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## All Labour Produces Value For Capital And We All Struggle Against Value

### Introduction

For most Marxists, and Marxist economists in particular, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is of key importance, essential to a proper understanding of variables such as the rates of surplus value and profit, and hence of capitalism's development and tendency towards crisis. Indeed, those who deny this distinction are frequently portrayed as of dubious adherence to Marxism's central tenets and, in particular, to the labour theory of value.

[I]f the distinction between productive and unproductive labor is rejected, then other fundamental categories of Marx's theory lose their theoretical coherence. It is not possible both to maintain the labor theory of value and to dispense with its fundamental building blocks. (Mohun 1996: 31)

Yet, a number of Marxists working outside of the economics discipline, and many of those outside of Marxist orthodoxy — in particular those within the tradition of *autonomia* ('autonomist' Marxism) — have allowed the distinction to fall by the wayside. For them such a distinction is (implicitly) illusory:

One can only conclude that the definition of productive labor which we begin to find in these pages of the *Grundrisse* and which we will find in other works is a *heavily reductive definition* in the literal form it assumes. We reject it in the literal form which it takes because it is invalidated by an objectivist, atomized, and fetishist consideration of theory of value: it is the consideration which is exactly the one one would want to attribute to Marx in order to make him an old materialist of the 18th century. (Negri 1991: 64; emphasis in original).<sup>1</sup>

But despite continuing development of thought within both these traditions, there has been little mutual engagement. In this paper I propose a rereading of Marx's

distinction between productive and unproductive labour. I suggest that Negri et al. are too hasty in rejecting the distinction — in doing so they discard an important analytical tool for understanding our struggle against capital. However, I also suggest also that we should rethink this distinction, such that it becomes a category of struggle, rather than a classificatory basis from which we analysis capital's 'laws of motion'. That is, we should start from the struggle between capital and labour — from human activity itself — and from this emerges the productive-unproductive labour distinction. Thus the distinction thus becomes an *open* category and inherent to the concept of value, not one of its 'building blocks'.

I structure the paper as follows. In the first section I briefly and uncritically review Marx's explicit writings on productive and unproductive labour (PUPL) and those of some of the staunchest defenders of the distinction. I am more critical in section 2, in which I suggest that although this Classical Marxist position may not be untrue as such, it is of limited use in interpreting the contemporary social struggles surrounding capital's attempt to impose ceaseless work and colonise new areas of human activity. The paper's heart is section 3. Here I interrogate the PUPL distinction starting from a number of key categories in turn, namely: *value*, the substance of which is *abstract labour*; *production and the commodity*; *capital*; and *labour-power*. I argue that capital's tendency is to (attempt to) make *all* labour productive of value. In the paper's final section, section 4, I suggest that much human activity remains (or becomes) *unproductive* of value for capital and that the productive-unproductive labour distinction should be understood as contingent upon class struggle, that is, as an *open* category. I suggest that this understanding retains the fundamental relation between the distinction and the labour theory of value, but *contra* most Classical Marxists, as an *internal* relation. The law of value is then nothing other than capital's, which humanity struggles to undermine and transcend.

## 1 Marx and Classical Marxists on Productive and Unproductive Labour

### 1.1 Marx on the productive-unproductive labour distinction

Marx touches upon PUPL in passages scattered throughout his writings, including the three volumes of *Capital*. He explicitly discusses the distinction in a few passages of the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973), in a section of the so-called 'unpublished sixth chapter' of *Capital's* first volume, 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' (Marx

1976b) and, most extensively, in a lengthy chapter in Part One of *Theories of Surplus Value* (Marx 1969). His position seems quite clear.

Marx begins the chapter on 'Theories of productive and unproductive labour' in *Theories of Surplus Value* with a definition:

Productive labour, in its meaning for capitalist production, is wage-labour which, exchanged against the variable part of capital (the part of the capital that is spent on wages), reproduces not only this part of the capital (or the value of its own labour-power), but in addition produces surplus-value for the capitalist. It is only thereby that commodity or money is transformed into capital, is produced as capital. Only that wage-labour is productive which produces capital. (Marx 1969: 152)

This definition is echoed in the 'unpublished sixth chapter' of *Capital*:

Since the immediate purpose and the *authentic product* of capitalist production is *surplus value, labour is only productive*, and an exponent of labour-power is only *a productive worker*, if it or he creates *surplus-value* directly, i.e. the only productive labour is that which is directly *consumed* in the course of production for the valorization of capital. (Marx 1976b: 1038; emphasis in original)

From this follows the definition of the productive worker:

The *worker* who performs *productive work* is *productive* and the work he performs is productive if it directly creates *surplus-value*, i.e. if it *valorizes* capital. (Marx 1976b: 1039; emphasis in original)

A second part of Marx's own definition of productive labour is borrowed from Adam Smith, who 'defines productive labour as labour *which is directly exchanged with capital*' (Marx 1969: 157). In the 'unpublished sixth chapter' Marx writes:

Productive labour is exchanged directly for *money as capital*, i.e. for money which is intrinsically capital, which is destined to function as capital and which confronts labour-power as capital. (Marx 1976b: 1043; emphasis in original).

From this, Marx is able to define unproductive labour:

This ... establishes absolutely what *unproductive labour* is. It is labour which is not exchanged with capital, but *directly* with revenue, that is, with wages or profit (including of course the various categories of those who share as co-partners in the capitalist's profit, such as interest and rent). (Marx 1969: 157)

Marx develops his understanding of productive labour and unproductive labour on the basis of these definitions. Two points are of particular importance.

First, the social form under which labour is performed is all-important, whilst the material content of the labour is irrelevant:

These definitions are therefore not derived from the material characteristics of labour (neither from the nature of its product nor from the particular character of the labour as concrete labour), but from the definite social form, the social relations of production, within which the labour is realised. (Marx 1969: 157)

The determinate material form of the labour, and therefore of its product, in itself has nothing to do with this distinction between productive and unproductive labour. (Marx 1969: 159)

Second, it is not necessary to *directly* produce a product in order to be a productive labourer, particularly with the development of the division of labour:

With the progressive accentuation of the co-operative character of the labour process, there necessarily occurs a progressive extension of the concept of productive labour, and of the concept of the bearer of that labour, the productive worker. In order to work productively, it is no longer necessary for the individual worker himself to put his hand to the object; it is sufficient for him to be an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions. (Marx 1976a: 643-44)

For example, Marx considers that the labours of organising, conceiving and designing production and production processes are all productive:

Included among these productive workers, of course, are all those who contribute in one way or another to the production of the commodity, from the actual operative to the manager or engineer (as distinct from the capitalist). (Marx 1969: 156-7)

Marx explicitly categories three types of labour as being unproductive. First, the labour of (re)producing labour-power:

Hence the former class [productive labourers] will produce immediate, material wealth consisting of *commodities*, all commodities except those which consist of labour-power itself. (Marx 1969: 161)

Productive labour would therefore be such labour as produces commodities or directly produces, trains, develops, maintains or reproduces labour-power

itself. Adam Smith excludes the latter from his category of productive labour; arbitrarily, but with a certain correct instinct—that if he included it, this would open the flood-gates for false pretensions to the title of productive labour. *In so far therefore as we leave labour-power itself out of account*, productive labour is labour which produces commodities. (Marx 1969: 172; my emphasis)

Second, the labour of superintendence of others' labour, as distinct to the labour of organisation of others' labour, is also deemed unproductive:

[O]ne part of the labour of superintendence merely arises from the antagonistic contradiction between capital and labour, from the antagonistic character of capitalist production, and belongs to the incidental expenses of production in the same way as nine-tenths of the 'labour' occasioned by the circulation process. (Marx 1972: 505)

Thus the third category of unproductive labour is that involved in the circulation of commodities. Here the worker 'expends his labour-power and his labour time in the operations *C-M* and *M-C* ... but the content of his labour creates neither value nor products' (Marx 1978: 290).

However, Marx does suggest that 'the value of the services of these unproductive labourers [is] determined and determinable in the same (or an analogous) way as that of the productive labourers: that is, by the production costs involved in maintaining or producing them.' (Marx 1969: 159). Similarly, the value of the labour-power of unproductive workers is determined in the same way as for their productive fellows.

From one point of view, a commercial employee of this kind is a wage-labourer like any other. Firstly, in so far as his labour is bought with the merchants' variable capital, not with money that he spends with revenue; it is bought, in other words, not for a personal service but for the purpose of valorizing the capital advanced in it. Secondly, in so far as the value of his labour-power, and therefore his wage, is determined, like that of all other wage-labourers, by the production and reproduction costs of this particular labour-power and not by the product of his labour. (Marx 1981: 406)

Moreover, unproductive workers, such as those involved in circulation activities, although they produce neither value nor surplus value, still perform unpaid or surplus labour:

He expends his labour-power and his labour time in the operations *C-M* and *M-C*. And hence he lives off this in the same way as someone else might live from spinning or making pills. ... Let us assume that he is simply a wage-

labourer, even if one of the better paid. Whatever his payment, as a wage-labourer he works part of the day for nothing. He may receive every day the value product of eight hours' labour, and function for ten. The two hours' surplus labour that he performs no more produce value than do his eight hours' of necessary labour, although it is by means of the latter that a part of the social product is transferred to him. (Marx 1978: 209–10).

The commercial worker does not produce surplus-value directly. But the price of his labour is determined by the value of his labour-power, i.e. its cost of production, although the exercise of this labour-power, the exertion, expenditure of energy and wear and tear it involves, is no more limited by the value of his labour-power than it is in the case of any other wage-labourer. His wage therefore does not stand in any necessary relationship to the amount of profit that he helps the capitalist to realize. What he costs the capitalist and what he brings in for him are different quantities. What he brings in is a function not of any direct creation of surplus-value but of his assistance in reducing the cost of realizing surplus-value, in so far as he performs labour (part of it unpaid). (Marx 1981: 414)

So, to summarise, productive labour is (i) labour which is *directly exchanged with capital*; (ii) labour which produces value, surplus value and hence capital; (iii) any labour which contributes to the production of the commodity (e.g., that of a manager or technician, but not that of a capitalist). Unproductive labour is labour which is exchanged directly with revenue (wages, profit, rent or interest) or labour which does not produce value. This category of unproductive labour includes the labour of (re)producing the proletariat, supervisory activities and circulation activities. Some sort of *law of value* is in operation with respect to unproductive labour, for the value of services produced by unproductive labourers is determined by the socially necessary labour time, whilst the value of unproductive labour-power is determined by the costs of its (re)production in the same way as productive labour-power. Finally, unproductive workers may perform surplus labour.

## 1.2 Marxist economists on productive and unproductive labour

It is possible to distinguish four main positions on PUPL within Marxist theory and Marxian economics (see, for example, Laibman 1992). Here I consider mainly the *analytic* definition, which appears to be closest to Marx's own and most 'orthodox'.

The analytic approach is most forcefully argued by Fred Moseley, Simon Mohun and Anwar Shaikh and co-workers. The position and its importance can be summarised:

It must be emphasized once again that the classical distinction between production and nonproduction labor is essentially analytical. It is founded on the insight that certain types of labor share a common property with the activity of consumption — namely, that in their performance they use up a portion of existing wealth without directly resulting in the creation of this wealth. To say that these labors indirectly result in the creation of this wealth is only another way of saying that they are necessary. Consumption also indirectly results in production, as production indirectly results in consumption. But this hardly obviates the need for distinguishing between the two. (Shaikh and Tonak 1994: 25)

For Savran and Tonak (1999) the PUPL distinction is important for three *general* reasons. *First*, only productive labour produces surplus value and is therefore a source of accumulation. Further, since ‘the wages of unproductive workers have to be paid out of the surplus-value created by productive workers[, ...] the mass of unproductive labour employed in a capitalist economy is in fact a positive restraint on capitalist accumulation. *Second*, it has implications for the determination of surplus value, variable capital, their ratio, the rate of surplus value, and the rate of profit (what Mandel calls ‘social bookkeeping’). Hence the distinction ‘is essential for an understanding of capitalist crises. *Third*, the distinction is necessary for the analysis of state intervention and, in particular, the ‘net impact of state intervention in the sphere of income distribution’ (116–7). The distinction is important for three further reasons peculiar to contemporary capitalism: in order to assess the impacts of, *first*, the ‘explosion of financial services’, *second*, the growth in consumer services, and *third*, the changes in social-service provision, on capital accumulation. (118–9)

Shaikh and Tonak begin by distinguishing four ‘basic activities of social reproduction’: (i) ‘production’; (ii) ‘distribution’; (iii) ‘social maintenance and reproduction’; and (iv) ‘personal consumption’. Activities (i), (ii) and (iii) qualify as labour (personal consumption is not labour); only (i) — ‘production, in which the various objects of social use (use values) are utilised in the process of the creation of new such objects’ — is production labour (1994: 21–2). *Productive* labour is then a subset of this category of production labour, and is that labour which is exchanged with capital and which produces surplus value.

The identification of that labor which produces surplus value — in other words, that labor which is productive of capital — immediately allows us to

specify its two salient properties: (a) it is wage labor which is first exchanged against capital (i.e., it is capitalistically employed); (b) it is labor which creates or transforms use values (i.e., it is production labor). (Shaikh and Tonak 1994: 30)

While Shaikh and Tonak use the category of *production labour*, Savran and Tonak (1999) adopt Marx's *productive labour in general*, a 'definition of productive labour applicable to all modes of production... [Then] productive labour for capital is a *subset* of productive labour in general' (Savran and Tonak 1999: 120).<sup>2</sup>

For these three authors, production activities are those which transform nature and hence 'mediate the *relationship of society to nature*'. By contrast, 'those... who carry out, within the context of a given social division of labour, the activities of circulation and the reproduction of the social order, simply execute tasks which flow from a historically determined set of socio-economic *relations among human beings* with a definite society.' (Savran and Tonak 1999: 122). The concept of productive labour in general is very important to their argument, as they re-emphasise towards the end of their paper:

[T]he quality of being productive labour in general is a *necessary* (though not sufficient) condition for labour to be productive for capital. This means that any activity which is not directly necessary for humanity's intercourse with nature in order to transform aspects of it in accordance with human needs *cannot* be regarded as productive labour in general, nor, therefore, as productive labour under capitalism. In other words, this *double determination* of the concept productive labour implies that productive labour under capitalism is a subset of productive labour in general. (Savran and Tonak 1999: 144; emphasis in original)

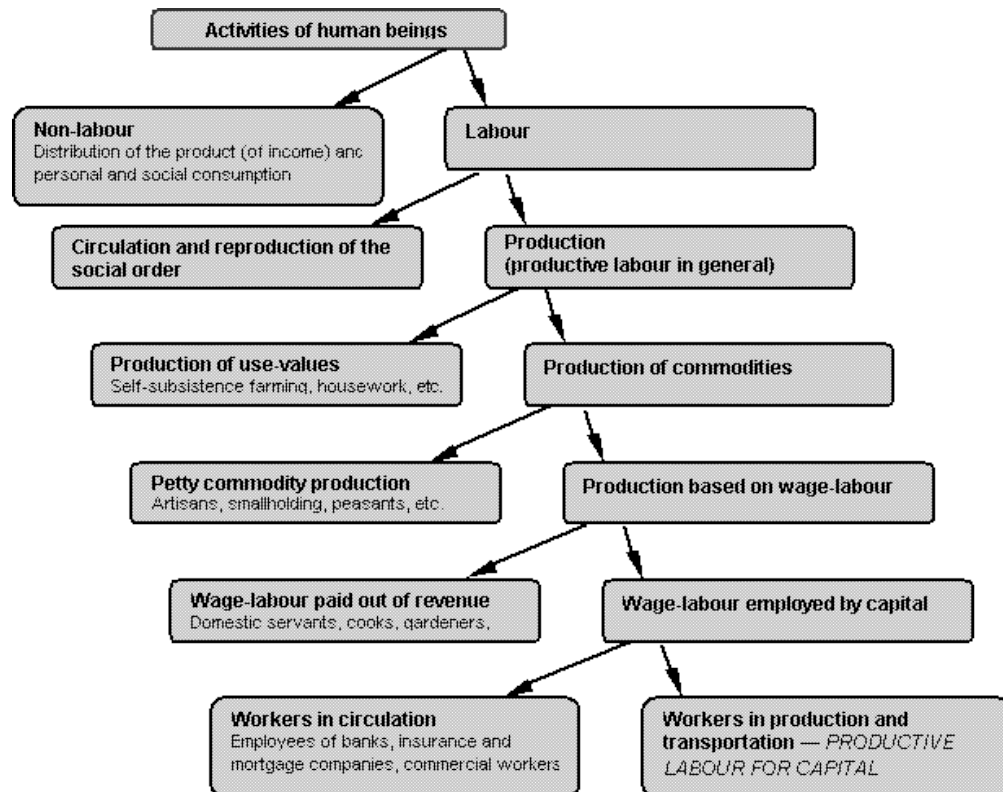
Savran and Tonak then make the following points, many of which simply rehearse Marx's treatment of the distinction, which I summarised in section 1.1, above.

- 'Productive labour for capital is that labour which produces surplus-value' (124).
- '[T]labour of self-sufficient peasant households or housework under capitalism' is unproductive since it produces use-values, but not commodities (125).
- Similarly, the labour of petty commodity producers is not productive, since the direct producers own the means of production and hence exchange the products of their labour rather than their labour-power. Savran and Tonak include not only artisans and small-holding peasants in this category of unproductive labour, but also homeworkers, who are part of the modern 'putting-out' system, 'even in those



case where the instruments of labour and raw materials are provided by the capitalist' (125).

- '[O]nly labour-power exchanged against capital can serve as the source of productive labour under capitalism', which hence categorises the labour of 'domestic servants, cooks, drivers, gardeners, etc.' as unproductive (127)
- The productive-capital phase of the circuit  $M-C...P...C-M$  is the basis of the valorization process and it is thus only during this phase that surplus value is produced. Tasks carried out in the other phases — i.e. circulation — are unproductive, even though these tasks are necessary for the overall process of reproduction and may 'produce' use-values of some nature. 'Workers employed by capital working in the sphere of circulation are unproductive as is their labour'. Savran and Tonak point out that 'circulation activities in the strict sense of the term are not an inseparable ingredient of production *in general* but are only necessary under the given conditions of *capitalism* and its indissociable companion, generalized commodity production'. They are '*by definition unproductive in all types of socio-economic organization*'. In other words, since circulation activities cannot be considered a part of productive labour in general they cannot be productive labour under capitalism. (128–30 & 144–45).
- Similarly, other necessary roles and activities, such as those of law enforcement, are unproductive. (130)
- Some transportation and storage activities are part of production and hence are productive, provided the labour in the sector is employed by capital. But other such activities, those 'due purely to motives peculiar to circulation (e.g. speculation or re-exportation due to differential government regulation) are immaterial to the production process and the labour employed therein counts as unproductive.' (131–32)
- Although circulation capital depends upon the workers it employs for its profits, both these profits and the wages it pays to its workers are a portion of the total surplus value produced by productive workers in the sphere of production. (132)

**Figure 1.** Savran and Tonak's (1999) productive-unproductive labour distinction

Savran and Tonak nicely sum up their discussion with two diagrams, which I have aggregated in figure 1. It's worth noting here that in their categorisation of housework as unproductive, since it involves 'labour expended with the sole purpose of producing use-values', i.e., not commodities (125; their second point, above), Savran and Tonak completely ignore the fact that housework produces the *commodity* labour-power (see, e.g., Dalla Costa and James 1972). More generally, such classifications are problematic, neglecting any consideration of the 'role of extra-market relations in the process of social reproduction, when market relations become the paradigm of social exchange' (Caffentzis 1999: 153).

Savran and Tonak go onto consider service-sector and state workers. They stress that those service workers who exchange their labour-power with capital and whose product (service) takes the form of a commodity are productive:

So long as the labour in question transforms a particular aspect of nature with the purpose of satisfying a need, so long, that is, this activity is an aspect of *production in general*, labour engaged in such a process can, if it is

employed by capital, serve as productive labour (Savran and Tonak 1999: 135)

Savran and Tonak group the activities of the state under three headings. First, activities which 'relate exclusively to the reproduction of the social order'. Workers who perform these activities 'are unproductive labourers *by definition* [since t]heir labour is not productive in the general sense... It does not act upon nature to transform certain aspects into use-values with a view to satisfying human needs, directly or indirectly' (138). The second type of state activity is the organization of production activities within state-owned corporations and companies. Such enterprises are capitalist and attempt to extract surplus-value from their workers, who are therefore productive. The third and final group of state activities comprises those directed towards the provision of social services (the welfare state). Some workers within this group, 'such as prison wardens or tax-collectors', really fall into the first group of state employees, since their 'exclusive task is the reproduction of the existing social order'; their labour is thus 'unproductive by definition'. Other welfare-state workers, such as health and education workers, produce use-values and their labour may be productive or unproductive depending upon the context in which this labour is organized and whether these use-values are sold as commodities. For example, 'the national education system or the national health service of a capitalist country cannot be regarded as capitalist enterprises. Consequently, the workers they employ cannot be classified as productive labourers.' (139)

## 2 The Decline of the Law of Value?

### 2.1 The increase in unproductive labour

Many of those Classical Marxists who have written on and defended the PURL distinction have also been concerned with the estimation and measurement of key Marxian variables, such as the rate of surplus value and the rate of profit.<sup>3</sup> A principle finding of these authors has been the increase in unproductive labour over the post-war period and the corresponding decline in productive labour.

For example, Moseley (1983) estimates that the ratio of the number of unproductive to productive workers in the U.S. economy increased by 82% over the period 1947–1977. By 1977 'almost half the total wage bill of capitalist enterprises was paid to workers who performed unproductive labor ... [and] we have the striking result that over half of the surplus-value produced by productive labor was used to pay the

wages of unproductive labor within capitalist enterprises, or inversely, that less than half of the total surplus-value was available for capital accumulation and for other purposes' (Moseley 1983: 183). The ratio of unproductive to productive workers rose by a further 20% between 1977 and 1987; by 1987 'unproductive' workers comprised 44% of U.S. employees (Moseley 1991: Tables A7 and A8). Shaikh and Tonak (1994) broadly concur. They agree that the proportion of 'unproductive' labour in the U.S. economy is increasing, but suggest that it was already above 60% for the 1980s.

In the U.K., Cockshott et al.'s (1995) data suggests that the ratio of unproductive-worker wages to variable capital (i.e. productive-worker wages) rose from 22% in 1970 to 102% in 1989, a leap of more than 350% over just two decades. Gouverneur (1990) adopts a slightly broader definition of productive labour, which includes all wage-workers except those employed in 'non-market services' and those employed by 'private households'. Yet his findings for the rise in the ratio of unproductive to productive labour in the U.S., the U.K., France and Germany tell a similar story to these authors'.

The declining proportion of productive labour vis-à-vis the total mass of waged labour, or labour, or human activity, in general raises at least three points concerning the PUPL distinction, in particular, and the continued relevance of Marxism, in general.

First, capital is a social relation and the capitalist mode of production is a historically specific form of social relations. As others, including Elson (1979) and Bonefeld (2001a, 2001b), have emphasised, what distinguishes Marx's critique from the analyses of political economy is that Marx asks 'the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, *why labour is expressed in value*, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product' (*Capital I*: 1, 174; my emphasis). The first part of this question is sharp enough to go straight to the heart of the matter, to highlight the perverted nature of capital the social relation: why does our creative activity as human beings — work — take the social form of value, of abstract labour? But the whole thrust of the developing PUPL distinction is to blunt this question. For with the category unproductive labour, we have a whole and, what is more, expanding subset of human activities which, although they are both subjugated to and necessary for the capitalist mode of production, which do not create — are not expressed in — value.

The second point concerns the second part of Marx's question above: 'why [is] the measurement of labour by its duration ... expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product'? Again, the question is blunted when we admit the existence of

unproductive labour. How do we understand the fact, for example, that a pair of Nike trainers costs four or more times as much as a physically similar 'no logo' pair? If all the creative human activity involved in designing (beyond the physical design of the shoes) and marketing the Nike product is unproductive, adding nothing to the shoes' value, then the values of the Nike and 'no logo' trainers will be similar. A significant divergence of price from value is the only result. How is this to be explained?<sup>4</sup>

The third point is related to the second, but concerns capitalist strategies in the class struggle, more explicit than the pricing of final commodities. Marx's categories of the rate of surplus value and the rate of profit and his discussion of the capitalist strategies of absolute and absolute surplus value offer clear tools for understanding class struggle. These tools become clumsy and unwieldy when we attempt to apply them to unproductive labour.

Let us first disregard unproductive labour, or consider only class struggle involving productive workers. The strategy of absolute surplus value involves the extension of the working day. Necessary labour time and hence the value of variable capital  $V$ , remain constant, but surplus labour time and hence surplus value  $S$  both rise. The rate of surplus value and rate of profit both increase, since in both cases the numerator has risen whilst the denominator has remained constant (assuming no change in the value of constant capital  $C$ ). With the strategy of relative surplus value, capital manages to increase productivity such that necessary labour time and hence  $V$  fall, allowing an increase in surplus labour time and  $S$  with the length of the working day constant. Again the rate of surplus value rises, because *not only* has the numerator risen but, *in addition*, the denominator has fallen. But the effect on the rate of profit is ambiguous. Whilst the numerator rises, the denominator will too since the strategy involves increasing the value of constant capital  $C$ . That is, the strategy of relative surplus value causes both the rate of surplus value and the organic composition of capital  $C/V$  to rise.

Now consider the existence of unproductive labour. According to Marx and most of those Marxists who accept the PUPL distinction, unproductive expenditures, including the wages of unproductive workers, are a deduction from surplus value. It is obviously in the interests of capital to minimise these unproductive expenditures since the lower they are the greater the magnitude of surplus value which remains to be accumulated. But, as in the 'productive' sphere, there are two main strategies which capital can adopt in order to do this. It can either (try and) force unproductive workers to work longer hours or more intensely, or it can introduce new technology which will allow fewer unproductive workers to perform the same volume of tasks. Of course, these two

strategies correspond to those of absolute and relative surplus value, respectively, but it is harder to distinguish them since their effects are hidden in the single term *unproductive expenses*, the deduction from *S*. To analyse work processes within the growing number of unproductive enterprises, we are required to graft whole new layers of theory onto Marx's own, in a way which to me seems unnecessarily complicated. This is certainly the implication of Shaikh and Tonak's theoretical approach, which posits two distinct rates of exploitation:

[A]ll capitalistically employed labor is exploited by capital, whether it is productive labor or unproductive labor. The rate of exploitation of each is their respective ratio of surplus labor time to necessary labor time. Necessary labor time is simply the value of the labor power involved, that is, the labor value of the average annual consumption per worker in the activities in question. Surplus labor time is [the] excess of working time over necessary labor time. In the case of productive workers, their rate of exploitation is also the rate of surplus value. (Shaikh and Tonak 1994: 31)

No doubt Shaikh and Tonak would argue the circumstances of unproductive labour are conditioned by those of productive labour and capital. However they do not suggest a process by which this determination takes place. Indeed they express 'surprise' at the 'close parallelism between wages of productive and unproductive workers' and later find that the rates of exploitation of these two types of workers 'move in remarkably similar ways' (ibid.: 150 & 224).

## 2.2 Making sense of capitalist crisis

Various authors' interpretations of the capitalist crisis of the 1970s and '80s also seem to highlight the limitations of the Classical-Marxist distinction between productive and unproductive labour. Moseley (1999) goes so far as to suggest that 'the conventional rate of profit [which does not take the PUPL distinction into account] is more important than the Marxian rate of profit in an analysis of the current crisis. ... [The] significant decline in the conventional rate of profit seems to be an important cause of the economic stagnation of the 1970s and 1980s' (103-4).

Given this, he seeks to 'formulate a Marxian theory of the conventional rate of profit', in which variable capital (the wages of productive workers) is distinguished from the 'flow of unproductive capital', and constant (productive) capital is distinguished from the stock of unproductive capital (108).<sup>5</sup> Then, 'the proximate causes of the decline in the conventional rate of profit in the postwar US economy were the significant increases in the composition of capital and in the two ratios of

unproductive capital to variable capital ... [with] the proximate determinant which contributed the most to the decline in the rate of profit was the ratio  $UF'$ , i.e., that of the flow of unproductive capital, 95% of which is the wages of unproductive labour, to variable capital, i.e., the wages of productive labour' (111). Moseley further finds that the 72% rise over the period 1947–1977 in the ratio of wages of unproductive labour to variable capital can mostly be accounted for by an 83% increase in the ratio of the number of unproductive workers to productive — from 0.35 to 0.64 — whilst their relative wages remained 'more or less constant' (113).

Moseley's embarks upon a series of further decompositions, considering the relative contributions of the output and productivity growth of commercial and financial labour (circulation labour) and supervisory labour. His main conclusions are that (i) commercial labour accounted for almost two-thirds of the total increase of unproductive labour; financial and supervisory labour each accounted for roughly half of the remaining increase; (ii) the relative increase in commercial labour was mainly due to slower productivity growth of this type of labour vis-à-vis productive labour; (iii) the relative increase of financial labour was mainly due to the faster output growth of banks vis-à-vis productive-labour output, which Moseley ascribes to the wider use of personal checking to make payments; (iv) the relative increase in supervisory labour — which, relative to productive labour, increased by 86%, from 0.07 in 1950 to 0.13 in 1980 — was most likely due to increased firm size, increased union membership, lower rates of unemployment and managers' (150–51).

Two points about Moseley's analysis stand out. First, his suggestion that the 'conventional rate of profit' is actually more important in terms of explaining capitalist crisis than the Marxian rate, in which unproductive labour is disregarded. This remark both begs the question, *what use is the Marxian rate?* and forces him to construct the elaborate expressions outlined above. Second, while his decompositions and empirical evidence are extremely illuminating, they serve to focus attention on so-called 'unproductive' activities, activities which fall outside the scope of the labour theory of value.

Shaikh and Tonak (1994) adopt a startlingly different approach. The broad sweep of their empirical results is similar to that of Moseley's, but they instead focus on the Marxian rather than conventional variables. Emphasising the rising rates of surplus value and profit over nearly all of the postwar period, they appear to deny any period of real crisis in the US economy. For example, they write:

[T]he Marxian measure of productivity  $q^*$  is between three and four times as large as the conventional measure  $y$ . Moreover,  $q^*$  rises relative to  $y$  for significant periods. This is most notable during the post-1972 period, which is exactly when the pernicious and puzzling ‘productivity slowdown’ is supposed to have occurred. ...  $GNP/TP^*$  falls from 1972 to 1982, most probably because the oil-price shock in 1973 raises  $TP^*$  relative to GNP. At the same time, the ratio of total employment relative to productive employment rises more rapidly in this period (because of the relatively rapid growth of unproductive employment). ... *The so-called productivity slowdown* exhibited by the conventional measures ... in this critical period *is the result of these two disparate movements*. (Shaikh and Tonak 1994: 132; emphasis in original).

The effect of Shaikh and Tonak’s argument is not only to ignore class struggle and working-class power, but to deny it. The struggles which exploded in the US, and elsewhere, throughout the late 1960s and ‘70s are hidden behind the ‘objective’ increase in unproductive labour. But, adopting a different perspective, one can understand this rise in ‘unproductive’ labour as one part of capital’s *response* to these social struggles. After all, militant workers, blacks, housewives, students and others must be quietened by a combination of increased repression, on the one hand, and placation, on the other: more police, more social spending, both ‘unproductive’. For example, Federal social spending — on social security, income security, Medicare, health, education and veterans’ benefits — increased from 5% of GDP in 1950 to 11.6% in 1980, with almost two-thirds of this increase occurring in the single decades of the 1970 (United States Bureau of the Census 1995).

Another part of capital’s response to the crisis of the 1970s was the manipulation of prices, in particular oil prices, which in turn affect many other prices. By using inflation rising real incomes can be dampened and value transferred back to capital (Clever 1981; Midnight Notes Collective 1992; Oppenheim 1976–77, cited in Cleaver 2000). But for Shaikh and Tonak the oil-price shock was just that, a shock, and completely unrelated to class struggle in the United States.

### 2.3 ‘The question is not: is it true? But: does it work?’ (Massumi 1987: xv)

It is not my intention to attempt to formally refute the Classical Marxist theory of the PUPL distinction. Such a refutation may not possible and, *on their own terms*, the orthodox theorists of the distinction may well be consistent. But I do think that Marxist orthodoxy here fails to grasp what I consider fundamental, namely capital’s ceaseless imposition of work, which has spread into more and more spheres of human activity,



most ‘unproductive’, and the many struggles around this imposition. In this sense then, I am not claiming that the orthodox distinction is ‘wrong’ or ‘false’, but that it simply isn’t very useful — it doesn’t ‘work’ — in understanding class struggle. Our differences are not ones of formal logic, but of interpretation and of perspective. Whilst Classical Marxists perhaps understand the distinction as a logical category and a *basis* for analysis, I wish to reinterpret it as an *open* category, a distinction which *immediately* helps us understand struggle and which *emerges* from struggle.<sup>6</sup> I attempt this task in the next two sections.

### 3 All Labour is Productive

#### 3.1 Abstract labour, the substance of value

The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist. (Marx 1976a: 644)

Productive workers are workers who produce value and surplus-value. But what, in fact, is value? Here we can distinguish the ‘Marxian theory of value’, or the ‘social paradigm’, from the ‘Ricardian theory of value’, the so-called ‘technological paradigm’ (de Vroey 1982). In the Ricardian theory, value is simply embodied labour. By contrast, in the Marxian theory, value is embodied labour *which is also abstract labour*. That is, *the substance of value is abstract labour* (see, e.g., Cleaver 2000).

So let us now look more closely at abstract labour. For Marx, abstract labour is ‘human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure’. Like labour, like result: ‘All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished.’ (Marx 1976a: 128). De Angelis (1995) suggests that ‘without regard to the form of its expenditure’ means ‘without regard to the pain, suffering, human brutalisation, boredom, stupidity, etc, that work may imply’ (110) and he goes on to show ‘that abstract labour is *alienated, imposed, and boundless in character*’. Labour is alienated because the work activity appears to the worker as an *external power*, outside their direct control: it is not ‘the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself’ (Marx 1975: 226). Since alienated labour appears as an external power, such labour is ‘not voluntary but forced, it is *forced labour*’, i.e., it is imposed (Marx 1975: 326). And since abstract labour, by definition abstracts from concrete labour and from the useful character of concrete labour, it cannot be limited by a set of needs, neither those of the direct producer(s) nor of some other individual(s), such as the feudal lord, who

appropriates surplus labour. It is thus boundless, 'production for production's sake'. (De Angelis 1995: 111–13; including references to Marx).

But exactly these characteristics — alienated, imposed, boundless — are increasingly those of an apparently ever-expanding array of human activity under capitalism! At school and in universities, students face an immense battery of tests and examinations, with their associated pressures, from an ever-younger age. Schoolwork is alienated: its content is determined by external forces (teachers and, to an increasing extent, national syllabi) and it is directed towards passing exams, acquiring specific and 'transferable' skills and becoming 'employable'. It is imposed: 'you must do well at school, or else you'll end up like...'; 'if you don't get a degree...'. It is boundless: 'testing for testing's sake'. Teachers and parents, particularly mothers, face associated and similar pressures. 'Good' and 'responsible' parenting is directed towards giving one's child the 'best start in life' — finding the 'best' schools and doing whatever is necessary such that the child will be admitted, helping with homework, etc. — and seems to be driven by endless rounds of new research, government suggestions and scare-stories. One should always strive to be a 'better parent', to do 'better' for one's child(ren). The labour of being a modern parent can thus be alienated, imposed and boundless. Other examples of alienated, imposed and boundless labour, both waged and unwaged, abound.

This perspective on abstract labour — and thus value — understands it as a tangible reality, the 'sensuous-less' of alienated, imposed and boundless activity. (See De Angelis 1996; 2004.) And this tangible reality is as applicable to the labour performed in capital's reproductive circuit,  $LP-M-C(MS)...P...LP^*$  (see Cleaver 2000: 123), as it is to that performed in its industrial circuit,  $M-C\{LP, MP\}...P...C'-M'$ . The two circuits are, of course, interlinked: when the industrial circuit of capital expands, the reproductive circuit will be affected. Clearly too, this perspective on abstract labour understands it as a category of struggle: how can it be otherwise when sensuous beings are forced to engage in sensuous-less work?

An important aspect of abstract labour, not discussed thus far, is the question of *commensuration*. For Classical Marxists, the process of 'real abstraction' which makes commensurate the various heterogeneous concrete labours is market exchange:

[H]eterogeneous concrete labors are rendered homogeneous and abstract *by the market*. The creation of value is not only a process of labor embodiment, or objectification of labor, in production; it is also, and *crucially*, a social process involving *exchange in the market*. (Mohun 1996: 33; my emphasis)

Labour which is 'unproductive' is then categorised as such because commensuration through market exchange does not take place. But I would argue that markets are only one social mechanism through which commensuration of heterogeneous concrete labours can take place. Markets are, in fact, a disciplinary device for capital: concrete labours become commensurate as individuals actors are forced to meet and beat benchmarks or social norms. (See De Angelis 2005 — this issue of *The Commoner*.) But markets are only one such device amongst many and capital habitually uses a combination of markets and planning. Moreover, commensuration is never 'perfect' or 'complete': it is a process (a verb not a noun!) and subject to struggle. So-called 'free markets' are never really free and unfettered. Private capitals from the largest global corporation right down to the smallest small business, have always attempted to gain political power in order to influence market structures and prices, both for labour-power and for other commodities. Labour, for its part, has always struggled in various ways to obtain the political power to influence markets and prices — particularly the price of labour-power — in *its* favour. Marx's simplifying assumption, throughout much of *Capital*, of no unequal exchange is just that, a simplifying assumption. And, of course, although Marx leaves this unspecified, the 'moral and historical element' in the determination of the value of labour-power clearly refers to struggle.

As production has become increasingly social and cooperative in nature, the private capitals that exploit cooperating labourers have used a variety of strategies to determine the remuneration of individual workers. These strategies are as much concerned with maintaining discipline and hierarchy as with 'efficiently' equating each worker's wage with the value of his or her labour-power, they involve administrative or 'political' decision-making or 'quasi-market' structures ('internal markets'). And similar strategies are increasingly being embraced by state organisations, which largely employ 'unproductive' labour.<sup>7</sup> Private capitals' 'internal' decisions are ultimately vindicated or not by the market 'outside' and, frequently, this 'outside' market is the world market. But we can think of this world market as also judging nation states in terms of their 'competitiveness', and thus their 'political' decision making and 'quasi-markets'.<sup>8</sup> If we think of individual nation states competing in order to attract and retain private capitals within their borders (see, e.g., the collections Bonefeld and Holloway 1991; 1995; Clarke 1991), then the organisation and 'efficiency' of state labour, along with the quantity and 'quality' of the unwaged reproductive labour of mothers and others, are as important parameters within this competition as are the tax regimes, juridical framework and level of infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

In fact the question of measure or commensuration and the law of value is problematic, though we should also remember that linking labour and value is *capital's* problem, it is not ours. The task of 'trac[ing] the development of the expression of value' (Marx 1976a: 139) is increasingly challenging as production and reproduction become increasingly social and collective, both more reliant upon the 'general intellect', and with the product or 'commodity' more likely to be ephemeral in nature. It is these tendencies that have led to the rejection of the law of value by thinkers such as Toni Negri.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, every day the personifications of capital — whether private capital or state — make judgements regarding value and its measure. Managers, technicians, human-resource experts, accountants and all manner of other specialists make decisions on prices and the allocation of labour-powers. These decisions span every aspect of production, reproduction and so-called 'circulation'. Some decisions will be vindicated somewhere between the local level and the final arbiter the world market, while some decisions will affect the very structure of the market(s).<sup>11</sup> 'Good' decision-makers will be rewarded, 'poor' decision-makers will be penalised. (At 'higher' levels within administrative structures, those who reward (penalise) 'good' decision-makers and penalise (reward) 'poor' decision-makers will themselves be rewarded (penalised), and so on). All such decisions within this framework ultimately relate to reinforcing the connection between value and work, to the reduction, in practice, of concrete labours to abstract. Isn't this is the law of value?

In more and more areas of life, economists, statisticians, bureaucrats, civil servants are struggling to devise and impose new metrics, frameworks by which performances can be judged and productivity measured. Examples are the 'proletarianisation' of many professions, the organisational changes in the public sector, driven by the rhetoric of 'quality', 'efficiency' and 'value for money' (Pollit 1993; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio 1995; Clarke and Newman 1997). We can think of league tables for schools and hospitals; in universities we have the Quality Assurance Agency the Research Assessment Exercise and yet more league tables (see Harvie 2000). We have cultures of 'best practice', we have 'performance indicators', we have 'benchmarking'. On the one hand we have the case of Patricia Amos, the mother who in May 2002 was jailed for 60 days (reduced to 28 on appeal), under the 1996 Education Act, for allowing her two teenage daughters to play truant from school (Morris and Smithers 2002; Gillan 2002). On the other hand, the government is currently piloting plans to pay young people up to £40 a week to remain at school or college, with this payment linked to satisfactory attendance and performance (DfES 2003: chapter 6, box K). In fact, we can understand attempts of neoclassical economists to estimate 'returns to

schooling', to model labour-market participation (wage-labour versus household production), to develop concepts such as 'social capital', and so on, as both a recognition of the increasingly abstract nature of diverse types of labour, both waged and unwaged, and a part of capitalist strategy to make commensurable heterogeneous concrete labours. While some have lamented and criticised this 'colonisation' of the social sciences by 'fortress economics' (e.g., Fine 1997; 1999; 2001), in fact, in this respect, neoclassical economics is far in advance of Marxian orthodoxy.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2 Production and the commodity

[T]he only productive labour is that which is directly consumed in the course of *production* for the valorization of capital. (Marx 1976b: 1038; emphasis altered)

Labour is productive ... if it is converted into *commodities*. (Marx 1976b: 1039; Marx's emphasis)

[P]roductive labour is labour which produces commodities. (Marx 1969: 172)

Productive labour is that labour which is involved in *production*, which is usually opposed to circulation, supervisory or other activities concerned with maintaining the social order. Moreover, the product of productive labour must take the form of a commodity. So let us examine the nature of production and the commodity.

Most Classical Marxists tend to understand the commodity as a *thing*, even if it is a service. Following capital's purchase of labour-power and means of production, a thing — commodity — is produced, and then it just *is*, until it is sold — its value realised — and hence 'falls out of circulation and into consumption' (*Capital I*: 250). To ease this moment of realisation *C-M*, the employer of the (productive) producer of the commodity also employs the services of marketers and advertisers, credit-providers and retailers. These (unproductive) services are located firmly *within* the moment *C-M*, i.e., within circulation.

My argument is that these 'circulation' and reproductive (of the social order) activities and outputs are not only 'socially necessary' (as I think all agree), but themselves take the form of commodities. That is, such activities and outputs have a dual existence, being both values and use-values. These activities are therefore really part of production. I have already considered, in section 3.1, how a wide variety of concrete labours can be and are reduced to abstract labour. It should therefore be clear that such 'circulation' and reproductive activities contain abstract labour and are

thus productive of value. I will examine the use-values produced. It is neither here nor there that so-called 'pure circulation' activities such as selling (as opposed to the 'productive' labour of transporting goods to convenient locations, etc.) is perhaps not 'socially useful' in any moral sense, i.e., does not produce new *wealth*. It is sufficient that this activity is the result of abstract human labour and produces a use-value for someone, where frequently that 'someone' is capital (either individual or in general).<sup>13</sup>

Retailers *sell* products, they do not give them away, and they use a range of techniques to prevent theft. As such they provide a use-value to both an individual capital, by ensuring that the values of *its* commodities are preserved and realised in money-form, and to capital-in-general, by safe-guarding property relations. (Consumer) credit-providers provide a use-value to workers and capital, who share the cost. For capital, credit, like retail services, provides the use-value of allowing it to realise the values of its commodities more easily. For workers, the use-value of credit is its ability to allow them to enjoy other use-values earlier. Some use-values many workers would never be able to enjoy without credit.

Advertising too provides an individual capital with the use-value of easing the realisation of its commodities' values as money and profit. As Hunt has already suggested, they 'lessen the work and worry of a capitalist facing the vagaries of the sphere of circulation' (1979: 322). But, advertising and, more generally, *branding*, play a far more important role and also provide workers (as consumers) with use-values. The purpose of branding (see, of course, Klein 2000) is to produce imagined, non-corporeal qualities of products and, as such, branding *does alter* the use-values of commodities.<sup>14</sup> In fact, in terms of use-value, it is probably impossible to disentangle the product, in its tangible form, from the brand, i.e., to separate the corporeal and ethereal qualities of commodities. If we wear Nike, for example, we're not just wearing mere sports wear, we can (pretend to) be Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong or Ronaldo. We buy not only the tangible good, but the identity too. Thus, as Negri (1991: 142) has suggested 'productive capital extends into circulation'.<sup>15 16</sup>

The category of *immaterial labour* is useful here. This is defined by Lazzarto (1996: 133) as 'the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity'. But immaterial labour not only advertises and brands individual commodities.

[A]s regards the activity that produces the 'cultural content' of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work' — in other words, the kind of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions,

tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion. Once the privileged domain of the bourgeoisie and its children, these activities have since the end of the 1970s become the domain of what we have come to define as ‘mass intellectuality’ (Ibid.: 133–34)

The relations involved are far too complex to discuss in detail here. But we can mention two examples of this complexity. First, much immaterial labour is unwaged, or is performed in return for small ‘perks’, and may not be perceived as labour at all by those who perform it. For example, AOL chat-room hosts tend to provide their services in exchange for ‘free’ connection time and more privileged access (see Margonelli 1999; Terranova 2000). Klein (2000) recounts how the ‘street styles’ of black kids in the Bronx and even of anti-capitalist demonstrators are appropriated by ‘cool hunters’. The ‘cool hunters’ are waged labourers. Those whose styles they appropriate are not. Second, the roles of ‘advertiser’ and ‘advertised’ are frequently confused due to so-called ‘synergy’. For example, the Spice Girls advertised Coca-Cola, but this simultaneously involved Coke endorsing the Spice Girls. David Beckham advertises numerous products, but the constant reproduction of his image alongside ‘cool’ brands simultaneously promotes the David Beckham *brand*. It is the enormous complexity of these relationships that leads writers such as Hardt and Negri, as I noted above, in footnote 10, above, to suggest that the production of value now takes place ‘outside measure’ and the PUPL distinction’s defenders to declare this labour *unproductive*. Both these approaches are problematic. On the one hand, Hardt and Negri ignore capital’s attempts to devise and impose metrics adequate to its need to measure, which I discussed briefly in section 3.1, above. Hardt and Negri may believe in the ‘impossibility of power’s calculating and ordering production at a global level’ (2000: 357), but ‘power’ certainly hasn’t stopping trying and the ‘impossibility’ of its project derives directly from our own struggles against the reduction of life to measure.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the Classical Marxists tend to neglect the myriad interconnections between waged work and unwaged, the ‘economic’ and the ‘social’, production and reproduction. (See, e.g., Caffentzis 1999 for a discussion of some of these connections.) And *both* approaches would seem to imply that the question of measure was (or is) straightforward in the nineteenth century (or the ‘productive’ sector).

### 3.3 Labour-power as a produced commodity

Accumulation of capital is therefore multiplication of the proletariat. (Marx 1976a: 764)

Marx explicitly ruled out the labour of producing and reproducing labour-power as being productive, and most Classical Marxists have followed him on this point, categorising it as unproductive or non-productive. Today, such a position seems less and less tenable.

There are a number of aspects to consider and it is useful to distinguish reproductive labour on the basis of whether it is, first, concerned with (re)producing human beings as human beings or with (re)producing human beings as the commodity labour-power (its function), and second, whether this labour is waged or unwaged (its form). (See Table 1.)

On the reproduction of labour-power, Simon Mohun writes:

The value of any other commodity [apart from labour-power] is determined by the socially necessary labour-time required to produce it. But labour-power is not a produced commodity in the same sense. It is a capacity or potentiality of people, and people are not (re)produced under capitalist relations of production. No capitalist production process is involved, no process of adding value to the means of production by living labour; neither do there exist different technologies of production in competition with one another which must be averaged to find a market value. (Mohun 1994: 398)

Labour-power is not a produced commodity; it is a commodified aspect of human beings, and human beings are not produced in any valorisation process. It might be suggestive for some purposes to consider that labour process which (re)produces people, but the relations involved are not class ones, there is no private property in the means of (re)production from which non-possessors can be excluded, the labour involved is not wage labour, and (re)production is neither production for sale nor production for profit. (Ibid.: 401)

These activities [including 'daily and generational reproduction of labor-power'] do not produce value, because there is no social mechanism for commensurating different labor activities, and so there is no way in which the time taken in such activities can be regarded as 'socially necessary'. ... Such labor is non-productive; indeed, in value theory terms it does not count quantitatively at all. (Mohun 1996: 38)



**Table 1.** Examples of reproductive labour

		Function	
		(Re)production of humans <i>qua</i> humans	(Re)production of humans as labour-power
Form	Unwaged	[1.1] 'Natural' biological reproduction, aspects of obtaining and preparing food, within family and community healing	[1.2] Many aspects of parenting, e.g, basic rules of capitalist society: 'do not steal'.
	Waged	[2.1] 'Artificial' biological reproduction, aspects of state and private health services	[2.2] Education services, police, military, judicial system, etc., 'capitalist culture'

But consider education, for example. Privately-educated human beings tend, in nearly all countries, to be better-educated than those reliant solely on state-provision. These individuals are able to command higher wages, that is, the value of their labour-power is higher. In many countries, not least the UK, schools compete with each other, on the basis of various targets, which involve frequent testing of students. Relative success for schools equates to greater resources for the school, including higher remuneration for its head, who as *manager*, rewards her or his 'best' teachers. Educational goals tend to be determined by capital's needs: students need to be disciplined, to be able to turn up on time, to have 'transferable skills' and so on. Science subjects are deemed more important than humanities. The culture of adopting 'good practice' or, better, 'best practice' can be understood as part of a process by which schools are forced to adopt the most 'efficient' of alternative 'technologies'. In turn, education systems are compared across countries, with particular use made of key economic indicators, such as productivity and growth rates. As I suggested in section 3.1, above, this is the arbitration of the world market. Education is concerned with reproducing human beings as labour-power and is largely provided by waged teachers. As such it falls into cell [2.2] in Table 1, above.<sup>18</sup>

Similar inequalities exists with regard to the biological reproduction of new human beings and the biological reproduction of self, i.e., health, both as a result of diet and access to health-care resources. The reality is stark: *poor people are less healthy than rich* and, in turn, their future earnings potential, i.e., the value of their labour-power, is lower. With cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, expensive tailors, special diets, gym workouts and so on we can alter the way we look. In this way we exercise power over

the daily reproduction of ourselves as human beings, moreover as human beings of a particular type. In many ways, this control is empowering, yet it frequently takes the form of a commodity: gym-membership must be paid for, special-diet food, along with fresh fruit and vegetables, tends to cost more than crisps, chocolate bars and TV dinners. What is particularly interesting is the approach of an increasing number of people to their 'fitness' activities. For many, good health is not a benign by-product of participation in enjoyable physical recreational activities, coupled with a naturally balanced diet. Rather it is something to be attained and maintained through 'scientific' and 'efficient' exercise programmes, which becomes a chore: the time spent doing 'exercise' must be minimised and, if possible, it must be combined with some other activity.<sup>19</sup> In this way attaining and maintaining a certain physical appearance has, for many, become a labour activity, even one with its own associated socially-necessary labour time. The pressures to attain and maintain such fitness regimes are varied, but it is certainly the case that increasing numbers of people are *obliged* to look a certain way as part of their job: *fat*, for example, is no longer just a *feminist* issue, it is also a *class* issue!

Other examples are the Human Genome Project, cloning and staggering medical developments in fertility treatments. All have the goal of taking control of the very building blocks of life, but are in fact only the latest development in a centuries-long struggle over fertility. (See, e.g., Federici 2004.) One interesting point about many of these issues concerning biological reproduction is that the boundaries between the cells in Table 1 become fuzzy. For example, a striking feature of many US citizens is their 'perfect' teeth. But to what extent does such a dental 'norm' — requiring expensive dentistry — reproduce the human being as human being and to what extent does it reproduce labour-power?

Of course, the feminists of 'wages for housework' and other theorists of the 'social factory' have long recognised the value-producing aspect of reproductive labour (e.g., Dalla Costa and James 1972; Tronti 1973; Modern Times Collective 1974; Federici 1975; James 1975; Fortunati 1995). What I have tried to do is extend some of their arguments to cover the ever-wider range of reproductive activities we engage in and, more importantly, to suggest that these activities are increasingly becoming subject to more pernicious 'benchmarks', 'social norms' and so on. Essentially, reproductive activity is increasingly becoming subject to *measure*, which threatens the establishment (followed by discipline and development) of *socially-necessary labour times*. It should certainly be clear, as the various examples above illustrate, that *first*, class relations are involved in the (re)production of human beings, and *second*, the capital relation is

the separation of humans from the conditions of production, i.e., creation of labour-power from human beings. I develop this argument in the next section.

### 3.4 What is capital?

*Productive labour is only that which produces capital ... labour becomes productive only by producing its own opposite.* (Marx 1975: 305 f/n; emphasis in original)

The commodity is the most elementary form of bourgeois wealth. The explanation of ‘productive labour’ as labour which produces ‘commodities’ also corresponds, therefore, to a much more elementary point of view than that which defines productive labour as labour which produces capital. (Marx 1969: 173)

Capitalist production therefore reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labour-power and the conditions of labour. (Marx 1976a: 723)

Capital is a *social relation*. The social relation is characterised by the fact that one class of people controls the means or conditions of production, whilst another class of people owns nothing but its ability to work and is thus *separated* from the conditions of production. Capital is a social relation of struggle between these two classes, capitalist class and working class. This struggle is both over the way in which labour is combined with the conditions of production, i.e., over the imposition of work, *and* over the way in which the separation is maintained, i.e., over the way in which capitalist class and working class are reproduced. (See, example, De Angelis 2001.)

In *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx describes the ‘separation [of the conditions of production from the labourer] as the real generation process of capital ... New capital formation [is then] the fact that the *additional* conditions of production confront the worker as capital’ (Marx 1972: 422; my emphasis). This formulation can also be understood as the separation and struggle between living labour and dead labour or, as Holloway (2002) has suggested, as that between those that *do* and those that appropriate what has *been done*.

If we understand capital as the separation (or rather, the *separating*—again, see Holloway 2002) of worker and capital (or doing and done), and if productive labour is that which produces capital, then we can understand productive labour as those human activities which reproduce this separation and produce it on an expanded scale. This has *always* been the case. However when nearly all production involved the

production of *things*, corporeal commodities, it was easy to overlook the simultaneous (re)production of separation, of capital, on the one hand, and proletarians, on the other. Yet, as Marx wrote:

The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total, connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces *not only* commodities, not only surplus-value, but *it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer.* (Marx 1976a: 724; my emphasis)

With the growth of services and all manner of other ‘superstructural’ phenomena it is more important than ever to understand the category of *separation* as central to capital. All manner of activities, usually characterised as ‘unproductive’ (though ‘necessary’), in fact (re)produce the separation of labour from the conditions of production and should thus be understood as productive, even though they produce no *thing*. Spheres of such activities clearly include the legal and judicial system, which enforces laws protecting private property,<sup>20</sup> but also much ‘culture’, which encourages acceptance of capitalist social relations, i.e., encourages acceptance of this separation.<sup>21</sup> So, as Negri suggests: ‘productive labour is no longer “that which directly produces capital [capital understood here in its narrow economic sense]”, but that which reproduces society’ (1996: 157).

## 4 Productive and Unproductive Labour and the Law of Value

In the previous section, I considered Marx’s category of productive labour from a number of standpoints, namely: *value*, whose substance is abstract labour; the *production of commodities*, the commodity having a two-fold existence as value and use-value; *labour-power*; and, *capital as social relation of separation*. We argued that there is a tendency for all labour in capitalist society to be reduced to abstract labour — alienated, imposed and boundless, and mutually commensurable through various mechanisms and metrics, perhaps with the world market as final arbiter — and thus to be productive of value. We showed that many activities, normally considered as ‘pure circulation’ or supervisory, are in fact a part of production, in that these activities produce both use-value and value, i.e., a commodity. We also showed that labour-power, rather than being merely a ‘commodified aspect of human beings’, can in fact be treated as a produced commodity. Finally, I suggested that if capital is understood as the social relation by which labour is separated from its conditions of production, then productive labour should be understood as any activity which maintains and

extends this separation. We can thus agree with Cyril Smith (1996: 87), who suggests that, '[i]n present-day society, productive labour can have no other meaning but production under the dominion of capital'.

So, all labour is productive. But...

... capital's dominion is not total; it never has been and it never can be. We are humans, not automatons, and, what is more, capital depends upon our existence as humans for its existence (see Caffentzis 1990). For all that we are forced to perform 'sensuous-less' labour, we remain sensuous beings. Just as there are many ways by which capital attempts to reduce all of life to value-producing abstract labour, there are many varied ways in which we resist and attempt to escape this reduction. Many of our activities reproduce our separation from the conditions of production, but there are also numerous ways in which we struggle to overcome this separation, to build relationships based on our common humanity rather than on commodity-ownership. These acts of resistance, of humanity, of going-beyond the commodity-form — of 'self-valorization' (Negri 1991) — do not produce value for capital. They do not produce and reproduce capital. They are, from capital's perspective, unproductive.<sup>22</sup>

But productive and unproductive labours are commingled. Looking at society in its totality this commingling appears fractal-like. Whatever the scale of our perspective, productive and unproductive activities each contain the germ of their opposite. On a 'macro' scale, even the most revolutionary of movements contains elements that can be recuperated by capital. For instance, images from the Russian Revolution and 'anti-work' slogans from the 1980s make good advertising copy,<sup>23</sup> while this season's anti-capitalist street-cool may reappears on next season's cat-walk. Conversely, even the most disciplined, controlled and productive of factory workforces can suddenly down tools and walk off the job. At a more 'micro' level, many 'revolutionary' groups, with their emphasis on discipline, hierarchy, specialist roles and quantities (number of papers sold, number of members, number on a demonstration) and so on, simply reproduce capitalist structures and social relations, while the welcoming super-market 'greeter' and the obsequious waiter/waitress are becoming unproductive if they are surly.

Thus we should understand productive and unproductive labour as *open* categories, as categories of struggle. All labour can be *either* productive or unproductive, or rather, all labour tends to be *both*. Whether a particular concrete labour activity creates value or not is contingent on class struggle. While capital struggles to subsume all of life under it, reducing all labours to value-producing,

abstract (and hence productive) labour, the working class (or better, *humanity*) struggles to be *unproductive*, to free its activities from value, to go *beyond value*. In this understanding, we retain the relation between the productive-unproductive labour distinction and the labour theory of value, but instead of the distinction being a 'building block' of — i.e., prior to — the labour theory of value (Mohun: 1996: 31), the relation is *internal*. Labour's struggle against the law of value *is* its struggle against productive labour.<sup>24</sup>

This understanding can therefore also be thought of as *strategic* from a working-class point of view, or *political* (cf. Cleaver 2000). That is, it allows us to assess various activities and strategies from the explicit perspective of wishing to transcend the capitalist mode of production. And, as such, the question, *is this activity productive or unproductive of value for capital?* is a reformulation of the Solidarity group's understanding of 'meaningful action for revolutionaries' vis-à-vis 'sterile and harmful action' (Solidarity 1967), but in a context which goes beyond the revolutionaries *versus* masses dichotomy.

Finally, this understanding allows us to interpret in a meaningful sense Marx's comment that '[t]o be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune' (Marx 1976a: 644). If some workers are productive and other workers are unproductive, but all are exploited or dominated by capital, then the unproductive worker is no more fortunate than the productive: Marx's statement is empty. Once we understand the productive worker to be anyone who is subjugated to capitalist social relations, anyone who performs alienated, imposed and boundless abstract labour, Marx's declaration acquires some force. Conversely, that worker who is able to reclaim from the boss minutes, hours, days of her life, that worker who is able, like Milton, to produce 'as the activation of *his own* nature' (Marx 1976b: 1044) is a fortunate worker indeed.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

1. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri write: 'In the biopolitical context of Empire... the production of capital converges ever more with the production and reproduction of social life itself; it thus becomes ever more difficult to maintain distinctions among productive, reproductive, and unproductive labor. Labor — material or immaterial, intellectual or corporeal — produces and reproduces social life, and in the process is exploited by capital' (2000: 402).

2. 'Marx throws out as useless the question of what kind of labor is productive in general, in all historical epochs, independently of the given social relations.' (Rubin 1973: 260).
3. In some ways, the theoretical debate has been driven by these authors' empirical work. In the expression for the rate of surplus value, for example, the value productive labour-power forms the denominator,  $V$ , whilst unproductive labour is paid for out of surplus value,  $S$ , the numerator. Hence, clear definitions and distinctions between the two types of labour are necessary if the rate of surplus value is to be estimated correctly.
4. An unsympathetic (and anonymous) reviewer of this paper suggests that this 'is not difficult to explain at all! The divergence of the price from value ... is due to the fact that on the basis of copyright and patent laws, Nike has a monopoly on the production of Nike labelled trainers. The price of Nike trainers is a monopoly price. The work of marketing Nike trainers, as opposed to designing them, is unproductive since it simply persuades people to buy Nike trainers rather than other trainers or other commodities in general'. Of course, theories of monopoly *can* be invoked to explain the price differential for Nike trainers. But questions concerning branding and the creation and maintenance of monopolies, including the juridical framework (intellectual property rights) in which they are created and maintained, remain and, from the Classical Marxist perspective, this labour falls outside the ambit of the law of value. In fact 'unproductive labour' would surely sit quite nicely up in the superstructure, alongside 'politics', 'law', 'aesthetic effect' and so on, in E.P. Thompson's diagram of 'Althusser's Marxist Orrery' (Thompson 1978: 292).
5.  $CRP = P/K = (S - U_f)/(C + U_s) = (S/V - U_f/V)/(C/V + U_s/V) = (RS - UF)/(CC + US)$ , where  $CRP$  stands for conventional rate of profit,  $P$  is total profit,  $K$  is total capital,  $S$  is surplus value,  $V$  and  $C$  are variable and constant (productive) capital, respectively, and  $U_f$  and  $U_s$  are flow and stock of unproductive capital, respectively. Then  $RS$  is the rate of surplus value,  $CC$  is the composition of capital, while  $UF$  and  $US$  are the ratios of the flow and stock, respectively, of unproductive capital to variable capital.
6. My anonymous critic argues that 'in *Capital* class struggle is attenuated in order to bring to the fore the logic of capital. To my mind it is misconceived to attempt to read off class struggle *immediately* from *Capital*, particularly forms of class struggle which do not arise from the immediate process of production.' Harry Cleaver (2000) and John Holloway (2001) both explicitly argue against such an interpretation of *Capital*.

7. Mohun dismisses 'quasi-market criteria for "efficient" decision-making' as 'artificial competition', which cannot 'act as surrogate for the real coercive forces of competition on commodity producers to reduce socially necessary labor times' (1996: 47). But, first, this would seem to imply that 'normal' markets are *not* somehow artificial and, second, it neglects the fact that socially necessary labour times *are* in fact being driven down in the state sector.
8. The world market is no 'freer' than any other. TNCs and nation states will use all in their power to influence the structures of this market in their own favour.
9. The two 'sets' of parameters are not separate. A tax regime, juridical framework and level of infrastructure favourable to capital will generally require an 'efficient' and 'productive' state sector (if small) and a high level of unwaged reproductive work.
10. Hardt and Negri suggest that the production of value now takes place 'outside measure', where this 'refers to the impossibility of power's calculating and ordering production at a global level' (2000: 357). As an alternative theoretical framework for understanding the development of human activity outside the law of value they offer the rather ill-defined opposition *generation-corruption*, e.g.: '[W]hen capitalism loses its relationship to value (both as the measure of individual exploitation and as a norm of collective progress), it appears immediately as corruption.' (390)
11. Since the market is socially constituted, *all* decisions will affect its structure in possibly infinitesimal ways.
12. The problem with neoclassical economics is not that it is misguided or wrong, rather that it is the science of the enemy, capital.
13. This is one root of my argument with at least some of the defenders of the PURL distinction. For example, Shaikh and Tonak suggest that 'it is the production of new *wealth* which has been, at least so far, the real foundation of economic success' (1994: 210; my emphasis). I would argue that it is not *wealth* which is central to the capitalist mode of production (and 'economic success'), but *value* or command over labour.
14. 'The commodity is ... a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of *whatever* kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or *the imagination*, makes no difference' (*Capital I*: 125; my emphasis). The quotation which Marx appends as a footnote here is also worth



repeating: 'Desire implies want; it is the appetite of the mind, and as natural as hunger to the body ... The greatest number (of things) have their value from supplying the wants of the mind.'

15. Marx writes: 'Circulation can *create value* only in so far as it requires fresh employment — of *alien labour* — in addition to that directly consumed in the production process. This is then the same as if more *necessary labour* were used in the direct production process. Only the actual *circulation costs* increase the *value* of the product, but decrease the surplus value.' (Marx 1973: 548; emphasis in original.) But the last sentence here is a little careless. Surely *all* costs, as *costs*, decrease surplus value. But expenses are nevertheless necessary for capital's valorisation. By laying out money (value) on labour-power, capital hopes this value will be both preserved and enhanced. If the labour is both value-creating and exploited, this will be the case.
16. Mohun would perhaps object here that 'one might question whether a category such as the rate of exploitation is well-defined under circumstances in which the production of value continues to the point of consumption' (1999: 5 f/n). This may be so. But, as we suggested in section 3.1, quantitatively defining the rate of exploitation is capital's problem; it should not be ours.
17. Hardt and Negri claim that the production of value takes place both 'outside measure' and 'beyond measure' (2000: 354–359), but they seem to treat these two characteristics of value production in *Empire* as though they were somehow separate. I would suggest there is an internal relationship: 'outside measure' flows from our struggles to go 'beyond measure.'
18. There is increasing pressure, however, on parents to involve themselves with their child(ren)'s education: attending parents' evenings, ensuring homework gets done and assisting with it if necessary, for example. Such parenting activity is unwaged and thus falls into cell[1.2].
19. Such as sitting at one's desk working or in one's armchair watching television!
20. '[T]he pickpocket becomes a productive worker too, since he indirectly produces books on criminal law (this reasoning at least as correct as calling a judge a productive worker because he protects *from* theft)' (Marx 1973: 273). Marx's sarcastic example is rather unfortunate: the pickpocket's actions challenge private property, thus undermining the separation of labour from its conditions, and hence are unproductive; the judge's, on the other hand, enforce this separation and thus

are productive of capital. But the example does contain a grain of truth: capital's development takes place through responding to challenges against it (cf. Tronti (e.g., 1979) and other 'workerists'; Wright 2002).

21. On the role of culture in reproducing capitalist social relations see, of course, Marcuse, Adorno and the other Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School.
22. This understanding of productive and unproductive labours is similar to O'Connor's (1975). He equates unproductive activity with 'the struggle against both the boss and the repressive mechanism of self-control class society develops with the aim of extracting obedience' (318).
23. Images from the Russian Revolution have been used to advertise a bank and vodka, for example, whilst Berghaus, the outdoor-clothing manufacturer has encouraged people to phone in sick to work (provided they wear its equipment out on the hills, of course, and presumably as long they don't work for Berghaus!)
24. Cf. the questions *does definition come prior to struggle, or is struggle partly over (against) definition?* (Holloway 1998; 2000; De Angelis 2001; Leeds May Day Group 2004) and *structure-vs.-struggle* debates of the 1970s and 1980s. My formulation corresponds to the latter position in both cases.
25. Many thanks to Massimo De Angelis, who has made many useful comments and suggestions. I'm also grateful to George Caffentzis and Simon Mohun who have both offered encouragement (although Simon disagrees with 'just about everything' I say).

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