

“A bunch of notes and quotes” – Vol III

Labour

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This is not even a draft. Please let me know if you want to quote the thing:

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Notes

This the third in the “notes and quotes” series, a poorly-organised collection of ramblings on the various organising themes that have defined capitalism as such. By mentioning definitions, I want to draw attention to something both specific and non-specific: I am not quite sure that we can call this system capitalism anymore, at least not without some serious qualifications.

Some of the contradictions in the current system (whether it is new capitalism, hypercapitalism, late capitalism, fast capitalism, network capitalism, digital capitalism, etc, ad infinitum – or whatever else you want to call it) can, I think, be illuminated by a discussion of the concept of “labour”. Once again, my foundation is Marx – but where labour was concerned, his foundation was Adam Smith (and the two are not surprisingly similar in many respects), who in turn used the Aristotlean categories of scholastic economics to work out his original anti-mercantilist formulation.

Labour is a very old abstraction. It is the human version of “horsepower”. If we want to achieve something specific, we need to know, firstly, how much human power is needed, not only in terms of quantity; we also need to know qualitative specifics. This is as true for the construction of a house or a cathedral as it is for the production of a research thesis, an annual report, a policy statement, or an advertising campaign.

Although this has always been true, labour takes on more specific meanings in each distinct set of social relations. In the west, from ancient Greece to 19th century United States, slave labour constituted a formal and significant part of economic activity, with feudalism being a notable exception. In feudal relations, labour was divided into many categories and strata, but it excluded what, for instance, kings, priests, and scholars did. Labour takes on a more distinct meaning in capital because it can be – must be – bought *en masse*.

Usually – and this is true for most of history – people who have claimed the status of non-labourers are those who have benefited most from the labour of others. This continues to be the case. Historically, the distinction has been made in terms of “intellectual” and “manual” labour, intellectual labour being considered far more valuable than the manual kind. The distinction relies on the Cartesian fallacy, namely, that the human mind is somehow separate from the body. While seemingly nothing more than a philosophical gaff, the effect is somewhat more insidious. Today it is management who sees itself as being apart from labour, even though managers are a form of wage labour.

The fact that manual labour is conceived of as a separate category, a category distinct from intellectual labour, allows the idea that some sorts of human activity can be carried on without any intellectual engagement whatsoever. Even the corporatist

Weber new differently. But it is an important qualitative distinction. It implies categories of human labour that are cattle-like, mere brute physical forces. That assumption is the basis of labour as a commodity, a mass Thing, an homogenous category of activities that can be bought at a particular price, and which needs to be organised by intellectual labour. Labour needs to be *managed* because it lacks consciousness; “it” does not – cannot – think. Conversely, thinkers are not labourers; they are the controllers of labour.

It is a function of the English language that we render unconscious entities as neutered, as “it” (Halliday). Labour is an “it”, an unconscious force to be manipulated and directed. The ideal of the “knowledge worker” is a new phenomenon in our current constellation. And that is also an important development. It devalues both thinkers and their thoughts, dividing them from each other and rendering both as “things”. The concept of the “knowledge worker” implies that lumps of knowledge can be “produced” by a qualitatively homogenous group of people, like so many golf balls and mouse traps.

Labour is a dead category in language. It is a “dead metaphor”, a dead grammatical metaphor, (Martin) in economic thought. While Marx makes the distinction between dead and living labour, that is, between the things that labour has produced (dead labour; past activity embodied in commodities) and the life activities of people (living labour; activity in the present tense), in mainstream economic thought labour is merely a technical concept that is reduced to a factor-price, an economic *cost* (not an asset or a value). The price of labour must therefore be kept to a minimum. In real life, this translates into the imperative for lower relative living conditions for the greater mass of people who fall into the category of labour. That is why it ‘is *at bottom false to say that living labour consumes capital; capital ... consumes the living in the production process*’ (Marx, 1973: 349). This is one of Marx’s multifaceted statements.

The commodities produced by the “knowledge worker” can be compared with religious artefacts because, as in religion,

the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities ... I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (Marx, 1976, p. 165).

The diachronic transition from the concrete commodity-forms of Marx’s day to the more abstract cultural commodities of late capitalism creates an increased

immediacy [that] takes the place of the mediated, exchange-value itself. If the commodity in general combines exchange-value and use value, then the pure use value, whose illusion the cultural goods must preserve in a completely capitalist society, must be replaced by pure exchange-value, which precisely in its capacity of exchange-value deceptively takes over the function of use value (Adorno, 1991, p. 34).

In other words, more and more intricate forms of human activity have been rendered unconscious and dead in the process of capital spreading throughout more domains of society.

At the earliest stages of capitalist development, the labour process of systemic capital was mostly concerned with producing concrete commodities, coal, cotton and linen for instance, with the emphasis of the commodity production system being upon brute

aspects of labour power (Marx 1976: 1043). But industrialists quickly realised that the advantages of scale that the use of industrial technology (constant capital) offered were at the same time hampered by the amount of labour (variable capital) that increasingly massive amounts of machinery required (Marx 1976: 922-3: 1051-55). Consequently, systemic capital has tended to ‘increase constant capital at the expense of variable’ (1976: 1051). As a matter of course, then, ‘the acceleration of technological innovation is a corollary of the systematic application of science to production’ (Mandel 1975: 248).

The development and diffusion of technology within capital has tended towards an emphasis on its ability to firstly appropriate and commodify, and later to replace, increasingly intricate and intimate aspects of human labour power. Systemic capital firstly concerns itself with raw, “physical” labour power. Then, the division of labour engendered by the application of technology to production ‘gradually transforms the worker’s operations into more mechanical ones, so that at a certain point a mechanism can step in to take their place’ (Marx 1973: 703). Consequently, ‘[i]nvention becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes a prospect which determines and solicits it’ (1973: 704).

This is the nature of capital, of production founded on capital, that circulation time becomes a determinant moment for labour time, for the creation of value. The independence of labour time is thereby negated, and the production process is itself posited as determined by exchange, so that immediate production is socially linked to it and dependent on this link – not only as a material moment, but also as an economic moment, a determinant characteristic form. (Marx, 1973: 628).

There are numerous precursors to the “knowledge worker” of the new political economy, at almost every stage of civilization.

The commodification of knowledge and its relation to religion

In Padua, the renaissance had begun, with the likes of Galileo challenging orthodox conceptions of the Universe (Haskins, 1922). Heresy. The Aragonese kings, had, perhaps, merely found the sermon form most effective in motivating the masses, because the whole family of Aragonese monarchs, from Spain to Sicily, was in the habit of giving sermon-like addresses at the opening of each royal court (Cawsey, 1999, p. 445).

At the same time, new commercial institutions were beginning to spring up throughout Europe because of the regular trade and travel along the well-established but violently contested trade routes to Palestine, the Holy Land. Most notable amongst these institutions were the first banks (Galbraith, 1987, p. 141). The emergence of banks also put pressure on the papacy, whose edicts against usury became problematic as soon as Viennese bankers found out that money, once held in large, concentrated amounts, shed the ‘modest personality’ it had traditionally developed once in use, and developed a ‘separate identity’ altogether (p. 141). The church suddenly found itself under attack from commerce, fragmented monarchies, and the unchecked spread of their most sacred knowledge. The point to note here, then, is that the thirteenth century marks the historical turning point at which the Roman Catholic Church begins to lose its monopoly control of a highly-developed and sophisticated governance, military, commercial, scientific, and literary system that it had inherited from the ruins of the Roman empire.

The religious language - and therefore thought - of the scholastics has maintained its place in “expert” dialects throughout western history by focusing upon the most decisive moments in the development of our modern technocracy. During such times, the various branches of society that present themselves today as apparently autonomous fields have used the lexico-grammar of religious language to legitimise their own place in the power structures of western society. Such a course must trace a path through classical and neo-classical economics, through the Enlightenment and rationalism, through to the perfect mixing of religion and science in the liberal eugenics of the early Fabian society. Today, that world view, first developed by Francis Galton and endorsed by George Bernard Shaw and H.G Wells among many others, is manifest in the language that promotes the benefits of genetic technologies for the entire human race. It is also the language that led to the most destructive and malicious human actions in history: the mechanical slaughter of 11 million Jews, Slavs, homosexuals and other genetically “undesirable” types during the second world war in Germany and central Europe.

The industrial revolution focuses attention upon Britain, where it began. In fact, there is no date which is decisively agreed upon as the start of the industrial revolution, and such definitions depend on all sorts of nuances and theoretical quibbles (Hobsbawm, 1962, pp. 42-43). However, we will take Hobsbawm’s (pp. 42-25) distinctions into account and consider the revolution to be a function of the Enclosures Act having achieved the complete privatisation of property in Britain for around 50 years; that some expeditious interplay between the steam engine, spinning jenny, water frame, and power loom made the mechanisation of the textile industry possible; that the international slave trade was in full swing; that increasing international demand for textiles created a world market; and that, therefore, the 1780s is the decade which is most significant in defining the start of the industrial revolution (pp. 47-49). Overall, though, the best evidence for dating the industrial revolution to this era is that Britain’s economy exploded, and the explosion centred around international trade in the cotton and slavery industries.

Cheap entry costs and inordinately high returns made cotton mills a very attractive investment for entrepreneurs. The supply of cotton from the US, made possible by the booming slave trade, was cheap and plentiful. International trading companies were encouraged by the complementary possibilities of selling woven cotton from England into colonial markets, slaves from Africa into US cotton plantations, and raw cotton from these plantations into the English cotton manufacturing industries: throughout the early industrial revolution, ‘slavery and cotton marched together’ through the developing world market (1962, p. 49). As a result, traders’ ships were never empty.

The much heralded transition to industrialised economies was thus not without its social costs. To put things very mildly, and in the words of an apologist, it ‘created misery and discontent’ (Hobsbawm 1962, p. 56). As it flourished, the cotton industry not only thrived on and complemented the slave trade outside England, it also created slavery within England itself. After centuries of land enclosures, large areas of urban and rural Britain had developed into ghettos filled with the unemployed and dispossessed. The developing cotton industry demanded more and more labour in hitherto remote areas. The Poor Law Commission and their ‘flesh-agents’ saw to it that industry was supplied with sufficient, and sufficiently cheap, labour:

An office was set up in Manchester, to which lists were sent of those people in agricultural districts wanting employment, and their names were registered in books ... they were in effect as regularly sold to these manufacturers as slaves are sold to cotton growers in the United States ... The manufacturers again found they were short of hands ... They applied to the “flesh agents”, as they are called. (Ferrand, 1863, in Marx, 1976, p. 378)

Unfortunately for the manufacturers, by this time the ‘surplus population had been absorbed’ (p. 378). The pressing imperatives of trade demanded that the vacant positions be filled. Thus, after the

“flesh agents and their sub-agents” had vainly combed through the agricultural districts “a deputation came up to London and waited on the right hon. gentlemen [the Poor Law Commissioners PG] with a view of obtaining poor children from certain union houses for the mills of Lancashire” (Villiers, 1863, in Marx, 1976, p. 379).

Legally, the Commission could not oblige –not immediately. Nevertheless, child slavery was already well entrenched in England and the trade in children quickly expanded, and the associated laws dealing with such matters were altered to reflect social mores. A nominal weekly payment was made to children, or sometimes to their parents, but this was ususally just enough to pay for meagre food and lodgings which were almost always provided by employers (Langholm, 1998, pp. 118-127). This is what is meant by wage slavery. Working conditions during the early years of the industrial revolution were harsh, especially for children. This distasteful feature did not go unnoticed by the *Factories Enquiry Commission* (1833, in Marx, 1976, pp. 391-395), who immediately set to sorting the problem out in a recognisable manner:

The great evil of the factory system ... has appeared to us that it entails the necessity of continuing the labour of children to the utmost length of that of the adults [ie a minimum of 16½ hours per day PG]. The only remedy for this evil, short of the limitation of the labour of adults, which would, in our opinion, create an evil greater than that which is sought to be remedied, appears to be the plan of working double sets of children. (1833, in Marx, 1976, p. 391)

The argument that factory owners put up against legally limiting the working day, for children *or* adults, was that the state ought not do such a thing because it would be interfering with, and limiting, the labourers’ “freedom” to work (Langholm 1998, pp. 120-121; Hobsbawm, 1975, pp. 255-261; Marx, 1981, pp. 998-999; Thompson, 1980, pp. 207-215). In other words, liberal notions of “freedom” were advanced as moral arguments against legislation to stop child wage slavery! (Marx, 1976, p. 391). Until the rise of the organised labour movement some years later, the factory owners succeeded, managing to bog down humanitarian advances in anti-child labour laws for years to come.

Excess labour as a presupposition of capital

Excess production depends upon surplus time, surplus value, and thus surplus labour being available:

what is required for all forms of surplus labour is growth of population; of the labouring population for the first form [absolute surplus labour]; of population generally for the second [relative surplus labour]. (Marx 1973: p. 771)

Growing wealth requires increases in surplus time; surplus time requires surplus labour; surplus labour means surplus human activity, *surplus human life*. We do not need elaborate statistical graphs to illustrate the direction of global population trends

over the last century, especially since 1950.¹ Whether or not the expansionary tendencies of capital directly *cause* increases in population, the fact remains that human populations have exploded over the last century, most particularly in the “developing” nations of the world.

Labour seems to be a very simple category. The notion of labour in this universal form, as labour in general, is ... extremely old. Nevertheless “labour” in this simplicity is economically considered just as modern a category as the relations which give rise to this modern abstraction. The Monetary System, for example, still regards wealth quite objectively as a thing existing existing independently in the shape of money. Compared with this standpoint, it was a substantial advance when the Manufacturing or Mercantile system transferred the source of wealth from the object to subjective activity —mercantile or industrial labour— but it still considered that only this circumscribed activity itself produced money. In contrast to this system, the Physiocrats assume that a specific form of labour —agriculture— creates wealth, and they see the object no longer in the guise of money, but as a product in general, as the result of universal labour ...

It was an immense advance when Adam Smith rejected all restrictions with regard to the activity that produces wealth – for him it was all labour as such, neither manufacturing, nor commercial, nor agricultural labour, but all types of labour. (Marx, 1970, p. 209)

Here, when Smith enters, the expression of purely subjective - active - value emerges as a concept for the first time (even though Locke acknowledge the role of labour in extracting value): for Smith, ‘the wealth of nations’ is the work of people, even though he sees them as qualitatively cattle-like (Smith, 1776/1997, p. 100):

Labour was the first price, the original purchase money that was paid for all things. It was not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all the wealth of the world was originally purchased; and its value, to those who possess it, and who want to exchange it for some new productions, is precisely equal to the quantity of labour which it can enable them to purchase or command.

Wealth, as Mr Hobbes says, is power. (Smith, 1776/1997, p. 135)

Today, wealth and power are once again synonymous. It would seem that capital has reverted to its childhood – the vicious and elitist mindset of high-mercantilism. But this is just another aspect of senility. The idea that wealth is power is as fallacious as the idea that knowledge is power. Neither are true. But the belief in such fancies is merely the result of systemic senility.

Systemic senility and the dead universe of economised humanity

If this is still capitalism, it has reached a senile stage in its development. We refuse to look at our past and acknowledge not only *what* we have done, but also *how* we have

¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, best available estimates put global population at 1.5 - 1.7 billion. At the year 2000, the mid-year global population is estimated to be 6,073,104,685 (US Census Bureau 2000a,b).

done it. Conversely, we generally refuse to see that *what we say is as equally important as how we say it*. More often than not we refuse to even remember *what* we have said, let alone its consequences for society, preferring to emphasise the crude and inferior technological means of the exchange. But today, public language – the language that is formally designed to get masses of people to do certain things, mostly forms of labour – appears to be a mechanism that invites little more than an acknowledgement that it actually only exists for that purpose. Devoid of memory, the mechanised discourse of techno-corporatism whirs and clicks its monotonous way to monopoly, as any corporatised artefact of public necessity tends to do. The technocratic mantras of contemporary public discourse have fallen victim to their own generic deterioration. They are expressions of a socially senile system, the expressions of which take the most bizarre and farcical forms:

Ave Maria School of Law in Michigan is among various conservative Catholic causes bankrolled by a Tom Monaghan who sold his controlling share in Domino's in 1998 and has pledged to spend his millions promoting his faith. He is devoting \$US 50 million to the law school, hoping to meld legal theory with Catholic theology while addressing his concerns that Catholic education has been watered down.

Other reasons he has cited: "The lack of God in our society, the breakup of families, the low legitimacy rate, abortion - the list goes on." (Suhr, 2000)

Only during a stage of history so stricken by the systemic amnesia of techno-corporatist senility is such a bizarre hybrid possible: an ex-global-pizza-magnate-funded law school named after a popular hymn about a sacred virgin in a patriarchal theology, having the express purpose of reintroducing legal studies to its own philosophical ancestor in order to cure society's ills through rechristianisation! But such expressions are not rare, nor are they even necessarily pernicious. In this case, the vague and ineffectual odour of counter-reformationist sentiment might even be funny if it were not so pathetic.

The last word on labour

As a part of the language of neo-classic economics, the term "Labour" is one whose implications often pass unnoticed today; it is accepted as meaning an agglomeration—potential or actual—of human energies, human life force. It hides a multitude of hideous attitudes: we need a flexible labour market; we need efficient and productive labour; we need more highly-skilled labour; we need more knowledge workers—and so on. These are all merely excuses to cheapen the value of human life. It is achieved by inculcating the assumption that all human life must be directed towards profitability as it is measured in terms of money.

It is assumed that every aspect of human life is for sale to other human beings—and, for the most part, it is.

But, as Lynne White Jr says: "the goal of labour is to end labour", not merely as a category, but as an end in itself, as the social meaning of human life. Those who espouse "the dignity of labour" are merely echoing the rhetoric of a naïve Christian dogma that was developed after centuries of systemic slavery, oppression, and mass slaughter in Rome. There is no more dignity in labour than there is in slavery. In fact, one of the underpinning assumptions of the likes of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln was that wage labour was less dignified than slavery.

To buy and sell human life is to engage in slavery. To reduce all aspects of human activity to an economic cost, or as the producer of saleable materials, is to be a despot who denies creativity as an essential and natural state of human being.

Specialised wage labour is the denial of creativity and the possibility of human wholeness. Wage labour is the generalisation of slavery minus the traditional responsibilities of the slave-keeper. Today, one's wage is the social expression of one's social worth. It is also the means of life. Today, the slave is not indentured to a master; the slave is indentured to an abstract system of monetary measurements, calculated on the basis of agglomerated costs.

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