

Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism

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THIS essay is an attempt to outline a reinterpretation of central aspects of Marx's analysis of the essence of capitalism and its historical development and, therefore, of his notion of socialism. His analysis of social labor and its implications for a consideration of needs and forms of consciousness which point to the possible overcoming of capitalism will be the focus of my examination. The intent is to provide a critique of the traditional Marxist point of view which, at the same time, lays the foundation for another critical historical analysis of the capitalist social formation.

Within the Marxist tradition, the essence of capitalism has generally been characterized in terms of the market economy and private ownership of the means of production. Socialism, as its historical negation, has correspondingly been seen *essentially* in terms of collective ownership of the means of production and economic planning. The term "traditional Marxism" shall be used to denote this shared set of fundamental assumptions among various theories which, on other levels, may stand opposed to one another.¹

¹ For an example of a nonorthodox version of traditional Marxism, see B. Brick and M. Postone, "Friedrich Pollock and the 'Primacy of the Political,'" *International Journal of Politics*, no. 3 (Fall, 1976). It would have been beyond the bounds of this essay to specifically show how many Marxist thinkers, who stand outside the mainstream of the Marxism of the 2nd and 3rd Internationals, share those basic assumptions which I have termed characteristic of traditional Marxism. I intend to deal with this theme more exhaustively in the future.

In this general view, the course of capitalist development can be summarized as follows: The structure of free-market capitalism was such that it gave rise to industrial production—a mode which, under conditions of accumulation, competition, and crises, gave rise in turn to the technical possibilities of centralized planning as well as to its socio-organizational presuppositions: centralization and concentration of the means of production, the tendency of ownership and management to become separated from one another, and the constitution and concentration of an industrial proletariat. In other words, the capitalist mode of ownership and *distribution* gave rise to a new mode of production—industrial production—which created a degree of wealth previously unthinkable, although distributed in a highly inequitable fashion. Nevertheless, this mode of production creates the conditions of possibility of a historically new, just, and consciously regulated mode of *distribution*. In other words, socialism is considered as a social form of the organization of distribution more adequate to the industrial mode of production. The ultimate concern of this version of the theory is, then, the mode of distribution.

This, at first glance, may appear paradoxical. All Marxists claim that theirs is a theory of social *production*. Yet closer examination of the traditional Marxist interpretation of the course of capitalist development reveals that this is not the case. Production does, to be sure, play a very important role, but the development of large-scale industrial production is considered essentially as the historical mediation from the capitalist mode of distribution to the possibility of another. The historical critique is that of the mode of distribution.

This approach informs the interpretation of all key Marxian categories. The interpretation of the category of value, for example, generally associated with this view, is that of a category of distribution—as the nonconscious, “automatic” regulator of the social distribution of goods and services, capital and labor. Similarly, the Marxian contradiction between the

forces and relations of production is also interpreted primarily from the aspect of the distribution of social wealth, where “forces of production” are equated with the industrial mode of production, and capitalist “relations of production” are grasped as private appropriation mediated socially by the automatism of the “self-regulatory” market. The contradiction is seen as that between a productive capacity which could potentially satisfy the *consumptive* needs of all members of society and socioeconomic relations which prevent that potential from being realized.

It should be noted that, within this theory, the industrial process of production, once emerged, becomes endowed with an independent historical existence. It is viewed as being intrinsically independent of the “capitalist economy” which, in turn, is introduced as a set of extrinsic factors: private ownership and exogenous conditions of the valorization of capital within a market economy. The historically dynamic element is seen embedded in the “economic sphere,” narrowly understood, where the industrial mode of production is considered outside of and in growing contradiction to that sphere. A separation is made between class domination and private property as specific to capitalism, and industrial labor as independent of and nonspecific to capitalism. *Once this basic framework is accepted, however, it follows that the industrial mode of production—that based on proletarian labor—is seen as historically final.* This leads to a notion of socialism as the *linear* continuation of the industrial mode of production to which capitalism gave rise; as a new mode of political administration and economic distribution of the *same* mode of production.

It is this basic framework which I call traditional Marxism. There have been, to be sure, extremely important diverging and opposing views within this broad interpretation: for example, determinism versus attempts to treat social subjectivity and class struggle as integral aspects of the history of capitalism; Council Communists versus Party Communists; theories which have attempted, in various fashions, to synthe-

size Marxism and psychoanalysis, or to develop a critical theory of culture or of everyday life. Nevertheless, insofar as they operate with those basic assumptions as to the essence of capitalism and of socialism outlined above, they remain bound within the framework of traditional Marxism, which ultimately is concerned with a new mode of social distribution and with the form of organization and regulation of a proletarian-based industrial mode of production. This latter mode, however, is itself not called into question.

This theory has been capable of analyzing the historical dynamic of liberal capitalism leading to a stage characterized by the growing substitution of the market by the interventionist state as the agent of distribution. Because, however, the moment of distribution is considered in a one-sided and exaggerated manner as *the* determinant of social totality, the growing replacement of the market by the state has posed serious problems for this theory. Inasmuch as the dynamic element is located in the “economic sphere,” narrowly understood, the theory becomes incapable of providing an immanent historical critique of this new stage. It can either concentrate on those aspects of the market form which still remain or, limiting the applicability of the Marxian analysis to nineteenth-century capitalism, can only posit a political critique—one, however, which lacks an immanent dynamic. Neither approach involves a consideration of the mode of production, inasmuch as the latter has become a historical invariable. This is particularly problematic for those positions which, sharing the same theoretical presuppositions as to the essence and dynamic of capitalism, attempt to provide a “Marxist” critique of the Soviet Union. An understanding of the “economic sphere” primarily in terms of distribution does not allow for a historical critique—one concerned with an immanent dynamic of development—once central planning becomes realized. Thus, frequently, the Soviet Union is considered socialist in its “economic base,” but not yet in the “political sphere.” The *nonidentity* of the economic and the political which, in Marx’s analysis,

is characteristic of the capitalist social formation becomes a *nonrelation*.² The critique of political economy has become transformed into an “alternate” political economy: one whose object of investigation—the mode of distribution—is identical to that of classical political economy and which differs from it only insofar as it possesses a historical dynamic. Yet, as I will attempt to indicate, Marx’s analysis of capitalism was a *critique* of political economy precisely because it had another object of investigation.

Traditional Marxism is increasingly being called into question at the present time. It not only does not allow for an immanent critical analysis of existent “socialist” societies but, more importantly, at a time of growing popular questioning of technological “progress” and economic “growth,” and of a growing consciousness of ecological problems, traditional Marxism has become open to criticisms that it is merely a variant of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century beliefs in progress—beliefs which have become anachronistic.

But does this mean that Marxian thought per se must be rejected, or that certain concepts, such as alienation, and certain intentions, such as the analysis of the possibility of an emancipatory social existence, can be “saved,” whereas the body of Marx’s critical analysis of the capitalist social formation must be rejected as a growing fetter on the possibility of emancipatory thought? The difficulty, however, with most attempts to formulate a non-Marxian theory, critical of contemporary society, is that none have been able to combine an analysis of society with a historical dynamic which convincingly points to the possibility of the realization of the “good society.”

Nevertheless, if Marxism is to once again acquire social significance in advanced industrialized countries, the failure of traditional Marxism to critically examine the process of industrial production must be overcome. The adequate historical critique of the capital-determined social totality would have to show that the proletarian-based mode of industrial production

² *Ibid.*

can also be overcome. This would allow for a critical examination of the relation people have to their labor, as well as the relation of humanity to nature, as mediated over the process of production—two crucial areas which cannot be adequately dealt with by a theory whose primary concern is the transformation of the mode of distribution and in which the industrial mode of production is historically hypostasized. *In other words, the adequate historical critique must place the question of alienated production in the center of its investigation.* A theory whose central concern is the mode of production itself would also, in my opinion, provide the necessary point of departure for considerations of culture, of everyday life, of various current emancipation movements, and a host of other considerations which could not be adequately dealt with within the framework of the traditional Marxist interpretation.

Marx's Notion of Socialism, and the Critique of Production

The point of departure for my reinterpretation is the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, a manuscript written by Marx in 1857/58. There, Marx implied an analysis of the essence of capitalism very different from that described above as traditional Marxism, in which the moment of distribution—whether mediated “automatically” by the market or “consciously” by the state—is considered in a one-sided and exaggerated manner as *the* determinant of social totality.

In the *Grundrisse* Marx explicitly criticizes those points of view which consider the mode of distribution as historically changeable, but not the industrial mode of production. He takes as an example John Stuart Mill's statement that “the laws and conditions of the production of wealth partake of the character of physical truths. . . . It is not so with the distribution of wealth. That is a matter of human institutions solely.”³

³ J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1849), vol. 1, pp. 239–240; quoted in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 832.

Marx maintains that this separation is illegitimate: “The ‘laws and conditions’ of the production of wealth and the laws of the ‘distribution of wealth’ are the same laws under different forms, and both change, undergo the same historic process; are as such only moments of a historic process.”⁴

It is important to note that Marx considers property relations—“the worker’s propertylessness, and . . . the appropriation of alien labour by capital”⁵—as an aspect of the mode of distribution. “These modes of distribution are the relations of production themselves, but *sub specie distributionis*.”⁶ This implies that the concept of the “relations of production” is not exhausted by a consideration of the mode of distribution—as is the case in traditional Marxism—but also includes an aspect “*sub specie productionis*,” that is, immanent to the capital-determined industrial mode of production itself. This, however, would mean that *the “forces of production” cannot be equated with the mode of production per se and that the overcoming of capitalism must involve a transformation of the mode of production and not merely of the existing mode of distribution*. It is in this sense that Marx approvingly points to the significance of Fourier’s thought: “Labor cannot become play, as Fourier would like, although it remains his great contribution to have expressed the suspension [*Aufhebung*] not of distribution, but of the mode of production itself, in a higher form, as the ultimate object.”⁷

The Marxian critique of capitalism proceeds from an analysis of the determinations of social labor, indicating the historically emergent possibility of a new form of production, and not merely from a critique of property and other forms of distribution. This is made abundantly clear in the following passage:

It requires no great penetration to grasp that, where e.g., free labour or wage labour arising out of the dissolution of bondage is

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 712.

the point of departure, there machines can only *arise* in antithesis to living labour, as property alien to it, and as power hostile to it; i.e. that they must confront it as capital. But it is just as easy to perceive that machines will not cease to be agencies of social production when they become e.g. property of the associated workers. In the first case, however, their distribution, i.e. that they *do not belong* to the worker, is just as much a condition of the mode of production founded on wage labour. In the second case the changed distribution would start from a *changed* foundation of production, a new foundation first created by the process of history.⁸

In order to grasp what is meant by a transformation of the mode of production itself it is necessary to examine Marx's concept of the "foundation" of (capitalist) production, that is, to analyze the determinations of "the mode of production founded on wage labor" and what a "changed," "new" foundation of production could mean.

My investigation of this problem will begin with a consideration of an extremely crucial section of the *Grundrisse* entitled "Contradiction between the *foundation* of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development."⁹ Marx begins this section as follows:

The exchange of living labour for objectified labour—i.e. the positing of social labour in the form of the contradiction of capital and wage labour—is the ultimate development of the *value-relation* and of production resting on value.¹⁰

In other words, Marx considers *value* to be the foundation of bourgeois production. It is highly significant that, although he is considering only the form of *production* here, he speaks of "exchange" and "value-relation," implying that they are not to be understood merely in terms of the mode of distribution of commodities, prior and post to the process of production, but rather as integral to the capitalist process of production—the "exchange of living labor for objectified labor"—itself. It ap-

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 832–833.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 704; emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

pears that *the Marxian notion of the contradiction between forces and relations of production must therefore be reformulated to include differentiable aspects of the process of production* rather than—as in traditional Marxism—equating the latter as such with “forces of production.” Value appears here to have a meaning which goes far beyond that of the “automatism” of the self-regulating market and instead is to be understood as an intrinsic aspect of capitalist production itself. “Production resting on value” and “the mode of production founded on wage labor” appear to be closely related.

Let us begin pursuing this train of thought. When Marx speaks of production resting on value, he is referring to a mode whose “presupposition is—and remains—the mass of direct labor time, the quantity of labor employed, as the determinant factor in the production of wealth.”¹¹ Yet the historical development of this mode of production is such that this foundation of production becomes increasingly inadequate to the forces to which it gave rise:

But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose ‘powerful effectiveness’ is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology Real wealth manifests itself . . . in the monstrous disproportion between the labour time applied, and its product, as well as in the qualitative imbalance between labour, reduced to a pure abstraction, and the power of the production process it superintends.¹²

The opposition between real wealth and labor time should be noted. To emphasize what may be an unnecessary point, value for Marx is a historical rather than a natural or suprahistorical category of social wealth.¹³ Marx has written a *critique* of politi-

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 704–705.

¹³ This has, unfortunately, been frequently misunderstood. For a more recent example of an author who seems not to have recognized the sociohistorical specificity

cal economy, and value is to be understood as a critical category: one with which the foundations of the form of wealth specific to capitalism are revealed and yet which—in its dynamic—reveals the *historicity* of that form. Beyond a certain historical stage, value becomes less and less adequate as a measure of wealth, that is, capitalist relations of production become increasingly anachronistic in terms of the productive forces to which they gave rise.

The logic of these productive forces does not, however, imply merely the possibility of a greater mass and more equitable distribution of consumptive wealth. *It implies, more essentially, a newer, emancipatory organization of social labor:*

Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself. . . . He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, not the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body—it is, in a word, the development of the *social individual* which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. *The theft of alien labor time, on which the present wealth is based, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself.*¹⁴

This section of the *Grundrisse* makes abundantly clear that the overcoming of capitalism for Marx involves the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production based on value—the expenditure of direct human labor time—as the social form of wealth. Moreover, and this is crucial, what would be involved is a total transformation of the material form of production, of

of the Marxian concept of value, see Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 256. It could be argued that Habermas's attempt to ground the possibility of human emancipation in a sphere of interaction separable from and historically parallel to that of labor, as well as his equation of labor with instrumental activity, follow logically from this misunderstanding.

¹⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 705; emphasis added.

the way people work. *The overcoming of "the mode of production founded on wage labor" appears to involve the overcoming of the concrete labor done by the proletariat.*

Previously, I had maintained that traditional Marxism focuses only on the transformation of the mode of distribution (collective ownership of the means of production and social planning, as opposed to private ownership and market regulation) and posits the industrial mode of production per se as intrinsically independent of capital. In other words, the category of value is understood only as a market category. Here, however, it is obvious that when Marx states that "the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour,"¹⁵ he is in no way speaking merely of the expropriation of private property and its utilization in a more rational, humane, and efficient manner. The appropriation of which he speaks includes the above, of course, but goes far beyond it. *It involves the reflexive utilization of the forces of production historically developed under capitalism upon the process of production itself.* The potential embedded in technology becomes the means by which the process of production is transformed, leading to the abolition of that system of social production, become anachronistic, in which wealth is created through the appropriation of direct labor time and workers labor as cogs of a productive apparatus.

This position, which implies an overcoming of industrial production which goes beyond it, avoids both the uncritical assumption that this mode of production continues to develop linearly, as well as its romantic rejection. By incorporating moments of both of these positions, it reveals the one-dimensionality of each: whereas the one sees only the moment of "progress," hypostasizing it, the other does the same with the moment of alienation. Marx's position grasps both moments as simultaneous characteristics of the capitalist epoch in such a way that the faith in progress together with its romantic

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 708.

rejection can be understood as constituting an antinomy which, *in both of its terms*, is characteristic of that epoch.

My reconsideration, based upon these passages in the *Grundrisse*, involves a materialization of the Marxian concept of *alienation* by locating it in the form of social labor itself—neither “philosophically,” that is, socially nonspecific, nor in the mere fact that the means of production as well as the products belong to the capitalist rather than to the workers. From the passages quoted above, it is clear that Marx emphasizes that the mode of concrete labor under capitalism must be abolished. That is, alienation does not result merely from the fact that people’s objectifications are taken from them, but rather it is *how* they objectify themselves which is crucial. The implication is that *proletarian labor in itself is alienating and that it creates capital. It is proletarian labor as such which must be overcome*. The overcoming of alienation has a moment of *reversal*, of reappropriation, and has as its material presupposition the moment of reversal of the forces of production outlined above—their reflexive utilization on the process of production itself. *If a central determination of capitalism is that social production is for the sake of production, whereas the individual labors in order to consume, its negation should be characterized as a social formation in which social production is for consumption, whereas the labor of the individual is sufficiently satisfying to be pursued for its own sake*.

This interpretation sheds light on Marx’s well-known statement that the capitalist social formation marks the conclusion of the prehistory of human society.¹⁶ Prehistory would then refer to those social formations—Asiatic, antique, feudal, and capitalist—in which a social surplus exists and is created primarily by direct human labor. For all of their differences, this moment is shared by slave, serf, and wage labor. Yet the specific dynamic of the social formation based upon wage labor leads to the emergence of the historical possibility that

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), pp. 21–22.

direct human labor as an internal element of the process of production can be overcome. A new social formation can be created in which “the *surplus labour of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as *the non-labour of the few*, for the development of the general powers of the human head.”¹⁷

This implies the overcoming of the separation between manual and intellectual labor. But it is a historical overcoming. In other words, it is not to be achieved by merely fusing together the two antinomic poles; a combination of existing manual labor and existing intellectual labor. A new synthesis, rather, must involve the overcoming of each of these poles—not merely the overcoming of their separation. The material basis which Marx indicates as necessary for the overcoming of this antinomy (as well as all other antinomies of the capitalist social formation—which, as I have indicated above, Marx succeeded in achieving on the *theoretical* level in his critique) is a new structure and definition of labor in which the one-sided fragmentation of existing labor is overcome.

This overcoming is a moment of a more general one: the overcoming of the opposition between individual and society. The enormous development of the forces of production was carried out under capitalism, a social form in which objectified labor is alienated from living labor and in which, therefore, social wealth confronts labor as an alien and dominant power.¹⁸ The creation of social wealth was done at the expense of narrowing and emptying the particular individual, by the increasing fragmentation of social labor. Value-based production created enormous possibilities of wealth, but only by “the positing of an individual’s entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker. . . .”¹⁹ Under capitalism the power and knowledge of humanity is enormously increased, but in an alienated form which oppresses

¹⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 705.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 831.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 708.

the individual and tends to destroy nature.²⁰ The “species-being” comes into existence, but as an abstract and alienated Subject: Capital. The social form based upon abstract human labor not only constituted the bourgeois individual out of the member of an earlier communal form, but also created society—as the abstract Other, confronting the individual. The real transcendence of this opposition requires a totally different mode of labor.

The overcoming of capitalism, then, can in no way be considered in terms of the linear continuation of the industrial mode of production to which it gave rise. The moment of reversal which I have emphasized involves the material transcendence of the previously necessary split between the narrowed and impoverished individual and the richness and power of an alienated general productive knowledge—by a reincorporation of the latter into the former. The “mere worker” must become the “*social individual*”—one who incorporates in himself the human knowledge and potential first developed and expressed, in alienated form, in society in general. The “social individual,” as a possibility given by the historical course of alienated social production, reveals the category of class to be one of alienation. It does not simply refer to a person who labors communally and altruistically with other people. The overcoming of the opposition between individual and society does not involve the subsumption of the former under the latter; the notion of the “social individual” implies that Marx does not simply positively oppose that collectivity in which all persons are parts to the atomized individual. An implication of my investigation is that if, in Marx’s critique, the “atomized individual” is related to the sphere of commodity circulation, the meta-apparatus in which persons are mere cogs is analyzed as *characteristic* of the sphere of capital-determined production—and in no way represents its over-

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 638.

coming. Together, these one-sided determinations of the relationship of individual to society constitute another antinomy of the capitalist social formation.

The overcoming of this antinomy must involve the material overcoming of the sphere of capital-determined production as well as that of commodity circulation. The notion of the "social individual," as the incorporation of this overcoming, points to the possibility of every individual existing as a full and richly developed being whose labor, as self-constituting activity, is adequate to the richness and knowledge of society as a whole. *A necessary presupposition for the realization of this possibility, then, is that the concrete labor of each person is full and rich in a way which corresponds to the level of general social richness, rather than being its fragmented presupposition and, therefore, in opposition to it.* In terms of my interpretation, it would be ideological at best to claim that this situation is realized when people have a collective, socially responsible attitude toward their labor—when the concrete labor of each remains the same as under capitalism. Labor can be constitutive of the social individual only when the potential of the productive forces is used in such a way that the organization of the labor process itself is completely revolutionized. People must be able to step out of the direct labor process in which they had previously labored as parts and control it from above. The control of this "process of nature, transformed into an industrial process"²¹ must be available not only to society in general but to all of its members. The necessary material condition for the full development of all is that "labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased."²²

In other words, the material foundation of a classless society is one in which the surplus product is not any longer created by direct human labor. The presupposition for the self-abolition of the proletariat is the material abolition of the concrete labor which it does. *The most crucial question of*

²¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 705.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 325.

socialism, then, is not whether or not a capitalist class exists but whether a proletariat still exists.

Any theory which deals only with the overcoming of the bourgeois mode of distribution not only cannot grasp this moment but, worse, can serve to veil the fact that class society is not overcome until the foundation of the mode of production is overcome. Thus traditional Marxism can, in one variant, become an ideology of legitimation for those social forms—the so-called “socialist” societies—in which the abolition of the liberal bourgeois mode of distribution has been accomplished, but not the capital-determined mode of production; in which the abolition of the former veils the continued existence of the latter. Yet even those variants of traditional Marxism which are critical of the Soviet Union are in no position to provide an adequate sociohistorical critique. They can criticize the bureaucratization, the lack of civil liberties, the lack of democracy and of workers’ control of the means of production. But these criticisms, no matter how well founded, remain descriptive and essentially nonhistorical. Insofar as history is introduced, it is as a series of contingencies—a remarkable reversal and statement of weakness for a theory whose purported foundation is “historical materialism.”

(The emphasis on capital-determined production in my reinterpretation allows for a historical analysis of the rise of these “socialist” societies in terms of a dialectic between the development of industrial capitalism in the metropolises of the world market and the increasing role of the state in “peripheral” lands as the only means of creating total capital on a national level. The suspension of free commodity circulation by no means represents socialism in such a situation. It is, rather, the only means by which a “capital revolution” can succeed in the periphery within such a world-market context. The original historical connection of bourgeois revolution and the creation of total capital on the national level no longer exists within such a context. The relation of individual to society therefore becomes that of the capital-determined sub-

sumption of the former under the latter, unmitigated by the individualizing sphere of bourgeois commodity circulation. In a sense, 1917 should be seen as representing the form which 1789 takes on in the world-market context of the twentieth century rather than as its overcoming.)

Lacking a notion of the overcoming of the industrial mode of production, traditional Marxism cannot come to grips with the essential core of the social formation, in all its divergent variations. This, as was stated above, renders the theory increasingly incapable of dealing with new problems of Western capitalist societies and, perhaps more importantly, of being able to grasp that whole variegated range of expressions of historically new needs which—whether directly or mediately—call into question the contemporary organization as well as material form of social labor.

The emphasis in my reinterpretation on dialectical reversal as a historical possibility is not only intended as a critique of traditional Marxism but also as an attempt to lay the groundwork for an adequate reply to the pessimistic analyses of such great social thinkers as Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber. All of them clearly saw and analyzed elements of the negative aspect of the development of capitalism in its cultural ramification (e.g., Simmel's examination of the growing gap between the richness of "objective culture" and the relative narrowness of individual, subjective culture; Durkheim's investigation of the increase of anomie with the supersession of mechanical by organic solidarity; Weber's analysis of the rationalization of all spheres of social life). A notion of socialism based essentially upon a theory of distribution can in no way meet the challenge posed by their various critiques of contemporary society. In fact, their not concentrating on the term "capitalism" in their analyses is an indication of the recognition that a transformation of the mode of distribution alone leaves essential moments of industrial society, of the social totality, untouched. The distinction between capitalism and socialism, as defined by traditional Marxism, involved, for

these thinkers, a nonessential transformation of the social formation—even a heightening of its negative aspects.

Only a notion of the overcoming of capitalism as a reversal of essential structures—as the subjective reappropriation of objective culture and its transformation, as grounded in the material overcoming of alienated labor—provides another possibility adequate to their perceptions. The difference between capitalism and socialism could then indeed be justified as one which encompasses the transformation of the essence of the culture in all of its ramifications.

Categorical Foundations of the Critique of Traditional Marxism

A thorough grounding of this reinterpretation would have to show that the sections of the *Grundrisse* cited above do not merely contain utopian visions of Marx, visions which stand outside of his critique of political economy. In other words, it would be necessary to ground this reinterpretation in an analysis of the fundamental categories of that critique. While such an undertaking would go beyond the scope of this essay, an outline of such an analysis is in order.²³

A careful analysis of *Capital* indicates that Marx's fundamental categories, such as value and surplus value, not only encompass the mode of distribution in the sense outlined above but are categories of a historically particular mode of production itself. Moreover, in the passages quoted above, the abolition of direct human labor time as the measure of social wealth is inextricably tied to the abolition of direct human labor in the process of production:

As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use-value.²⁴

²³ My current work is concerned with the further development of the reinterpretation presented in this essay.

²⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 705.

This implies that *an analysis of value as the social form of wealth cannot be simply separated from the concrete material form of that labor which produces it*; that surplus-value-producing labor, wage labor, cannot be separated from the concrete form of proletarian labor. One primary task of a further investigation, then, would be to show that value, surplus value, etc., are categories which grasp a particular concrete mode of production and that the overcoming of value can only mean the overcoming of value-creating labor in its concrete material form.

This analysis of value and surplus value as categories of production, which entail particular concrete modes of labor, provides the basis for an examination of weaknesses in those positions which understand the category of surplus value only in terms of distribution, that is, as that portion of the total value created by workers which is greater than that required for their own immediate reproduction and which is appropriated by the capitalist. The problem with such understandings—which posit a moment of the category as the totality of relationships which it entails—becomes clear when the question of what the abolition of surplus value could mean is posed. (1) It cannot, on the one hand, mean abolition of *any* form of surplus product since—as Marx pointed out in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*²⁵—some form of surplus is necessary for *any* historical form of society. In other words, it is historically inadequate and socially naive to view the category of surplus value as simply one of moral demystification: that since the workers “really” produce surplus value, they should get all that they produce. (2) If, however, the category of value, and hence surplus value, is interpreted as one of the market and private property, then the expropriation of the capitalist class and the social administration of the surplus should suffice in order to overcome surplus value. Nevertheless, this point of view leaves the process of production out of

²⁵ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1966), p. 7.

consideration. It is based on a reading of Marx whereby a product becomes a commodity and hence acquires value in the act of exchange; surplus product becomes surplus value as a result of its appropriation by the capitalist class. Accordingly, after the overcoming of surplus-value-directed production, people would continue to labor much as under capitalism, under a changed structure of distribution. It is ironic that a theory which claims to examine social labor cannot, in fact, grasp that very aspect of social life.

My interpretation is strategically directed to indicate that Marx's category of surplus value has meaning as a category of totality only if the overcoming of surplus value is understood as entailing that concrete mode of social labor which produces surplus value. This implies that, as opposed to the interpretation mentioned above, a product is *produced* as a commodity in capitalism, that is, acquires value in its production, which is then *realized* in exchange; that, consequently, *value-producing labor entails particular concrete modes of labor, and surplus value is produced by a particular mode of social labor.*

The Marxian contradiction between the forces and relations of production could then no longer be interpreted as in traditional Marxism, where "relations of production" are understood only in terms of the mode of distribution and the industrial mode of production per se is hypostasized as those "forces of production" which, once unfettered, can produce even more and better goods, and where the concrete manner in which goods are produced is not considered.²⁶ The Marxian contradiction must, rather, be understood as one *within* the mode of production itself—as a *growing contradiction between the sort of concrete labor people do under capitalism, and the sort of labor which they could do if the productive potential developed under capitalism were reflexively utilized to liberate people from the objectified sway of their own labor.*

²⁶ The so-called "productivist bias" has nothing, therefore, to do with a critical theory of production, but rather is one version of a critical theory of distribution which leaves the sphere of production unexamined.

This reinterpretation, by concentrating on the material form of social labor, provides the basis for a new notion of the dynamic development of the capitalist social formation, one not limited to the immanent development of the market-bound mode of distribution to a stage in which the state increasingly functions as the agent of distribution. Instead, the central concern of an analysis of the immanent dynamic development of capitalism becomes the qualitative changes within the process of production itself and their subjective as well as objective ramifications. Such qualitative changes do not cease with the growing supersession of the market by the state.

The point of departure for such an analysis must be an examination of Marx's analysis of the capitalist process of production in terms of two conceptually separable elements: the labor process and the valorization process. These conceptually separable dimensions of the process of production represent an essential continuation of the dialectic of use-value and value which Marx introduces in his analysis of commodities. The interaction of these two dimensions gives rise to a historical dynamic in which the social form of the valorization process determines the material form of the labor process. In the course of this historical dynamic, each of these elements changes qualitatively, giving rise eventually to the fundamental contradiction outlined above. It should be noted that this approach analyzes the determinations of use-value and value within the process of production itself and not merely with reference to the mode of distribution, within the sphere of simple commodity circulation. Thereby, a dynamic moment is conceptually imparted to the *whole* of the capitalist social formation which, in traditional Marxism, was limited to its liberal phase. Furthermore, a consideration of historically emergent needs is allowed for, which are not limited to consumption but which call the mode of capitalist production itself into question. It is central to my argument that *the overcoming of value and the establishment of production based upon use-value is not merely a matter of production geared to the creation of*

use-values as articles of consumption but, more fundamentally, one of use-value as the dominant principle within production itself, that is, that the mode of social labor is enriching, rather than alienating, for the individual—and that this is a historical possibility.

This reconsideration of the Marxian categories of commodity, value, use-value, surplus value, as categories of production is necessary if the charge against traditional Marxism—that it is a critical theory of distribution rather than of production—is to be grounded in an attempt to provide the framework for another sociohistorical critique of the capital-determined social formation. The attempt is to avoid the pitfalls of those criticisms of traditional Marxism stemming from the “libertarian Left,” which remain limited to the political sphere and questions of organization and “explain” the Soviet Union either in terms of historical contingency or in terms of the negative practical effects of Marxist theory itself—that is, substitute a rather vulgar variation of the History of Ideas in which the social form is derived from the theory for a historical analysis in which the social grounds for the transformation of the theory are examined.²⁷ Such approaches can historically analyze neither the “socialist” countries nor the Western capitalist countries. The adequate critique must be able to grasp both in such a way that the possibility of their overcoming is implied.

The Problem of the “Nonidentical” in Capitalism

This reinterpretation has important implications for a reconsideration of the Marxian notions of history and of subjectivity. In this essay, the second major problem to be dealt with is that of the presuppositions—subjective as well as objective—for the development outlined above.

In Marx’s analysis it is clear that, although in the course of capitalist development the *possibility* emerges for the newer

²⁷ See, for example, the “Nouvelle Philosophie” in France.

organization of social labor outlined above, its *realization* is impossible under capitalism.

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary.²⁸

The question of “necessary” and “superfluous” labor time will be dealt with below. Here it suffices to note that for Marx, although capitalism tends to develop powerful forces of production whose potential increasingly renders an organization of production based upon direct labor time obsolete, it cannot allow for their full realization inasmuch as the only form of wealth appropriable by capital is that created by direct human labor.

There is then, according to Marx, no quasi-automatic transition from capitalism to a newer, more emancipatory form. This being the case, how is the overcoming of capitalism possible? Which conditions make possible that overcoming and how do they come into being?

It should be clear that the terms of this problem are radically changed by a redefinition of socialism as the material overcoming of alienated labor rather than only as the overcoming of private property and the market. This applies both to a consideration of social objectivity as well as to the content of social subjectivity. Too often in this century, the implicit determination of socialism in terms of distribution has led to considerations whose primary thrust was to explain why the revolution had *not* occurred, given that the “objective” possibilities for the abolition of private property and the establishment of a planned economy had long been present. In spite of the broadening and deepening of Marxism which

²⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 706.

sometimes resulted from such attempts, especially those which concerned themselves with the subjective dimension of capitalist culture, they were limited by the underlying presupposition that the essence of the social formation is its mode of distribution. A center of concern, therefore, became the arrest of history—either through new capitalist institutions and tactics or because of historically arrested subjectivity.

The problem must be posed differently when the history of capitalism, in terms of the emergence of the possibility of socialism, is considered primarily in terms of the changing structure of labor—a process which is still continuing—and not primarily in terms of arrested subjective development, or increased state intervention or imperialism. All of these are, of course, important, but they must be embedded in another theory—one whose central concern is the historical critique of production.

My intent, then, is not to analyze the *probability* of socialism—an approach which assumes that the determinations of capitalism and socialism are clear and which tends to concern itself with concrete conditions conducive to mass action. I intend instead to analyze the *possibility* of socialism, which implies reexamining the basic defining determinations of the present social formation. In my approach the question of conditions, of contradiction and negation, will not be dealt with simply in terms of social “objectivity,” much less in merely “economic” terms. Marx’s critical categories are not to be considered as merely economic but as determinations of the mode of social existence which simultaneously represent forms of social being as well as social forms of consciousness and of needs. This approach, which is based upon a critical appropriation of the works of George Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, necessarily entails developing, if only implicitly, elements of a critical-historical theory of knowledge very different from the well known mechanical scheme of base and superstructure with its related “copy” or “reflection” theory of knowledge.

The primary focus of this aspect of my investigation will be the subjectivity of labor. If, as I have argued above, the Marxian notion of the overcoming of capitalism entails, as its very essence, the material overcoming of alienated labor and its supersession by social forms of labor which are rich and individually satisfying, then *capital-negating forms of consciousness must embody a need for self-fulfilling activity.*

This train of thought, however, is confronted with the following paradox: although the capitalist mode of production does give rise to productivity of such a magnitude that proletarian labor could conceivably be abolished, it does so by increasingly fragmenting and emptying the labor that each worker does. If concrete labor is understood as self-constituting for the individual, how could a positive need for meaningful labor and a consciousness that existing labor is alienating emerge? This paradox is not to be solved by simply opposing individual to collective consciousness—since the labor of the class as a whole is alienated. Within the reinterpretation of the essence of capitalism and of socialism outlined above, the result of socialist revolution is the abolition, not the maintenance and glorification, of proletarian labor.

There are several major possible directions the solution to this problem could take. One line of argument is to posit an anthropological ontology in which “human nature” is considered as a quasi-natural repository of needs for wholeness and fulfillment which rebels against capitalist oppression, fragmentation, and alienation once they become “too extreme.”

A second line of argument attempts to avoid this sort of anthropological ontology and views humans (and the human spirit) as socially formed. However, one tendency in this direction can be characterized as viewing capitalism only in terms of alienation; the culture and forms of consciousness immanent to this social formation are seen only as reified. Consequently, revolutionary consciousness can either only be considered as that brought to the working class from an avant-garde (the source of whose consciousness remains unexplained) or this

view must have recourse to the periphery—to areas and/or social groupings which, having not yet been fully subsumed by capitalist production (i.e., they incorporate another, less fragmented principle of social formation), come into contact with the immanence of that subsumption and rebel, remembering the past. But this is, historically, a losing proposition. A one-sided emphasis on the degree of militance with which capitalist production is opposed on the eve of its introduction and which therefore posits that historical moment as the only one possible for socialist revolution, ignores the fact that, even where successful, such revolutions (what I have termed “capital revolutions”) do not stop the logic of capital development. Not only the roots, but also the historical *results* of mass action must be understood with reference to their historical context—rather than to the degree of militance or even self-understanding of those involved. Moreover, such a view must look in vain for the emergence of similar forms once capital subsumption takes place, not considering that a qualitative historical development implies qualitatively changing needs and forms of consciousness, including those with oppositional content.

Both lines of argument have in common a view of capitalism only in terms of deformation and reification. In Marxian language, they grasp only the value dimension—a moment of a more complex social totality—as that totality itself. Use-value is dealt with only as it is developed by Marx on the logical level of the analysis of commodities—as the material carrier of exchange-value which, in itself, plays no intrinsic role in capitalism. Therefore, the only source of opposition to the reified value-dimension is taken to be that use-value which is not yet subsumed by capitalist forms—whether that is interpreted in terms of nature or precapitalist social moments. The notion of an *immanent* contradiction between value and use-value (which, to be sure, does not exist on the logical level of the analysis of commodities) is absent. The so-called “fetish of

commodities” is therefore mistakenly equated with the entire critical epistemological content of *Capital*.

A third possible line of argument also rejects an anthropological ontology, but attempts to locate the contradiction *within* capitalism itself, rather than between capitalism and that which is not-yet-capitalized, or between capitalism and “nature.” In this view, the capitalist social formation not only entails reified forms of consciousness and needs, but also socially formed, historically changing other needs which are neither “natural” nor precapitalist and which form the bases for oppositional, critical, and revolutionary forms of consciousness. This certainly appears to be Marx’s intent when he speaks of the “contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois economy . . . and its development.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the Marxian view can be maintained only if the critique of capitalism can indicate that that social formation is inherently contradictory, that is, that it incorporates in its essential structure a dimension other than that of value. A “nonidentical” moment *within* capitalist development must be located—as *an intrinsic moment of the social formation which yet is in contradiction to it and is the source of its possible negation*. Only then can capitalism be presented as a simultaneity of deformation and formation, alienation and possible emancipation.

This “nonidentical” moment, however, cannot be too unmediately identified as the proletariat. For if, as argued above, concrete labor and the labor process are determined in their material form by abstract labor and the valorization process, how could proletarian labor per se—as *the* essential element of capital—be the source of the possible negation of capitalism? If the overcoming of capitalism involves the overcoming of that concrete labor—proletarian labor—specific to it, then a historically emergent need to abolish that labor must arise out of a contradiction between it and something else. The basis for

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 704.

the fundamental Marxian contradiction outlined above is therefore not to be sought in a contradiction between capitalist relations of distribution and proletarian labor within the industrial labor process, but rather between existent proletarian labor—that is, the existent labor process—and a nonidentical moment immanent to capitalist development. Such a contradiction would provide the context for the emergence of a need for meaningful activity, one which calls the existent structure of social labor into question.

This highlights the inadequacies of those attempts to ground the possibility of revolutionary consciousness in a subject-object dialectic understood as one between unitary wholes, between a reified objectivity (“objectified labor”) and the human factor (“living labor”). Such views must end up positing an anthropological ontology, for—if the objective dimension is understood only in terms of reification, if it were unequivocally the realm of necessity—subjective strivings toward freedom could then be located only in human nature, inasmuch as they could not be located within the social framework itself. It would therefore be inadequate to state, for example, that “objectivistic” Marxism analyzes the objective course of capital development and simply leaves out the subjective dimension. A more differentiated analysis of the contradictory character of objectified social relations should be able to indicate that what is called “objectivistic” or “deterministic” Marxism is grounded in assumptions of the essential character of capitalism which grasp only its quantitative, valorization moment—that of reification—and that these same assumptions underlie subjectivistic versions of the theory. However, the subject-object dialectic unfolded in Marx’s critique of political economy is precisely not one between simple unitary wholes but is far more complicated. The “objective dimension” is not simply reified but is itself a dialectic of value and use-value, one which implies a constantly changing qualitative process and is contradictory in that it gives rise to its own nonidentical moment. Thus socially formed subjectivity

under capitalism is neither to be considered totally reified nor in terms of a residuum which stands opposed to the social form, but rather as part and parcel of that contradictory social totality.

My point of departure for an attempt to locate the nonidentical moment will consequently be the above-mentioned consideration of the use-value dimension in its interaction with the value dimension *within the capitalist process of production itself*. By developing the *historical* course of this interaction, I intend to show the theoretical possibility that critical, revolt-like, and revolutionary consciousness can be derived from the immanence of the social formation, as well as how the character of such consciousness changes with qualitative changes in the course of the development of the capitalist mode of production. The attempt is to indicate a dimension, immanent to capitalism, other than that related to reification. Revolutionary consciousness, as that social subjectivity which points beyond the bounds of the existing social formation and which cannot be materially realized within its framework, will be dealt with in relation to contradictions within the social totality—and not in terms of a simple antagonism between social objectivity and subjectivity in which the latter must remain historically indeterminate.

Historical Necessity, Labor, and Time

Historical Necessity. The general problem of locating the nonidentical moment involves a consideration of the problem of historical necessity, labor, and time in Marx—for the question of how, in a society characterized by alienated labor, the need for meaningful activity could emerge is related to another central question: how can historical necessity give rise to the possibility of freedom?

A full examination of this problem is not possible here. Nevertheless, my approach can be outlined in three steps: The

first is to distinguish between transhistorical, or “natural,” necessity and historical necessity in Marx. The former—for example, labor as the production of articles of human use—“is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society.”³⁰ The degree of this necessity can be and has been diminished in the course of human history, but it can never be entirely overcome. Historical necessity, on the other hand, is not a transhistorical notion in Marx and is inextricably bound with that of *alienation*—that social relations are such that they are objectified, externalized, and acquire a life of their own. These alienated structures then react back on individuals as a quasi-natural objective necessity—a “second nature.” Mankind, according to Marx, freed itself from the overwhelming domination and vicissitudes of Nature by the unconscious and unintentional creation of this second nature; it overcame the domination of the first at the price of creating that of the second. Alienation, as the domination of social structures which have a specific mediational character such that they exist as “abstract,” “objective” compulsions, is thus to be distinguished from oppression and other forms of non-mediated domination. Such structures, furthermore, are not static but, rather, as a result of the dialectic of value and use-value, possess an immanent dynamic and, thus, provide the material ground for an immanent historical *logic*. The existence of an immanent historical logic is thus to be understood as characteristic of a social form whose structure of relations is alienated and possesses a dynamic.

The second step is to historically specify that situation. Marx’s analysis in *Capital* indicates that only capitalism can be analyzed as an alienated social totality. This implies that, for Marx, precapitalist development (given the commodity form) can be understood as logically necessary—but *only when viewed from the vantage point of the capitalist present, retrospectively*. The process of historical transformation from one social mode to

³⁰ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 133.

another is to be seen as a progressively less random development with the rise and full unfolding of the commodity form. Not, however, as the unfolding of an immanently necessary principle of motion. *Only the history of the capitalist social formation—not the history of humanity as such—has an immanent, as opposed to a retrospective, logic that indicates a form of historical necessity.* Yet because this present is determined as a totality of a contradictory essence, it logically points beyond itself to the possibility of a future, nonalienated form—historical freedom. It should be noted that historical freedom involves the overcoming of alienated labor, of the “second nature”—that is, of historical necessity and an immanent logic of history which itself expresses the overcoming of the overwhelming domination of Nature. It does not, however, involve the overcoming of the “natural” necessity that *some* form of labor as the mediation between humans and Nature continues to exist.³¹ The result is an equilibrium with, rather than freedom from, Nature.

By locating the material ground of historical necessity, of a historical logic, in the “double-character” of the alienated structures characteristic of capitalism (the commodity as value and use-value, the process of production as valorization process and labor process), Marx breaks with any notion of a single transhistorical principle of human history. *History is thus to be analyzed as a movement from contingency to a necessity of a contradictory nature such that historical freedom becomes a possibility.* This view undercuts any teleological theory—whether in its deterministic or in its subjectivistic variant—and overcomes the antinomy of historical contingency and teleology.

The third step is to examine the character of that “necessity” characteristic of capitalism and in what ways it contains—from the very beginning—the seeds of the possibility of its own negation. This must be analyzed primarily with reference to the historical development of the two moments of the process of

³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), p. 820.

production outlined above, and will be dealt with within the framework of an investigation of the relationship between necessity and time, mediated over the category of value. *Value, as a measure of time, grasps only immediate time, time as present, whereas one aspect of the use-value dimension on the logical level of the analysis of the sphere of capital, in fact entails the accumulation of past knowledge and labor time which, however, finds no expression in the value-determined forms of appearance.* The category of use-value is thus introduced—but not, as is usually the case, on the logical level of the analysis of the commodity, nor as the material substratum which supposedly stands in opposition to the abstractions of value—an interpretation with strong Romantic overtones. The nonidentical aspect of use-value is *temporal*, not material.

The Dialectic of Labor and Time. Marx's analysis entails a *dialectic of objectified labor time* which can be roughly sketched as follows: In capitalism, the social form of wealth is value. That is, wealth is based upon direct labor time. This implies that society is constituted—at the expense of the individual. Direct labor time is the transmission of the parts to the whole, constituting the latter.

But this process does not remain temporally frozen; it has direction. Labor time becomes objectified as value in commodities, money, and finally capital. As capital—or, more specifically, constant capital (of which machinery is the essential element)—the expenditure of immediate labor time finds an objectified form which incorporates not only the labor time directly involved but, *when viewed from the use-value dimension*, the social labor and knowledge of the past. Immediate social-labor time finds a form which preserves past social-labor time. That is, objectified time within a given historical moment discovers a form which preserves historical time.

As objectified labor time “grows with time,” the social necessity—when viewed from the objectified use-value dimension—for the expenditure of immediate labor time falls.

Immediate labor time has given rise to its negation: historical labor time.

This negation, however, finds no direct expression in the value dimension, where the measure of wealth is the time expended rather than the mass of goods produced.³² The accumulation of objectified historical labor time does not, therefore, lead to an inversely proportional diminution in expended immediate labor time but, rather, to increased productivity—inasmuch as the time standard remains constant. Consequently, increased productivity does not increase the mass of value produced in a given time period. Thus, machines—in spite of their wealth-producing and time-saving potential—create no new value. Rather, they only (1) transmit to the products the amount of value—direct-labor time—incorporated in their own production and (2) increase value indirectly by decreasing the relative proportion of necessary labor time (that portion of the work-day within which the worker creates sufficient value for his own reproduction), thereby relatively increasing appropriable surplus value.³³

Social necessity under capitalism remains determined by the value dimension. The effect, therefore, of the accelerating development of the forces of production is not to decrease the expenditure of immediate labor time but rather leads to its increasing length and/or tempo. Objectified labor time is alienated, is form-determined as capital, and therefore—as social wealth—confronts living labor as an alien and dominant power.³⁴ Instead of the alleviation of human misery within production, the interaction of objectified concrete labor and abstract labor results in the continuous development of the forces of production at an ever-increasing tempo. “The most developed machinery thus forces the worker to work longer than the savage does, or than he himself did with the simplest, crudest tools.”³⁵ The past, as past

³² Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 137.

³³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 701.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 831.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 709.

labor and knowledge, is not merely transmitted but is accumulated as “dead labor”—in a form which oppresses the living. “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”³⁶

Nevertheless, because the capitalist measure of wealth, value, is only the objectification of immediate labor time (time as present), it comes into increasing contradiction with the wealth-producing possibilities of its result—objectified past labor time. This contradiction between value and this aspect of use-value becomes increasingly “real” with time and involves the practical, if potential, separation of society from its capitalist form; the implicit abolition of their previously necessary connection. *Social necessity becomes historically divided into that which is, and remains necessary for capitalism, and that which would be necessary for society—were it not for capitalism.* Capitalism is revealed as a form which bases itself upon time—and yet seeks to maintain time as Present.

The Developmental Pattern of the Social Division of Time. This dialectic of immediate objectified labor time with preserved past objectified labor time finds expression in a *developmental pattern of the social division of time*. In the passage from the *Grundrisse* quoted above, Marx opposes *necessary* and *superfluous* labor time. This opposition is not identical to that of “necessary” and “surplus” labor time. The origin of historical forms of society is based necessarily on the existence of surplus production: more than is necessary to satisfy the immediate needs of the producers. In every historical form, then, there is a distinction between that amount of production required to reproduce the laboring population and that additional amount, appropriated by nonlaboring classes, “necessary” for society as a whole. In capitalism, according to Marx, that distinction exists as well, but is not manifest. The surplus is not appropriated as a result of direct domination

³⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 13.

but, rather, is mediated over the abstract domination of value as external necessity in such a way that the source of surplus value is veiled. Nevertheless, a critical examination of capitalism indicates that the above distinction can be analyzed in terms of a nonmanifest division between that portion of the workday in which the worker labors for his own reproduction (“necessary” labor time) and that portion which is appropriated by capital (“surplus” labor time). *So long as wealth and the expenditure of direct labor time are in close correlation, both “necessary” and “surplus” labor time can be considered socially necessary.*

This, however, is no longer the case when productivity has developed to such an extent that value becomes increasingly inadequate as a measure of wealth. In such a situation the amount of real wealth produced may be so out of proportion to direct labor time that—were it not for the continued measure of wealth in the form of value—socially necessary labor, in *both* its aspects (individual reproduction and for society generally), would require far less labor time:

. . . not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the *necessary labour of society* to a minimum. . . .³⁷

But as a general reduction fully commensurable to the existing productive capacities cannot occur under capitalism, the form begins to constrain the content. The difference between that total labor time defined as socially necessary by capitalism and that which would be necessary, given the level of productivity, is what Marx calls “*superfluous*” labor time. As applied to social production in general, it is a new historical category.

Until this historical stage, socially necessary labor time in its two aspects defined and filled the time of the laboring masses, allowing nonlabor time for the few. Now, because of the enormous productive potential developed by capitalism, socially necessary time in both its aspects can become so drastically reduced that an entirely new historical category of “extra”

³⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 706; emphasis added.

time for the many emerges. But it emerges only as potential. Because capitalism attempts to define it back, to fill it as direct labor time, it can only exist in the form of “superfluous” labor time. The term reflects the contradiction: as defined by the old relations of production it remains labor time; as judged in terms of the potential of the new forces of production it is, in its old definition, superfluous.

It should be clear that “superfluous” is not an unhistorical category of judgment developed from a position outside of society. It is rather an immanent critical category which is rooted in the potential of historically developed forces of production at a point when they increasingly come into contradiction with their social form. From that point of view one can distinguish labor time which is necessary for capitalism from that which *would* be necessary for society—were it not for capitalism. Seen as such, *superfluous is the immediate negation of necessary*, a transitional category of contradiction which reflects the historical point at which it becomes possible to distinguish society from its capitalist form, to separate out their previous necessary connection. The contradictory moment allows for the judgment of the older form and the imagination of a newer one.

But the realization of a new social definition of time adequate to the potential of the forces of production would require revolutionizing the relations of production. The contradiction between the way people must work and live under capitalism and the way they *could* do so is resolvable only by a revolution of the “mass of workers.”³⁸ Only then can “necessary labour time . . . be measured by the needs of the social individual and [yet], on the other [side], the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that, even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all, *disposable time* will grow for all.”³⁹

Disposable time is defined by Marx as “room for the develop-

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 708.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

ment of the individual's full productive forces, hence those of society also."⁴⁰ *This is the positive form taken on by that "extra" time, freed by the forces of production, which under late capitalism remains bound as "superfluous."* "Superfluous" expresses only negativity—the historical nonnecessity of a previous historical necessity—and therefore has as its reference the older Subject: society in general in its alienated form. "Disposable time" reverses that negativity and gives it a new reference: the social individual. As a category it expresses the negation of the negation. Nonalienated labor time and disposable time condition one another positively as constitutive of the social individual, just as alienated labor time and that alienated form of disposable time which emerges in advanced capitalism as "leisure time" condition one another antithetically: "*Labour time as the measure of value posits wealth itself as founded on poverty, and disposable time as existing in and because of the antithesis to surplus labour time.*"⁴¹

The developmental pattern of the social division of time—from (1) socially necessary (individually necessary and surplus), through (2) socially necessary and superfluous, to (3) socially necessary and disposable—expresses the movement from capitalism, the historical period in which society as a richly developed organism is constituted, but at the expense of the individual, to its reversal in a new historical stage in which individuals fully realize themselves as subjects by reincorporating that which had been alienated in constituting society.

These considerations lead to a notion of the *history of the capitalist social formation*, of the relationship of past, present, and future, very different from that implied in any linear notion of historical development. The dialectic of objectified present time and objectified past time can be summarized as follows: *The objectified past is preserved in alienated form and, as such, oppresses the living. Yet, beyond a given point, it allows for people's liberation from the present by destroying its necessary moment*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

and thereby makes possible the future—the appropriation of history such that the older relations are reversed and transcended. Instead of a social form based on the *present*, direct labor time, there can be a social form based upon the full utilization of a no-longer-alienated *history*, both for society in general and for the individual.⁴²

The historical movement of capitalism, driven forward by the interaction of wage-labor and capital within the framework of the *dialectic of objectified time*, finds expression in the developmental *pattern of the social division of time*, and results in the possibility that the *social meaning of time* be reversed: “The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time.”⁴³

Technology and Nature. The location of the “nonidentical” in an aspect of the use-value dimension in which past labor and knowledge is preserved and accumulated can be useful in approaching the problem of technology and socialism. The dialectic of labor and time presented above embodies a reinterpretation of the Marxian contradiction between forces and relations of production. As was argued above, this contradiction cannot be understood as one between the industrial mode of production (as forces of production) and private property and the market (as relations of production), but must be sought within the mode of production itself. The category of value, as the basic category of capitalist relations of production, has not been considered merely as a category of the

⁴² It seems to me that a parallel exists between this notion of the history of the capitalist social formation and Freud’s notion of individual history, where the past does not appear as such but, rather, in a veiled, internalized form dominates the present. The task of psychoanalysis is to unveil the past in such a way that its appropriation becomes possible. The necessary moment of a compulsively repetitive present is thereby destroyed—which allows the individual to move into the future. This parallel might be worth further investigation in order to establish if it is merely contingent or whether it could serve as the point of departure for an attempt to mediate the history of the individual and that of the social formation.

⁴³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 708.

market but rather in terms of the temporally quantified direct labor time objectified in production. Therefore capitalist relations of production as expressed in the categories of value and capital have been considered as objectified in the mode of production developed under capitalism. "Forces of production" does not, then, refer to the concrete form of the means of production, where "relations of production" are then understood as nonmaterial and nonobjectified. As was pointed out above, the concrete material aspect of the use-value dimension is not simply separable from its abstract social form (the value dimension) but rather is materially formed by it. It is, after all, the specificity of the capitalist social formation, according to Marx, that social relations are expressed in material form. Accordingly, the concrete form of the labor process and of the means of production embody the relations of production. And yet we have seen that, within the capitalist mode of production, a growing tension emerges between the value dimension as objectified present time and that aspect of the use-value dimension—preserved past time—which is not expressible in value terms. *The Marxian contradiction between forces and relations of production should therefore be understood as one between the concrete form of the mode of production as the objectification of immediate labor time (value as the basic category of capitalist relations of production) and the immanent potential of past labor time which is preserved, but not expressed, by that form.*

This approach allows for a distinction between the *manifest form* and the *immanent potential* of the technology developed under capitalism. Consider Marx's treatment of the machine: it is form-determined as constant capital. In terms of what has been previously discussed, this does not mean that the machine is socially neutral, that under capitalism it is employed to the end of capital realization, and that it is simply this purpose which must be changed. That machinery is form-determined means that its concrete form itself is socially determined—not simply the purpose for which it is used. This, however, need not lead to a romantic rejection of technology. The notion of

the objectified past which cannot be expressed in terms of value, of the objectified present, allows one to grasp the machine as being not totally subsumed under its form-determination as capital. It also objectifies the potentially liberating accumulation of human power and knowledge, even if in an alienated concrete form. This aspect of the use-value dimension characterizes a nonidentical moment whose potential grows with the course of capitalist development—comes increasingly in real contradiction to its capital form-determination. But this remains a contradiction. There is no smooth linear progression to a new form. The course of capitalism drives technological development forward, whose concrete form remains an instrument of domination—yet whose growing potential allows for a transformation of society, of a reflexive utilization of this potential on the social division of labor such that *not only the goal of machine production but the machines themselves will be different.*

The possibility of this dialectical reversal allows for the overcoming and rejection of the two antinomic socially critical positions which are immanent to the capital-determined social formation: (1) the attempt to “overcome” alienated labor and the alienation of people from nature by rejecting industrial technology per se, in the hope of a historically impossible return to a preindustrial society, and (2) the attempt to strive for a just mode of distribution of the great mass of goods and services produced, while accepting the linear continuation of capital-determined technology in its manifest form—a form of production which tends to undermine “the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker.”⁴⁴ Both positions are immanent to the capitalist form of appearance insofar as each only grasps—either accepting or rejecting—that which is manifest: the value dimension as it is expressed in the material aspect of the use-value dimension.

The reflexive utilization of the immanent potential of the

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 638.

forces of production on the process of production itself, thereby abolishing one-sided concrete labor and allowing for new forms of social labor and a new technology, does not only entail the material overcoming of alienated labor. *It also entails the overcoming of the alienated relation of human production to nature.* As was already argued, the well-known statement that the forces of production must be freed from the fetter of the relations of production does not mean that the mode of production remains the same and that only the market and private ownership of the means of production are abolished. If this were the case, then “freeing” the forces of production would not have the reflexive goal of transforming social labor and, therefore, could only mean producing even more goods by means of the same process of production. This, in turn, implies that the relation of social production to nature would remain essentially the same as under capitalism.

If, however, “freeing” the forces of production is understood as releasing their immanent potential in order to transform the structure and definition of social labor itself, then production as well as its goal would be transformed. A new social mode of production would be based upon a new technology—one whose possibility is immanent to, but not manifest in, the development of that capital-determined technology which dominates both people and nature. This new mode of production, freed from the external and abstract compulsions which alienated structures exert, could allow for another, more harmonious relation of humanity to nature. Whereas individual labor would be rich and satisfying and therefore, in one sense, pursued for its own sake, social production would no longer, as under capitalism, be for production but rather for social consumption. The domination of nature would no longer require its one-sided, brutal exploitation and destruction, but would be manifest in a conscious cyclical regulation of the material interaction between humanity and nature.

Historical Nonnecessity and Revolutionary Consciousness

My primary concern in developing the dialectic of objectified time is to provide the foundation for an examination of forms of consciousness which can be associated with the growing tension between the sort of labor people continue to do because the only measure of wealth under capitalism is direct labor time, and the sort of labor which, as a result of the continued accumulation of the past, they could do—were it not for this “necessity” of capitalism. It is an attempt to free the notion of class consciousness from sociological reductionism and to retranslate it into historical terms by locating the “nonidentical”—the immanent source of the possible negation of capitalism—in the accumulation of historical time as outlined above. My concern here, then, is the subjective dimension of the nonidentical moment.

That Marx continued to think that the socialist transformation of society could be accomplished only by proletarian revolution is clear from the citations introduced to this point. The structure and identity of the proletariat cannot be adequately dealt with at this level of the analysis. What has clearly emerged, however, is that the revolution must be directed against the mode of production developed under capitalism—not simply against the mode of distribution and the ownership of the means of production by the bourgeoisie.

As stated above, however, this conception is very problematic. It implies that, with the development of the basic contradiction outlined, the proletariat, as an essential element of value-based relations of production, becomes as anachronistic as those relations themselves; and that the goal of proletarian revolution must be the abolition of the proletariat in the material sense outlined above.

And yet, if we pursue this train of thought, we find it useful in beginning to approach the problem of the constitution of revolutionary class consciousness. The historical specificity of the contradiction developed by Marx indicates that any at-

tempt to deal with revolutionary class consciousness, based only upon the assumption of the existence of an industrial proletariat, its quantitative development and concentration, without further analyzing the qualitatively changing structure of labor and the proletariat as capitalism further develops, remains essentially unhistorical.

It can only deal with those elements of what I would term *class-constituting consciousness*, suggested in *Capital*, which allow workers to constitute and defend themselves as a class within the capitalist system of production and which are crucial to the unfolding of the wage-labor/capital dynamic as the driving motor of the development of the capitalist social formation. However, the consciousness implied in the existence of labor-power as a commodity leads to no more than trade-union consciousness; the consciousness available by a perception through the capital fetish such that workers recognize themselves as the producers of surplus value leads—when unmediately developed—at best to a communism of distribution. In other words, these elements remain bound within the form of capitalist production and do not lead directly to the sort of consciousness which would have as its goal the overcoming of that form.

If, however, the course of capitalism is analyzed as a qualitatively changing development leading to the possibility that capital-determined labor be abolished, then the development of class consciousness can also be analyzed historically—as having a qualitatively changing content. *Revolutionary class consciousness could then be considered as the historical reversal of class-constituting consciousness, which has the latter as its historical assumption.* If class is in fact a category of alienation, then revolutionary class consciousness could only mean the desire to abolish and transcend itself. *This position rejects the notion of the proletariat as the historical Subject* whose existence as such is veiled by fetishized forms of thought and appearance and whose “task” is to emerge openly as the Subject. The problem with the proletariat as “dogmatic subject” is basically due to

defining the proletariat as Subject. This not only does not allow for a concept of socialist revolution as the self-overcoming of proletarian labor by the proletariat, but—what is related—necessarily posits a static, nonhistorical proletariat. This has often led in reaction to positions which reject *any* notion of the proletariat as dogmatic. In the position here developed, the proletariat is considered as the *source* of the alienated Subject—capital—which, in its interaction with the latter, is the essential driving force of the historical development of the capitalist social formation, leading to the historical possibility that it abolish itself—and therefore capital—thereby allowing humanity to become the historical Subject.

The distinction between *class-constituting* and *class-transcending* consciousness is, then, a historical one—as expressions of different stages in capital development. The first is, and historically could only have been, capital immanent. It calls into question the *conditions* of labor and of remuneration, but not the *fact* of doing immediate productive labor itself. The second calls that labor itself into question. The development of the use-value dimension has reached a point where labor which a machine could do appears unsatisfactory for humans. The content of the notion “human” is revealed as a historical variable. This historical distinction should not, however, be taken as meaning that class-constituting consciousness is linearly superseded by class-transcending consciousness, for the conditions of the first by no means disappear with the development of advanced industrial production.⁴⁵ Moreover, crises in capitalism, by dramatically reestablishing the “necessary” connection of labor as presently defined and material reproduction, have the tendency to roll back elements of class-transcending consciousness and to reinforce elements of class-constituting consciousness—even if in militant form. The development is anything but linear. The intent is, rather, to

⁴⁵ See my review of Helmut Reinicke, *Revolt im bürgerliche Erbe*, in *Telos*, no. 29 (Fall 1976): 239–245.

argue that class-transcending consciousness becomes *possible* only beyond a given point in historical development. This thesis allows for a more historical analysis than the static separation made by Lenin (trade unionist versus revolutionary consciousness) or Lukács (given versus ascribed consciousness). Moreover, it allows a retrospectively historical examination of their analyses—as expressions of an epoch when the radical rejection of capitalist labor was not a historical possibility.

Such a historical approach should be able to provide the foundation for an explanation of why elements of the contents of workers' demands, even those of revolutionary workers, change historically. Similar considerations apply to the content of what was thought of as the abolition of capitalism. By concentrating on the *contents* of needs and consciousness, the distinction, made above, can be introduced between the historical *possibility* of socialism and the *likelihood* or *probability* of revolution. The first clarifies the problem on the horizontal dimensional axis of historical time, as the historical changing content, independent of degree of militance. The second deals with the problem vertically, moving from an abstract analysis of the metahistory of the social formation to a consideration of more immediate, concrete, and contingent factors. By means of this distinction, militant and revolutionary movements, even when successful, can be located historically—particularly with reference to the possible realization of socialism— independent, if necessary, of their self-understanding.

The question remains, however, as to the conditions necessary to the development of revolutionary class consciousness so described. I have, in the course of analysis, touched upon the category of historical necessity. Its relationship to freedom has not been direct, but rather has been mediated over the category of superfluity, that is, of historical nonnecessity. *Perhaps one could begin to develop a notion of revolutionary class consciousness with reference to the dialectic of necessary, superfluous,*

and free social labor time—a notion of consciousness which would have at its center the relationship between historical necessity and superfluity on the one hand, and the experience as well as possible perception of existing structures—in particular the structure and nature of the labor process—on the other.

This approach attempts to mediate (1) a social objectivity in which a certain structure of labor has become anachronistic in terms of the potential accumulated as the objectified past, but which remains necessary for the present, for capitalism, and (2) the ways people experience their labor—even when this experience is not politically articulated. It is an attempt to mediate everyday life and the social totality by means of the dialectic of social labor and time. *The thesis is that value-creating labor can, on the mass level, be directly experienced as alienating (rather than as underpaid or oppressive) only once that historical point is reached where such labor has become socially anachronistic in terms of the potential accumulated in the objectified use-value dimension and, nevertheless, is maintained—albeit not “consciously”—only because of the necessity for capitalism that value-producing labor continue to exist.*

This attempted solution, albeit on a highly abstract theoretical level, does not seek the source of capital-negating needs such as that for meaningful activity, only in the concrete labor done by the individual or even that done by the class—the “total worker.” As has been emphasized, that labor is alienated and therefore could not in itself be the source of needs which call alienated labor into question. Neither does this approach seek the origins of such needs in “everyday life”—when the latter is introduced merely as a supplement to a consideration of existent concrete labor. Rather, the source of such needs is sought in the emergent contradiction between existent concrete labor and the immanent potential of the forces of production. In this way, the view that labor is self-constituting for the individual is freed from a consideration of only the reflexive effects of the immediate labor done. *Instead two moments of*

the reflexive effects of labor (as social praxis) on consciousness are considered: one is the reflexive effects of immediate concrete labor—which is alienated; the other is the reflexive effects of the objectified labor of the social totality on the individual. When this latter, however, is not considered only in terms of the objectified present labor time but also in terms of the preserved objectified past labor time and knowledge of the social totality, then the growing contradiction between the two, as outlined above, is one entailing the increasing superfluity—in terms of what has become possible—of much existing concrete labor. *At that point, the simultaneous reflexive effects of both of these moments as contradictory could indeed give rise to the possibility that alienated labor be experienced as such—for then it is experienced, even when not consciously, in contrast to another felt possibility.* The possibility is then given for discontent with work itself as presently defined, and for the emergence of a popular need for meaningful activity as a condition for self-fulfillment. This latter itself could then be interpreted as a subjective expression of the potential implicit in the forces of production, as a need whose full realization could be achieved only by a form adequate to that historically developed potential.

This attempt to relate the possibility of revolutionary class consciousness to historically emergent contradictions of the social totality does not do so directly, but mediates them over prepolitical and even preconscious levels of subjectivity and needs. It is the first level of an attempt to explain the historical constitution of a particular subjectivity whose manifest expressions are not necessarily directly political—such as, for example, the growth of so-called “countercultural” experiments—and can even be negative—such as certain forms of depression and illness. Nevertheless, my thesis is that the need for meaningful activity, for active self-fulfillment, is the historically adequate need crystalizing this subjectivity, which is often vaguely or nonconsciously experienced. This formed structure of subjectivity, then, would be the necessary

historical condition for revolutionary class consciousness which would, in this sense, involve two moments of consciousness. The first is an awareness of that need itself. The second is the perception as to how that need could be socially realized, that is, the recognition of that which prevents its realization. Whereas the underlying subjectivity is an *expression* of a contradictory historical development, revolutionary class consciousness *expresses* it. Its source, however, is neither the realization of an ascribed mission, nor the step-by-step defetishization of capitalist society, but rather a prepolitical and preconscious structure of needs which is historically formed, the self-reflected consciousness of which allows for a social consciousness which strikes at the root of the present social order: alienated labor.

By introducing the moment of the reflexive effect of objectified labor mediated over the social totality in addition, and in contradiction, to the reflexive effect of immediate concrete labor, this attempt can also be the first step in explaining why such new needs do not necessarily first emerge within the ranks of the traditional working class itself. Although value-producing labor is, in its interaction with the dual dimensions of objectified labor, the *driving force* of the qualitatively changing development of capitalism, this does not necessarily mean that the *reflexive effects* of this development on consciousness and on needs are limited to value-producing workers—inasmuch as those effects are mediated over the social totality.

Moreover, by dealing with a total social framework in its historical development, this attempt indicates the inadequacies of attempts to treat social consciousness, needs, or attitudes only in terms of class, strata, or any other sociological grouping, without first analyzing the historical framework within which further sociological specification must take place. This approach could, for example, provide a possible point of departure for an historical analysis of two movements common to all Western capitalist countries in the past decade: the

student revolt and the women's movement. For what cannot be adequately explained by nonhistorical sociological or psychological analyses is why those movements arose when they did, why they have been so international, and why their contents and demands contain elements and needs not found in movements of similar grouping in the past. Nevertheless, the thesis outlined above indicates that, if the emergence of those needs have their *ultimate* roots in the historical dialectic of labor and time as reflexively mediated to specific groupings, then they can be fully realized only when their conscious expressions take into account the structure of labor as the essential core of the present social totality.

This also holds true for the ecology movement. It must take into account and call into question the structure of social labor under capitalism—that labor for the individual is necessary as a means of immediate reproduction and that, because social production is for the sake of production, individuals are compelled to do work, the results of which can be damaging not only to their physical well-being but to that of all members of society. If this is ignored, then the ecology movement will be met with the resistance of those who, accepting that structure of labor as a quasi-natural necessity, see the means of their immediate reproduction, their jobs, threatened. In such a situation, class-constituting consciousness can become a hindrance to a movement which seeks to halt the further destruction of nature before it becomes irreversible. Yet if the conscious expressions of that movement would also call into question the structure of alienated social labor, the antinomy of job security versus ecological reason could be overcome. This could then represent an extremely important dimension of class-transcending consciousness.

In terms of these various considerations on the historical determinateness of revolutionary consciousness, one could perhaps reintroduce the notion of the self-recognition by workers as producers of surplus value, but within a historical

context such that that recognition goes beyond its immediacy: not merely that through the appropriation of surplus value capital increases itself, but that through the existence of value-creating labor, of proletarian labor, capital exists.

The realm of freedom is neither the voluntary submission to necessity, understanding its “laws” in order to regulate it, nor its attempted voluntaristic subjugation. It is the possibility made available by the mass recognition beyond a given historical point of the temporality, the no-longer-necessity, of historical necessity.