the temporarily valid form of thought that, lacking self-reflection, fails to perceive its own historically specific ground, and therefore considers itself to be "true," that is, transhistorically valid.

The unfolding of Marx's argument in the three volumes of *Capital* should be understood, on one level, as presenting what he describes as the only fully adequate method of a critical materialist theory: "It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized. The latter method is the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific one."⁵⁴ An important aspect of Marx's method of presentation is that he develops from value and capital—that is, from the categories of "the actual, given relations of life"—the surface forms of appearance (cost price, profit, wages, interest, rent, and so on) that have been "apotheosized" by political economists and social actors. He thereby tries to render his deep structural categories plausible while explaining the surface forms.

By logically deriving the very phenomena that seem to contradict the categories with which he analyzes capitalism's essence from the unfolding of these same categories, and by demonstrating that other theories (and the consciousness of most social actors directly involved) are bound to the mystified forms of appearance of that essence, Marx provides a remarkable display of the rigor and power of his critical analysis.

Historical specificity and immanent critique

The historical specificity of the categories, then, is central to Marx's mature theory and marks a very important distinction between it and his early works.⁵⁵ This shift to historical determinateness has far-reaching implications for the nature of Marx's critical theory—implications that are inherent in the point of departure of his mature critique. In the introduction to his translation of the

54. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 494n4.

55. I shall not discuss extensively the differences between Marx's early writings and his later writings in this work. My treatment of his mature critique of political economy will, however, suggest that many of the explicit themes and concepts of the early writings (such as the critique of alienation, the concern with the possibility of forms of human activity not defined narrowly in terms of work, play, or leisure, and the theme of the relations between men and women) remain central, if implicit, in Marx's later works. Nevertheless, as I shall discuss with reference to the notion of alienation, some of these concepts were fully worked out—and were modified—only when Marx clearly developed a historically specific social critique based upon an analysis of the specificity of labor in capitalism.

Grundrisse, Martin Nicolaus draws attention to this shift by arguing that Marx's introduction to the manuscript proved to be a false start, for the categories used are simply direct translations of Hegelian categories into materialist terms. For example, where Hegel begins his *Logic* with pure, indeterminate *Being*, which immediately calls forth its opposite, *Nothing*, Marx begins his introduction with *material production* (in general), which calls forth its opposite, *consumption*. In the course of the introduction, Marx indicates his dissatisfaction with this starting point and, after writing the manuscript, he begins anew, in the section entitled "Value" (which he added at the end). He does so with a different point of departure, one that he retains in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital*—the commodity.⁵⁶ In the course of writing the *Grundrisse*, Marx discovers the element with which he then structures his mode of presentation, the point of departure from which he unfolds the categories of the capitalist formation in *Capital*. From a transhistorical starting point, Marx moves to a historically determinate one. The category "commodity," in Marx's analysis, does not simply refer to an object, but to a historically specific, "objective" form of social relations—a structuring and structured form of social practice that constitutes a radically new form of social interdependence. This form is characterized by a historically specific duality purportedly at the core of the social system: use value and value, concrete labor and abstract labor. Proceeding from the category of the commodity as this dualistic form, this nonidentical unity, Marx seeks to unfold from it the overarching structure of capitalist society as a totality, the intrinsic logic of its historical development, as well as the elements of immediate social experience that veil the underlying structure of that society. That is, within the framework of Marx's critique of political economy, the commodity is the essential category at the heart of capital; he unfolds it in order to illuminate the nature of capital and its intrinsic dynamic.

With this turn to historical specificity, Marx now historicizes his earlier, transhistorical conceptions of social contradiction and the existence of an intrinsic historical logic. He now treats them as specific to capitalism, and roots them in the "unstable" duality of material and social moments with which he characterizes its basic social forms, such as the commodity and capital. In my analysis of *Capital*, I shall show how this duality, according to Marx, becomes externalized and gives rise to a peculiar historical dialectic. By describing his object of investigation in terms of a historically specific contradiction, and grounding the dialectic in the double character of the peculiar social forms underlying the capitalist social formation (labor, the commodity, the process of production, and so on), Marx now implicitly rejects the idea of an immanent logic of human history and any form of transhistorical dialectic, whether inclusive of nature or restricted to history. In Marx's mature works, the historical dialectic does not result from the interplay of subject, labor, and nature, from the reflexive work-

56. Martin Nicolaus, Introduction, in *Grundrisse*, pp. 35–37.

ings of the material objectifications of the Subject's "labor" upon itself; rather, it is rooted in the contradictory character of capitalist social forms.

A transhistorical dialectic must be grounded ontologically, either in Being as such (Engels) or in social Being (Lukács). In light of Marx's historically specific analysis, however, the idea that reality or social relations in general are essentially contradictory and dialectical is now revealed to be one that cannot be explained or grounded; it can only be assumed metaphysically.⁵⁷ In other words, by analyzing the historical dialectic in terms of the peculiarities of the fundamental social structures of capitalism, Marx removes it from the realm of the philosophy of history and places it within the framework of a historically specific social theory.

The move from a transhistorical to a historically specific point of departure implies that not only the categories but also the very form of the theory are historically specific. Given Marx's assumption that thought is socially embedded, his turn to an analysis of the historical specificity of the categories of capitalist society—his own social context—involves a turn to a notion of the historical specificity of his own theory. The historical relativization of the object of investigation is also reflexive for the theory itself.

This implies the necessity for a new, self-reflexive sort of social critique. Its standpoint cannot be located transhistorically or transcendently. In such a conceptual framework, no theory—including Marx's—has absolute, transhistorical validity. The impossibility of an extrinsic or privileged theoretical standpoint is also not to be contravened implicitly by the form of the theory itself. For that reason, Marx now feels compelled to construct his critical presentation of capitalist society in a rigorously immanent fashion, analyzing that society in its own terms, as it were. The standpoint of the critique is immanent to its social object; it is grounded in the contradictory character of capitalist society, which points to the possibility of its historical negation.

Marx's mode of argumentation in *Capital* should, then, be understood as an attempt to develop a form of critical analysis that is consonant with the historical specificity both of its object of investigation—that is, its own context—and, reflexively, of its concepts. As we shall see, Marx attempts to reconstruct the social totality of capitalist civilization by beginning with a single structuring principle—the commodity—and dialectically unfolding from it the categories of money and capital. This mode of presentation, viewed in terms of his new self-understanding, itself expresses the peculiarities of the social forms being investigated. Such a method itself expresses, for example, that a peculiar characteristic of capitalism is that it exists as a homogeneous totality that can be unfolded from a single structuring principle; the dialectical character of the presentation purportedly expresses that the social forms are uniquely constituted in

57. See M. Postone and H. Reinicke, "On Nicolaus," *Telos* 22 (Winter 1974–75) pp. 135–36.

a way that grounds a dialectic. *Capital*, in other words, is an attempt to construct an argument that does not have a logical form independent of the object being investigated, when that object is the context of the argument itself. Marx describes this method of presentation as follows:

Of course the mode of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject matter is now reflected in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an *a priori* construction.⁵⁸

What appears as an "*a priori* construction" is a mode of argument intended to be adequate to its own historical specificity. The nature of the Marxian argument, then, is not supposed to be that of a logical deduction: it does not begin with indubitable first principles from which everything else may be derived, for the very form of such a procedure implies a transhistorical standpoint. Rather, Marx's argument has a very peculiar, reflexive form: The point of departure, the commodity—which is posited as the fundamental structuring core of the social formation—is validated retroactively by the argument as it unfolds, by its ability to explain the developmental tendencies of capitalism, and by its ability to account for the phenomena that apparently contradict the validity of the initial categories. That is, the category of the commodity presupposes that of capital and is validated by the power and rigor of the analysis of capitalism for which it serves as the point of departure. Marx briefly described this procedure as follows:

If there were no chapter on "value" in my book, the analysis of the real relations that I provide contains the proof and the evidence of the real value relation. The blather about the necessity to prove the concept of value rests upon complete ignorance of the issues involved as well as of the methods of science. . . . Science entails developing how the law of value prevails. If one wished to "explain" from the very beginning all the phenomena that apparently contradict the law, one would have to present the science *prior* to the science.⁵⁹

In this light, Marx's actual argument regarding value as well as the nature and the historicity of capitalist society should be understood in terms of the full unfolding of the categories of *Capital*. It follows that his explicit arguments deriving the existence of value in the first chapter of that work are not in-

58. Marx, "Postface to the Second Edition," *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 102.

59. Marx to L. Kugelmann, July 11, 1868, in *MEW*, vol. 32, pp. 552–53.

tended—and should not be seen—as “proof” of the concept of value.⁶⁰ Rather, those arguments are presented by Marx as forms of thought characteristic of the society whose underlying social forms are being critically analyzed. As I shall show in the following section, those arguments—for example, the initial determinations of “abstract labor”—are transhistorical; that is, they already are presented in mystified form. The same holds true for the form of the arguments: it represents a mode of thinking, typified by Descartes, that proceeds in a decontextualized, logically deductive manner, discovering a “true essence” behind the changing world of appearances.⁶¹ I am suggesting, in other words, that Marx’s arguments deducing value should be read as part of an ongoing metacommentary on forms of thought characteristic of capitalist society (for example, of the tradition of modern philosophy, as well as of political economy). That “commentary” is immanent to the unfolding of the categories in his presentation, and thereby implicitly relates those forms of thought to the social forms of the society that is their context. Inasmuch as Marx’s mode of presentation is intended to be immanent to its object, the categories are presented “in their own terms”—in this case, as decontextualized. The analysis, then, purports to take no standpoint outside of its context. The critique only fully emerges in the course of the presentation itself which, in unfolding the basic structuring social forms of its object of investigation, shows the historicity of that object.

The drawback of such a presentation is that Marx’s reflexive, immanent approach is easily subject to misinterpretation. If *Capital* is read as anything other than an immanent critique, the result is a reading that interprets Marx as affirming that which he attempts to criticize (for example, the historically determinate function of labor as socially constitutive).

This dialectical mode of presentation, then, is intended to be the mode of presentation adequate to, and expressive of, its object. As an immanent critique, the Marxian analysis claims to be dialectical because it shows its object to be so. This presumed adequacy of the concept to its object implies a rejection of both a transhistorical dialectic of history and any notion of the dialectic as a universally valid method applicable to various particular problems. Indeed, as we have seen, *Capital* is an attempt to provide a critique of such conceptions

60. Marx “deduces” value in the first chapter of *Capital* by arguing that various commodities must have a nonmaterial element in common. The manner of his deduction is decontextualized and essentializing: value is deduced as the expression of a substance common to all commodities (with “substance” meant in the traditional philosophical sense): see *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 126–28.

61. John Patrick Murray has pointed out the similarity between the structure of Marx’s argument deriving value and Descartes’s derivation, in the *Second Meditation*, of abstract, primary-quality matter as the substance underlying the changing appearance of a piece of wax. Murray also regards this similarity as the expression of an implicit argument by Marx: see “Enlightenment Roots of Habermas’ Critique of Marx,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 57, no. 1 (November 1979), p. 13ff.

of decontextualized, nonreflexive methods—whether dialectical (Hegel) or not (classical political economy).

Marx’s turn to historical specificity also changes the character of the critical consciousness expressed by the dialectical critique. The point of departure of a dialectical critique presupposes its result. As mentioned, for Hegel, the Being of the beginning of the dialectical process is the Absolute, which, unfolded, is the result of its own development. Consequently, the critical consciousness that is obtained when the theory becomes aware of its own standpoint necessarily must be absolute knowledge.⁶² The commodity, as the point of departure of the Marxian critique, also presupposes the full unfolding of the whole; yet its historically determinate character implies the finitude of the unfolding totality. The indication of the historicity of the object, the essential social forms of capitalism, implies the historicity of the critical consciousness that grasps it; the historical overcoming of capitalism would also entail the negation of its dialectical critique. The turn to the historical specificity of the basic structuring social forms of capitalism thus signifies the self-reflexive historical specificity of Marx’s critical theory—and thereby both frees the immanent critique from the last vestiges of the claim to absolute knowledge and allows for its critical self-reflection.

By specifying the contradictory character of his own social universe, Marx is able to develop an epistemologically consistent critique and finally to move beyond the dilemma of earlier forms of materialism he outlined in the third thesis on Feuerbach.⁶³ A theory that is critical of society and assumes humans and, therefore, their modes of consciousness to be socially formed must be able to account for the very possibility of its own existence. The Marxian critique grounds this possibility in the contradictory character of its categories, which purport to express the essential relational structures of its social universe and, simultaneously, to grasp forms of social being and of consciousness. The critique is thus immanent in another sense: showing the nonunitary character of its own context allows the critique to account for itself as a possibility immanent to that which it analyzes.

One of the most powerful aspects of Marx’s critique of political economy is the way it locates itself as a historically determinate aspect of that which it examines rather than as a transhistorically valid positive science that constitutes a historically unique (hence, spurious) exception standing above the interaction of social forms and forms of consciousness it analyzes. This critique does not

62. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. Jeremy Shapiro [Boston, 1971]), Habermas criticizes Hegel’s identification of critical consciousness and absolute knowledge as one that undermines critical self-reflection. Habermas attributes this identification to Hegel’s presupposition of the absolute identity of subject and object, including nature. He does not, however, proceed to consider the negative implications for epistemological self-reflection of any transhistorical dialectic, even when nature is excluded. See p. 19ff.

63. Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5: *Marx and Engels: 1845–47* (New York, 1976), p. 4.

adopt a standpoint outside of its object and is, therefore, self-reflexive and epistemologically consistent.

Abstract labor

My contention that Marx's analysis of the historically specific character of labor in capitalism lies at the heart of his critical theory is central to the interpretation presented in this work. I have shown that the Marxian critique proceeds from an examination of the commodity as a dualistic social form, and that he grounds the dualism of the fundamental structuring social form of capitalist society in the double character of commodity-producing labor. At this point, that double character, especially the dimension Marx terms "abstract labor," must be analyzed.

The distinction Marx makes between concrete, useful labor, which produces use values, and abstract human labor, which constitutes value, does not refer to two different sorts of labor, but to two aspects of the same labor in commodity-determined society: "It follows from the above that the commodity does not contain two different sorts of labour; the *same* labour, however, is determined as different and as opposed to itself, depending on whether it is related to the *use-value* of the commodity as its product, or to the *commodity-value* as its mere objectified expression."⁶⁴ Marx's immanent mode of presentation in discussing this dual character of commodity-producing labor, however, makes it difficult to understand the importance he explicitly attributes to this distinction for his critical analysis of capitalism. Moreover, the definitions he provides of abstract human labor in *Capital*, Chapter One, are very problematic. They seem to indicate that it is a biological residue, that it is to be interpreted as the expenditure of human physiological energy. For example:

On the one hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values.⁶⁵

If we leave aside the determinate quality of productive activity, and therefore the useful character of the labour, what remains is its quality of being an expenditure of human labour-power. Tailoring and weaving, although they are qualitatively different productive activities, are both a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc., and in this sense both human labour. They are merely two different forms of the expenditure of human labour-power.⁶⁶

64. Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1 (1st ed., 1867), in Iring Fetscher, ed., *Marx-Engels Studienausgabe*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt, 1966), p. 224.

65. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 137.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–35.

Yet, at the same time, Marx clearly states that we are dealing with a *social* category. He refers to abstract human labor, which constitutes the value dimension of commodities, as their "*social substance*, which is common to them all."⁶⁷ Consequently, although commodities as use values are material, as values they are purely social objects:

Not an atom of matter enters into the object-ness of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous object-ness of commodities as physical objects. . . . However, let us remember that commodities possess value object-ness only in so far as they are all expressions of the same social unity, human labour; their object-ness as values is therefore purely social.⁶⁸

Furthermore, Marx explicitly emphasizes that this social category is to be understood as historically determinate—as the following passage, cited before, indicates: "The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most general form of the bourgeois mode of production. This mode is thereby characterized as a particular sort of social production and, hence, as historically specific."⁶⁹

If, however, the category of abstract human labor is a social determination, it cannot be a physiological category. Furthermore, as my interpretation of the *Grundrisse* in Chapter One indicated and this passage confirms, it is central to Marx's analysis that value be understood as a historically specific form of social wealth. That being the case, its "social substance" could not be a transhistorical, natural residue, common to human labor in all social formations. As Isaak I. Rubin argues:

One of two things is possible: if abstract labor is an expenditure of human energy in physiological form, then value also has a reified-material character. Or value is a social phenomenon, and then abstract labor must also be understood as a social phenomenon connected with a determined social form of production. It is not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labor with the historical character of the value which it creates.⁷⁰

The problem, then, is to move beyond the physiological definition of abstract human labor provided by Marx and analyze its underlying social and historical meaning. An adequate analysis, moreover, must not only show *that* abstract human labor has a social character; it must also investigate the historically specific social relations that underlie value in order to explain *why* those relations appear and, therefore, are presented by Marx, as being physiological—as transhistorical, natural, and thus historically empty. Such an approach, in other words, would

67. *Ibid.*, p. 128 (emphasis added).

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–39 (translation amended).

69. *Ibid.*, p. 174n34 (translation amended).

70. Isaak Illich Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, trans. Milos Samardzija and Fredy Perlman (Detroit, 1972), p. 135.

examine the category of abstract human labor as the initial and primary determination underlying the “commodity fetish” in Marx’s analysis—that social relations in capitalism appear in the form of the relations among objects and, hence, seem to be transhistorical. Such an analysis would show that, for Marx, even categories of the “essence” of the capitalist social formation such as “value” and “abstract human labor” are reified—and not only their categorial forms of appearance such as exchange value and, on a more manifest level, price and profit. This is extremely crucial, for it would demonstrate that the categories of Marx’s analysis of the essential forms underlying the various categorial forms of appearance are intended not as ontological, transhistorically valid categories, but purportedly grasp social forms that themselves are historically specific. Because of their peculiar character, however, these social forms appear to be ontological. The task confronting us, then, is to uncover a historically specific form of social reality “behind” abstract human labor as a category of essence. We must then explain why this specific reality exists in this particular form, which appears to be ontologically grounded and, hence, historically nonspecific.

The centrality of the category of abstract labor to an understanding of Marx’s critique also has been argued by Lucio Colletti in his essay, “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International.”⁷¹ Colletti claims that contemporary conditions have revealed the inadequacies of the interpretation of the labor theory of value first developed by the Marxist theorists of the Second International. That interpretation, according to Colletti, is still prevalent; it reduces Marx’s theory of value to that of Ricardo and leads to a narrow understanding of the economic sphere.⁷² Like Rubin, Colletti maintains that what has rarely been understood is that Marx’s theory of value is identical to his theory of the fetish. What must be explained is why the product of labor assumes the form of the commodity and why, therefore, human labor appears as a value of things.⁷³ The concept of abstract labor is central to such an explanation, yet, according to Colletti, most Marxists—including Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, and Paul Sweezy—have never really elucidated this category. Abstract labor has been treated implicitly as a mental generalization of various sorts of concrete labor rather than as an expression of something real.⁷⁴ If such were the case, however, value would also be a purely mental construction, and Böhm-Bawerk would have been right in arguing that value is use value in general and not, as Marx had argued, a qualitatively distinct category.⁷⁵

71. Lucio Colletti, “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International,” in *From Rousseau to Lenin*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White (London, 1972), pp. 45–110.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–80. Sweezy, for example, defines the category as follows: “Abstract labor, in short, is, as Marx’s own usage clearly attests, equivalent to ‘labor in general’; it is what is common to all productive human activity” (*The Theory of Capitalist Development*, p. 30).

75. Colletti, “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International,” p. 81.

To show that abstract labor does indeed express something real, Colletti examines the source and significance of the abstraction of labor. In so doing, he concentrates on the process of exchange: he argues that, in order to exchange their products, people must equalize them, which, in turn, entails an abstraction from the physical-natural differences among the various products and, therefore, from the differences among the various labors. This process, which constitutes abstract labor, is one of alienation: such labor becomes a force in itself, separated from the individuals. Value, according to Colletti, is not only independent of people, but also dominates them.⁷⁶

Colletti’s argument parallels some aspects of that developed in this work. Like Georg Lukács, Isaak Rubin, Bertell Ollman, and Derek Sayer, he considers value and abstract labor to be historically specific categories and regards Marx’s analysis as concerned with the forms of social relations and of domination that characterize capitalism. Nevertheless, he does not really ground his description of alienated labor and does not pursue the implications of his own interpretation. Colletti does not proceed from an examination of abstract labor to a more fundamental critique of the traditional Marxist interpretation, and thereby develop a critique of the form of production and of the centrality of labor in capitalism. This would have required rethinking the traditional Marxist conception of labor and seeing that Marx’s analysis of labor in capitalism is one of a historically specific form of social mediation. Only by developing a critique centered on the historically unique role of labor in capitalism could Colletti—and other theorists who have argued for the historical specificity of value and abstract labor—have effected a basic theoretical break with traditional Marxism. Instead, Colletti remains well within the limits of a social critique from the standpoint of “labor”: the function of social critique, he says, is to “defetishize” the world of commodities and thereby to aid wage labor to recognize that the essence of value and capital is an objectification of itself.⁷⁷ It is telling that, although Colletti begins this section of his essay with a critique of Sweezy’s notion of abstract labor, he nevertheless concludes the section by approvingly citing Sweezy’s absolute and historically abstract opposition of value as the principle of capitalism to planning as the principle of socialism.⁷⁸ That is, Colletti’s reconsideration of the problem of abstract labor does not significantly alter the conclusions at which he arrives: the problem of abstract labor is effectively reduced to one of interpretative detail. Despite his assertion that most Marxist interpretations of the labor theory of value have been Ricardian, and his insistence on the centrality of abstract labor as alienated labor in Marx’s analysis, Colletti ends up reproducing, in a more sophisticated fashion, the position he had criticized. His critique remains one of the mode of distribution.

76. *Ibid.*, pp. 82–87.

77. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–91.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

The theoretical problem facing us, then, is to reconsider the category of abstract labor so as to provide the basis for a critique of the mode of production—a critique, in other words, that *does* differ fundamentally from the Marxism of the Second International, whether in historically specific or transhistorical form.

Abstract labor and social mediation

We can begin to understand Marx's interrelated categories of the commodity, value, and abstract labor by approaching them as categories of a determinate form of social interdependence. (By not beginning with certain common questions—for example, whether market exchange is regulated by relative quantities of objectified labor, by considerations of utility, or by other factors—this approach avoids treating Marx's categories too narrowly as political-economic categories that presuppose what he is actually attempting to explain.)⁷⁹ A society in which the commodity is the general form of the product, and hence value is the general form of wealth, is characterized by a unique form of social interdependence—people do not consume what they produce but produce and exchange commodities in order to acquire other commodities:

In order to become a commodity, the product must cease to be produced as the immediate means of subsistence of the producer himself. Had we gone further, and inquired under what circumstances all, or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we would have found that this only happens on the basis of one particular mode of production, the capitalist one.⁸⁰

We are dealing with a new sort of interdependence, one that emerged historically in a slow, spontaneous, and contingent way. Once the social formation based upon this new form of interdependence became fully developed, however (which occurred when labor power itself became a commodity),⁸¹ it acquired a necessary and systematic character; it has increasingly undermined, incorporated, and superseded other social forms, while becoming global in scale. My

79. Marx's theory should, on one level, be seen as an attempt to analyze the underlying structural bases of a society characterized by the universal exchangeability of products—that is, one in which all goods, and the relations of people to goods, have become “secular” in the sense that, unlike in many “traditional” societies, all goods are considered “objects,” and people can theoretically choose among all goods. Such a theory differs fundamentally from theories of market exchange—whether labor theories of value or utility theories of equivalence—that presuppose as a background condition precisely what Marx's analysis of the commodity seeks to explain. Moreover, as we shall see, Marx's analysis of the commodity is intended to provide the basis for an elucidation of the nature of capital—which is to say, his theory attempts to explain the historical dynamic of capitalist society. As I shall elaborate, that dynamic is rooted in the dialectic of abstract and concrete labor, according to Marx, and cannot be grasped by theories that focus on market exchange alone.

80. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 273.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

concern is to analyze the nature of this interdependence and its constituting principle. In examining this peculiar form of interdependence and the specific role played by labor in its constitution, I shall elucidate Marx's most abstract determinations of capitalist society. On the basis of Marx's initial determinations of the form of wealth, the form of labor, and the form of social relations that characterize capitalism, I shall then be able to clarify his notion of abstract social domination by analyzing how these forms confront the individuals in a quasi-objective fashion, and how they give rise to a particular mode of production and an intrinsic historical dynamic.⁸²

In commodity-determined society, the objectifications of one's labor are means by which goods produced by others are acquired; one labors in order to acquire other products. One's product, then, serves someone else as a good, a use value; it serves the producer as a means of acquiring the labor products of others. It is in this sense that a product is a commodity: it is simultaneously a use value for the other, and a means of exchange for the producer. This signifies that one's labor has a dual function: On the one hand, it is a specific sort of labor that produces particular goods for others, yet, on the other hand, labor, independent of its specific content, serves the producer as the means by which the products of others are acquired. Labor, in other words, becomes a peculiar means of acquiring goods in commodity-determined society; the specificity of the producers' labor is *abstracted* from the products they acquire with their labor. There is no intrinsic relation between the specific nature of the labor expended and the specific nature of the product acquired by means of that labor.

This is quite different from social formations in which commodity production and exchange do not predominate, where the social distribution of labor and its products is effected by a wide variety of customs, traditional ties, overt relations of power, or, conceivably, conscious decisions.⁸³ Labor is distributed by mani-

82. Diane Elson also has argued that the object of Marx's theory of value is labor and that, with his category of abstract labor, Marx attempts to analyze the foundations of a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over people, rather than vice versa. On the basis of this approach she does not, however, call into question the traditional understanding of the basic relations of capitalism. See “The Value Theory of Labour,” in Elson, ed., *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* (London, 1979), pp. 115–80.

83. Karl Polanyi also emphasizes the historical uniqueness of modern capitalist society: in other societies, the economy is embedded in social relations, but in modern capitalism, social relations are embedded in the economic system. See *The Great Transformation* (New York and Toronto, 1944), p. 57. However, Polanyi focuses almost exclusively on the market and claims that fully developed capitalism is defined by the fact that it is based on a fiction: human labor, land, and money are treated as if they were commodities, which they are not (p. 72). He thereby implies that the existence of labor products as commodities is, somehow, socially “natural.” This very common understanding differs from that of Marx, for whom nothing is a commodity “by nature,” and for whom the category of the commodity refers to a historically specific form of social relations rather than to things, people, land, or money. Indeed, this form of social relations refers first and foremost to a historically determinate form of social labor. Polanyi's approach, with its implicit social ontology and exclusive focus on the market, deflects attention away

fest social relations in noncapitalist societies. In a society characterized by the universality of the commodity form, however, an individual does not acquire goods produced by others through the medium of overt social relations. Instead, labor itself—either directly or as expressed in its products—replaces those relations by serving as an “objective” means by which the products of others are acquired. *Labor itself constitutes a social mediation in lieu of overt social relations.* That is, a new form of interdependence comes into being: No one consumes what one produces, but one’s own labor or labor products, nevertheless, function as the necessary means of obtaining the products of others. In serving as such a means, labor and its products in effect preempt that function on the part of manifest social relations. Hence, rather than being mediated by overtly or “recognizably” social relations, commodity-determined labor is mediated by a set of structures that—as we shall see—it itself constitutes. Labor and its products mediate themselves in capitalism; they are self-mediating socially. This form of social mediation is unique: within the framework of Marx’s approach, it sufficiently differentiates capitalist society from all other existent forms of social life, so that, relative to the former, the latter can be seen as having common features—they can be regarded as “noncapitalist,” however else they may differ from one another.

In producing use values, labor in capitalism can be regarded as an intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion—what Marx terms “concrete labor.” The *function* of labor as a socially mediating activity is what he terms “abstract labor.” Various sorts of what we would consider labor exist in all societies (even if not in the general “secularized” form implied by the category of concrete labor), but abstract labor is specific to capitalism and therefore warrants closer examination. It should already be clear that the category of abstract labor refers neither to a particular sort of labor, nor to concrete labor in general; rather, it expresses a particular, unique social function of labor in capitalism in addition to its “normal” social function as a productive activity.

Labor, of course, has a social character in all social formations, but as noted in Chapter Two, this social character cannot be grasped adequately only in terms of whether it is “direct” or “indirect.” In noncapitalist societies, laboring activities are social by virtue of the matrix of overt social relations in which they are embedded. That matrix is the constituting principle of such societies; various labors gain their social character through these social relations.⁸⁴ From the standpoint of capitalist society, relations in precapitalist formations can be described as personal, overtly social, and qualitatively particular (differentiated according to social grouping, social standing, and so on). Laboring activities, accordingly, are determined as overtly social and qualitatively particular; various labors are imbued with meaning by the social relations that are their context.

from consideration of the “objective” form of social relations and intrinsic historical dynamic characteristic of capitalism.

84. *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 170–71.

In capitalism, labor itself constitutes a social mediation in lieu of such a matrix of relations. This means that labor is *not* accorded a social character by overt social relations; rather, because labor mediates itself, it both constitutes a social structure that replaces systems of overt social relations and accords its social character to itself. This reflexive moment determines the specific nature of labor’s self-mediated social character as well as of the social relations structured by this social mediation. As I shall show, this self-grounding moment of labor in capitalism imparts an “objective” character to labor, its products, and the social relations it constitutes. The character of social relations and the social character of labor in capitalism come to be determined by a social function of labor which replaces that of overt social relations. In other words, labor grounds its own social character in capitalism by virtue of its historically specific function as a socially mediating activity. In that sense, *labor in capitalism becomes its own social ground.*

In constituting a self-grounding social mediation, labor constitutes a determinate sort of social whole—a totality. The category of totality and the form of universality associated with it can be elucidated by considering the sort of generality related to the commodity form. Each producer produces commodities that are particular use values and, at the same time, function as social mediations. A commodity’s function as a social mediation is independent of its particular material form and is true of all commodities. A pair of shoes is, in this sense, identical to a sack of potatoes. Thus, each commodity is both particular, as a use value, and general, as a social mediation. As the latter, the commodity is a value. Because labor and its products are not mediated and accorded their social character and meaning by direct social relations, they acquire two dimensions: they are qualitatively particular, yet they also possess an underlying general dimension. This duality corresponds to the circumstance that labor (or its product) is bought for its qualitative specificity but is sold as a general means. Consequently, commodity-producing labor is both particular—as concrete labor, a determinate activity that creates specific use values—and socially general, as abstract labor, a means of acquiring the goods of others.

This initial determination of the double-character of labor in capitalism should not be understood out of context as implying simply that all the various forms of concrete labor are forms of labor in general. Such a statement is analytically useless inasmuch as it could be made of laboring activities in all societies, even those in which commodity production is only of marginal significance. After all, all forms of labor have in common that they are labor. But such an indeterminate interpretation does not and cannot contribute to an understanding of capitalism precisely because abstract labor and value, according to Marx, are specific to that social formation. What makes labor general in capitalism is not simply the truism that it is the common denominator of all various specific sorts of labor; rather, *it is the social function of labor which makes it general.* As a socially mediating activity, labor is abstracted from the specificity of its product,

hence, from the specificity of its own concrete form. In Marx's analysis, the category of abstract labor expresses this real social process of abstraction; it is not simply based on a conceptual process of abstraction. As a practice that constitutes a social mediation, labor is labor in general. We are dealing, moreover, with a society in which the commodity form is generalized and therefore socially determining; the labor of *all* producers serves as a means by which the products of others can be obtained. Consequently, "labor in general" serves in a socially general way as a mediating activity. Yet labor, as abstract labor, is not only socially general in the sense that it constitutes a mediation among all producers; the *character* of the mediation is socially general as well.

This requires further elucidation. The labor of all commodity producers, taken together, is a collection of various concrete labors; each is the particular part of a whole. Likewise, their products appear as an "immense collection of commodities"⁸⁵ in the form of use values. At the same time, all of their labors constitute social mediations; but because each individual labor functions in the *same* socially mediating way that all the others do, their abstract labors taken together do *not* constitute an immense collection of various abstract labors but a *general* social mediation—in other words, socially total abstract labor. Their products thus constitute a *socially total mediation—value*. The mediation is general not only because it connects all producers, but also because its character is general—abstracted from all material specificity as well as any overtly social particularity. The mediation has, therefore, the same general quality on the individual level as on the level of society as a whole. Viewed from the perspective of society as a whole, the concrete labor of the individual is particular and is *part* of a qualitatively heterogeneous *whole*; as abstract labor, however, it is an individuated *moment* of a qualitatively homogeneous, general social mediation constituting a *social totality*.⁸⁶ This *duality* of the concrete and the abstract characterizes the capitalist social formation.

Having established the distinction between concrete labor and abstract labor, I can now modify what I said above about labor in general, and note that the constitution of the duality of the concrete and the abstract by the commodity form of social relations entails the constitution of two different sorts of generality. I have outlined the nature of the abstract general dimension, which is rooted in labor's function as a socially mediating activity: all forms of labor

85. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

86. It should be noted that, this interpretation—as opposed to Sartre's, for example—does not presuppose the concepts of "moment" and "totality" ontologically; it does not claim that, in general, the whole should be grasped as being present in its parts: see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London, 1976), p. 45. Unlike Althusser, however, this interpretation does not ontologically reject these concepts: see Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York, 1970), pp. 202–204. Rather, it treats the relation of moment and totality as historically constituted, a function of the peculiar properties of the social forms analyzed by Marx with his categories of value, abstract labor, commodity, and capital.

and labor products are rendered equivalent. This social function of labor, however, also establishes another form of commonality among the particular sorts of labor and labor products—it entails their *de facto* classification as labor and as labor products. Because any particular sort of labor can function as abstract labor and any labor product can serve as a commodity, activities and products that, in other societies, might not be classified as similar *are* classified in capitalism as similar, as varieties of (concrete) labor or as particular use values. In other words, the abstract generality historically constituted by abstract labor also establishes "concrete labor" and "use value" as general categories; but this *generality* is that of a heterogeneous whole, made up of particulars, rather than that of a homogeneous totality. This distinction between these *two forms of generality*, of the totality and the whole, must be kept in mind in considering the dialectic of historically constituted forms of generality and particularity in capitalist society.

Society is not simply a collection of individuals; it is made up of social relations. Central to Marx's analysis is the argument that the relations that characterize capitalist society are very different from the forms of overt social relations—such as kinship relations or relations of personal or direct domination—that characterize noncapitalist societies. The latter sorts of relations are not only manifestly social, they are qualitatively particular; no single, abstract, homogeneous sort of relation underlies every aspect of social life.

According to Marx, though, the case is different with capitalism. Overt and direct social relations do continue to exist, but capitalist society is ultimately structured by a new, underlying level of social interrelatedness which cannot be grasped adequately in terms of the overtly social relations among people or groups—including classes.⁸⁷ The Marxian theory does, of course, include an analysis of class exploitation and domination, but it goes beyond investigating the unequal distribution of wealth and power within capitalism to grasp the very nature of its social fabric, its peculiar form of wealth, and its intrinsic form of domination.

What renders the fabric of that underlying social structure so peculiar, for Marx, is that it is constituted by labor, by the historically specific quality of labor in capitalism. Hence, the social relations specific to, and characteristic of, capitalism exist only in the medium of labor. Since labor is an activity that necessarily objectifies itself in products, commodity-determined labor's function as a socially mediating activity is inextricably intertwined with the act of objectification: commodity-producing labor, in the process of objectifying itself as concrete labor in particular use values, also objectifies itself as abstract labor in social relations.

87. While class analysis remains basic to the Marxian critical project, the analysis of value, surplus value, and capital as social forms cannot be fully grasped in terms of class categories. A Marxian analysis that remains limited to considerations of class entails a serious sociological reduction of the Marxian critique.

According to Marx, then, one hallmark of modern, or capitalist society is that, because the social relations that essentially characterize this society are constituted by labor, they exist only in objectified form. They have a peculiar objective and formal character, are not overtly social, and are characterized by the totalizing antinomic duality of the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the homogeneously general. The social relations constituted by commodity-determined labor do not bind people to one another in an overtly social fashion; rather, labor constitutes a sphere of objectified social relations which has an apparently nonsocial and objective character and, as we shall see, is separate from, and opposed to, the social aggregate of individuals and their immediate relations.⁸⁸ Because the social sphere that characterizes the capitalist formation is objectified, it cannot be grasped adequately in terms of concrete social relations.

Corresponding to the two forms of labor objectified in the commodity are two forms of social wealth: value and material wealth. Material wealth is a function of the products produced, of their quantity and quality. As a form of wealth, it expresses the objectification of various sorts of labor, the active relation of humanity to nature. Taken by itself, however, it neither constitutes relations among people nor determines its own distribution. The existence of material wealth as the dominant form of social wealth implies, therefore, the existence of overt forms of social relations that mediate it.

Value, on the other hand, is the objectification of abstract labor. It is, in Marx's analysis, a self-distributing form of wealth: the distribution of commodities is effected by what seems to be inherent to them—value. Value is, then, a category of mediation: it is at once a historically determinate, self-distributing form of wealth and an objectified, self-mediating form of social relations. Its measure, as we shall see, is very different from that of material wealth. Moreover, as noted, value is a category of the social totality: the value of a commodity is an individuated moment of the objectified general social mediation. Because it exists in objectified form, this social mediation has an objective character, is not overtly social, is abstracted from all particularity, and is independent of directly personal relations. A social bond results from the function of labor as a social mediation, which, because of these qualities, does not depend on immediate social interactions but can function at a spatial and temporal distance. As the objectified form of abstract labor, value is an essential category of capitalist relations of production.

The commodity, which Marx analyzed as both use value and value, is thus the material objectification of the double character of labor in capitalism—as concrete labor and as a socially mediating activity. It is the fundamental structuring principle of capitalism, the objectified form of both the relations of people with nature as well as with each other. The commodity is both a product and a

88. *Grundrisse*, pp. 157–62.

social mediation. It is not a use value that *has* value but, as the materialized objectification of concrete and abstract labor, it is a use value that *is* a value and, therefore, has exchange value. This simultaneity of substantial and abstract dimensions in the form of labor and its products is the basis of the various antinomic oppositions of capitalism and, as I shall show, underlies its dialectical and, ultimately, contradictory character. In its double-sidedness as concrete and abstract, qualitatively particular and qualitatively general-homogeneous, the commodity is the most elementary expression of capitalism's fundamental character. As an object, the commodity *has* a material form; as a social mediation, it *is* a social form.

Having considered the very first determinations of Marx's critical categories, it should be noted here that his analysis in Volume 1 of *Capital* of the commodity, value, capital, and surplus value does not sharply distinguish "micro" and "macro" levels of investigation, but analyzes structured forms of practice on the level of society as a whole. This level of social analysis, of the fundamental forms of social mediation that characterize capitalism, also allows for a socio-historical theory of forms of subjectivity. This theory is nonfunctionalist and does not attempt to ground thought merely with reference to social position and social interests. Rather, it analyzes thought or, more broadly, subjectivity, in terms of historically specific forms of social mediation, that is, in terms of determinately structured forms of everyday practice that constitute the social world.⁸⁹ Even a form of thought such as philosophy, which seems very far removed from immediate social life, can, within this framework, be analyzed as socially and culturally constituted, in the sense that this mode of thought itself can be understood with reference to historically determinate social forms.

89. In this work, I shall begin to outline aspects of the subjective dimension of Marx's theory of the constitution of modern social life by determinate structured forms of social practice, but I shall not address issues of the possible role of language in the social constitution of subjectivity—whether in the form of the (Sapir-Whorf) linguistic relativity hypothesis, for example, or discourse theory. For attempts to relate culturally specific forms of thought to linguistic forms, see Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York, 1921), and Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956). The notion that language does not simply transport preexisting ideas but codetermines subjectivity can be brought together with social and historical analyses only on the basis of theories of language and society which allow for such mediation in the way they conceive of their objects. My intention here is first to explicate a social-theoretical approach that focuses on the form of social mediation rather than on social groups, material interests, and so on. Such an approach could serve as one starting point for considering the relation of society and culture in the modern world in a way that moves beyond the classical opposition of materialism and idealism—an opposition that has been recapitulated between economic or sociologic theories of society and idealist theories of discourse and language. A resultant social theory could be more intrinsically capable than more conventionally "materialist" approaches of addressing issues raised by linguistically oriented theories. It also implicitly demands of theories of the relation of language and subjectivity that they acknowledge and be intrinsically capable of addressing issues of historical specificity and large-scale ongoing social transformations.

As I have suggested, Marx's unfolding of the categories of his critique can also be read as an immanent metacommentary on the social constitution of philosophical thought in general, and Hegel's philosophy in particular. For Hegel, the Absolute, the totality of the subjective-objective categories, grounds itself. As the self-moving "substance" that is "Subject," it is the true *causa sui* as well as the endpoint of its own development. In *Capital*, Marx presents the underlying forms of commodity-determined society as constituting the social context for notions such as the difference between essence and appearance, the philosophical concept of substance, the dichotomy of subject and object, the notion of totality, and, on the logical level of the category of capital, the unfolding dialectic of the identical subject-object.⁹⁰ His analysis of the double character of labor in capitalism, as a productive activity and as a social mediation, allows him to conceive of this labor as a nonmetaphysical, historically specific "*causa sui*." Because such labor mediates itself, it grounds itself (socially) and therefore has the attributes of "substance" in the philosophical sense. We have seen that Marx explicitly refers to the category of abstract human labor with the philosophical term "substance," and that it expresses the constitution of a social totality by labor. The social form is a totality because it is not a collection of various particularities but, rather, is constituted by a general and homogeneous "substance" that is its own ground. Since the totality is self-grounding, self-mediating, and objectified, it exists quasi-independently. As I shall show, on the logical level of the category of capital this totality becomes concrete and self-moving. Capitalism, as analyzed by Marx, is a form of social life with metaphysical attributes—those of the absolute Subject.

90. The rise of philosophy in Greece has been related by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, among others, to the development of coinage and the extension of the commodity form in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.: see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit* (Frankfurt, 1972); George Thomson, *The First Philosophers* (London, 1955); and R.W. Müller, *Geld und Geist* (Frankfurt, 1977). A revised version of Sohn-Rethel's book appeared in English as *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1978.) Sohn-Rethel, however, does not distinguish between a situation such as that in fifth-century Attica, where commodity production was widespread but by no means the dominant form of production, and capitalism, a situation in which the commodity form is totalizing. He is, therefore, unable to ground socially the distinction, emphasized by Georg Lukács, between Greek philosophy and modern rationalism. The former, according to Lukács, "was no stranger to certain aspects of reification [but did not experience them] as universal forms of existence; it had one foot in the world of reification while the other remained in a 'natural' society." The latter was characterized by "its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the principle which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind" (*History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone [London, 1971], pp. 111, 113). Nevertheless, because of his assumptions regarding "labor" and, therefore, his affirmation of totality, Lukács himself is not sufficiently historical with regard to the capitalist epoch: he is unable to analyze Hegel's notion of the dialectical unfolding of the *Weltgeist* as an expression of the capitalist epoch; and he interprets it instead as an idealist version of a form of thought that *transcends* capitalism.

This does not mean that Marx treats social categories in a philosophical manner; rather, he treats philosophical categories with reference to the peculiar attributes of the social forms he analyzes. According to his approach, the attributes of the social categories are expressed in hypostatized form as philosophical categories. His analysis of the double character of labor in capitalism, for example, implicitly treats self-groundedness as an attribute of a historically specific social form rather than as the attribute of an Absolute. This suggests a historical interpretation of the tradition of philosophical thought that demands self-grounded first principles as its point of departure. The Marxian categories, like those of Hegel, grasp the constitution of subject and object with reference to the unfolding of an identical subject-object. In Marx's approach, however, the latter is determined in terms of the categorial forms of the social relations in capitalism, which are rooted in the duality of commodity-determined labor. What Hegel sought to grasp with his concept of the totality is, according to Marx, not absolute and eternal, but historically determinate. A *causa sui* does indeed exist, but it is social; and it is not the true endpoint of its own development. That is, there is no final end point: overcoming capitalism would entail the abolition—not the realization—of the "substance," of labor's role in constituting a social mediation, and, hence, the abolition of the totality.

To sum up: In Marx's mature works, the notion that labor is at the core of social life does not simply refer to the fact that material production is always a precondition of social life. Nor does it imply that production is the historically specific determining sphere of capitalist civilization—if production is understood only as the production of goods. In general, the sphere of production in capitalism should not be understood only in terms of the material interactions of humans with nature. While it is obviously true that the "metabolic" interactions with nature effected by labor is a precondition of existence in any society, what determines a society is also the nature of its social relations. Capitalism, according to Marx, is characterized by the fact that its fundamental social relations are constituted by labor. Labor in capitalism objectifies itself not only in material products—which is the case in all social formations—but in objectified social relations as well. By virtue of its double character, it constitutes as a totality an objective, quasi-natural societal sphere that cannot be reduced to the sum of direct social relations and, as we shall see, stands opposed to the aggregate of individuals and groups as an abstract Other. In other words, the double character of commodity-determined labor is such that the sphere of labor in capitalism mediates relations that, in other formations, exist as a sphere of overt social interaction. It thereby constitutes a quasi-objective social sphere. Its double character signifies that labor in capitalism has a socially synthetic character, which labor in other formations does not possess.⁹¹ Labor as such does *not* constitute society per se; labor in capitalism, however, *does* constitute that society.

91. As I shall further elaborate, the analysis of the double character of commodity-producing labor

Abstract labor and alienation

We have seen that, according to Marx, the objective and general quality of capitalism's essential social relations are such that they constitute a totality. It can be unfolded from a single structuring form, the commodity. This argument is an important dimension of Marx's presentation in *Capital*, which attempts to reconstruct theoretically the central features of capitalist society from that basic form. Proceeding from the category of the commodity and the initial determination of labor as a social mediation, Marx then develops further determinations of the capitalist totality by unfolding the categories of money and capital. In the process, he shows that the labor-mediated form of social relations characteristic of capitalism does not simply constitute a social matrix within which individuals are located and related to one another; rather, the mediation, initially analyzed as a means (of acquiring others' products), acquires a life of its own, independent, as it were, of the individuals that it mediates. It develops into a sort of objective system over and against the individuals, and it increasingly determines the goals and means of human activity.⁹²

It is important to note that Marx's analysis does not ontologically presuppose the existence of this social "system" in a conceptually reified manner. Rather, as I have shown, it grounds the systemlike quality of the fundamental structures of modern life in determinate forms of social practice. The social relations that fundamentally define capitalism are "objective" in character and constitute a "system," because they are constituted by labor as a historically specific socially mediating activity, that is, by an abstract, homogeneous, and objectifying form of practice. Social action is conditioned, in turn, by the forms of appearance of these fundamental structures, by the way in which these social relations are manifest to and shape immediate experience. Marx's critical theory, in other words, entails a complex analysis of the reciprocal constitution of system and action in capitalist society which does not posit the transhistorical existence of that very opposition—between system and action—but grounds it and each of its terms in the determinate forms of modern social life.

The system constituted by abstract labor embodies a new form of social domination. It exerts a form of social compulsion whose impersonal, abstract, and

shows that *both* positions in the debate initiated by Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. Jeremy Shapiro [Boston, 1971])—that is, on whether labor is a social category sufficiently synthetic to fulfill all that Marx demanded of it, or whether the sphere of labor must be supplemented conceptually by a sphere of interaction—deal with labor as "labor" in an undifferentiated transhistorical fashion, rather than with the specific and historically unique synthetic structure of labor in capitalism, as analyzed in the critique of political economy.

92. In this work, I shall not address the question of the relationship between the constitution of capitalist society as a social totality with an intrinsic historical dynamic and the growing differentiation of various spheres of social life that characterizes that society. For one approach to this problem, see Georg Lukács, "The Changing Function of Historical Materialism," in *History and Class Consciousness*, esp. p. 229ff.

objective character is historically new. The initial determination of such abstract social compulsion is that individuals are compelled to produce and exchange commodities in order to survive. This compulsion exerted is not a function of direct social domination, as is the case, for example, with slave or serf labor; it is, rather, a function of "abstract" and "objective" social structures, and represents a form of *abstract, impersonal domination*. Ultimately, this form of domination is not grounded in any person, class or institution; its ultimate locus is the pervasive structuring social forms of capitalist society that are constituted by determinate forms of social practice.⁹³ Society, as the quasi-independent, abstract, universal Other that stands opposed to the individuals and exerts an impersonal compulsion on them, is constituted as an alienated structure by the double character of labor in capitalism. The category of value, as the basic category of capitalist relations of production, is also the initial determination of alienated social structures. Capitalist social relations and alienated structures are identical.⁹⁴

It is well known that, in his early writings, Marx maintains that labor objectifying itself in products need not be alienating, and criticizes Hegel for not having distinguished between alienation and objectification.⁹⁵ Yet how one conceptualizes the relation of alienation and objectification depends on how one understands labor. If one proceeds from a transhistorical notion of "labor," the difference between objectification and alienation necessarily must be grounded in factors *extrinsic* to the objectifying activity—for example, in property relations, that is, in whether the immediate producers are able to dispose of their own labor and its products, or whether the capitalist class appropriates them. Such a notion of alienated labor does not adequately grasp the sort of socially constituted abstract necessity I have begun to analyze. In Marx's later writings, however, alienation is rooted in the double character of commodity-determined labor, and as such, is *intrinsic* to the character of that labor itself. Its function as a socially mediating activity is externalized as an independent, abstract social sphere that exerts a form of impersonal compulsion on the people who constitute it. Labor in capitalism gives rise to a social structure that dominates it. This form of self-generated reflexive domination is alienation.

Such an analysis of alienation implies another understanding of the difference between objectification and alienation. This difference, in Marx's mature works,

93. This analysis of the form of domination entailed by the social forms of commodity and capital in Marx's theory provides a different approach to the sort of impersonal, intrinsic, and pervasive form of power Michel Foucault sees as characteristic of modern Western societies. See *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977).

94. In his sophisticated and extensive study of the notion of alienation as a central structuring principle of Marx's critique, Bertell Ollman also has interpreted the category of value as one that grasps capitalist social relations as relations of alienation. See *Alienation* (2d ed., Cambridge, 1976), pp. 157, 176.

95. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3: *Marx and Engels: 1843–44* (New York, 1975), pp. 329–35, 338–46.

is not a function of what occurs to concrete labor and its products; rather, his analysis shows that *objectification is indeed alienation—if what labor objectifies are social relations*. This identity, however, is historically determinate: it is a function of the specific nature of labor in capitalism. Hence, the possibility exists that it could be overcome.

Thus, once again, it is clear that Marx's mature critique succeeds in grasping the "rational core" of Hegel's position—in this case that objectification is alienation—by analyzing the specificity of labor in capitalism. I noted earlier that a "materialist transformation" of Hegel's thought on the basis of an historically undifferentiated notion of "labor" can apprehend socially Hegel's conception of the historical Subject only in terms of a social grouping, but not in terms of a suprahuman structure of social relations. We now see that it also fails to grasp the intrinsic (albeit historically determinate) relation between alienation and objectification. In both cases, Marx's analysis of the double character of labor in capitalism permits a more adequate social appropriation of Hegel's thought.⁹⁶

Alienated labor, then, constitutes a social structure of abstract domination, but such labor should not necessarily be equated with toil, oppression, or exploitation. The labor of a serf, a portion of which "belongs to" the feudal lord, is, in and of itself, not alienated: the domination and exploitation of that labor is not intrinsic to the labor itself. It is precisely for this reason that expropriation in such a situation *was and had to be* based upon direct compulsion. Nonalienated labor in societies in which a surplus exists and is expropriated by nonlaboring classes necessarily is bound to direct social domination. By contrast, exploitation and domination are integral moments of commodity-determined labor.⁹⁷ Even the labor of an independent commodity producer is alienated, if not to the same degree as that of an industrial worker, because social compulsion is effected abstractly, as a result of the social relations objectified by labor when it functions as a socially mediating activity.

96. Marx's discussion of alienated labor in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* indicates that he has not yet fully worked out the basis for his own analysis. On the one hand, he explicitly states that alienated labor is at the core of capitalism, and is not based on private property, but that, on the contrary, private property is the product of alienated labor (pp. 279–280). On the other hand, he has not yet clearly worked out a conception of the specificity of labor in capitalism and, hence, cannot really ground that argument: his argument regarding alienation is only fully worked out later, on the basis of his conception of the twofold character of labor in capitalism. This conception, in turn, modifies his notion of alienation itself.

97. Giddens notes that in precapitalist, "class-divided" societies, the dominated classes do not need the dominant class in order to carry on the process of production, but that in capitalism the worker does need an employer to gain a livelihood: see *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (London and Basingstoke, 1981), p. 130. This describes a very important dimension of the specificity of the domination of labor in capitalism. My intention in this work, however, is to delineate another dimension of this specificity, that of the domination of labor *by* labor. This form can be overlooked when one focuses only on the ownership of the means of production.

The abstract domination and the exploitation of labor characteristic of capitalism are grounded, ultimately, not in the appropriation of the surplus by the nonlaboring classes, but in the form of labor in capitalism.

The structure of abstract domination constituted by labor acting as a socially mediating activity does not appear to be socially constituted; rather, it appears in naturalized form. Its social and historical specificity is veiled by several factors. The form of social necessity exerted—of which I have only discussed the first determination—exists in the absence of any direct, personal, social domination. Because the compulsion exerted is impersonal and "objective," it seems not to be social at all but "natural," and, as I shall explain later, conditions social conceptions of natural reality. This structure is such that one's own needs, rather than the threat of force or other social sanctions, appear to be the source of such necessity.

This naturalization of abstract domination is reinforced by the overlapping of two very different sorts of necessity associated with social labor. Labor in some form is a necessary precondition—a transhistorical or "natural" *social necessity*—of human social existence as such. This necessity can veil the specificity of commodity-producing labor—that, although one does not consume what one produces, one's labor is nevertheless the necessary social means of obtaining products to consume. The latter necessity is a *historically determinate social necessity*. (The distinction between these two sorts of necessity is important for understanding Marx's conception of freedom in postcapitalist society, as will become clear.) Because the specific social mediating role played by commodity-producing labor is veiled, and such labor appears as labor *per se*, these two sorts of necessity are conflated in the form of an apparently valid transhistorical necessity: one must labor to survive. Hence, a form of social necessity specific to capitalism appears as the "natural order of things." This apparently transhistorical necessity—that the individual's labor is the necessary means to their (or their family's) consumption—serves as the basis for a fundamental legitimating ideology of the capitalist social formation as a whole, throughout its various phases. As an affirmation of capitalism's most basic structure, such an ideology of legitimation is more fundamental than those that are more closely tied to specific phases of capitalism—for example, those related to the market-mediated exchange of equivalents.

Marx's analysis of the specificity of labor in capitalism has further implications for his conception of alienation. The meaning of alienation varies considerably depending upon whether one considers it in the context of a theory based on the notion of "labor" or in the context of an analysis of the duality of labor in capitalism. In the former case, alienation becomes a concept of a philosophical anthropology; it refers to the externalization of a preexisting human essence. On another level, it refers to a situation in which capitalists possess the power of disposal over the workers' labor and its products. Within the framework of such

a critique, alienation is an unequivocally negative process—although it is grounded in circumstances that can be overcome.

In the interpretation presented here, alienation is the process of the objectification of abstract labor. It does not entail the externalization of a preexisting human essence; rather, it entails the coming into being of human powers in alienated form. In other words, alienation refers to a process of the historical constitution of human powers which is effected by labor objectifying itself as a socially mediating activity. Through this process, an abstract, objective social sphere emerges, which acquires a life of its own and exists as a structure of abstract domination over and against the individuals. Marx, in elucidating and grounding central aspects of capitalist society in terms of this process, evaluates its results as two-sided, rather than as unequivocally negative. So, for example, in *Capital* he analyzes the constitution by alienated labor of a universal social form that is both a structure in which human capacities are created historically and a structure of abstract domination. This alienated form induces a rapid accumulation of the social wealth and productive power of humanity, and it entails as well the increasing fragmentation of labor, the formal regimentation of time, and the destruction of nature. The structures of abstract domination constituted by determinate forms of social practice give rise to a social process that lies beyond human control; yet they also give rise, in Marx's analysis, to the historical possibility that people could control what they had constituted socially in alienated form.

This two-sidedness of the process of alienation as a process of social constitution can also be seen in Marx's treatment of universality and equality. As noted, it has commonly been assumed that Marx's critique of capitalist society contrasts the values articulated in the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the particularistic and inequitable underlying reality of capitalist society, or that he criticizes the universalistic forms of bourgeois civil society as serving to mask the particularistic interests of the bourgeoisie.⁹⁸ The Marxian theory, however, does not simply—and affirmatively—oppose the universal to the particular, nor does it dismiss the former as a mere sham; rather, as a theory of social constitution, it examines critically and grounds socially the character of modern universality and equality. According to Marx's analysis, the universal is not a transcendent idea but is historically constituted with the development and consolidation of the commodity-determined form of social relations. What emerges historically is not, however, the universal per se but a specific universal form, one that is related to the social forms of which it is a part. Thus in *Capital*, for example, Marx describes the spread and generalization of capitalist relations as a process that abstracts from the concrete specificities of various labors and, at the same time, reduces them

98. See, for example, Jean Cohen, *Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory* (Amherst, Mass., 1982), pp. 145–46.

to their common denominator as human labor.⁹⁹ This universalizing process, according to Marx, constitutes the sociohistorical precondition for the emergence of a popular notion of human equality upon which, in turn, modern theories of political economy are based.¹⁰⁰ In other words, the modern idea of equality is rooted in a social form of equality that has arisen historically concomitantly with the development of the commodity form—that is, with the process of alienation.

This historically constituted form of equality has a double-sided character. On the one hand, it is universal: It establishes commonality among people, but it does so in a form abstracted from the qualitative specificity of particular individuals or groups. An opposition of the universal to the particular arises which is grounded in a historical process of alienation. The universality and equality constituted thus have had positive political and social consequences; but because they entail a negation of specificity, they also have had negative results. There are many examples of the ambiguous consequences of this opposition. For example, the history of the Jews in Europe following the French Revolution can, on one level, be seen as that of a group caught between an abstract form of universalism, which allows for the emancipation of people only qua abstract individuals, and its concrete, antiuniversalistic antithesis, whereby people and groups are identified particularistically and judged—for example, in a hierarchical, exclusionary, or Manichaean manner.

This opposition between the abstract universality of the Enlightenment and particularistic specificity should not be understood in a decontextualized fashion; it is a historically constituted opposition, rooted in the determinate social forms of capitalism. To regard abstract universality, in its opposition to concrete specificity, as an ideal that can only be realized in a postcapitalist society, is to remain bound within the framework of an opposition characteristic of that society.

The form of domination related to this abstract form of the universal is not merely a class relation concealed by a universalistic facade. Rather, the domination Marx analyzes is that of a specific, historically constituted form of universalism itself, which he tries to grasp with his categories of value and capital. The social framework he analyzes thus is also characterized by the historically constituted opposition of the abstract social sphere and individuals. In commodity-determined society, the modern individual is historically constituted—a person independent of personal relations of domination, obligation, and dependence who no longer is embedded overtly in a quasi-natural fixed social position and so, in a sense, is self-determining. Yet this “free” individual is confronted by a social universe of abstract objective constraints that function in a lawlike fashion. In Marx's terms, from a precapitalist context marked by relations of

99. *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 159–60.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

personal dependence a new one emerged characterized by individual personal freedom within a social framework of "objective dependence."¹⁰¹ The modern opposition between the free, self-determining individual and an extrinsic sphere of objective necessity is, according to Marx's analysis, a "real" opposition that is historically constituted with the rise and spread of the commodity-determined form of social relations, and is related to the more general constituted opposition between a world of subjects and a world of objects. This opposition, however, is not solely one between individuals and their alienated social context: it also can be seen as one within the individuals themselves or, better, as one between different determinations of individuals in modern society. These individuals are not only self-determining "subjects," acting on the basis of will; they are also subjected to a system of objective compulsions and constraints that operates independent of their will—and in this sense, are also "objects." Like the commodity, the individual constituted in capitalist society has a dual character.¹⁰²

The Marxian critique, then, does not simply "expose" the values and institutions of modern civil society as a facade that masks class relations, but grounds them with reference to the categorially grasped social forms. The critique calls for neither the implementation nor the abolition of the ideals of bourgeois society;¹⁰³ and it points neither to the realization of the abstract homogeneous universality of the existent formation nor to the abolition of universality. Instead, it elucidates as socially grounded the opposition of abstract universalism and particularistic specificity in terms of determinate forms of social relations—and as we shall see, it is their development that points to the possibility of another form of universalism, one not based upon an abstraction from all concrete specificity. With the overcoming of capitalism, the unity of society already constituted in alienated form could then be effected differently, by forms of political practice, in a way that need not negate qualitative specificity.

(It would be possible, in light of this approach, to interpret some strains within recent social movements—notably, among women and various minorities—as efforts to move beyond the antinomy, associated with the social form of the commodity, of an abstract, homogeneous universalism and a form of particularism that excludes universality. An adequate analysis of such movements should, of course, be historical: it should be able to relate them to developments of the underlying social forms in a way that accounts for the historical emergence of such attempts to surpass this antinomy that characterizes capitalism.)

There is a conceptual parallel between Marx's implicit critique of historically constituted abstract universality and his analysis of industrial production as in-

101. *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

102. The Marxian framework, then, implies an approach to the problem of the subject/object nature of the individual in modern society different from that developed by Michel Foucault in his extensive discussion of modern "Man" as an empiricotrascendental doublet. See *The Order of Things* (New York, 1973), pp. 318ff.

103. *Grundrisse*, pp. 248–49.

trinsically capitalist. As I noted in discussing the *Grundrisse*, overcoming capitalism, for Marx, would entail neither a new mode of distribution based on the same industrial mode of production nor the abolition of the productive potential developed in the course of the past centuries. Rather, the form as well as the goal of production in socialism would be different. In its analysis both of universality and of the process of production, then, the Marxian critique avoids hypostatizing the existent form and positing it as the sine qua non of a future free society, while also avoiding the notion that what was constituted in capitalism will be completely abolished in socialism. The two-sided quality of the process of alienation signifies, in other words, that its overcoming entails the appropriation by people—rather than the simple abolition—of what had been socially constituted in alienated form. The Marxian critique differs from both abstract rationalist and romantic critiques of capitalism in this regard.

The process of alienation in Marx's later works, then, is integral to a process by which structured forms of practice historically constitute the basic social forms, forms of thought, and cultural values of capitalist society. The notion that values are historically constituted should not, of course, be taken as an argument that because they are not eternal, they are a sham or merely conventional and without validity. A self-reflexive theory of the ways in which forms of social life are constituted must move beyond such an opposition of abstract absolutist and abstract relativist approaches, both of which suggest that humans can somehow act and think outside of their social universes.

According to Marx's theory of capitalist society, that the social relations constituted in alienated form by labor undermine and transform earlier social forms, indicates that those earlier forms are also constituted. Nevertheless, one should differentiate between the sorts of social constitution involved. People in capitalism constitute their social relations and their history by means of labor. Although they also are controlled by what they have constituted, they "make" these relations and this history in a different and more emphatic sense than people "make" precapitalist relations (which Marx characterizes as spontaneously arisen and quasi-natural [*naturwüchsig*]). If one were to relate Marx's critical theory and Vico's dictum that people can know history, which they have made, better than they can know nature, which they have not,¹⁰⁴ one should do so in a manner that distinguishes between "making" capitalist society and precapitalist societies. The alienated, labor-mediated mode of social constitution not only weakens traditional social forms, but does so in a way that introduces a new sort of social context characterized by a form of distance between individuals and society that allows for—and perhaps induces—social reflection on, and analysis of, society as a whole.¹⁰⁵ Because of the intrinsic dynamic logic of

104. See, for example, Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 32–37.

105. In this sense, one could argue that the rise and spread of the commodity form is related to the transformation and partial supersession of what Bourdieu calls "the field of doxa," which

capitalism, moreover, such reflection need not remain retrospective once the capital form is fully developed. By substituting an alienated, dynamic structure of “made” relations for traditional “quasi-natural” social forms, capitalism allows for the objective and subjective possibility that a still newer form of “made” relations be established, one no longer “automatically” constituted by labor.

Abstract labor and the fetish

I can now turn to address the problem of why Marx presents abstract labor as physiological labor in his immanent analysis. We have seen that labor, in its historically determinate function as a socially mediating activity, is the “substance of value,” the determining essence of the social formation. It is by no means self-evident to speak of the essence of a social formation. The category of essence presupposes the category of form of appearance. It is not meaningful to speak of an essence where no difference exists between what is and the way it appears. What characterizes an essence, then, is that it does not and cannot directly appear, but must find expression in a distinct form of appearance. This implies a *necessary* relation between essence and appearance; the essence must be of such a quality that it necessarily appears in the manifest form that it does. Marx’s analysis of the relation of value to price, for example, is one of how the former is expressed and veiled by the latter. My concern here is with a prior logical level—that of labor and value.

We have seen that labor constitutes social relations in capitalism. Labor, however, is an objectifying social activity that mediates between humans and nature. It necessarily is as such an objectifying activity, then, that labor effects its function in capitalism as a socially mediating activity. Labor’s specific social role in capitalism, therefore, must *necessarily* be expressed in forms of appearance that are the objectifications of labor as a productive activity. The historically specific social dimension of labor, however, is both expressed and veiled by labor’s apparently transhistorical “material” dimension. Such manifest forms are necessary forms of appearance of labor’s unique function in capitalism. In other societies, laboring activities are embedded within an overt social matrix and, hence, are neither “essences” nor “forms of appearance.” It is labor’s unique role in capitalism that constitutes labor both as an essence and as a form of appearance. In other words, because the social relations characterizing capitalism are mediated by labor, it is a peculiarity of that social formation that it has an essence.

“Essence” is an ontological determination. The essence I am considering

he characterizes as “a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization (as in ancient societies) [whereby] the natural and social world appears as self-evident” (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 164).

here, however, is historical—a historically specific social function of labor. Yet this historical specificity is not apparent. We have seen that the social relations mediated by labor are self-grounding, have an essence, and appear not to be social at all but objective and transhistorical. They appear, in other words, to be ontological. Marx’s immanent analysis is *not* a critique from the standpoint of a social ontology; rather, it provides a critique of such a position by indicating that what seems to be ontological is actually historically specific to capitalism.

Earlier in this work I examined critically those positions that interpret the specificity of labor in capitalism to be its indirect character and formulate a social critique from the standpoint of “labor.” It is clear now that such positions take the ontological appearance of the basic social forms of capitalism at “face value,” for labor is a social essence only in capitalism. That social order cannot be historically overcome without abolishing the essence itself, that is, the historically specific function and form of labor. A noncapitalist society is not constituted by labor alone.

Positions that do not grasp the particular function of labor in capitalism, attribute to labor as such a socially synthetic character: They treat it as the transhistorical essence of social life. Why labor as “labor” should constitute social relations cannot, however, be explained. Moreover, the relationship we have just examined, between appearance and essence, cannot be elucidated by such critiques from the standpoint of “labor.” As we have seen, such interpretations postulate a separation between forms of appearance which are historically variable (value as a market category) and a historically invariable essence (“labor”). According to such positions, while all societies are constituted by “labor,” a noncapitalist society would presumably be directly and overtly so constituted. In Chapter Two, I argued that social relations can *never* be direct, unmediated. At this point, I can supplement that criticism by noting that social relations constituted by labor can never be overtly social, but necessarily must exist in objectified form. By hypostatizing the essence of capitalism as the essence of human society, traditional positions cannot explain the intrinsic relation of the essence to its forms of appearance and, therefore, cannot consider that a hallmark of capitalism may be that it has an essence.

The misinterpretation just outlined is certainly understandable, for it is a possibility immanent to the form under consideration. We have just seen that value is an objectification not of labor per se but of a historically specific function of labor. Labor does not play such a role in other social formations, or does so only marginally. It follows, then, that the function of labor in constituting a social mediation is not an intrinsic attribute of labor itself; it is not rooted in any characteristic of human labor as such. The problem, however, is that when the analysis proceeds from an examination of commodities in order to uncover what constitutes their value, it can come upon labor—but not its mediating function. This specific function does not, and cannot, appear as an attribute of labor; nor can it be uncovered by examining labor as a productive activity,

because what we term labor is a productive activity in all social formations. Labor's unique social function in capitalism cannot appear directly as an attribute of labor, for labor, in and of itself, is not a socially mediating activity; only an overt social relation can appear as such. The historically specific function of labor can only appear objectified, as value in its various forms (commodity, money, capital).¹⁰⁶ It is, therefore, impossible to uncover a manifest form of labor as a socially mediating activity by looking *behind* the form—value—in which it is *necessarily* objectified, a form that itself can only appear materialized as the commodity, money, and so on. Labor, of course, does appear—but the form of its appearance is not as a social mediation, but simply as “labor” itself.

One cannot discover the function of labor as constituting a medium of social relations by examining labor itself; one must investigate its objectifications. This is why Marx began his presentation not with labor but with the commodity, the most basic objectification of capitalist social relations.¹⁰⁷ However, even in the investigation of the commodity as a social mediation, appearances can deceive. As we have seen, a commodity is a good and an objectified social mediation. As a use value, or good, the commodity is particular, the objectification of a particular concrete labor; as a value, the commodity is general, the objectification of abstract labor. Commodities, however, *cannot* simultaneously fulfill both determinations: They cannot function as particular goods and a general mediation at once.

This implies that the general character of each commodity as a social mediation must have a form of expression that is separate from the particular character of each commodity. This is the starting point for Marx's analysis of the value form, leading to his analysis of money.¹⁰⁸ The existence of each commodity as a general mediation acquires an independent materialized form as an equivalent among commodities. The value dimension of all commodities becomes externalized in the form of one commodity—money—which acts as a universal equivalent among all other commodities: it appears as the universal mediation. Thus, the duality of the commodity as a use value and as a value becomes externalized and appears in the form of the commodity, on the one hand, and money, on the other. As a result of this externalization, however, the commodity does not appear to be a social mediation itself. Instead, it appears as a pure “thingly” object, a good, which is socially mediated by money. By the same token, money does not appear as a materialized externalization of the abstract, general dimension of the commodity (and of labor)—that is, as an expression of a determinate form of social mediation—but as a universal

mediation in and of itself, one that is external to social relations. The object-mediated character of social relations in capitalism, then, is expressed and veiled by its manifest form as an externalized mediation (money) among objects; the existence of that mediation can then be taken to be a result of convention.¹⁰⁹

The appearance of the commodity simply as a good or a product conditions, in turn, conceptions of value and value-creating labor. That is, the commodity seems not to *be* a value, a social mediation, but rather a use value that *has* exchange value. It is no longer apparent that value is a particular form of wealth, an objectified social mediation, which is materialized in the commodity. Just as the commodity appears to be a good that is mediated by money, value then appears to be (transhistorical) wealth that, in capitalism, is distributed by the market. This displaces the analytic problem from one of the nature of social mediation in capitalism to one of the determinations of exchange ratios. One can then argue whether the ratios of exchange are ultimately determined by factors extrinsic to the commodities, or whether they are intrinsically determined, for example, by the relative amount of labor that went into their production. In either case, however, the specificity of the social form—that value is an objectified social mediation—will have become blurred.

If value is taken to be wealth mediated by the market, and it is assumed that that wealth is constituted by labor, then value-constituting labor seems simply to be wealth-creating labor in a situation where its products are exchanged. In other words, if, as a result of their manifest forms, the determinate nature of the basic social forms of capitalism is not grasped, then even if value is seen as a property of the commodity, it is not of the commodity as a social mediation but as a product. Consequently, value seems to be created by labor as productive activity—labor as it produces goods and material wealth—rather than by labor as a socially mediating activity. Since labor apparently creates value regardless of its concrete specificity, it then appears to do so simply by virtue of its capacity as productive activity in general. Value, then, seems to be constituted by the expenditure of labor *per se*. To the extent that value is considered to be historically specific, it is as a form of distribution of that which is constituted by the expenditure of “labor.”

The peculiar social function of labor, which renders its indeterminate expenditure constitutive of value, cannot, then, be uncovered directly. As I have argued, this function cannot be revealed by seeking it behind the form in which it necessarily is objectified; what one discovers, instead, is that value appears to be constituted by the mere expenditure of labor, without reference to the function of labor that renders it value-constituting. The difference between material wealth and value, which is rooted in the difference between labor mediated by social relations in noncapitalist societies, and labor mediated by labor itself

106. According to Marx's analysis of price and profit, even the value level of objectified appearances is overlaid with a more superficial level of appearances.

107. Marx, “Marginal Notes on Adolf Wagner's *Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie*,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24: *Marx and Engels: 1874–83* (New York, 1975), pp. 544–45.

108. *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 137–63.

109. *Ibid.*, pp. 188–243.

in capitalism, becomes indistinct. In other words, when the commodity appears to be a good with exchange value and, therefore, value appears to be market-mediated wealth, value-creating labor appears not to be a socially mediating activity but wealth-creating labor in general. Hence, labor seems to create value merely by virtue of its expenditure. Abstract labor thus appears in Marx's immanent analysis as that which "underlies" all forms of human labor in all societies: the expenditure of muscle, nerve, and so on.

I have shown how the social "essence" of capitalism is a historically specific function of labor as a medium of social relations. Yet, within the framework of Marx's mode of presentation—which is already immanent to the categorial forms and proceeds from the commodity to examine the source of its value—the category of abstract labor appears to be an expression of labor per se, of concrete labor in general. The historically specific "essence" of capitalism appears in the immanent analysis as a physiological, ontological essence, a form that is common to all societies: "labor." The category of abstract labor presented by Marx is thus an initial determination of what he explicates with his notion of the fetish: because the underlying relations of capitalism are mediated by labor, hence are objectified, they appear not to be historically specific and social but transhistorically valid and ontologically grounded forms. The appearance of labor's mediational character in capitalism as physiological labor is the fundamental core of the fetish of capitalism.

The fetishized appearance of labor's mediating role as labor in general, taken at face value, is the starting point for the various social critiques from the standpoint of "labor" I have termed "traditional Marxism." The possibility that the object of Marx's critique can be transformed into what traditional Marxism affirms with its "paradigm of production" is rooted in the circumstance that the core of capitalism, according to Marx, has a necessary form of appearance that can be hypostatized as the essence of social life. In this way, the Marxian theory points to a critique of the paradigm of production which is able to grasp its historical "rational core" in the social forms specific to capitalism.

This analysis of the category of abstract human labor is a specific elaboration of the immanent nature of Marx's critique. His physiological definition of this category is part of an analysis of capitalism *in its own terms*, that is, as the forms present themselves. The critique takes no standpoint outside of its object, but rests, instead, on the full unfolding of the categories and their contradictions. In terms of the self-understanding of the Marxian critique, the categories that grasp the forms of social relations are at once categories of social objectivity and subjectivity, and are themselves expressions of this social reality. They are not descriptive, that is, external to their object, hence, they do not exist in a contingent relation to it. It is precisely because of this immanent character that the Marxian critique can be so easily misunderstood, and that quotes and concepts torn out of context can so easily be used to construct a

positive "science."¹¹⁰ The traditional interpretation of Marx and a fetishized understanding of capitalism are parallel and interrelated.

The *Materie* in Marx's "materialist" critique, then, is social—the forms of social relations. Mediated by labor, the characterizing social dimension in capitalism can appear *only* in objectified form. By uncovering the historical and social content of the reified forms, the Marxian analysis becomes as well a critique of those varieties of materialism which hypostatize these forms of labor and its objects. His analysis provides a critique of both idealism and materialism by grounding each in historically specific, reified and alienated social relations.

Social relations, labor, and nature

The forms of social relations that characterize capitalism are not manifestly social and, thus, appear not to be social at all, but "natural" in a way that involves a very specific notion of nature. The forms of appearance of capitalist social relations not only condition understandings of the social world but, as the approach presented here suggests, of the natural world as well. In order to extend the discussion of the Marxian sociohistorical theory of subjectivity introduced above and to suggest an approach to the problem of the relation of conceptions of nature to their social contexts—which I shall only be able to touch upon here—I shall now examine further the quasi-objective character of capitalist relations by considering briefly the question of the meaning accorded labor and its objects.

For heuristic purposes, I shall proceed from the highly simplified comparison of traditional and capitalist social relations with which I began. As noted, in traditional societies, laboring activities and their products are mediated by, and embedded in, overt social relations, whereas in capitalism labor and its products mediate themselves. In a society where labor and its products are embedded in a matrix of social relations, they are informed, and accorded their social character, by those relations—yet the social character accorded various labors seems to be intrinsic to them. In such a situation, productive activity does not exist as a pure means, nor do tools and products appear as mere objects. Instead, informed by social relations, they are imbued with meanings and significances—whether manifestly social or quasi-sacred—that seem to be intrinsic to them.¹¹¹

110. Cornelius Castoriadis, for example, overlooks the immanent nature of Marx's critique when he assumes that it is metaphysical and involves an ontologization of labor: see "From Marx to Aristotle," *Social Research* 45, no. 4, (Winter 1978), esp. pp. 669–84. Castoriadis implicitly reads Marx's negative critique as a positive science and then criticizes it on this basis; he does not consider the relation between Marx's categorial analysis and his notion of the commodity fetish, and imputes an implausible degree of inconsistency to Marx. He implies that, in one and the same chapter of *Capital*, Marx holds the very quasi-natural, nonhistorical position he analyzes critically in his discussion of the fetish.

111. See György Márkus's excellent discussion of the relation of direct, explicit norms, social structures, and objects and tools in precapitalist societies in "Die Welt menschlicher Objekte:

This entails a remarkable inversion. An activity, implement, or object that is *determined* nonconsciously by social relations appears, because of its resultant symbolic character, to possess a socially *determining* character. Within a rigidly traditional social framework, for example, the object or activity seems to embody and determine social position and gender definition.¹¹² Laboring activities in traditional societies do not simply appear as labor, but each form of labor is socially imbued and appears as a particular determination of social existence. Such forms of labor are very different from labor in capitalism: they cannot be understood adequately as instrumental action. Moreover, the social character of such labor should not be confused with what I have described as the specific social character of labor in capitalism. Labor in noncapitalist societies does not constitute society, for it does not possess the peculiar synthetic character that marks commodity-determined labor. Although social, it does not constitute social relations but is constituted by them. The social character of labor in traditional societies is, of course, seen as “natural.” However, this notion of the natural—thus of nature as well—is very different from that in a society where the commodity form prevails. Nature in traditional societies is endowed with a character that is as “essentially” variegated, personalized, and nonrational as the social relations characterizing the society.¹¹³

As we have seen, labor in capitalism is not mediated by social relations but, rather, itself constitutes a social mediation. *If, in traditional societies, social relations impart meaning and significance to labor, in capitalism labor imparts an “objective” character to itself and to social relations.* This objective character is historically constituted when labor, which is accorded various specific meanings by overt social relations in other societies, mediates itself and thereby negates those meanings. In this sense, objectivity can be seen as the nonovertly social “meaning” that arises historically when objectifying social activity reflexively determines itself socially. Within the framework of this approach, then, social relations in traditional societies determine labors, implements, and objects that, inversely, appear to possess a socially determining character. In capitalism, labor and its products create a sphere of objective social relations: they are in fact socially determining but do not appear as such. Rather, they appear to be purely “material.”

This latter inversion merits further examination. I have shown that the specific mediating role of labor in capitalism necessarily appears in objectified form and not directly as an attribute of labor. Instead, because labor in capitalism accords

Zum Problem der Konstitution im Marxismus,” in Axel Honneth and Urs Jaeggi, eds., *Arbeit, Handlung, Normativität* (Frankfurt, 1980), esp. pp. 24–38.

112. Márkus, for example, mentions societies in which objects belonging to one group are not even touched by members of other groups—for example, the men’s weapons are not to be touched by women and children (*ibid.*, p. 31).

113. Lukács has suggested such an approach to conceptions of nature: see “Reification and the Consciousness of Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 128.

its social character to itself, it appears simply as labor in general, stripped of the aura of social meaning accorded various labors in more traditional societies. Paradoxically, precisely because the social dimension of labor in capitalism is reflexively constituted, and is not an attribute accorded it by overt social relations, such labor does not appear to be the mediating activity it actually is in this social formation. It appears, rather, only as one of its dimensions, as concrete labor, a technical activity that can be applied and regulated socially in an instrumental fashion.

This process of the “objectification” of labor in capitalist society is also a process of the paradoxical “secularization” of the commodity as a social object. Although the commodity as an object does not acquire its social character as a result of social relations but, rather, is intrinsically a social object (in the sense of being a materialized social mediation), it appears to be a mere thing. As noted, although the commodity is simultaneously a use value and a value, the latter social dimension becomes externalized in the form of a universal equivalent, money. As a result of this “doubling” of the commodity into commodity and money, the latter appears as the objectification of the abstract dimension, whereas the former appears to be merely a thing. In other words, the fact that the commodity is itself a materialized social mediation implies the absence of overt social relations that imbue objects with a “suprathingly” (social or sacred) significance. As a mediation, the commodity is itself a “suprathingly” thing. The externalization of its mediational dimension results, therefore, in the appearance of the commodity as a *purely* material object.¹¹⁴

This “secularization” of labor and its products is a moment of the historical process of the dissolution and transformation of traditional social bonds by a social mediation with a dual—concrete-material and abstract-social—character. The precipitation of the former dimension proceeds apace with the construction of the latter. Hence, as we have seen, it is only apparently the case that with the overcoming of the determinations and limits associated with overt social relations and forms of domination, humans now freely dispose of their labor. Because labor in capitalism is not really free of nonconscious social determination, but itself has become the medium of such determination, people are

114. I shall not, on this abstract level of the analysis, address the question of the meaning accorded to use values in capitalism, other than to suggest that any examination of this question should take into account the very different relationships between objects (and labor) and social relations in capitalist and noncapitalist societies. It seems that objects are accorded significance in capitalism in a different sense than in traditional societies. Their meaning is not so much seen as intrinsic to them, an “essential” attribute; rather, they are “thingly” things that *have* meaning—they are like signs in the sense that no necessary relationship exists between the signifier and the signified. One could attempt to relate the differences between the “intrinsic” and the “contingent,” “suprathingly” attributes of objects, as well as the historical development of the social importance of judgments of taste to the development of the commodity as the totalizing social form of capitalist society. This theme, however, cannot be treated in this work.

confronted with a new compulsion, one grounded in precisely that which overcame the compelling bonds of traditional social forms: the alienated, abstract social relations that are mediated by labor. These relations constitute a framework of "objective," apparently nonsocial constraints within which self-determining individuals pursue their interests—whereby "individuals" and "interests" seem to be ontologically given rather than socially constituted. That is, a new social context is constituted that appears neither to be social nor contextual. Put simply, *the form of social contextualization characteristic of capitalism is one of apparent decontextualization.*

(Overcoming nonconscious social compulsion in an emancipated society, then, would entail "freeing" secularized labor from its role as a social mediation. People could then dispose of labor and its products in a manner free from both traditional social limits and alienated objective social compulsions. On the other hand, labor, although secular, could once again be imbued with significance—not as a result of nonconscious tradition but because of its recognized social importance as well as the substantial satisfaction and meaning it could afford individuals.)

According to Marx's analysis of capitalism, then, the dual character of commodity-determined labor constitutes a social universe characterized by concrete and abstract dimensions. The former appears as the variegated surface of immediate sensuous experience, and the latter exists as general, homogeneous, and abstracted from all particularity—but both dimensions are accorded an objective character by the self-mediating quality of labor in capitalism. The concrete dimension is constituted as objective in the sense of being objectlike, "material" or "thingly." The abstract dimension also has an objective quality, in the sense of being a qualitatively homogeneous general sphere of abstract necessity that functions in a lawful manner, independent of will. The structure of social relations that characterize capitalism has the form of a quasi-natural opposition between "thingly" nature and abstract, universal, "objective" natural laws, an opposition from which the social and historical have vanished. The relation of these two worlds of objectivity can then be construed as that of essence and appearance, or as that of an opposition (as has been expressed historically, for example, in the opposition between romantic and positive-rational modes of thought).¹¹⁵

115. See M. Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism," in A. Rabinbach and J. Zipes, eds., *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust* (New York and London, 1986), pp. 302–14, where I analyze modern anti-Semitism with reference to this quasi-natural opposition in capitalist society between a concrete "natural" sphere of social life and an abstract universal one. The opposition of its abstract and the concrete dimensions allows capitalism to be perceived and understood in terms of its abstract dimension alone; its concrete dimension can thereby be apprehended as noncapitalist. Modern anti-Semitism can be understood as a fetishized, one-sided form of anticapitalism that grasps capitalism in terms of its abstract dimension alone, and biologically identifies that dimension with the Jews, and the concrete dimension of capitalism with the "Aryans."

There are many similarities between the characteristics of these social forms, as analyzed thus far, and those of nature as conceptualized by seventeenth-century natural science, for example. They suggest that when the commodity, as a structured form of social practice, becomes widespread, it conditions the way in which the world—natural as well as social—is conceived.

The world of commodities is one in which objects and actions are no longer imbued with sacred significance. It is a secular world of "thingly" objects bound together by, and revolving around, the glittering abstractum of money. It is, to use Weber's phrase, a disenchanting world. One could reasonably hypothesize that the practices that constitute and are constituted by such a social world could also generate a conception of nature as deanimated, secularized, and "thingly," one whose further characteristics, moreover, can be related to the particular character of the commodity as a concrete object and an abstract mediation. Dealing with commodities on an everyday level establishes a social commonality among goods as "thingly" and involves as well a continuous act of abstraction. Each commodity has not only its specific concrete qualities, measured in concrete material quantities, but all commodities share in common value, a nonmanifest abstract quality with (as we shall see) a temporally determined magnitude. The magnitude of their value is a function of abstract measure rather than of concrete material quantity. As a social form, the commodity is completely independent of its material content. This form is not, in other words, the form of qualitatively specific objects but is abstract and can be grasped mathematically. It possesses "formal" characteristics. Commodities are both particular, sensual objects (and are valued as such by the buyer) and values, moments of an abstractly homogeneous substance that is mathematically divisible and measurable (for example, in terms of time and money).

Similarly, in classical modern natural science, behind the concrete world of manifold qualitative appearances is a world consisting of a common substance in motion, which possesses "formal" qualities and can be grasped mathematically. Both levels are "secularized." That of the underlying essence of reality is an "objective" realm in the sense that it is independent of subjectivity and operates according to laws that can be grasped by reason. Just as the value of the commodity is abstracted from its qualities as a use value, true nature, according to Descartes, for example, consists in its "primary qualities," matter in motion, which can only be grasped by abstracting from the level of appearances of qualitative particularity ("secondary qualities"). The latter level is a function of the sense organs, the "eye of the beholder." Objectivity and subjectivity, mind and matter, form and content, are constituted as substantially different and opposed. Their possible correspondence now becomes an issue—they now must be mediated.¹¹⁶

116. As mentioned above, it is noteworthy in this regard that the form of Marx's initial "derivation" of value in its opposition to use value closely parallels Descartes's derivation of primary qualities in opposition to secondary qualities.

One could describe and analyze further the points of similarity between the commodity as a form of social relations and modern European conceptions of nature (such as its impersonal, lawlike mode of functioning). On this basis, one could then hypothesize that not only the paradigms of classical physics but also the emergence of a specific form and concept of Reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are related to the alienated structures of the commodity form. One could even try to relate changes in forms of thought in the nineteenth century to the dynamic character of the fully developed capital form. I do not, however, intend to pursue such an investigation at this point. This brief outline is intended merely to suggest that conceptions of nature and paradigms of natural science can be socially and historically grounded. Although, in discussing the problem of abstract time, I shall continue to examine certain epistemological implications of the categories, I cannot investigate more extensively in this work the relation of conceptions of nature to their social contexts. It should, however, be clear that what I have outlined here has very little in common with attempts to examine social influences on science in which the social is understood in an immediate sense—group or class interests, “priorities,” and so on. Although such considerations are very important in examining the application of science, they cannot account for conceptions of nature or scientific paradigms themselves.

The nonfunctionalist sociohistorical theory of knowledge suggested by the Marxian critique maintains that the ways in which people perceive and conceive of the world in capitalist society is shaped by the forms of their social relations, understood as structured forms of everyday social practice. It has little in common with the “reflection” theory of knowledge. The emphasis on the *form* of social relations as an epistemological category also distinguishes the approach suggested here from attempts at a materialist explanation of the natural sciences such as those of Franz Borkenau and Henryk Grossmann. According to Borkenau, the rise of modern science, of “mathematical-mechanistic thought,” was closely related to the emergence of the system of manufacture—the destruction of the artisanal system and the concentration of labor under one roof.¹¹⁷ Borkenau does not attempt to explain the relationship he postulates between the natural sciences and manufacture in terms of utility; rather, he notes that science played a negligible role in the process of production during the period of manufacture, that is, until the emergence of large-scale industrial production. The relationship between production and science Borkenau postulates was indirect: he claims that the labor process developed in manufacture at the beginning of the seventeenth century served as a model of reality for natural philosophers. That labor process was characterized by an extreme detail-division of labor into relatively unskilled activities, giving rise to an underlying substratum of ho-

mogeneous labor in general. This, in turn, allowed for the development of a conception of social labor and, hence, for the quantitative comparison of labor time units. Mechanistic thought, according to Borkenau, arose from the experience of a mechanistic organization of production.

Leaving aside Borkenau’s attempt to derive the category of abstract labor directly from the organization of concrete labor, it is by no means clear why people should have begun to conceive of the world in terms similar to the organization of production in manufacture. In describing the social conflicts of the seventeenth century, Borkenau does point out that the new worldview was of advantage to those groupings associated with, and struggling for, the new emerging social, economic, and political order. Its ideological *function*, however, can hardly explain the *ground* of such a form of thought. A consideration of the structure of concrete labor, supplemented by one of social conflict, does not suffice as the basis of a sociohistorical epistemology.

Henryk Grossmann criticizes Borkenau’s interpretation, but his criticisms are restricted to the empirical level.¹¹⁸ Grossmann argues that the organization of production which Borkenau attributes to the period of manufacture actually came into being only with industrial production; in general, manufacture did not entail the breakdown and homogenization of labor, but brought together skilled artisans in one factory without appreciably changing their mode of labor. In addition, he claims that the emergence of mechanistic thought should not be sought in the seventeenth century, but earlier, with Leonardo da Vinci. Grossmann then suggests another explanation for the origins of such thought: it emerged from the practical activity of skilled handicraftsmen in inventing and producing new mechanical devices.

What Grossmann’s hypothesis has in common with that of Borkenau is that it attempts to derive a form of thought directly from a consideration of labor as productive activity. Yet, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel points out in *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, Grossmann’s approach is inadequate because, in his essay, the devices that supposedly give rise to mechanistic thought are already understood and explained in terms of the logic of such thought.¹¹⁹ The origins of particular forms of thought must be sought on a deeper level, according to Sohn-Rethel. Like the interpretation outlined in this work, his approach is to analyze underlying structures of thought—for example, those which Kant posited ahistorically as transcendental *a priori* categories—in terms of their constitution by forms of social synthesis. However, Sohn-Rethel’s understanding of social constitution differs from that presented in this work: he does not analyze the specificity of labor in capitalism as being socially constituting but, rather, posits two forms of social synthesis—one effected by means of exchange, and one by means of

117. For the following summary, see Franz Borkenau, “Zur Soziologie des mechanistischen Weltbildes,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1 (1932), pp. 311–35.

118. See Henryk Grossmann, “Die gesellschaftlichen Grundlagen der mechanistischen Philosophie und die Manufaktur,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 4 (1935), pp. 161–229.

119. Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, p. 85n20.

labor. He argues that the sort of abstraction and form of social synthesis entailed in the value form is not a labor abstraction but an exchange abstraction.¹²⁰ According to Sohn-Rethel, there is a labor abstraction in capitalism but it occurs in the process of production rather than in the exchange process.¹²¹ Sohn-Rethel, however, does not relate the notion of labor abstraction to the creation of alienated social structures. Instead, he evaluates positively the mode of social synthesis purportedly effected by labor in industrial production as noncapitalist and opposes it to the mode of societalization effected by exchange, which he assesses negatively.¹²² The latter mode of social synthesis alone, according to Sohn-Rethel, constitutes the essence of capitalism. This version of a traditional interpretation of the contradiction of capitalism leads Sohn-Rethel to claim that a society is potentially classless when it acquires the form of its synthesis directly through the process of production and not through exchange-mediated appropriation.¹²³ It also weakens his sophisticated attempt at an epistemological reading of Marx's categories.

Within the framework of this work, the synthesis of societalization is never a function of "labor" but of the form of social relations in which production takes place. Labor effects that function only in capitalism, as a result of the historically specific quality we have uncovered in examining the commodity form. Sohn-Rethel, however, interprets the commodity form as being extrinsic to commodity-determined labor, and then attributes to production as such a role in societalization which it does not possess. This prevents him from grasping adequately the character of these alienated social structures created by labor-mediated societalization and the specificity of the process of production in capitalism.

In Chapter Five I shall examine the social compulsion exerted by abstract time as a further basic determination of the alienated social structures grasped by the category of capital. It is precisely these structures, however, that Sohn-Rethel evaluates positively as noncapitalist: "The functional necessity of a unitary organization of time, which characterizes the modern continuous labor process, contains the elements of a new synthesis of societalization."¹²⁴ Such an evaluation is consistent with an approach that understands abstraction as a market phenomenon completely extrinsic to labor in capitalism, and, hence, implicitly regards labor in capitalism as "labor." The form of alienated social synthesis that is indeed effected by labor in capitalism is, thereby, assessed positively as a noncapitalist form of societalization, effected by labor per se.

This position also hinders Sohn-Rethel from dealing with nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of thought in which the form of capital-determined pro-

duction itself takes on a fetishized form. His emphasis on exchange, which excludes any examination of the implications of the commodity form for labor, restricts his social epistemology to a consideration of forms of static, abstract mechanical thought. This necessarily excludes many forms of modern thought from the purview of his critical social epistemology. The failure to consider the mediating role of labor in capitalism indicates that Sohn-Rethel's understanding of the form of synthesis differs from that of the form of social relations I have developed here. Although my interpretation parallels, in some respects, Sohn-Rethel's attempt to relate the historical emergence of abstract thought, philosophy, and natural science to abstract social forms, it is based upon a different understanding of the character and constitution of those forms.

Nevertheless, a theory of social forms is of central importance to a critical theory. A theory based on an analysis of the commodity form of social relations can, in my judgment, account at a high level of logical abstraction for the conditions under which scientific thought shifted, with the rise of capitalist civilization, from a concern with quality (use value) and questions addressing the substantive "what" and "why" to a concern with quantity (value) and questions dealing with the more instrumental "how."

Labor and instrumental action

I have argued that the forms of capitalist social relations have "cultural" significance: they condition understandings of nature as well as of the social world. A basic characteristic of modern natural science is its instrumental character—its preoccupation with questions of how nature functions to the exclusion of questions of meaning, its "value-free" character with regard to substantive goals. Although I shall not continue to pursue directly the question of the social grounding of such a natural science at this point, this question can be illuminated indirectly by examining the problem of whether labor should be considered instrumental activity, and by considering the relation between such activity and the form of social constitution that characterizes capitalism.

In *Eclipse of Reason*, Max Horkheimer relates labor to instrumental reason, which he characterizes as that reduced form of reason which has become dominant with industrialization. Instrumental reason, according to Horkheimer, is concerned only with the question of the correct or most efficient means to a given end. It is related to Weber's notion of formal, as opposed to substantive, rationality. Goals themselves are not seen as ascertainable by means of reason.¹²⁵ The idea that reason itself is meaningfully valid only in relation to instruments, or is itself an instrument, is closely tied to the positivist deification of the natural sciences as the only model of knowledge.¹²⁶ Such an idea results in complete

120. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

121. *Ibid.*

122. *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 186.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

125. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York, 1974), pp. 3–6.

126. *Ibid.*, pp. 59ff., 105.

relativism with regard to substantive goals and systems of morals, politics, and economics.¹²⁷ Horkheimer relates this instrumentalization of reason to the development of increasingly complex methods of production:

The complete transformation of the world into a world of means rather than of ends is itself the consequence of the historical development of the methods of production. As material production and social organization grow more complicated and reified, recognition of means as such becomes increasingly difficult, since they assume the appearance of autonomous entities.¹²⁸

Horkheimer does state that this process of increasing instrumentalization is not a function of production per se, but of its social context.¹²⁹ As I have argued, however, Horkheimer, despite some equivocations, identifies labor in and of itself with instrumental action. While I agree that there is a connection between instrumental action and instrumental reason, I take issue with his identification of the former with labor as such. Horkheimer's explanation for the increasing instrumental character of the world in terms of the growing complexity of production is less than convincing. Labor may always be a pragmatic technical means for achieving particular goals, in addition to whatever meaning it may be accorded, but this can hardly explain the growing instrumental character of the world—the growing domination of “value-free” means over substantive values and goals, the transformation of the world into one of means. Only at first glance does labor appear to be the example par excellence of instrumental action. Both György Márkus and Cornelius Castoriadis, for example, have argued convincingly that social labor is never simply instrumental action.¹³⁰ In terms of the argument I have developed here, that proposition can be modified: Social labor as such is *not* instrumental action; labor in capitalism, however, *is* instrumental action.

The transformation of the world into one of means rather than ends, a process that extends even to people,¹³¹ is related to the particular character of commodity-determined labor as a means. Although social labor is always a means to an end, this alone does not render it instrumental. As noted, in precapitalist societies, for example, labor is accorded significance by overt social relations and is shaped by tradition. Because commodity-producing labor is not mediated by such relations it is, in a sense, de-signified, “secularized.” This development may be a necessary condition for the growing instrumentalization of the world, but it is not a sufficient condition for labor's instrumental character—that it

127. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

129. *Ibid.*, pp. 153–54.

130. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, trans. Kate Soper and Martin H. Ryle (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 244–49; György Márkus, “Die Welt menschlicher Objekte,” p. 24ff.

131. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 151.

exists as a pure means. That character is a function of the sort of means labor in capitalism is.

As we have seen, commodity-determined labor is, as concrete labor, a means for producing a particular product; moreover and more essentially, as abstract labor, it is self-mediating—it is a *social means* of acquiring the products of others. Hence, for the producers, labor is abstracted from its concrete product: it serves them as a pure means, an instrument to acquire products that have no intrinsic relation to the substantive character of the productive activity by means of which they are acquired.¹³²

The goal of production in capitalism is neither the material goods produced nor the reflexive effects of laboring activity on the producer, but value, or, more precisely, surplus value. Value, however, is a purely quantitative goal; there is no qualitative difference between the value of wheat and that of weapons. Value is purely quantitative because as a form of wealth it is an objectified means: it is the objectification of abstract labor—of labor as an objective means of acquiring goods it has not produced. Thus production for (surplus) value is production where the goal itself is a means.¹³³ Hence, production in capitalism necessarily is quantitatively oriented, toward ever-increasing amounts of surplus value. This is the basis of Marx's analysis of production in capitalism as production for the sake of production.¹³⁴ The instrumentalization of the world, within such a framework, is a function of the determination of production and social relations by this historically specific form of social mediation—it is not a function of the increasing complexity of material production as such. Production for the sake of production signifies that production is no longer a means to a substantive end but a means to an end that is itself a means, a moment in a never-ending chain of expansion. *Production in capitalism becomes a means to a means.*

The emergence of a goal of social production which is actually a means underlies the increasing domination of means over ends, noted by Horkheimer. It is not rooted in the character of concrete labor as a determinate material means of creating a specific product; rather, it is rooted in the character of labor in

132. This analysis of abstract labor provides an abstract and initial logical determination for the development in the twentieth century, noted by André Gorz and Daniel Bell, among others, of workers' self-conceptions as being worker/consumers rather than worker/producers. See André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, trans. Gillian Handyside and Chris Turner (London and New York, 1989), p. 44ff.; and Daniel Bell, “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,” in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1978), pp. 65–72.

133. The rise of social and political, as well as theoretical, formalism could be investigated with reference to this process of the separation of form and content, whereby the former dominates the latter. On another level, Giddens has suggested that, because the process of commodification both destroys traditional values and modes of life and entails this separation of form and content, it induces widespread feelings of meaninglessness. See *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, pp. 152–53.

134. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 742; *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, pp. 1037–38.

relativism with regard to substantive goals and systems of morals, politics, and economics.¹²⁷ Horkheimer relates this instrumentalization of reason to the development of increasingly complex methods of production:

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The transformation of the world into one of means rather than ends, a process that extends even to people,¹³¹ is related to the particular character of commodity-determined labor as a means. Although social labor is always a means to an end, this alone does not render it instrumental. As noted, in precapitalist societies, for example, labor is accorded significance by overt social relations and is shaped by tradition. Because commodity-producing labor is not mediated by such relations it is, in a sense, de-signified, “secularized.” This development may be a necessary condition for the growing instrumentalization of the world, but it is not a sufficient condition for labor's instrumental character—that it

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131. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 151.

exists as a pure means. That character is a function of the sort of means labor in capitalism is.

As we have seen, commodity-determined labor is, as concrete labor, a means for producing a particular product; moreover and more essentially, as abstract labor, it is self-mediating—it is a *social means* of acquiring the products of others. Hence, for the producers, labor is abstracted from its concrete product: it serves them as a pure means, an instrument to acquire products that have no intrinsic relation to the substantive character of the productive activity by means of which they are acquired.¹³²

The goal of production in capitalism is neither the material goods produced nor the reflexive effects of laboring activity on the producer, but value, or, more precisely, surplus value. Value, however, is a purely quantitative goal; there is no qualitative difference between the value of wheat and that of weapons. Value is purely quantitative because as a form of wealth it is an objectified means: it is the objectification of abstract labor—of labor as an objective means of acquiring goods it has not produced. Thus production for (surplus) value is production where the goal itself is a means.¹³³ Hence, production in capitalism necessarily is quantitatively oriented, toward ever-increasing amounts of surplus value. This is the basis of Marx's analysis of production in capitalism as production for the sake of production.¹³⁴ The instrumentalization of the world, within such a framework, is a function of the determination of production and social relations by this historically specific form of social mediation—it is not a function of the increasing complexity of material production as such. Production for the sake of production signifies that production is no longer a means to a substantive end but a means to an end that is itself a means, a moment in a never-ending chain of expansion. *Production in capitalism becomes a means to a means.*

The emergence of a goal of social production which is actually a means underlies the increasing domination of means over ends, noted by Horkheimer. It is not rooted in the character of concrete labor as a determinate material means of creating a specific product; rather, it is rooted in the character of labor in

132. This analysis of abstract labor provides an abstract and initial logical determination for the development in the twentieth century, noted by André Gorz and Daniel Bell, among others, of workers' self-conceptions as being worker/consumers rather than worker/producers. See André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, trans. Gillian Handyside and Chris Turner (London and New York, 1989), p. 44ff.; and Daniel Bell, “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,” in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1978), pp. 65–72.

133. The rise of social and political, as well as theoretical, formalism could be investigated with reference to this process of the separation of form and content, whereby the former dominates the latter. On another level, Giddens has suggested that, because the process of commodification both destroys traditional values and modes of life and entails this separation of form and content, it induces widespread feelings of meaninglessness. See *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, pp. 152–53.

134. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 742; *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, pp. 1037–38.

capitalism as a social means that is quasi-objective and supersedes overtly social relations. Horkheimer, in effect, attributes a consequence of the specific character of labor in capitalism to labor in general.

Although the process of instrumentalization is logically implied by the two-fold character of labor in capitalism, this process is greatly intensified by the transformation of humans into means. As I shall elaborate, the first stage of this transformation is the commodification of labor itself as labor power (what Marx calls the “formal subsumption of labor under capital”), which does not necessarily transform the material form of production. The second stage is when the process of producing surplus value molds the labor process in its image (the “real subsumption of labor under capital”).¹³⁵ With real subsumption, the goal of capitalist production—which is actually a means—molds the material means of its realization. The relation of the material form of production and its goal (value) are no longer contingent. Rather, abstract labor begins to quantify and shape concrete labor in its image; the abstract domination of value begins to be materialized in the labor process itself. A hallmark of real subsumption, according to Marx, is that, despite appearances, the actual raw materials of the process of production are not the physical materials that are transformed into material products, but the *workers* whose objectified labor time constitutes the lifeblood of the totality.¹³⁶ With real subsumption this determination of the valorization process is materialized: the person has, quite literally, become a means.

The goal of production in capitalism exerts a form of necessity on the producers. The goals of labor—whether defined in terms of the products or the effects of labor on the producers—are neither given by social tradition nor decided upon consciously. Rather, *the goal has escaped human control*: people cannot decide on value (or surplus value) as a goal, for this goal confronts them as an external necessity. They can decide only which products are most likely to maximize the (surplus) value obtained; the choice of material products as goals is a function of neither their substantive qualities, nor the needs to be fulfilled. Yet the “battle of the gods”—to borrow Weber’s term—that does actually reign among the substantive goals only *appears* to be pure relativism; the relativism that prevents one from judging on substantive grounds the merits of one goal of production relative to another stems from the fact that, in capital-determined society, *all* products embody the same underlying goal of production—value. This actual goal, however, is itself not substantive; hence the appearance of pure relativism. The goal of production in capitalism is an absolute given that, paradoxically, is only a means—but one that has no end other than itself.

As the duality of concrete labor and labor-mediated interaction, labor in capitalism has a socially constituting character. This confronts us with the follow-

135. *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, p. 1034ff.

136. *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 296–97, 303, 425, 548–49.

ing, only apparently paradoxical, conclusion: it is precisely because of its socially mediating character that labor in capitalism is instrumental action. Because the mediating quality of labor in capitalism cannot appear directly, instrumentality then appears as an objective attribute of labor as such.

The instrumental character of labor as self-mediating is, at the same time, the instrumental character of labor-mediated social relations. Labor in capitalism constitutes the social mediation that characterizes this society; as such it is a “practical” activity. We are now confronted with a further paradox: labor in capitalism is instrumental action precisely because of its historically determinate “practical” character. Conversely, the “practical” sphere, that of social interaction, is fused with that of labor and has an instrumental character. In capitalism, then, the instrumental character of both labor and social relations is rooted in labor’s specific social role in that formation. Instrumentality is rooted in the (labor-mediated) form of social constitution in capitalism.

This analysis, however, need not imply the necessary pessimism of Critical Theory discussed in Chapter Three. Because the instrumental character we have investigated is a function of the double character of labor in capitalism—and not of labor per se—it can be analyzed as an attribute of an internally contradictory form. The growing instrumental character of the world need not be understood as a linear, endless process bound to the development of production. The social form can be seen as one that not only accords itself an instrumental character but, from the same duality, gives rise to the possibility of its fundamental critique and to the conditions of the possibility of its own abolition. The concept of the double character of labor, in other words, provides the starting point for a reconsideration of the meaning of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society.

Abstract and substantive totality

I have analyzed value as a category expressing the self-domination of labor, that is, the domination of the producers by the historically specific mediating dimension of their own labor. Except in the brief discussion of the subsumption of labor under capital in the previous section, my analysis up to this point has treated the alienated social totality constituted by labor in capitalism as formal rather than as substantive—it is the externalized social bond among individuals which results from the simultaneous determination of labor as a productive activity and as a socially mediating activity. If the investigation were to stop here, it might seem as though what I have analyzed as the alienated social bond in capitalism does not—given its formal character—differ fundamentally from the market. The analysis of alienation presented thus far could be appropriated and reinterpreted by a theory that would focus on money as the medium of exchange rather than on labor as a mediating activity.

However, in continuing this investigation, and examining Marx’s category of

surplus value, hence, of capital as well, we shall see that the alienated social bond in capitalism does not remain formal and static, in his analysis. It has, rather, a directionally dynamic character. That capitalism is characterized by an immanent historical dynamic is due, in the Marxian analysis, to the form of abstract domination intrinsic to the value form of wealth and of social mediation. As noted, an essential characteristic of that dynamic is an ever-accelerating process of production for the sake of production. What characterizes capitalism is that, on a deep systemic level, production is not for the sake of consumption. Rather, it is driven, ultimately, by a system of abstract compulsions constituted by the double character of labor in capitalism, which posit production as its own goal. In other words, the “culture” that ultimately mediates production in capitalism is radically different than in other societies inasmuch as it itself is constituted by labor.¹³⁷ What distinguishes the critical theory based on the notion of labor as a socially mediating activity from approaches that focus on the market or on money is the former’s analysis of capital—its ability to grasp the directional dynamic and trajectory of production of modern society.

As I investigate Marx’s category of capital, it will become clear that the social totality acquires its dynamic character by incorporating a substantive social dimension of labor. Up to this point, I have considered a specific, abstract, social dimension of labor in capitalism as a socially mediating activity. This dimension should not be confused with the social character of labor as a productive activity. The latter, according to Marx, includes the social organization of the process of production, the average skill of the working population, the level of the development, and the application of science, among other factors.¹³⁸ This dimen-

137. In this sense, the criticism that Marx neglects to incorporate in his theory an analysis of the historical and cultural specificity of use values in capitalism—or, more generally, an analysis of culture in mediating production—focuses on a different logical level of social life in capitalism than that which Marx seeks to elucidate in his mature critique. This criticism, moreover, overlooks the fact that Marx regards the essential characteristic and driving force of the capitalist social formation as being a historically unique form of social mediation that results in production for the sake of production rather than for consumption. This analysis, as we shall see, does address the category of use value, although it is not identified with consumption alone. Nevertheless, it does argue that theories of consumption-driven production cannot account for the necessary dynamism of capitalist production. (The interpretation I present in this work casts doubt on recent tendencies in social theory to identify consumption as the locus of culture and subjectivity—which implies that production is to be considered essentially technical and “objective”; and more fundamentally, it casts doubt on any notion of “culture” as a transhistorical universal category, which everywhere and at all times is constituted in the same manner.) Such criticisms do, however, indicate that other considerations of use value—with regard to consumption, for example—are important in investigating capitalist society on a more concrete level. It is crucial, though, to distinguish among levels of analysis and work out their mediations. For the above criticisms of Marx, see Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 135, 148ff.; and William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1976), pp. xvi–xx.

138. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 130.

sion—the social character of concrete labor as productive activity—has remained outside of my considerations until now; I have treated the function of labor as a socially mediating activity independently of the specific concrete labor performed. However these two social dimensions of labor in capitalism do not simply exist alongside one another. In order to analyze how they determine each other, I shall first examine the quantitative and temporal dimension of value; this will allow me to show—in elucidating the dialectic of labor and time—that, with the capital form, the social dimension of concrete labor is incorporated into the alienated social dimension constituted by abstract labor. The totality, which I have treated only as abstract thus far, acquires a substantive character by virtue of its appropriation of the social character of productive activity. I shall undertake this analysis in the third part of this work in order to provide the basis for an understanding of Marx’s category of capital. In the course of this investigation, I shall show that the social totality expressed by the category of capital also possesses a “double character”—abstract and substantive—rooted in the two dimensions of the commodity form. The difference is that, with capital, *both* social dimensions of labor are alienated and, together, confront individuals as a compelling force. This duality is the reason that the totality is not static but possesses an intrinsically contradictory character that underlies an immanent, historically directional dynamic.

This analysis of the alienated social forms as at once formal and substantive yet contradictory differs from approaches, such as that of Sohn-Rethel, that seek to locate capitalism’s contradiction between its abstract formal dimension and a substantive dimension—the proletarian-based industrial process of production—and presume the latter not to be capital-determined. At the same time, my approach implies that any fundamentally pessimistic notion of the totality as a “one-dimensional” structure of domination (one without intrinsic contradiction) is not fully adequate to the Marxian analysis. Rooted in the double character of commodity-determined labor, the alienated social totality is not, as Adorno for example would have it, the identity that incorporates the socially nonidentical in itself so as to make the whole a noncontradictory unity, leading to the universalization of domination.¹³⁹ To establish that the totality is intrinsically contradictory is to show that it remains an essentially contradictory identity of identity and nonidentity, and has not become a unitary identity that has totally assimilated the nonidentical.

139. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, 1973).