

Knowing capital today

Using *Capital* critically

The question

Reading *Capital*? The mere question evokes difficulty, complexity, contradiction. Was there not someone who began by writing a book for “reading *Capital*”, boasted about not having read it fully, and closed the contradictory circle writing the prologue for an edition of *Capital* where he *imperatively recommended* to begin by skipping the whole first section of the work?

Proposals of one-sided readings rain down on us given the complexity of the question. One author proposes to “read *Capital* politically”. Another considers his reading a “philosopher’s reading”. And yet another one proposes to leave out anything that does not concern “ethical foundations”. Of course, there is no scarcity of authors who read it as a text of “political economy”. There is even the author who proposes to read it with the indiscreetness implied by not having a concrete question other than “seeing what is in there”. But, are not politics, economics, ethics, philosophy, all of them social forms, social relations, whose unity cannot be split without completely mutilating the content of each one of them?

Is it then a question of *interpreting* the text in its unity? Will the solution perhaps be to face the reading with the intention of interpreting the world by interpreting Marx? This does not seem to be a clear way out of the problem. In the first place, there are those who threaten us with inevitably falling into “the most vulgar interpretation of the theory of value, which directly contradicts Marx’s theory” if we literally abide by the text written by him. But, above all, how do we overlook the absolute contradiction set out by Marx between *interpreting* the world and *changing* it?

If we refuse to interpret the text, how are we to confront it? Will we attain an objective perspective of it if we follow the recognized precept of looking in it for its “Logic (in capitals)”? But then, what will we do with Marx’s explicit rejection to

operate through the development of logical contradictions, since logic is “*alienated thinking*, and therefore thinking which abstracts from nature and from real man”?

Would it not be better to listen to those who say that it is not very useful to read it because it is “a model” which corresponds to nineteenth century England but that it is not “applicable” to, for example, modern Argentina? Furthermore, does not the scientific community consider *démodé* and obsolete any text after a handful of years of its publication given the speed with which reality changes?

But then what? Are we to leave out the text and begin an *independent* development from zero on our own? We would hardly progress beyond re-discovering gunpowder this way. Although, it would doubtless be worse to follow those who propose that we read *Capital* in order to “believe with Marx” in the existence of this or that social relation.

To come out of all these convolutions we do not have at this stage any recourse other than going back to the beginning. And what if we stop looking at *Capital* as an object for us to read and rather establish our necessity to read it, up to this moment simply present from the beginning as an immediate condition, as the object which *Capital* is to account for? But, in that case, it would not be a question of *reading* it anymore but of *using* it to answer for our own necessity. Thus, our starting point cannot be other than confronting the determinations that our necessity to use *Capital* immediately presents us with in the process of producing our own consciousness. And in this way the first question which is at stake is the very form of our process of production of knowledge. It is there then, where we will begin.

Cognition and recognition

Cognition is the process wherein the living subject carries out a limited expenditure of its vital energy, that is to say, of its material corporeality, with the object of appropriating the potentiality of its action with respect to the potentialities of the medium over which it is going to act. In this manner, the living subject governs the full expenditure of its body which it needs to carry out in order to appropriate its medium, not simply virtually but now effectively, and thus reproduce itself. In other words, cognition constitutes the moment of the action in which this action organizes itself to virtually appropriate its own necessity.

The process of human life has as its generic determination the appropriation of the medium through labor. That is to say, it operates through the bodily expenditure applied to the transformation of the medium, only then to appropriate the result of this transformation so as to reproduce the body itself. This generic determination is not simply restricted to labor *per se*, but it has the social character of labor as its foundation.

That is, the body expenditure carried out by an individual to transform his/her medium, his/her individual labor, results in a product which is useful for other individuals to reproduce their bodies, thus determining such labor as social labor. The process of human life is a process of social metabolism founded on labor.

The complexity of the process of social metabolism develops the materiality of cognition in a concrete form which becomes constitutive of the human generic being: consciousness. The characteristic human action, social labor, is necessarily ruled through a process of cognition which knows itself as such, that is, which knows itself as the process of organizing human transformative action.

Conscious knowledge is the product of the individual subjectivity of who produces it, thus ruling his/her concrete action. But it does not abstractly spring from this subjectivity. This subjectivity is the bearer of the powers of the process of cognition as itself a product of general social labor and, for what is specifically important here, of social labor applied to the development of conscious knowledge; that is, of social labor applied to the organization of social labor itself.

When an individual advances in his/her cognition over a concrete object hitherto unknown to him/her, he/she carries out an original process of cognition from his/her own individual standpoint. But insofar as that concrete object has already been cognized by another individual who has provided his/her knowledge with an objective social existence, and which therefore may be appropriated by the consciousness of others, such original individual cognition is determined as a process of recognition from the social point of view. Each original process of individual cognition thus acquires the powers given to it by virtue of being a concrete form of the reproduction of social knowledge. And, with its own reproduction, the process of individual cognition itself develops the distinctive powers of a process of recognition. The potentiation of the individual processes of conscious cognition as processes of recognition from the social point of view is the most genuinely human form of developing the productive forces of social labor.

The most powerful form of human cognition to transform the medium into a medium for human life is that which confronts the potentialities of the medium as existences whose objective necessity is exterior to its own subjectivity and that, at the same time, confronts its own subjective potentialities as objective existences. This is scientific cognition.

Logical representation is the absolutely dominant form of scientific consciousness in our time. This representation starts from taking concrete forms as existences whose objective necessity resides in the simple fact that they present themselves as exterior to the subject. Then, this modality of cognition takes the concrete forms reduced in this manner and presents them again to itself in their exteriority, that is, it represents them, as expressions of a necessity whose objectivity is given by the selfsame repetition of

their existence. In this manner, the concrete ends up represented as collections of objective existences, which are in themselves a product of the first representation, under the form of categories or concepts. Due to the very form under which the objective necessity has been represented in them, these concepts and categories are, from this point onwards, emptied out of the possibility of bearing in them a necessity which would be able to confront the process of cognition as a potentiality with the capacity to set itself in motion on its own. Subsequently, to integrate these concepts and categories in the construction of the knowledge of the singular concrete object to be acted upon, they must be linked in an exterior way through a general structure of relations of necessity which corresponds to the representation of the objective necessity by virtue of the repetition of the selfsame existence. This constructive necessity –in turn constructed through the abstraction of any concrete content which does not fit in with the reflection of any real relation as a necessarily exterior relation-, which intervenes by mediating in the movement of concepts and categories which constitute the representation, is logic.¹

This modality of scientific cognition possesses an enormous power to rule the action over the medium, by way of producing in the latter quantitative changes which are objectively known to produce a determinate qualitative transformation. But, the first hindrance that logical representation imposes to its own transformative power, resides in the fact that the exteriority of its ideal unfolding with respect to the real necessity turns over itself, forcing it to represent itself as an instance external to action. On the one hand, the moment in which the action is ruled, winds up represented as a process of cognition abstracted from the action itself, that is, as the production of theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, the moment in which the action effectively appropriates the medium is represented as the exclusive constituent of the action, which is to say, as pure practice. In the best of cases, the real unity existing between both moments is represented as an exterior relation to them, in which the theory informs the practice and the practice informs the theory in a “more or less” trend that cannot be defined through its own norm, that is, as praxis.

Given the form of the course followed originally to produce the logical representation of a determinate real concrete, from the social point of view the process of recognition does not need to confront this concrete object in its real existence itself. It suffices with representing the original representation as being a consistently objective one. The characteristic form of such process of recognition is the assimilation to the

¹ Marx unequivocally shows the character of logic:

“Logic [pure speculative thought] is the currency of the mind, the speculative thought-value of man and of nature, their essence which has become completely indifferent to all real determinateness and hence unreal, alienated thought, and therefore thought which abstracts from nature and from real man; abstract thought. The external character of this abstract thought...” (Marx, Karl (1844), “Economic and Philosophic manuscripts”, *Early Writings by Karl Marx*, Penguin Classics, 1992, p.383)

existent theory. It is then a question of analyzing the texts in which this theory has taken an objective social form.

By stopping at the exteriority of that which exists, logical representation bears in itself the limitation inherent in the fact that its own objectivity cannot go beyond being an interpretation of reality. This limitation over its reach has become today the vainglory of logical representation. It is proud that, effectively, any objective representation, that is, any theoretical construction, is a form of interpreting the existing reality, of interpreting the world in one way or another. As a result of which, as regards the process of recognition from the social point of view, the point is about interpreting the world in various ways by interpreting this or that author in this or that way. And, then, we run into the proclamation that the point is to interpret the world by interpreting Marx in one way or another, as the basis for the organization of the action which is to supersede the capitalist mode of production. But the impotence to surpass interpretation is the very negation of the capacity to rule action through the fully objective knowledge of its own determinations. “Free interpretation” is but the ideologically inverted form with which the absence of liberty with respect to one’s own determinations is presented, which implies that action is to be organized without knowing these determinations beyond their exteriority.²

Therefrom comes the impotence of any logical representation to be a form to rule the action which bears the supersession of the capitalist mode of production insofar as this supersession consists, inherently, in the development of the action ruled by an objective consciousness able to transcend all exteriority. It is not without reason that Marx directly opposes interpretation to the necessity of the transforming action: “Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”.³

The necessity of the action which is to supersede the capitalist mode of production confronts us, then, with the other existing form of objective knowledge, namely, dialectical cognition, “the reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.”⁴

Dialectical cognition does not stop when confronted with the exteriority which the concrete presents it with, but it only recognizes this concrete in its objectivity by virtually penetrating it to appropriate its necessity as a potentiality to be realized. This

² As Engels expresses it:

“Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. Therefore the freer a man's judgment is in relation to a definite question, the greater is the necessity with which the content of this judgment will be determined; [...] [freedom] is therefore necessarily a product of historical development.” (Engels, Frederick, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's revolution in science*, Moscow, Foreign Languages Press, 1959, p.157)

³ Marx, Karl, 11th thesis on Feuerbach, “Theses on Feuerbach”, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Indianapolis, Hackett Pub. Co. Inc., 1997, p. 402.

⁴ Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Classics, 1993, p. 101.

will then thrust dialectical knowledge further within its object, to recognize it in its objectivity as bearer of the necessity of the potential necessity. It thus continues to probe into the objective necessity of its object until it finds this necessity in its simplest form of an actual existence whose potential necessity is no other than the necessity of transcending itself, that is, of transforming itself. The subject of the action ruled by dialectical cognition then discovers that, to appropriate its own potentiality in relation to its object, it needs to ideally accompany the development of the necessity of the object until reaching it in its determination as a potentiality which has the action of the subject in question itself as the necessary form of the realization of the object.

The dialectical process of individual cognition which confronts its object as one already belonging to social knowledge cannot take as its starting point the existence of this previously objectified knowledge, to then represent it as the basis of its own objectivity. If it followed this path, it would cease to be a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought, to therefore acquire the exteriority of a representation. Its own form forces it to penetrate by itself –needless to say, in a virtual manner- inside the real concrete which it confronts, to then ideally reproduce its potentiality as the form with which the action of the subject is to be ruled.

What the existing dialectical knowledge provides to its process of recognition is no more than, although certainly no less than, the possibility of confronting the concrete over which it is to act now having a guide as to what necessity it is to seek in the concrete. What was a tortuous search for the strictly original knowledge with no guides other than its coming and going, for the process of recognition it consists in the possibility of probing directly whether the necessity is that which is already known. But it is only a guide. As soon as the process of recognition discovers in its singular concrete a necessity different than that which the existing knowledge was heading it to, or discovers one which transcends it, it needs to, thereupon, constitute itself into a purely original process of cognition. Hence, every individual reproduction of dialectical cognition inevitably subjects to critique the then existing social knowledge, making it account for its validity as such.

In *Capital*, Marx unfolds for the first time in history the reproduction by way of thought of the necessity which determines the historical reason for being of the capitalist mode of production and the action of the working class as the bearer of its revolutionary supersession in the development of the community of freely associated individuals; that is to say, of individuals capable of ruling their action by objectively knowing their own determinations beyond any apparent exteriority. And he does this giving this original cognition an objective social existence which makes it appropriate by others, the form of a published text.

From *Capital* onwards, any reproduction by way of thought which advances over the determinations unfolded in it is, from the social point of view, a process of

recognition. But, as I have already developed elsewhere, “it is not a question of *reading Capital*; not even of *studying* it. It is indeed a question of confronting by ourselves the real forms of capital to reproduce them ideally, with the potency that we obtain by having at our disposal the ideal reproduction of these forms as unfolded in *Capital*.”⁵

We are justified in saying then, that we count with a double advantage over Marx to objectively know the historical potencies of the capitalist mode of production and the determination of the working class, that is, our own determination, as subjects of its supersession. In the first place, we count with the product of Marx’s social labor to potentiate our advance in the free organization of the human life process. Secondly, we are confronting today the concrete object of our action, capital, under much more historically developed forms than those Marx confronted in his time. Concrete forms which existed as potencies barely insinuated, requiring an enormous effort to discover them -and Marx truly advances over them prodigiously- are today within our reach developed in a fully present manner. All of which signifies our responsibility as historical subjects whose action, which is to supersede the capitalist mode of production, is founded in the collective production of a consciousness capable of ruling its own action with the objective power of dialectical cognition.

With no other intention than giving raw expression to the critical relation between cognition and recognition, we could also say that what is important is what one finds by unfolding his/her own process of dialectical cognition. And this is precisely because what each one is producing is the organization of his/her own action as an organ of social life. What Marx found by developing his own process of cognition was Marx’s problem, what we find in the concrete real which we confront, be it the same or not as what Marx found, that is our problem.

The present work aspires to be *used*. In fact, its own process of gestation has fed on that purpose. In the same way in which it is the product of long years of solitary elaboration -although certainly fuelled by the unyielding critique of the comrade Luis L. Denari- it also is, in large measure, the product of having been utilized as a tool in workshops organized as a form of political action, that of the participants and my own, not to *read Capital*, but to *use* it critically. In this sense, it has been gestated as a product of a labor performed in a directly social manner, which has developed my individual subjectivity as its author.

The exposition is developed in two sections. The first reflects the course which my cognition follows as I advance over the concrete forms that I confront in the process of consciously ruling my action. The second directly reflects the character of a process of recognition from the social point of view of the determinations originally discovered by Marx in *Capital*. In it, my own individual analytical investigation and subsequent

⁵ Iñigo Carrera, Juan, *El capital: razón histórica, sujeto revolucionario y conciencia*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Cooperativas, 2003, p. 243.

unfolding of the necessity show how they advance using the already existing process of cognition as a guide. In fact, the second section was written before the first one and was the main foundation for the development of the latter. This is why the second section contains an outline of aspects and ways of facing the question which are fully unfolded in the first part. At the risk of being repetitious, I have left those outlines bare in order to accentuate the link between the two parts of the book.

The formal contrast between the two sections already makes manifest the way in which dialectical cognition subjects itself to its own critique every time it reproduces itself accompanying the selfsame reproduction of its object and the necessity of acting upon it. At those places where I essentially find myself reproducing the development already present in *Capital*, the first part will be limited to showing the synthesis of this development, necessary for further advance. At those places where my process of cognition advances over forms which transcend in their concrete development the point reached by Marx, as well as those places where I advance discovering concrete determinations which differ from those found by Marx at the same juncture, the first section will take on an original life of its own.

On the other hand, and with no intention nor capacity to emulate Julio Cortázar, whomever uses this work may invert the order of the sections with no problems, if this is the more useful way in which the necessity of developing his/her own thought process presents itself to him/her.

The present volume constitutes the first step in the development of the work. It advances over the determinations of the commodity until recognizing it in its condition as the simplest form which is taken by the general social relation in the capitalist mode of production. This is equivalent to saying that this first step advances until it recognizes itself as expression of the consciousness which affirms itself in its freedom, not by abstractly denying its determinations, but by knowing its own necessity insofar as the latter determines it as a consciousness alienated in the social powers of its own material product.

In its original edition, this preface included some general observations about the different Spanish translations of *Capital*. I am obviously unable to do the same with respect to the English translations. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable particularity shared by the three English translations generally available that needs to be considered. In Chapter 1, Marx explicitly synthesizes his discovery of private labor as the historical specific character of commodity producing labor by stating: “Nur Produkte selbständiger und voneinander unabhängiger Privatarbeiten treten einander als Waren gegenüber” and “Gebrauchsgegenstände werden überhaupt nur Waren, weil sie Produkte voneinander unabhängiger Privatarbeiten sind.”⁶ Strict translations to

⁶ Marx, Karl, *Das Capital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Band I, Frankfurt, Verlag Ulstein, 1981, pp. 24 and 52.

English would read: “Only the products of self-standing and mutually independent private labors can confront each other as commodities” and “Useful objects become commodities only because they are the products of mutually independently operated private labors.” All Spanish translations agree in the expression “mutually independent private labors” for “voneinander unabhängiger Privatarbeiten.” Conversely, English translations omit this direct expression by appealing to terms that are alien to the original text. The translation by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling reads: “Only such products can become commodities with regard to each other, as result from different kinds of labour, each kind being carried on independently and for the account of private individuals” and “As a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other.”⁷ Eden and Cedar Paul translate: “The only products which confront one another as commodities are those produced by reciprocally independent enterprises” and “Useful objects only become commodities because they are the products of the labour of individuals or groups of individuals working independently of one another.”⁸ In turn, Ben Fowkes translates: “Only the products of mutually independent acts of labour, performed in isolation, can confront each other as commodities” and “Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other.”⁹ One cannot but wonder how these inaccurate translations that repeatedly omit the original “private labor” may have predisposed the substitution of a so-called abstract labor for private labor as the historically specific character of labor in the capitalist mode of production, as prevails today among English-speaking Marxist theoreticians.

Nevertheless [and returning from here on to the translation of the Spanish preface], leaving aside the fact that each one could find an edition to be more or less accurate or readable than other, essentially, this is not what matters. The point is that a critical reading of *Capital* imposes on its subject the necessity to face capital as such. Therefore, no difficulty that could be imputed to the original text, or to its translations, can raise an insurmountable barrier to the development of the necessity to rule one’s own action with full objective knowledge of the cause, nor be used as an excuse to evade that necessity.

All italicized or emphasized texts included in the bibliographic quotations belong to their original sources; none of them has been added or removed. Original text that has

⁷ Marx, Karl, *Capital. A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1965, pp. 42 and 72-73 (numerous other editions, including MEGA).

⁸ Marx, Karl, *Capital*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946, pp. 11 and 46.

⁹ Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 132 and 165.

been intercalated for the sake of clarity is included inside brackets []; double brackets [[]] indicate text added by me.

Chapter 1

The reason for being of value or price according to political economy

The question of why things have value, exchange value, or price,¹ is the starting point of all economic theory.²

Neoclassical economics provides a direct answer to this question: things have exchange value when they are useful, that is to say, they are goods and they are scarce.³

¹ Political economy commonly uses the three terms indistinctly. We will abide by this criterion, to the extent that we move in its terrain.

² In the words of Adam Smith:

In order to investigate the principles which regulate the exchangeable value of commodities, I shall endeavour to show: First, what is the real measure of this exchangeable value; or, wherein consists the real price of all commodities. (Smith, Adam (1776), *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p.33)

³ According to Walras:

[...] [U]seful things limited in quantity are *valuable and exchangeable*. Once all things that can be appropriated (that is, all scarce things and nothing else) have been appropriated, they stand in a certain relationship to each other, a relationship which stems from the fact that each scarce thing, in addition to its own specific utility, acquires a special property, namely, that of being exchangeable against any other scarce thing in such and such a determinate ratio. An individual owning anyone of these scarce things can, by giving it up, acquire some other scarce thing which he lacks. He can get what he does not possess only on condition that he surrender some other scarce object which he has in his possession. (Walras, Léon (1874), *Elements of Pure economics, or the theory of social wealth*, translated by William Jaffé, Richard D. Irwin Inc, 1954, p.67)

Jevons expresses the same concept affirming that:

A commodity is any portion of wealth—anything, therefore, which is useful, and transferable, and limited in supply. (Jevons, W. Stanley (1878), *Political economy*, Forgotten Books, 2010, p.16)

In other words, goods have a price because they are useful and scarce.⁴ This is the cornerstone over which the complex mathematical structure of marginalist concepts is erected.

In turn, classical political economy has compounded a different definition as its starting point: things have price, or exchange value, because in order to be useful, they are products of labor. Or, exceptionally, because they are scarce, in the sense that being products of labor, it is beyond the control of labor to produce them in line with demand (for example, in the cases in which the use value of the good is based on having sprung from the singular subjectivity of its author, as it occurs with works of art and, even more, with those whose author is defunct).⁵ Indeed, the modern theoretical constructions based on this conception of the reason for being of price do not have the level of mathematical sophistication of those of neoclassical economics. Even so, they do not have much to envy the latter in, for example, the models developed following Sraffa.⁶

⁴ Stonier and Hague synthesize the question unequivocally:

The fundamental question which price theory sets out to answer is: ‘Why is it that goods and factors of production have prices?’ Put quite baldly, the answer is that they have prices because, on the one hand, they are useful, and on the other hand, they are scarce in relation to the uses to which people want to put them. Stonier, Alfred and Hague, Douglas (1953), John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1967, p.9)

⁵ For Ricardo:

Possessing utility, commodities derive their exchangeable value from two sources: from their scarcity, and from the quantity of labour required to obtain them. There are some commodities, the value of which is determined by their scarcity alone. No labour can increase the quantity of such goods, and therefore their value cannot be lowered by an increased supply.[...] These commodities, however, form a very small part of the mass of commodities daily exchanged in the market. By far the greatest part of those goods which are the objects of desire, are procured by labour, and they may be multiplied,[...]almost without any assignable limit, if we are disposed to bestow the labour necessary to obtain them. In speaking then of commodities, of their exchangeable value, and of the laws which regulate their relative prices, we mean always such commodities only as can be increased in quantity by the exertion of human industry, and on the production of which competition operates without restraint.[...] That this is really the foundation of the exchangeable value of all things, excepting those which cannot be increased by human industry, is a doctrine of the utmost importance in political economy... (Ricardo, David (1817), Principles of political economy and taxation, Prometheus books, 1996, pp.18-19)

⁶ Sraffa, Piero (1960), Production of commodities by means of commodities, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

In any of its two offshoots, the complexity and mathematical rigor of the conceptual constructions of economic theory seem to put it beyond all doubt.⁷ However, let us ask both theories of price an elementary question.

Suppose we go to a restaurant and we are offered ravioli. The dish is excellent, although frankly expensive. The next day a friend invites us to eat in his house. He cooks for us ravioli, kneaded with his own hands and prepared with a recipe exactly the same as that of the restaurant. The result is equally splendid. The ravioli smell so good that we wish they were “as abundant as air itself”. But, when we see the contents of the saucepan, we realize that they are too scarce to satisfy the demand of all companions at the table. Even then, our portion is similar to that of the restaurant. Only when we rise from the table do we realize, at last, that the ravioli served by our friend are different from those in the restaurant. This time, eating the plate of ravioli has not cost us one cent. Why have these ravioli, kneaded, cooked and served by our friend, come to the world, and left it, fulfilling the reason for being of any good, namely, to satisfy a human need, without having had any price or exchange value at any point of their existence? How do neoclassical economics and classical political economy explain this circumstance?

From the standpoint of neoclassical economics, the ravioli of the restaurant have a price because they are useful and are scarce. But, as it happens, the ravioli of our friend are also useful and scarce, and yet have no price. The answer would seem to lie in the fact that the ravioli of the restaurant are “economic” goods, while the latter are not. However, this only leads us to another question: what are economic goods? The neoclassical answer leads to a dead end: they are the goods which have a price. And: why do they have a price? Because they are useful and are scarce. But this is precisely what the ravioli of our friend are. So then, why do they not have a price?

Another alternative would appear to be that there is a different intentionality in one and the other producer of ravioli: the owner of the restaurant makes them to sell them, our friend, to please us and himself. Another version of the same argument would be to explain the presence or absence of price by the existent relation between the producer and consumer. However, neoclassical theory is clear in that intentionality plays no role

⁷ According to Walras:

[...][G]iven the *pure theory of economics*, it must precede *applied economics*; and this pure theory of economics is a science which resembles the physic-mathematical sciences in every respect.[...] why should we persist in using everyday language to explain things in the most cumbrous and incorrect way,[...] when these same things can be stated far more succinctly, precisely and clearly in the language of mathematics? (Walras, Léon, op.cit., pp. 71-72)

whatsoever in the determination of price. In no place does it say that utility and scarcity are necessary but insufficient conditions, so that one would have to add the intentionality of sales, for the goods to have a price.⁸ The same occurs with respect to the personal relations between producers and consumers. It is no accident that neoclassical economics commonly chooses air as an example of a useful good which lacks price by reason of its abundance, so as to set it in opposition to economic goods.⁹ In the case of air, it is clear that there is no difference of intentionality or relation between persons which may turn it into a non-economic good. It is simply its natural attribute. On the contrary, neoclassical theory has a univocal response to the question of why goods are bought and sold, namely, because they are useful and are scarce. Likewise, it defines economics as the “science which studies the allocation of scarce resources to facilitate the satisfaction of multiple goals”,¹⁰ a circumstance which our friend had to resolve to pamper us, without making his ravioli acquire price, that is, without making them an economic good.

It could also be argued that the reason why the ravioli of our friends lack price is that there is no demand and supply relation for them. Yet, why are goods demanded and supplied? Because they are useful and scarce. And, what are our friend’s ravioli but that?

Perhaps it would seem that, in reality, the ravioli of our friend do have a price, only that this has a peculiar aspect: the satisfaction of our friend in pampering us, or our thankfulness to them for their generosity. This explanation starts by disregarding that price, in its most elementary meaning, is the quantity of a thing which is given in exchange for another.¹¹

⁸ In the words of Stonier and Hague:

In order that any such goods may be priced, and may therefore be eligible for consideration in price theory, they must be useful and scarce. (Stonier, Alfred and Hague, Douglas, op.cit., p.9)

⁹ Walras, Léon, op.cit., p.65 ; Jevons, W.Stanley, op.cit., p.15 ; Stonier, Alfred and Hague, Douglas, op.cit., p.9.

¹⁰ In Samuelson’s terms:

Economics is the study of how men and society *choose*, with or without the use of money, to employ *scarce* productive resources, which could have alternative uses, to produce various commodities over time and distribute them for consumption, now and in the future, among various people and groups in society, Samuelson, Paul, Economics, seventh edition, McGraw-Hill book company, 1967, p.5)

¹¹ Stonier and Hague make this clear from the very beginning:

The price of anything is the rate at which it can be exchanged for anything else. (Stonier, Alfred and Hague, Douglas, op.cit., p.9)

Neither personal satisfaction, nor the thankfulness of someone, is in the category of “things”. On the other hand, even in the absurd situation that one may pay to oneself the price of one’s own product this would leave the individual in question in possession of exactly the same things that he had before the supposed exchange: they would have given themselves, and received from themselves, one and the other good. However, our friend is full with satisfaction, but with no ravioli in their hands. In turn, even if we were, absurdly, to consider thankfulness a “thing”, it is clear that we are perfectly able to leave our friend’s house with a full stomach and giving him no thanks at all. Moreover, it could be the case that the “friends” of our friend would, far from being thankful, simply gobble up the ravioli while laughing to their insides at such an idiot who has cooked for them without receiving in exchange anything but their thanklessness. But if someone tried to leave the restaurant without paying, they would end up in the police station.

There is one last alternative. It could be said that, in reality, the ravioli of our friend do have a price, but that this is not manifested due to the friendly relation that we have with him. This but introduces through the window the difference due to a social relation which neoclassical economics expels through the door. However, it evinces an inherent content in the neoclassical conception: goods have a price because of their own nature and that they could lose it in exceptional cases or due to the existence of some special social relation. This would mean that, when a mother breastfeeds her son, she would be “forgiving” him the price which her milk has by nature as a useful and scarce good. To be coherent with such nonsense, it would have to be claimed that, when a cow feeds her calf, her milk has a price by nature. As it happens, the natural biological process which unites each of these mothers with their offspring, and therefore, the natural relation which is established in each case is, in essence, the same. No matter how much a father may complain to his son: “this is how you pay everything I’ve done for you?”, it is clear that when he took care of rearing his child he did not do it because he was expecting to receive his love, or even less, “things”, in return. Nor did he do it because he was willing to forgive him such debt. He did it because it was in his personal nature as a father.

Such is the dead end to which neoclassical economics takes us to, so let us turn to classical political economy then. Here the question seems to be different due to the intervention of labor. Yet, the problem reappears. Our friend, just as the cook of the restaurant, has worked strenuously to make the ravioli. However, no matter how much our friend has exerted themselves; their labor was incapable of introducing the least exchange value into the ravioli. His ravioli are a product of his labor; nevertheless, they have no price.

Up to this point, we can confirm that for neoclassical economics price is an attribute of useful and scarce goods. In turn, for classical political economy, labor has the natural

attribute of producing goods with price. For the former, goods have a price by their own nature, for the latter, labor produces exchange value by its own nature. However, it is evident in historical, anthropological and archeological studies that price is a very recent phenomenon in the two to three million years since the human being has constituted itself into a distinct animal species by the development of a capacity to transform nature in a means for itself through labor. That is, price is a recent phenomenon in human history. In fact, its generalized and universal existence as a dominant attribute of useful things which are products of labor is not even two hundred years old. Only with the development of the capitalist mode of production, have goods with price become the dominant expression of social wealth.

Perhaps there are those who believe that the impotence of economic theory to locate the reason by which some goods have price and others do not, is merely a question which acquires importance only in the field of theoretical subtleties. However, in the first place, we cannot forget the purpose of all science. The object of science is to produce the consciousness capable of ruling human action with the potencies that this action acquires by knowing its own determinations beyond all appearances. So that the action upon economic reality which lacks the capacity to distinguish an economic good from one which is not is thus mutilated on its own foundations as a form to consciously operate over that reality. As complex and rigorous as the rationalization given for this action may appear to be, it could not be more solid than the feebleness of its point of departure. Secondly, the incapacity of economic theory to justify its own starting point is practically manifested in the statistical registry of economic activity.

Any system of registry must start from the qualitative definition of its object. That is, it must start by distinguishing what the attribute is that differentiates the objects which are to be registered from those which are not. The impotence of economic theory to distinguish why an economic good has a price and another one which complies with the necessary conditions does not have it, is revealed in its failure to define the object of national accounting. The modern registry of national accounts does not recognize the qualitative unity which defines its own object. But the economist has no more justification for this fact than to appeal to the, almost mythical, anecdote about Keynes' distress in observing that, if English knights would marry their housekeepers, the national product of England would fall, given that this includes wage labor but not the labor of housekeepers. Thus, after seven decades of history of national accounting, political economy is still incapable of explaining the reason for this exclusion. It is no wonder then, that faced with the impression produced by the apparent depletion of energy sources during the 1970s, the idea that national accounts should register the totality of natural and human energy consumption by society gained popularity. Accordingly, even sleeping would contribute to the social product, due to the consumption of basal energy. Matching the rhythm of the ups and downs for which

economic theory lacks conceptual foundation, national accounting practice operates over diffuse limits, where divergent criteria with respect to similar objects abound, and where the higher or lower level of practical difficulty crudely ends up as its validation.¹² For example, the renting imputed over one's own housing is registered, but not the rental imputed over one's own car, even though cars and houses are goods which consumption goes by in exactly the same way and which are commercialized both through selling and renting.

But the confusion occasioned by the impotence of economic theory to discover the reason for being of price does not stop at this stage of the registry of economic activity. At first glance, the accounting of companies seems to be immune to such confusion because it appears immediately clear that only objects with price lie in its field. However, economic theory makes sure of transmitting its own incoherencies to it. It maintains that, as the science in charge of defining the reason for existence of price, it is also the one which must define the criteria to register individual economic transactions. And, as is obvious, the practical criteria used by accounting firms are utterly uncongenial with the abstract categories of utility and scarcity. For example, accounting must reflect the value of advanced capital to measure the profit generated as a function of the juridical rights established between buyers and sellers by the difference against it. In consequence, it finds the criterion of valuation supposedly based in the larger or lesser utility which corresponds to a personal consumption later or earlier in time, that is, the purported marginal utility which decreases in time, completely alien to itself. Nor is the question here reduced to the technical subtleties of registry. In the beginning of the 1980's, the federal government of the United States initiated a trial against IBM, accusing it of mainframe monopoly (i.e. abuse of monopoly profits). Besides its team of lawyers, IBM hired two experts in economic theory. The report produced by these economists maintained: a) even though the accounting registries of IBM showed a rate of profit over capital superior to the one showed by the registries of American Motors (by then bankrupt), this information could not be considered indicative of which company, according to the precepts of economic theory, was the more profitable one; b) there was no way of transforming the accounting information in terms which would be meaningful from the point of view of economic theory; c) that, therefore, it was impossible to reach any definitive conclusion, in tune with economic theory, with respect to IBM's profitability.¹³ How, then, could IBM be accused of making monopoly profits if it could not even be established whether it was making profits of any sort? Given the expansive potential that IBM's capital has been showing since then, it seems

¹² Ohlsson, Ingvar, *On national accounting*, Konjunkturinstitutet, 1953, pp. 194-195.

¹³ F. Fisher and J. McGowan, "On the Misuse of Accounting Rates of Return to Infer Monopoly Profits", *American Economics Review*, 73, 1983, pp. 82-97.

likely that its executives have managed to resolve in practice the dilemma which its economic theorists declared insoluble, under the pledge of claiming the truth and nothing but the truth.

Neoclassical economics and classical political economy, that is, political economy as a whole, has taken us to its own dead end. We have no road forward open to us but one: the critique of political economy.

Chapter 2

The commodity as social relation

2.1. The starting point of the Critique of Political Economy: The social specificity of the commodity

Let us stop for a minute. What is the purpose of centering our attention on the critique of political economy? Is it perhaps that we are to convince the economists of how erroneous their theories are? The very name of 'political economy' makes it evident that what is at stake is something very different, to wit, the question of political action. Why then, do we not put aside political economy, and its world of abstract economic forms, and concretely face the question of political action? That's it, let's follow this road! Let's act to transform the existing social reality in the capitalist mode of production.

Our first step has, inevitably, the form of a question: what concrete form will we give our political action? What is to be done? If our political action is to be ruled by the knowledge of its necessity, that is, if it is to be a conscious action, our next step has again the form of a question: what is the necessity of our political action?

To answer that question, we first have to know what a political action is. It is commonly understood that a political action is the exercise in an antagonistic relation between different classes of individuals which expresses opposed interests. But, what are these opposed interests to which our political action concretely refers? Someone who may have become exasperated by now will tell us that it is obvious that the fundamental antagonistic character in our society derives from the struggle of the working class and the capitalist class. However, if our action is to be ruled by a consciousness which will not be deceived by appearances, as it happens for political economy, the only step we can take is to formulate a new question: what is the necessity which determines the working class and the capitalist class as such? Again the answer may seem obvious: the ways in which they partake in the social product; the wages of one, the profits of the other. But, what are wages, what are profits? Of course, the flows of income which emerge out of the movement of capital. Right, and what is capital? A sum of money that is put in motion with the end of transforming it into more money. But, what is money? A thing which is used in the market to mediate sales and

purchases. What is the market? Why, the place where commodities are exchanged. What is a commodity? A useful object, a good, which bears the capacity to transform itself into another without any material operation acting upon it, that is, a use value which bears exchange value. And, where does the commodity, unlike other use values, get such a property from?

The question regarding the necessity of our political action contains inside itself the question which constitutes the starting point of the critique of political economy. The next step in the conscious organization of our political action and, therefore, in the realization of our political action itself, takes root in the analysis of the commodity. It is not a question of convincing the economists of anything, but of answering to ourselves what the necessity of our own political action in the capitalist mode of production is about.

Political economy believes that the price or exchange value which certain goods or use values have is a natural attribute lying in them or the labor which produces them. But it is obvious that these goods can experience a completely anti-natural transformation: they can mutate their materiality, that is, become another use value for their owner, without anyone materially operating upon them. To do this, it is enough that they go through a process of exchange. For example, the ravioli of the owner of a restaurant can be converted into a pair of shoes, if the owner receives this use value in exchange for them. No matter how our friend put himself to the task of kneading, there is no way he can transform the ravioli into a pair of shoes. The most he can accomplish is to convert them into an inedible lumpy mess. The question we are still facing is: where do the ravioli made by the restaurant's cook get the really fantastic attribute of changing their materiality, without anyone materially operating upon them, from?

Our political action with respect to the capitalist mode of production demands that we answer ourselves this question. Let us analyze the commodity then, starting from its immediate exteriority as the elemental expression of the specific form that presents social wealth in the capitalist mode of production.

2.2. The source of value of commodities

The exchangeability of commodities has an immediate expression: the relation of equality established in exchange, that is, exchange value. For example, 10 plates of ravioli = 1 pair of shoes, or, $10R = 1S$. Since grade school we know that we cannot add apples with oranges. Therefore, the mere possibility of establishing this relation of equality, tells us that this equivalence between commodities encloses within it the presence in both commodities of the same quantity of a common quality with respect to which they are commensurable regardless of their other material differences. The

possession of this common quality is what enables them to be objects so equal to each other that they may reciprocally permute their materiality, that is, it makes them exchangeable objects.

It appears that asking ourselves about the determination of exchange value puts us in front of an analytical process which consists in searching by elimination, in the universe of commodities, a quality which repeats itself in all of them, and only in them, for the purpose of identifying it with that which equalizes them as exchange values. However, the question which confronts us is of a very different nature. The true question which is posed by the evidence of the common quality expressed in the exchange relation is: what is the necessity which makes the commodity an object bearing such quality and, therefore, an exchangeable object? That is, where does the aptitude of the commodity for exchange spring from? Far from having to extend itself over the universe of all commodities, our analysis must penetrate inside the commodity searching for the necessity which gives it the attribute of exchangeability, which makes it itself, an object capable of entering the exchange relation. That is, the necessity which makes the commodity a value which is expressed in the exchange relation with another commodity as its exchange value. From the analysis of the exchange value of commodities we pass now to the analysis of the value of the commodity. From analyzing the relation $10R = 1S$, we pass now to analyze the plate of ravioli of the restaurant.

Above all, the commodity has the attribute of being a good for use or use value. That is, it is a thing apt to satisfy human needs, a certain something whose materiality exists outside the person who is going to appropriate its utility. It could be that such external materiality is already objectified before the moment in which the person is going to appropriate its utility, or it could be that such materiality is being produced by an action external to the person in the same moment in which the person is appropriating its utility. Although in both cases we are dealing with a good in respect of its utility, political economy has taken care of making the question confusing by calling the first type of use value a “good”, while calling the second type a “service”.

The eventual inutility of a thing as a use value strips it away from any aptitude for exchange. Without utility, therefore, there is no value. However, the analysis of exchange already revealed that, for the commodity, the exercise of the capacity for exchange is necessarily realized against a use value which is qualitatively different; that the exchange relation $10R = 10R$ is meaningless because there is no change of materiality. Hence, use value cannot be the source of the aptitude for exchange. On the other hand, just by putting aside our plate of ravioli from the restaurant for a moment, and peering over the plate made by our friend, we readily see that utility is a quality that commodities share with simple goods. Nevertheless, even though our analysis of the commodity has discovered that use value cannot be the source of exchangeability, it

does not cease to tell us something essential to discover this cause. The utility, the use value, is an attribute which resides in the body, in the materiality, of the commodity. One must appropriate this body of the commodity to realize its utility, even if this utility be purely imaginary. If someone believes that the ravioli have aphrodisiac powers and not nourishing ones, they are still bound to realize the utility attributed to them by eating them.

But, how has this attribute reached the body of the good? Whatever the attribute a thing has, this is always the result of an action which has transformed the thing into a bearer of it. For example, if the ravioli have the quality of being edible, it is because the action of kneading and the action of the cooking temperature of water have transformed the flour and other ingredients into a digestible substance. Likewise, if the ravioli as a commodity have the quality of being exchangeable, it is because some action has put this quality in it. Therefore, given that utility or use value is a condition for the existence of value or, what is the same, that value is borne in the materiality of use value, the value of the commodity must be the product of some action which has produced its use value. If there were two independent actions concerned in the production of value and use value, this would imply the absurdity that only the action which produces value would be present without the one which produces use value and, consequently, that a commodity would have value without having use value. But, at the same time, it is clear that we cannot simply be dealing with the same action. If that were the case, use value would be the same as value or, in other words, every use value would have value. The action concerned then, must be an action which in its material unity has to intervene in two senses: it must have the double quality of being determinant of use value and determinant of value, which expresses itself in the exchange relation as a simple quantitative equality. Therefore, it must be an action which, by the materiality of its different concrete modalities, produces different use values and that, at the same time, has a materiality which results in the common content expressed in exchange value.

We can now observe that the scarcity resorted to by neoclassical economics to explain value is the inverted image of the activity which introduces value in it. In neoclassical economics, the action appears as the insufficiency or absence of action. Let us look at the question right-side-up then. One could think, in consonance with economic theory, that the action which puts value in the commodity is the same which subjectively determines its condition as use value. It would pertain to the human action of subjectively valorizing the goods as useful objects. And since in this valorization, without doubt, the effort, that is, the labor that it takes to obtain a commodity, intervenes, it could even be considered that the conception of the exchangeability of commodities of classical political economy is subsumed in it. However, this valorization by individuals occurs with respect to commodities as well as simple goods.

It occurs in the case of our ravioli as well as those of our friends: are they appetizing, would we prefer not to eat them, are we more attracted to them by the effort which took to produce them, etc.? Hence, even the mere external analysis in the search of a repeated attribute, evinces that it is not such valorization which can establish the specific difference which separates some goods from others according to their exchangeability.

It could also be thought that, it is the human action of exchanging a commodity for another itself which inserts the value in them. However, the use value of the commodity is born in its own materiality, and the action of exchange does not alter this materiality in the least. Precisely, exchange is characterized by transforming a use value into another one by leaving the materiality of the commodity untouched. Therefore, in the same way in which the action which produces the use value of the commodities occurs before exchange, its other inseparable face, that which produces value, must do it also. The question does not lie in explaining the attribute of exchangeability which commodities possess by the existence of exchange but, inversely, in discovering how it is possible that an object may transform its materiality into a different one without any material operation upon it, in other words, what the attribute enclosed in this object which explains the existence of exchange is.

The source of value then, is to be found in the actions which configure the process of production of the commodity. In the first place, simple natural actions intervene in this process. For example, in the case of the ravioli, the temperature of water, the hygroscopic properties of the flour, the resistance of steel or aluminum to temperature, etc. In the case of the shoes, the resistance of leather to friction and humidity, the power of steel to penetrate the leather, etc.

Incidentally, there are natural actions which intervene in the production of any use value. Gravity, without going any further, which is materialized in all use values in a common form: weight. However, natural actions can only transform an object into a different one acting upon its materiality, while the exchange of commodities consists, precisely, in the transformation of an object into a different without anything acting upon their respective materialities. Exchange pertains to the transformation in the materiality of a thing without acting upon this materiality itself. Natural actions are impotent to transform, for example, a table into three pairs of pants, while this is what exchange is about.

The alien character of natural actions with respect to the determination of the exchangeability of commodities is manifest when it is seen externally. However, no matter how equal they may be as products of the action of gravity, a pound of lead and a pound of gold have no equivalence relation whatsoever as exchange values; not to mention the weight of a haircut. It is obvious that the exchange of commodities is a human action for which any measure of the magnitude of the natural actions in the

production of the use values being exchanged is completely indifferent, even if the diverse forms that such natural actions take up could be reduced to a common unity with a finite magnitude.

Natural actions enter according to their different qualities, and the magnitude corresponding to them into the determination of the aptitude of each commodity for use. And this determination of use value is exactly what is being carried out in our friend's house. For example, there the cooking water boils at the same temperature as that in the kitchen of the restaurant, and the flour is converted into dough by the action of the same hygroscopic properties, without this implying that the ravioli which are produced through these natural actions will acquire value.

The analysis which inquires the potentiality of natural action, and even that which moves in the exteriority of the repetition of the attribute, evince that natural actions have no way of intervening in the determination of the completely anti-natural and purely quantitative equality between materially different commodities which is expressed in their aptitude for exchange.

Together with the simply natural actions, the action carried out by a subject no less natural intervenes in the production of use value, but that distinguishes itself from the rest of nature by its general capacity to appropriate it in order to pursue its own end. This is the human action which rules itself in a conscious and willful manner with the purpose of transforming the materiality of the objects which exists externally to its own body into use values, that is, productive labor, or more simply, labor. To sit down on a pile of flour, and that from this accident ravioli come out, is a human action which, certainly, has nothing to do here. To labor or work is the action of expending one's own body in a conscious and willful manner under such a modality that a use value results from it.

Let us then face labor to see if it is the action capable of producing value at the same time it produces the use value of the commodity. In the first place, the inquiry concerning this capacity transcends labor as such. As we already know, the production of value must be the result of an aspect of labor different from the one which produces use value. Insofar as labor intervenes in production as an action of specific concrete qualities, it generates use values which differentiate themselves from one another by their aptitude to satisfy this or that human need. Thus, the labor which makes the ravioli has a different concrete materiality from that which makes shoes; the former consists in kneading and cooking, the latter in cutting, nailing, etc. However, no matter how different their concrete forms may be, both imply the material expenditure of the human body which executes them, the material expenditure of human energy, in proportion to the intensity and duration of the activity. We are dealing then, with the simple expenditure of human labor power, with the conscious and willful expenditure of human muscles, brains, etc. executed with the end of transforming a determinate object into a

use value, whatever the concrete form in which it has been carried out. Such material expenditure is the materiality of abstract human labor, of which every commodity is a qualitatively undifferentiated product. Therefore, a commodity may transcend its original concrete materiality when being exchanged for another, conserving at the same time its material identity as a product of abstract human labor intact, at the moment in which it confronts another commodity which is the materialization of an equal quantity of this labor. The two commodities may mutate reciprocally their materiality as use values, because each of the poles of the relation conserves its materiality as the product of abstract human labor intact.

Human labor is the action which, concomitant with its concrete materiality which produces different use values, by its abstract materiality also produces these use values with an attribute which makes them apt to enter into the exchange relation as equals. Once the product of labor has reached exchange, this labor has already been expended, it is a past action. Therefore, it has no other way of presenting itself in the moment of exchange than through its result, as the labor which has materialized itself in the commodity.

The magnitude of the attribute which makes the commodity apt to enter into the exchange relation is measured by the quantity of abstract labor expended in its production. In the relation of equality in which this quantity is expressed there is no room for any qualitative difference. But the simple expenditure of human labor power still contains within itself a qualitative differentiation originated in the concrete form in which it has been carried out. It is of no relevance that it has been applied to produce this or that different use value, but of its quality as a simple expenditure of the human body itself: to produce the same use value, a smaller or larger expenditure of human labor power is required according to the ability or disposition of the individual who performs it, or in the technique being utilized. This is, therefore, a qualitative differentiation, characteristic of abstract labor itself, whose whole content is being a quantitative difference. Thus, the material identity as a product of abstract labor which allows a commodity to transform its concrete materiality into another through exchange is not an attribute inherent to the singularity of the conditions in which it was produced. On the contrary, it is an attribute of abstract labor itself insofar as its own materiality exceeds any singularity. And since it is characterized by surpassing a multitude of singular determinations which are independent of each other, such materiality necessarily has the form of normality. Thus, the abstract labor which is capable of being represented as the aptitude of the commodity for exchange is that which the generality of its producers requires to perform it in normal conditions, that is, the socially necessary abstract labor to produce it. Suppose that $\frac{1}{2}$ hour of labor is normally required to produce 10 ravioli plates but that the cooks are using a kneading machine which is so antiquated that it takes them 1 hour. In this case, they will have expended their body for

a complete hour, but only half of it will count as productive from the social point of view.

Every expenditure of human labor power is materialized in its product. But for it to be expressed as the attribute which makes this object exchangeable, it is necessary that its producer be not the one who will consume its use value. If they do it, the exchangeable object itself will vanish into thin air. Therefore, the labor applied to the production of the commodity is the expenditure of human labor power carried out by an individual but destined to other people's consumption. From the point of view of its exchangeability it only counts insofar as it is useful for others, that is, insofar as it satisfies a social necessity. We are dealing with the productive expenditure of an individual's body which will result in a medium for the productive expenditure of another individual's body, or in a medium for the immediate reproduction of another individual's body; that is to say, the product of this labor does not have the satisfaction of the individual producer's process of metabolism as its immediate end, but that of feeding a social process of metabolism. Thus, the labor which produces the capacity for exchange of the commodity is socially necessary in this second sense.

Considered in itself, the human socially necessary abstract labor which has materialized in a commodity, is the substance which gives it its capacity for exchange, it is the *value* of the commodity.

The expenditure of a larger or smaller normal quantity of labor to produce a use value reflects the productive capacity or productivity of that labor. The more productivity increases, the less the quantity of socially necessary labor to produce each commodity will be. Therefore, the less the value represented by each of the commodity's units will be, but, at the same time, the quantity of them which can be produced in a given time will be larger. During this time the same quantity of labor will be expended as before, but this mass of value will be materialized in a larger quantity of use values. The mass of material wealth produced in a certain quantity of time is directly proportional to the productivity of labor; the mass of value produced remains constant even though the productive capacity of labor changes; the value of each unit produced is inversely proportional to the productivity of labor. If 1 hour of labor was needed to produce a pair of shoes and now only $\frac{1}{2}$ hour is needed, the value represented by each pair will have fallen by half, but in 1 hour of labor 2 pairs instead of one will have been produced. And the value of these 2 pairs together is the one which now represents the expenditure of 1 hour of socially necessary labor. If productivity fell, the relations would be inverted. But the product of 1 hour of labor would still represent the same magnitude of value, even if this were, with the productivity reduced by a half for example, the value of $\frac{1}{2}$ a pair of shoes.

On the other hand, there are labors which can be carried out without requiring any previous preparation. But there are others where a previous period of training is needed.

During this period, the future producers expend their human labor power in a private and independent manner. But they do not do it to directly produce a commodity, but to produce themselves as producers of a commodity whose production requires this previous preparation. Therefore, in each hour of labor directly applied to produce the commodity the part proportional to the time expended in developing the necessary aptitude to carry out this production is condensed in it too. Let us suppose that to make a pair of shoes an hour of direct labor is required, but that to acquire the ability to do it would have required expending another hour of labor in the learning process. Then, each pair of shoes would encapsulate 2 hours of socially necessary labor carried out in a private and independent manner, and not simply the hour required in its direct production. This hour of labor condenses, in reality, the expenditure of human labor power of 2 hours and, as such, it is represented as a magnitude of value twice as large. This is then an amount of time of complex labor which has been condensed as the sum of the expenditures of simple human labor power carried out to produce the commodity. In this way, the value of this commodity is determined by the amount of time of simple labor expended to produce it and also that expended to acquire the capacity to do it.

Up to this point it would seem that we have advanced over absolutely firm ground, accounting for why commodities have value. However, let us stop to look again at the ravioli of the restaurant and those of our friends. We have said that the former have value, that is, aptitude for exchange, because they are the product of the socially necessary abstract labor expended to produce them. But our friends have also carried out an expenditure of human labor power to produce the ravioli. These are also the product of human abstract labor. Human labor is, in our friends' house, just as in any other place and epoch, a productive expenditure of the human body carried out in a determinate concrete form; unity of abstract labor and concrete labor. Besides, our friend could well have worked with the same skill, diligence and technique as that of the cook in the restaurant. And, of course, he has produced them for the consumption of other individuals distinct from him, his friends. Thus his ravioli are not only materializations of human abstract labor, but materializations of the socially necessary abstract human labor to produce them. Yet, his labor does not appear represented in them as an aptitude for exchange; his ravioli lack value. However deeply we have penetrated into the question, we have not yet accounted for why commodities have value.

Let us look again at the ravioli of the restaurant and their exchangeability with the shoes. This exchangeability is mediated by the fact that we are dealing with different use values and, therefore, with the product of different concrete labors. The cook of the restaurant makes ravioli, but not shoes; his diner makes shoes, but not ravioli. Hence, the cook can wear shoes because the shoe-maker has applied his labor to producing shoes, while the shoe-maker can eat ravioli because another individual has applied his

labor to cook them. In the determination of human labor as producer of an object which bears the aptitude for exchange with another there is the mediation of the social division of labor. It is clear that the latter also occurs in the house of our friend: we are able to eat because he has cooked for us. He has carried out a socially necessary labor, also in the sense of having been carried out to provide for the consumption of others. He has done it because we are united by a personal relation of affection, or in general, because there is a personal relation which associates us in a direct manner. He cooks for us, but not for anyone who walks by his door and tries to enter his house. His social labor is organized by the bonds which directly unite his person with the individuals who are going to consume his product. His labor is one which is carried out in a directly social manner.

But, what is the relation between the cook and the shoe-maker in the restaurant? In general, there is no direct personal bond which unites them. It is perfectly possible that they might have never seen each other's faces. The cook has produced the ravioli with total personal independence as regards who is going to consume them. The same has been done by the shoe-maker with regard to who will consume his shoes. Therefore, each one has carried out their labor for the other, their social labor, with independence regarding the other. None of them is subject to the other, nor has been able to subject the other, through a bond of personal dependence in the realization of their respective labors carried out for the consumption of the other, that is, their respective socially useful labors. They are reciprocally free individuals, who lack any bond of personal dependence between them. The decision regarding what to produce, how much to produce, when to produce and how to produce for the consumption of another individual, has been an exclusive attribute of the will of each one of them, free of any personal subjection to the other. Conversely, each one of them is deprived of any participation in the organization of the individual labor of the other. Each one of them has full control over their individual labor process. In order for this to occur, each one is to have full individual dominion over the means of production necessary for the realization of their individual labor. Their means of production are to be their private property, that is, a property which excludes others from access to them. If anyone could have access to the means of production of their owner, he or she would have to bind the organization of their own individual labor to the will of this other person, thus ceasing to be an individual independent of the other. At the same time, each one of our subjects is deprived of directly accessing the other's product, since they lack any personal bond with him. Such product confronts them as the private property of the other. In synthesis, each one has worked for the other's consumption, that is, has realized their social labor, in a private manner and with independence with respect to the other.

As free individuals, the cook and the shoe-maker relate to each other socially only when they exchange what each one has produced on their own account and at their own

risk, and it belongs to each one as property which excludes the other from direct access for his consumption. While our friend opens the doors of his house so that we may consume his ravioli because we are his friends, the owner of the restaurant has all the right to deprive of consumption those who do not pay the full value of his ravioli. That is to say, it is not only that the social division of labor mediates the exchange of commodities, but the fact that only the products of labors realized in a manner which is private and independent of each other that enter into exchange.

Let us return then to the strict analysis of the labor which produces commodities. No matter how diverse the concrete material forms in which it is carried out, the social labor realized in a private and independent manner encloses a material determination of its own as simple expenditure of human labor power: it is this expenditure, that is, abstract labor, executed under the specific material form which consists in that the control over itself is an attribute which belongs in an exclusive manner to the individuality, which results isolated, of the individual who performs it. This involves, then, a materiality which remains intact in both poles of the exchange relation even if the concrete materiality of each commodity takes the place of the other. At last, in this materiality which is inherent to the socially necessary abstract labor which is ruled by the full isolated individuality of the one who performs it, we have found the attribute which is specifically inherent in the commodity allowing it to experiment a transformation in its concrete materiality without anyone materially operating over it. This is the materiality which is represented as the purely immaterial attribute, purely social insofar as it relates one to the other, of the exchangeability of commodities.

The private and independent character with which social labor is carried out is the one which shows the specific difference which determines use values as commodities. Commodities have value, and therefore exchange value and price, because they are materializations of socially necessary abstract human labor performed in a private and independent manner. In other words, the value of commodities is the socially necessary abstract labor performed in a private and independent manner in order to produce them –that is, materialized in them- which is represented as their capacity to relate to each other as equals in exchange.¹

¹We can represent schematically the path followed by our analysis, allowing the unavoidable externality thus implied, in the following way (it is understood that the suffix *R* corresponds to *10R* and the suffix *S* to *1S*):

We have thus reached the answer to why commodities have value while goods which are not products of private and independent labor do not have it. Nonetheless this answer has but put another question before us: Why is it that when the labor expended in producing a good is performed in a private and independent manner it transforms this good into a commodity and is represented as its value? If we looked at the question outside the exchange relation itself, we could also express this question as: what is the necessity resolved by the society where the products of social labor performed in a

	Restaurant: commodities	Friend's house: non commodities	Relative attributes
	$10 R_c = 1 S_c$	$10 R_{-c} \quad 1 S_{-c}$	
Concerning their use value (<i>uv</i>)	$uvR_c \neq uvS_c$	$uvR_{-c} \neq uvS_{-c}$	$uvR_c = uvR_{-c}$ $uvS_c = uvS_{-c}$
Double character of the action (Exchange value: <i>ev</i>)	$a \langle \begin{matrix} a_{uvR_c} \neq a_{uvS_c} \\ a_{evR_c} = a_{evS_c} \end{matrix}$	$a \langle \begin{matrix} a_{uvR_{-c}} \neq a_{uvS_{-c}} \\ - \quad - \end{matrix}$	$a_{uvR_c} = a_{uvR_{-c}}$ $a_{uvS_c} = a_{uvS_{-c}}$
Natural actions (<i>na</i>)	$na \langle \begin{matrix} na_{uvR_c} \neq na_{uvS_c} \\ - \quad - \end{matrix}$	$na \langle \begin{matrix} na_{uvR_{-c}} \neq na_{uvS_{-c}} \\ - \quad - \end{matrix}$	$na_{uvR_c} = na_{uvR_{-c}}$ $na_{uvS_c} = na_{uvS_{-c}}$
Human labor (<i>l</i> ; concrete: <i>cl</i> ; abstract: <i>al</i>)	$l \langle \begin{matrix} cl_{R_c} \neq cl_{S_c} \\ al_{R_c} = al_{S_c} \end{matrix}$	$l \langle \begin{matrix} cl_{R_{-c}} \neq cl_{S_{-c}} \\ al_{R_{-c}} = al_{S_{-c}} \end{matrix}$	$cl_{R_c} = cl_{R_{-c}}$ $cl_{S_c} = cl_{S_{-c}}$, but also $al_{R_c} = al_{R_{-c}}$ $al_{S_c} = al_{S_{-c}}$
Socially necessary labor (<i>sn</i>)	$l \langle \begin{matrix} cl_{R_c} \neq cl_{S_c} \\ snal_{R_c} = snal_{S_c} \end{matrix}$	$l \langle \begin{matrix} cl_{R_{-c}} \neq cl_{S_{-c}} \\ snal_{R_{-c}} = snal_{S_{-c}} \end{matrix}$	$snal_{R_c} = snal_{R_{-c}}$ $snal_{S_c} = snal_{S_{-c}}$
Socially necessary labor privately and independently performed (<i>pi</i>)	$l \langle \begin{matrix} cl_{R_c} \neq cl_{S_c} \\ snalpi_{R_c} = snalpi_{S_c} \end{matrix}$	$l \langle \begin{matrix} cl_{R_{-c}} \neq cl_{S_{-c}} \\ - \quad - \end{matrix}$	

private and independent manner take the general form of commodities through this mode of production?

2.3. The form of value

If we observe the work of the cook in the restaurant at the moment he is carrying it out, all that it can corroborate is its condition of private labor. In turn, no matter how much we look at the ravioli he produces, in themselves, they are identical with those of our friend: simple use values. There is no way for them to make manifest their condition as values on their own. They can only do it, and therefore demonstrate that the labor which produced them was socially necessary, when they are associated with another commodity by entering into an exchange relation with it. Thus, in order to carry on the investigation into the specificity of the commodity, we have no other recourse than to go back to the equality in which the value of commodities is expressed, that is, in the expression of value as exchange value. For example, 10 plates of ravioli = 1 pair of shoes; or more simply, $10R = 1S$. We already know that this equality implies that both commodities contain an identical quantity of socially necessary abstract labor performed in a private and independent manner. But let us read the equality more carefully: How much are 10 plates of ravioli worth? A pair of shoes. We now notice that the equality of content contains within it a qualitative difference between the two poles of the relation. The ravioli express their value, relatively, in the shoes; the shoes do not express their own value, but their materiality is being used to express the value of the ravioli by way of being their equivalent. The value of the 10 plates of ravioli is expressed, in what? In a quantity of another use value, of shoes; in what way? By providing the evidence that they, the 10R, can equalize themselves to this thing of a different concrete materiality which is 1S, because they are materially equal to this pair of shoes as products of the socially necessary abstract labor performed in a private and independent manner, that is, as values. What 10R make manifest in being capable of entering into an exchange relation with 1S is that, they, the 10R, contain the same value as 1S, that is, 1S is their equivalent. Thus, the use value of the shoes has added a second determination: they are useful due to their materiality as shoes and they are useful because of their purely social capacity to express value.

In order for the shoes to express their value, we ought to turn the relation the opposite way. But then, the shoes would relatively express their value in the ravioli; and the latter would no longer express their value, but that of the shoes by being their equivalent. No commodity can express in itself its own value: by saying that 10 plates of ravioli are worth 1 pair of shoes we would know nothing about their value.

Moreover, outside their exchange relation with another, there is no way for a commodity to manifest its condition as value.

Let us illustrate the question with an analogy. Suppose that, in a class, we say that student A knows the same as student B, $A = B$. This equality relatively expresses the magnitude of the knowledge of A. It does this because it tells us that, just as B has knowledge, the knowledge of A is equal to it. It shows that A has knowledge because he or she can equalize with B as his or her “equisapient”. But there is no way it can make manifest the magnitude of the knowledge of B: B may know a lot, or may know very little. Therefore, the knowledge of A can be put into a relation of equality with that of B because it has the same magnitude as the latter. But, in this relation of equality, the magnitude of the knowledge of B is not relatively expressed, since this magnitude is not manifest at all, but is expressed in the corporeal figure of student B: in this relation, the presence of B counts only as the form in which the knowledge of A is manifested.

Let us return to the question of the necessary expression of value as exchange value. The relation of exchange contains a second qualitative difference between its poles. The commodities are products of the socially necessary labor at the very moment they are produced. It is then when the labor is materialized in them, and has no way of returning to its condition as force in action. Hence, if the labor was expended in a socially useless way at that moment, that is, if it did not produce a use value, its product lacks value from the very beginning. However, the attribute of the product as bearer or not of value can only be made manifest in the exchange itself. It does this, above all, to prove that it has it. That is, the commodity in question enters into the exchange relation to prove today that the labor expended in a private and independent manner in its production has been part of social labor at the moment of being performed. And it does this when it manages to compare itself as equal with another which acts as its equivalent, that is, when it shows that it has value because it can be put in a relation of equality with another which has it in the same magnitude. As a result, the commodity which acts as equivalent enters into the relation of exchange as an incarnation of value which possesses the attribute of proving whether the other one has it or not. In spite of being a product of a labor as private and independent as the one which produces the commodity which will relatively express its value in the exchange relation, the commodity which acts as equivalent does not enter into this relation to prove the existence of its own value, that is, its exchangeability. On the contrary, by being put in the exchange relation to play the role of a pure expression of value, it presents itself in said relation as though it was the product of the private labor which is, at the same time, the immediate representative of social labor. It presents itself, therefore, as if it was a commodity which possesses a property opposed to the condition of being a commodity itself, namely, the property of being immediately exchangeable with another.

In our example, $10R = 1S$, when the shoes enter in a passive manner into the exchange relation with the ravioli, letting the latter express their value in them, they make manifest that in the production of the ravioli a labor which is useful for the consumption of the free individual who produced the shoes, so that the labor in question is confirming itself in this act as social labor, has been materialized in a private and independent manner. Through the relation $10R = 1S$, the ravioli must prove that they are exchangeable with the shoes, but the shoes enter into the relation as immediately exchangeable with the ravioli. Only if the relation is inverted, $1S = 10R$, are the roles inverted: now, it is the shoes which would have to prove if they contain socially necessary labor by being exchanged with the ravioli, so that these act in the relation as the immediate bearers of value.

Let us see what happens when the productive capacity of the labor which produces the commodity which relatively expresses its value changes. Let us suppose that now $\frac{1}{2}$ hour of labor is required to produce 10 plates of ravioli. Their value will have reduced by half. And this is reflected in the exchange relation with the shoes, since now the same time as that materialized in one shoe instead of the pair is expended: $10R = \frac{1}{2} S$. If, on the other hand, the productivity of the labor which produces the ravioli fell by half, $10R$ would contain 2 hours of labor and, therefore: $10R = 2S$. Thus far, the change in the value of the ravioli is expressed unequivocally in its exchange value by shoes. But it can also occur that the productivity of the labor which produces ravioli remains constant while that of the labor which produces shoes changes. Let us suppose that the latter is doubled. Now, $10R = 2S$. Conversely, if this productivity fell by half, $10R = \frac{1}{2} S$. The expression of the value of the ravioli in shoes would change but its value would not. Let us suppose that both productivities move in equal proportion and in the same direction. The expression of value of the ravioli in shoes would remain intact, $10R = 1S$, in spite of the change operated over the value of the ravioli. But if both productivities moved in opposite directions, the variation in the value of the ravioli would appear multiplied in the expression of this value in shoes. And if the productivity of the labor which produces the ravioli and that of the one which produces the shoes changed in the same direction, but with a greater proportion in the latter than in the former, the change in the value of the ravioli would appear having the opposite sign in its expression in shoes; for example, if the productivity of the labor which produces the ravioli were doubled while that of the one which produces shoes were quadrupled, the reduction in value of the ravioli by half would be manifested as a doubling of its expression in shoes, $10R = 2S$.

When observing the evolution of the expression of value in a commodity it becomes impossible to recognize in an immediate manner the changes effectively experimented in its value. This distortion has a manifestation which is of particular interest. The total value produced during a given labor time always turns out to be the same however

much the productivity of labor changes. One hour of labor always yields the same quantity of value, only that this hour is prorated between a larger or smaller quantity of use values according to whether the productive capacity of labor is greater or lesser. But if there is a general tendency toward the increment of productivity which reaches both the commodity which relatively expresses its value and the one which serves as equivalent for this expression, the appearance will arise that the mass of value produced in one hour of labor tends to grow.

Now, it is obvious that the knowledge of any student is something which magnitude is, at best, truly hard to express in itself. But it is also obvious that it is not usually measured in relative terms, but through the conventional establishment of cardinal number grading systems. Confronted with the intangible nature of the magnitude of knowledge, one might say that the direct measurement of the abstract labor which produces commodities involves minor difficulties. We face, then, a new question: Why is the value of commodities only expressible in the exchange relation, that is, as exchange value, and not directly as quantities of its substance, that is, socially necessary abstract labor? In short: why can value not be measured in labor-time vouchers?

For the moment we have no other answer than to carry on. We already saw that the exchange value of a commodity is relatively expressed as a quantity of the body of another. Therefore, it is not expressed in the value of the latter, but in its materiality, that is, in the use value of it. We do not say, 10 plates of ravioli are worth the value of a pair of shoes, but 10 plates of ravioli are worth a pair of shoes. Hence, from the point of view of the commodity which occupies the pole of equivalent in the exchange relation, use value acts as expression of value. The pair of shoes can express the value of the ravioli because they are themselves a value, that is, the product of abstract labor. But it can only do this by having a different concrete materiality to that of the ravioli. If, as use values, the shoes were equal to the ravioli, they would fall in the impossibility of any commodity to express its value in quantities of its own body; i.e., in the impossibility that the equality $10R = 10R$ has no way of making manifest the value of the ravioli. The shoes can only express the value of the ravioli because they are use values different from them and, therefore, products of a different concrete labor from the one materialized in them. What stands out in the pole of the equivalent is not the abstract character of the labor which has produced it as value, that is, the one which allows it to enter into the exchange relation, but the concrete character of the labor which has produced it as use value. Thus, the concrete labor which has produced the equivalent appears as the one which has granted it its capacity to represent value. Finally, value is the product of socially necessary labor, and it is due to its condition as product of this labor that the pair of shoes can express the value of the ravioli. But in this expression it always intervenes through its use value produced by a definite concrete labor. And it does not have these attributes as product of a directly social labor

but, on the contrary, as product of labor performed in an independent and private manner. To sum up, from the point of view of the pole of the equivalent, use value appears as representative of value, concrete labor as the representative of abstract labor and private labor as representative of social labor. The fact that a commodity is put in the exchange relation as the equivalent of another for which it serves as expression of value, makes the commodity in question appear in an immediate manner as concrete materialization of social labor performed privately.

These appearances are manifested already in the simple, isolated or circumstantial expression of the value of a commodity in the body of another. But, since this is a simple relation of equality, nothing restricts the extension of the relative expression of the value of a commodity to the universe of commodities which cohabit with it in the process of exchange, that is, in circulation. The unfurling of the relative expression of value of the plates of ravioli results in:

10 plates of ravioli = 1 pair of shoes

10 plates of ravioli = 5 faucets

10 plates of ravioli = 1 chair

10 plates of ravioli = 8 haircuts

10 plates of ravioli = 1/5 pound of gold

...and so on until spanning the universality of the rest of the commodities.

In this unfurling, the private labor which produces the ravioli makes manifest its condition as social labor in the fact that its product relates, not only with the product of another private labor which officiates in a circumstantial and isolated way as representative of social labor, but with the social universality of the products of private labors. The private labor which produces ravioli thus manifests itself, in a late and indirect way, as a labor of the same nature as that of the rest of useful labors that are realized in society in a private and independent manner, that is, as a labor as social as them. Each one of the other commodities now appears as an especial equivalent of the ravioli.

If the developed relative expression of the value of a commodity is inverted, this appears as the general equivalent which serves to relatively express the value of the world of commodities:

1 pair of shoes = 10 plates of ravioli

5 faucets = 10 plates of ravioli

1 chair = 10 plates of ravioli

8 haircuts = 10 plates of ravioli

1/5 pound of gold = 10 plates of ravioli

etc.

The ravioli appear in this relation as a material object which possesses use value, product of a given concrete labor, performed in a private and independent manner

which, nonetheless, in its function as general equivalent, represents the social labor materialized in a private and independent manner in all the other commodities. Therefore, the ravioli are presented in this relation as having the property of being immediately exchangeable by all the other commodities in their quality of immediate incarnation of the socially necessary abstract labor expended in producing them. Only when they exchange their commodities by them, are the commodity producers able to recognize immediately the social character of the labor that each one has performed privately and independently. Evidently, in the real world, the ravioli are far from occupying such position, however tasty they may be and however disagreeable their cooks may find this. However, there is indeed a commodity which has historically occupied this place: gold. In reality, the relative expression of the universe of commodities has the form of:

1 pair of shoes = 1/5 pound of gold
 5 faucets = 1/5 pound of gold
 1 chair = 1/5 pound of gold
 8 haircuts = 1/5 pound of gold
 10 plates of ravioli = 1/5 pound of gold
 etc.

Consolidated as representative of the value of the world of commodities, gold acts as money. Up to here we have accepted the inbuilt ambiguity of political economy between exchange value and price. But here we need to clearly distinguish them. Exchange value is the expression of the value of a commodity in quantities of any other; price is the expression of the value of any commodity expressed in quantities of money.

When a commodity -in the concrete historical development, gold- consolidates in the function of money and, therefore, is socially recognized as an immediately exchangeable object by any other product of social labor performed privately, it accomplishes something which we saw at the beginning was impossible for any commodity: it expresses value even when it is not in any exchange relation with another commodity. It has become substantivized value, in the general representative of social wealth produced under the form of commodities. It is clear, however, that it is still impossible for it to express the magnitude of its own value by itself. Money can only express the magnitude of its value by entering into the exchange relation with another commodity which operates as its equivalent. But when it does this in a simple manner with a definite commodity, it does not conserve in this relation the evidence of its condition as money. It only does it under the unfurled relative form of its value, where each one of the other commodities is presented as a special equivalent of it equally with the others.

In being exchanged by money, commodities make manifest that they are the product of a portion of social labor expended in a useful way for social consumption.

Here, the money of the buyer acts as representative of the social necessity for the use value produced by the seller. But, if the money of the buyer embodies the social necessity, it does this precisely due to the condition of free individual, and therefore, private and independent as regards labor, of its possessor. Thus, the latter acts in turn as incarnation of the social necessity on his or her own account and at his or her own risk. If the commodity he or she has bought ends up having no use value afterward, he or she will have expended the product of his or her own social labor performed privately and independently in vain in buying it. Through the transformation of commodities into money and of money into commodities, that is, in the process of buying and selling which is realized in the market, the general unity of social production and consumption between private and independent producers is established.

2.4. The unity of the process of social metabolism established through the form of value of the product of social labor performed in a private manner

Like any living existence, human life is a process of metabolism in which the subject expends a portion of their own body to appropriate their medium, thus reproducing themselves as living subjects. In the generality of animal species, the energy expended by the subject at the expense of their body to appropriate their medium commonly results in the reproduction of the body of the subject itself. The labor which they perform, in the most generic sense of energy expenditure directed toward a goal, immediately throws into relief the appropriation of the means of life. So the animal can only realize this appropriation of its means of life if it finds them within their reach in nature. The general way in which it can amplify this reach is the mutation of its own body, in such a way as to multiply its potentialities with respect to its natural medium. This is why the inherent necessity of all living beings to expand their capacity to appropriate the medium is only openly manifested when faced with critical changes in it, under the appearance that this pertains to a necessity which can only be initiated by responding to an exterior stimulus, that is, as the necessity to adapt to the medium.

As expression of the necessity of multiplying the body's capacity to reproduce it, the process of animal metabolism takes a complex form. The subject starts by expending a limited portion of their body to appropriate the potentiality which their action has with respect to the potentiality of the medium, and only if this limited expenditure recognizes in the medium a means apt for the reproduction of the body in its unity, does the process of fully appropriating the medium trigger off. The action of appropriating the medium is thus developed in two moments: it starts with the knowledge of the potentiality of the subject's own action with respect to that of the medium, to culminate with the effective appropriation of the latter. The first moment,

the action of virtually appropriating the medium, that is, the action of knowing themselves as subject with respect to the medium, is but the action of organizing the action of effectively appropriating the latter. The process of knowledge is the action of organizing one's own action.

This is what the amoeba does when it extends a pseudopod. It expends only a portion of its body touching a medium which, if it destroys this portion, makes it retract. Conversely, if the medium allows it to reproduce this portion of its body, it throws the whole of it to incorporate it to itself. Of course, the process of organizing the action advances in the complexity of its forms, to the extent that the reach which the potentiality of the living subject has with respect to its medium develops.

The human being generically differentiates itself from the animal species by the potentiality that it has to expand the appropriation of its medium, not simply springing from its own body, but expanding its capacity to act over natural objects with the end of transforming them into means for this same action and, by upholding this action in them, produce means for the reproduction of human life. In short, the human being is distinct as a genre of the animal species by its capacity to appropriate its medium through the labor which produces use values.

This peculiar form which has the moment of the process of metabolism in which the body is expended to transform the medium into a means for itself, gives a form to the portion of the expenditure applied to organize the unity of the action which is also peculiar. At first, the human life process hardly differentiates itself from that of superior mammals. Thus, just to take a very schematic example, the future human being starts by differentiating itself from bovines in the production of its life only by the fact that it grabs the grass from the ground with the hands instead of the tongue. The organization of its action goes no further than knowing if the strength of its arm is sufficient and if that in front of it is edible or not. But as soon as it affirms itself as human, using a little stone to cut the grass, he or she needs to organize the action of taking the stone knowing the mediate potentiality which it has with respect to the reproduction of their own body; that is, they need to know that the result of the action of taking a stone is that they will eat grass. If they now multiply the capacity to reproduce themselves by taking the stone, which they will not utilize to cut the grass but to sharpen the stone effectively destined for this end, the reach of the knowledge of the potentiality of their action will have taken a step further. If this whole process is carried out during summer in order to have the grass at their disposal during winter, when it does not exist in the natural medium, then its organization implies that the individual needs to know that when it picks up the stone before the summer, what they are doing is initiating their process of eating grass in the winter. Not to mention that, when they need to know that the potentiality of their action is that in the moment of picking up the stone, what they are doing is initiating the process in which another individual different from them will eat grass during winter.

The development of the human capacity to transform the medium into a means for itself takes shape in the increasing instrumental, spatial, temporal and personal separation between the action which opens a cycle of metabolism and the result which closes it reproducing the human subject. It thus reaches a point where the knowledge of the potentiality itself with respect to the potentiality of the medium can only realize itself as a process which knows itself in its own potentiality. That is to say, as a process of knowledge which recognizes itself as such, a process whose subjects know themselves as individuals who have knowledge. The process of productive expenditure of a portion of the body to organize the labor which opens human metabolism thus takes the shape which is generically its own: conscious knowing, that is, consciousness. And consciousness opens up the full productive expenditure of the body because it knows the end of this action, that is, it takes the form of will. From this moment onwards, human labor becomes a conscious and willful action, an action which knows its own necessity, its determinations, and which unfolds itself because it knows what the end it will attain is.

Now, the human potentiality to expand the appropriation of the medium its appropriation of the medium does not simply differentiate itself, from the animal species in general, by realizing itself by transforming the medium through labor. Nor is the difference reduced to a question of degrees with respect to the animal species which act transforming their medium. As a product of its own development, the human genre proceeds to distinguish itself from the animal species because its labor, and therefore its process of metabolism itself, is an action ruled in a conscious and willful manner.

The natural history of human life is the history of the development of the productive potentialities of labor and, therefore, of the development of the modes in which the latter is organized, that is, of the development of consciousness and will. It is only through this development that the human being is able to mutate its own body. The clearest manifestation of this is the increase in volume of the natural organ which rules in a conscious and willful manner the application of the human force of labor –the cerebral cortex- with the expansion of the reach of this application. Given that each human generation provides the next one with a world which it has transformed in a conscious and willful manner, we can say that the human being is a historical subject, that it has a history, in contrast with the simple progression of the animal species.

Above all, labor is a process of an individual character: there is no way to work if one's own body is not expended in the process. Therefore, the productive potencies of labor are realized as an attribute of individual labor: the fact that a producer may be more or less skilled, more or less fast, etc. is borne in his or her individual productive subjectivity. But these productive forces of labor do not spring from the abstract individuality of those who work, on the contrary, each individual bears in his or her body, in his or her individual productive subjectivity, productive forces which have

reached him or her by the action of the labor of others. Therefore, what they bear in their individuality are the productive forces of social labor. That is, the productive potencies of individual labor are, above all, productive potencies of social labor. For example, the production of a scientific book is the result of the individual labor of its author. The rigor of the investigation, the plasticity of exposition, etc. are mediated by the productive attributes of its author. But the latter can realize their individual labor because they are bearers of a knowledge produced by the mass of social labor which has produced and reproduced them as bearers of such individual capacity to perform labor. Moreover, the author can carry out his investigation because he or she has eaten, dressed, transported to the workplace, etc., thanks to the product of the labor of a multitude of individuals which have produced for him or her the respective use values. The productive potencies of individual labor spring from and are sustained by the labor which they have performed for the author, from his or her predecessors to colleagues, dead or alive, to the last individual who has produced a use value which directly or indirectly has entered into his or her individual and productive consumption, and even further back (for example, the one who has produced the means of transport which he or she utilized to get to the workplace). At the same time, his or her cooperation with other individuals in the same labor process, the realization of an immediately collective labor, multiplies the productive potencies beyond the reach of his or her isolated individual labor. This means that the individual labor of the author is but an organic portion which integrates a process of general productive cooperation. The productive forces of his or her individual labor are productive of his or her social labor. In synthesis, labor is always an activity which contains this double determination: it is a productive expenditure of an individual body which realizes the productive potencies distinctive of the social character of labor.²

² Indeed, there are certain animal species whose life processes attain the form of truly complex processes of social metabolism, where the expenditure of a body of an individual at a determinate moment serves for the reproduction of another at a distant moment in time. For example, a leafcutter ant also cuts grass in summer, in a collectively organized activity, so that others may cultivate fungi which will serve as nourishment for more members of their same community in winter. But, in the complexity of this process of metabolism, the productive potencies of what we may for simplicity call social labor are sustained in the extreme mutilation of the individual productive attributes: the very body of each individual is biologically determined to accomplish a specialized partial task. Contrary to this, the process of human social metabolism owes its generic potency to the fact that the development of the social productive forces is borne by the development of the individual productive subjectivities. The emergence and development of consciousness and will are but the full concrete form of this generic potency: they are the ones in which the capacity to organize the process of social metabolism is a constitutive attribute of the individual productive subjectivities. This is why the development of the productive forces of social labor can only reach a historically limited extent when it is realized by concrete forms based on the mutilation of the individual subjectivity of those who perform the direct labor whereby their

The second moment of the process of human metabolism is that of consumption. The mere fact that labor is an individual process in its concrete form makes it evident that the consumption of means of production, that is, productive consumption, is in an immediate manner an individual process. But, so soon as the means of production of one are the product of the labor of others and, in turn, their consumer produces for others, that individual productive consumption is then socially determined. In turn, the moment in which the cycle of human metabolism closes, the consumption of means for subsistence, that is, the consumption which reproduces the body of the subject, is necessarily an individual process. This is a necessarily individual process by its very object, so much so that we can contrast it as a pure individual consumption with respect to the productive consumption of the means of production, the result of which is an existence exterior to the person who performs it. There is no way to consume means of subsistence without an individual intervention in the process of such consumption: no individual may nourish themselves because another individual consumes food. However, given that individual consumption nourishes itself from the products of social labor and that, at the same time, reproduces its subject as individual bearer of the productive forces of society, such consumption is determined as the concrete form of an organic necessity which transcends any abstract individuality. The consumption of each is determined by the consumption needs of others. Consumption is always an individual activity which potencies are socially determined.

Insofar as the process of human life is realized upon a purely natural basis, the process of human metabolism does not differentiate itself from that of any animal species. For example, when an individual breaths ambient air, their breathing is simply an animal breathing: they realize an expenditure of their body -which does not require being ruled in a conscious and willful manner- having the reproduction of such expenditure as its immediate result. Likewise, if an individual walks bare-footed over virgin lands, their walking is simply an animal walking. Only when it sustained by the consumption of the products of labor, is the process of human metabolism constituted as such. When an asthmatic breaths thanks to their medication, or when anyone breaths heated, cooled, etc. air –all consumptions which are mediated by a multitude of conscious and willful productive actions- their breathing differentiates itself generically

consciousness and will are stripped of the exercise of its social organization, as it happens in the slave mode of production. This is also why those who yearn for a stratified organization of social labor based on the attribution of a natural differentiation in the subjectivities of each individual praise the brain of the ant. But the naturalization of human social organization reaches universal diffusion, under an absolutely innocent appearance, in the inversion of the direct personal relations which rule those societies as an attribute of the different functions which the biologically specialized bodies of the ants carry out in the unity of their simply natural process of metabolism: queen, drone, soldier, worker.

from animal breathing. In the same way, when an individual walks wearing shoes, their walking distinguishes itself generically from animal walking.

Therefore, when an individual works producing their own shoes, they are producing themselves as human beings. But when they produce shoes for the consumption of others, when they perform a socially useful labor, what they do is produce the material condition for other human beings to realize their process of metabolism as such; so that the product of their labor is not simply shoes, not simply useful things, but other human beings. To the extent that the human metabolic process opens with an expenditure of the body of an individual in the labor process, to close with the reproduction of another individual through the consumption of use values directly or indirectly produced by the former, the process of human metabolism is determined as a process of social metabolism. And it is also so determined insofar as the two extremes of this process are mediated because an individual productively consumes for their own labor the product of the labor of another individual.

Taking the process of human metabolism in its social unity, we see that consciousness and will are attributes borne by each individual productive subjectivity. But they are not simply the forms in which each one organizes their abstractly individual labor process, but the forms in which the social character of the process of human metabolism is organized. Consciousness and will are the forms of human action which bear the organization of the process of social metabolism. They are the actions through which each individual recognizes himself or herself, and acts, as individual bearer of the productive forces of the labor of society. They are the bearers of the specifically human relations by which the process of social metabolism is ruled. They are, therefore, the bearers of the relations which rule the natural process of human metabolism in a way which is generically theirs. We succinctly recognize such relations in their own generic determination, differentiating them from any other form of natural relation, by the name of social relations.

The first question which must be resolved by any human society to reproduce its life, is the way in which it will assign the total labor capacity which it has available in order to carry out its process of social metabolism, with the end of applying it under the different concrete forms of useful labor to be performed individually by its members. Let us suppose a social unit formed by a group of friends who decide to eat a barbeque. First of all, it has to be prepared. In order to do this, this society counts with a certain quantity of total labor power, depending on the number of its members and the amount of time each is willing to dedicate. In function of such availability, the society assigns each of its members the portion of total labor that they are to perform: one will buy the meat, another the vegetables, the wine, prepare the fire, cook, etc. Thus, they will have assigned their total force of social labor to the different individual concrete useful labors. They will have done this on the basis of the direct personal relation which united

all the members, their bond of friendship; a bond through which the consciousness and will of each one recognizes the others as a member of their community of friends. And it would be perfectly possible that, due to this very bond, the members of the society agreed that one of them, who usually dislikes working in groups, be released of performing his part: “what are friends for?” In such situation, this society would put into action a lesser total capacity of labor than that which it would potentially have available. Once social labor is realized through the different individual concrete labors, this society would be in conditions to carry out its second step in its process of metabolism, the individual consumption of the use values which have been produced. The allocation of the social product to the different individual members is ruled by the direct relation of friendship. This relation may perfectly express itself, for example, in that the friend who goes by the nickname “fat” is given a double ration of meat. Again, “what are friends for?” Thus, our little society of friends will have given another step forward in the reproduction of its life.

Let us now leave behind the abstract simplicity of the above example and confront the situation in the complexity of the historical development of humanity. In the most primitive modes of production, the allocation of the total capacity for labor of society under the different concrete useful forms of labor to be carried out by each individual is resolved through relations of personal interdependence established inside of each community, upon a simple animal basis in the beginning. In societies with a slavery system, the problem is resolved by the direct relation of personal subordination of the slaves under the master. Through it, the latter commands the former to perform the concrete labors which correspond to each of them; or delegates his personal authority to a slave or group of slaves who impose this allocation in the master’s name. The consciousness of the slaves recognizes in the person of the master, even if only by the force of the stick, the sovereignty of organizing their social labor, to which they must submit their will. In a feudal society based on a tribute in kind, the serfs assign their capacity to perform labor in order to reproduce their life and provide use values which constitute the tribute to the lord of whom they are subjects by the direct personal relations of vassalage, the exercise of which is, again, based on the stick. In each of these societies, the social relations of interdependence and subordination are manifested as naturally inherent attributes of the persons involved in them. Lords are who they are by the grace of God, just as the serfs are who they are by a similar disgrace.

But let us focus on the capitalist mode of organizing social production, where commodity producers prevail. They are such, precisely, by having plain command over their respective individual labor processes and, therefore, by realizing individually their respective portions of social labor in a private and independent manner one from the other. As such mutually independent individuals, they lack any direct personal relation which rules the social organization of their labor. They are free individuals, in the sense

that their consciousness and will are not subjected to those of any other individual by relations of personal dependence, be they willful or forced upon them, in the organization of their individual labor for those others. Reciprocally, none can impose their consciousness and will upon others in the process in which they organize their individual labor for others. Therefore, at the very moment in which each one must work for the consumption of others, they confront the problem of how to organize this social labor without having any other social relation between them than being, each one of them, an individual bearer of a portion of the total capacity to perform the general labor of society, that is, to expend the materiality of their body under a concrete form - whatever this is- which produces a value of social use, to perform abstract labor. What do they do, then?

Each one applies their aliquot part of the capacity to perform social labor in general, productively expending their individual body, that is, their muscles, brains, etc., under a concrete form determined by what their consciousness as a free individual tells them will result in a value of social use for others. But none of them have a way of imposing this condition on the consciousness and will of the rest. On the contrary, it is the private consciousness and will of those others which has the authority of resolving which of the things each one has privately produced they (the others) will consume and, therefore, will recognize as part of the social product, as values of social use. If at the moment of performing their labor, each one acted affirming themselves in their liberty with respect to the other one for whom they worked; now each one acts affirming themselves in their liberty with respect to the other one who worked for them. The question, then, concerns the sovereignty that others have of recognizing the social character of the labor performed by each one, not in the effective moment of that performance where each one acted in a private and independent manner with respect to the others, but once said labor has already been materialized in its product. But this concerns a personal sovereignty that each one can exercise with respect to the product of the other only if, in turn, the other exercises theirs with respect to the product of each one. Therefore, it concerns a personal sovereignty that each one indirectly has over the other which, at the same time, is no personal sovereignty over the other. The social relation of the commodity producers has no way of assuming the concrete shape of a direct personal sovereignty at the moment in which each one privately performs their social labor, and it still cannot do it at the moment in which each one privately recognizes the social character of the labor performed for them. The unity of these two moments thus takes the concrete form of an indirect social relation between persons which is borne as the sovereignty which the products of social labor performed privately and independently have to exchange one with the other.

If the product of a private labor is capable of being exchanged for that of another, it will have confirmed its condition of being the materialization of social labor as the use

value for the consumption of someone other than its producer. Once a value of social use has been produced through the private and independent expenditure under a concrete form which is adequate to the corresponding portion of the total capacity of society to perform general human labor, then value will have been produced. That is, a use value which has a social aptitude for exchange will have been produced. And this aptitude will become manifest as the capacity of a commodity to enter the exchange relation with another in the proportion which corresponds to their reciprocal condition as materialization of the same quantity of abstract labor, that is, as exchange value. If that product is incapable of attracting another one, it will have demonstrated by this that the portion of the capacity of general social labor applied to its production has been expended in a socially useless manner. It will not have produced a social use value nor, therefore, value.

The socially necessary abstract labor expended to produce a commodity is represented as the aptitude it has to relate to another in exchange, that is, as its value, because this exchangeability is the indirect form in which the unity of social production whose organization is ruled in a private and independent manner is imposed. The form of value which commodities have is the general social relation that their private and independent producers indirectly establish among themselves. In other words, the commodity is the general materialized social relation which rules production –and, therefore, consumption- in the society in which social labor is realized in a private and independent manner. This is the way in which this society resolves the allocation of its total capacity to perform labor under different useful concrete forms which is carried out by each of its members and, therefore, the unity between the productive forces which are characteristic of each individual and their determination as social productive forces, between the individual materiality of consumption and its determination as concrete form of the process of social reproduction, between social production and consumption. In sum, the exchange of commodities, that is, the market, is the mode in which free individuals resolve the unity of the organization of their process of social metabolism through giving their general social relation the indirect form of a relation between things.

The little society we formed with that friend of ours who cooked the ravioli for us, by contrast, resolved the same problem based on the personal relation which unites us. It was on this basis that our friend applied his portion of the total capacity to perform labor for that small specific society so as to produce individually a directly social use value. By the same reason, the labor performed at home for the rest of the members of a family does not produce value nor does it have any way to do it. It concerns the portion of the total capacity to perform labor of the social family nucleus, borne by the individual productive subjectivity of one of its members, which is assigned under determinate concrete forms ruled by personal relations of dependence which define the

family as such. Its product can only be consumed by those who have this personal relation as their own personal attribute. Insofar as the member in question works for themselves, that is, expends their body producing a use value for their own consumption, they perform simple individual labor. When they expend their body producing a use value which will restore the body of their relatives, they perform social labor. But they do not perform it in a private and independent manner with respect to them, but in a directly social manner.

The fact that in the capitalist mode of production the unity of social labor is established *a posteriori* to the realization of this labor implies that it is a mode of organization of the process of social metabolism which, whatever the productive potencies it may have, carries within itself the waste of a part of the expenditure of labor power performed by society. What in other modes of organizing the expenditure of social labor constitutes an abnormality, an accident, namely, that the social forces to perform labor be applied without this resulting in the production of a social use value, here becomes the necessary expression of the normal movement of the process of social metabolism. Therefore, the capitalist mode of production carries within itself, right from the start, a specific limitation to the historical development of productive potencies of labor.

By discovering what the society of free individuals performs through the representation of socially necessary abstract labor effected in a private and independent manner as the value of commodities, we have discovered why the value of a commodity cannot express itself directly as quantities of its substance, but as quantities of the body of another commodity, that is, as exchange value. In order that the value of commodities could express itself in hours of labor, a social agreement or social authority would have to exist so that it would validate the time of socially necessary labor to produce each commodity. Concomitantly, this agreement or authority would have to establish the condition of each product as a social use value, both with respect to its qualitative attributes and the quantity to be produced. The establishment of the above determinations implies the establishment of the technical conditions in which each commodity will be produced. Hence, in order that this same agreement or authority could effectively rule the labor time and the quantity to be produced, it would have the sovereignty of allocating the correspondingly necessary means of production for each producer. But social labor produces commodities when it is performed in a private and independent manner, that is, when there is no direct social relation which rules it. In order that value be expressed in quantities of its substance, in time units of labor, commodities would have to be the product of a labor ruled in a directly social manner. But then, the problem that the form of the commodity was to resolve would already be resolved. That is, the total capacity to perform labor of society would have already been assigned under the different useful concrete forms of it. Therefore, this would be a

directly social labor and not a social labor performed privately and independently. In reality, it would be an absurd contradiction in terms which would make value redundant. Only the socially useful labor which is performed in a private and independent manner can produce value, and the latter can only be expressed in the exchange relation of a commodity with another. The socially useful labor performed in a directly social manner simply produces use values, and has no way of being represented as an aptitude for exchange.

Chapter 3

The consciousness of commodity producers, that is, the free consciousness which is the concrete form of alienated consciousness

Commodity producers are free individuals who are not subjected to the personal domination of anyone. They own their individual consciousness and will. They have their person at their disposal to apply their individual capacity to perform labor in the concrete way in which their individual consciousness and will consider appropriate. They are, therefore, reciprocally independent in the exercise of their generically human attribute, labor. However, these reciprocally independent individuals are brought together with a degree of social interdependence never before seen in human history. As is common to every historical form, the consumption of each one depends on the production of the rest, through the social division of labor. But, in this case, the consumption of each one depends directly on the consumption of the rest: in order to be able to buy commodities, they must first have sold theirs and, therefore, they must first have satisfied a social consumption need. Under the appearance of being absolutely independent individuals, they are absolutely interdependent individuals. Their absolute social interdependence takes concrete shape in the absence of any direct personal bond. Said interdependence only manifests itself in an indirect manner, through the exchange of commodities in which each one appears to affirm their condition as a fully free individual with respect to the others.

Let us return to the cook who produces ravioli. Let us suppose that he cooks ravioli for his family's dinner. Tired after the day of work, he makes a mistake and puts sugar instead of salt. As his family has a personal bond with him, it could be that they will let him know their repulsion when they try the uneatable ravioli, so that even he will go to bed reproaching himself for having ruined the family's evening. But the next morning, our man will sit to have breakfast as any other day, in his condition as a member of the family. Let us suppose now that he makes the same mistake in the restaurant. The client does not even have to get in personal trouble with him; all they will do is leave without paying the foul meal lacking any use value. The cook might go to sleep somewhat angry at his mistake. But what he will certainly not be able to do is sit at the breakfast table the next day: the family table will be empty because, having not sold his ravioli the day before, today there is nothing to buy the breakfast ingredients with.

As a personally free individual who has full control over his individual labor, the commodity producers realize, above all, that they have to apply their free consciousness and will to produce a use value for social consumption. Let us suppose that, fully conscious of this determination, our cook attentively observes the existing social necessities around him and, confronted with the abundance of malnourished children, he concludes that he cannot go wrong if he allots his individual portion of social labor power to produce ravioli for them. He will be late to discover that, in the kingdom of personally free individuals that the capitalist mode of production is, for the organization of the labor of society social needs are not presented as a personal attribute. Only the social need which is the bearer of the objectified general social relation counts, i.e. money. That is, only the social need which has purchasing power counts, namely, the solvent social need. And, however needful of nourishment the children may be, they do not carry with them the social bond which expresses this specific form of social need. Without having found someone to sell the product of his private labor to, the cook will be confronted with the fact that his own consumption needs no longer count as social needs and that, therefore, he is forbidden from participating in social consumption. But in the next opportunity, if he has it, he will already know that it is not enough to produce use values for others; that what he must produce are use values which bear value and, as such, are capable of attracting in exchange other objects which also bear value. To put it plainly, he will know that what he must produce is value. That this is the only end to which he must apply his free consciousness and will, as participant in the general organization of the process of human life. That only if he produces value he will have indirectly produced use values for himself. From the point of view of the materiality of the process of social metabolism, productive labor is that which produces social use values; from the specific point of view of the organization of social labor through commodity production, the only productive labor is that which produces value. As expression of a simple human necessity, hunger is hunger; as a necessity capable of expressing itself with respect to the organization of social labor in the capitalist mode of production, only that hunger which has purchasing power counts, “solvent” hunger.

The producer of ravioli in our example ought to be quite a fool if he had to get to this point to only now realize what he has to do. In reality, every commodity producer knows, since their tender childhood, that value has an objective form of existence: money. They know, therefore, just as Marx synthesized it, that their capacity to participate in social consumption -both productive and individual consumption- that is, their general social relation with others, must be carried in their pocket under the form of this thing, money. So that they learn very early on that their capacity to relate socially in a general manner is not their personal attribute but an attribute of the product of their labor expressed in its capacity to attract money and be exchanged for it.

It is not possible to perform labor without applying one's own consciousness and will to the realization of the foreseen end. And the consciousness and will of the commodity producer are those of a free individual, that is, those of an individual who has full control over their individual labor process. Therefore, when they work, they put into action the productive potencies of their individual labor in a more prolific form than that of a worker who is inhibited in their free individual subjectivity by relations of personal dependence. The more the control over their individual labor process belongs to them, that is, the more their consciousness and will rule the determinations of their individual labor, the more the individual is affirmed in their human personality. The free character of labor is, in itself, a human productive force. But, when the commodity producer performs labor, they cannot simply apply their consciousness and will to the production of a use value for others; they must put it at the service of the production of value. Their labor must not only produce a socially useful object, a social use value; it must produce, at the same time, their general social relation; it must produce value. This is not, then, a mere process of production of use values, socially mediated by their form as values. It is about a social production of use values which is ruled by having as its immediate object the production of value. Social use values and, therefore, human beings, are produced only on the condition that value is produced.

Because their labor is performed in a private and independent manner, the commodity producer has full control over the individual character of their labor process, but lacks all control over its social character; that is, over their social potencies and determinations. The potencies of their own individual labor with respect to the unity of the process of social metabolism completely escape their control. They have no way of dominating the interlacing in which their individual labor necessarily enters with the labor of others, which embodies said process. They cannot perform their labor in a directly social mode, cooperating with other producers, because they lack any social connection with them to organize their collective labor in a direct manner. They cannot even know if their labor is socially useful or not at the moment they carry it out. Their freedom consists in that they consciously rule the determinations of their individual labor on their own, thereby realizing their will. But the social determinations of their labor completely escape the reach of their consciousness, and their will must blindly be subject to it. They are free individuals in their individual labor, but they lack all liberty with respect to the social determinations of their labor.¹ They do not personally bear any

¹ Let us recall, again, the synthesis made by Engels:

Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. (Engels, Friedrich (1877) *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's revolution in science*, Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1959, p. 157)

capacity to directly participate in the organization of their own process of social metabolism. Hence, they must submit their consciousness and will as free individuals to the social potencies of the product of their labor. They are not subject to the personal domination of anyone, but they must be the servant of their commodity. If they rebel against this condition, if, for example, an independent producer refuses to privately obey the messages concerning the social usefulness or uselessness of their labor which they receive via the market, they end up being prohibited of having their general social relation available to them and, therefore, of reproducing their own life.

Value is not a social attribute belonging to their person, but the material product of their labor. Therefore, it is a social attribute of an object exterior to their person, an object which, however much the product of their conscious and willful activity, and however much it belongs to them as their private property, it is different than their person. In those societies organized on the basis of the direct relations between persons -whether they are those of the primitive community, slavery, feudalism, the modern family or friendships, etc.- each individual bears their social dependence as their personal attribute. Their social bond is inseparable from their personality as members of such societies. On the contrary, the commodity producer lacks any capacity to directly relate to others in general; this social attribute is alien to their person. It is therefore no coincidence that they are individuals free of any bond of direct personal dependence. Their free consciousness and will have been applied at the service of a social potency alien to them and which belongs to the commodity: it, and not their producers, is the one which has the capacity, the potency, to socially relate with others in exchange. The material product of their labor confronts them as a social potency which is alien to them and to which they must submit their consciousness and will as free individuals. Since the will of the commodity producer has full control over the private exercise of their individual labor performed in an independent manner with respect to others, it is completely subject to the social potencies of the product of this labor. Therefore, the free consciousness and will of the commodity producers are the form in which the alienation of their consciousness and will as attributes of the commodity is realized. In the same act in which they affirm themselves as bearers of a free consciousness and will in the individual richness of their generically human attributes, that is, in the same act in which they put into action their free consciousness and will to rule their individual labor process in a private and independent manner, what they are putting into action is their consciousness and will alienated in the commodity. The act in which their consciousness and will dominate by themselves the determinations of their individual labor affirming them as free individuals, is the act in which their consciousness and will give shape to their impotence to rule the social determinations of their labor, realizing their absolute lack of freedom with respect to them. The moment in which they act as free individuals producing commodities, is the

moment in which they act as producers of value and, therefore, as individuals alienated in their commodity. The act in which their free consciousness and will materially submit things to their private dominion, is ruled by the subjection of their free consciousness and will to the domination that those same things exert over them, as bearers of the social character of their labor. Their free consciousness and will are the form in which their alienated consciousness is realized. The commodity producer needs to apply the attributes of their human personality, their consciousness and will, as if they were attributes of their commodity. They must act as personifications of their commodity. From the point of view of their participation in social labor, this free producer cannot have more will than that of producing value. For the organization of their social labor they do not count as persons, but as personification of their commodity. Only as such personification they may relate socially, that is, count for the exercise of their general social relation. Thus, we could say that, as far as his person is concerned, the cook who owns the restaurant may be called John Pippin, but from the point of view of the organization of social labor, he had better be recognized as Mister Ravioli. Again, the free consciousness and will of the commodity producers are the concrete form of their consciousness and will alienated in the commodity.

When an individual works they affirm themselves in their generically human being. And this affirmation reaches its full breadth when the control over the determinations of the individual expenditure of the laboring individual's body is under the complete command of their consciousness and will. Therefore, when the commodity producer works, they affirm themselves in their generically human being over and above the slave or the serf, whose individual labor processes are subject to the personal domination of others. But the commodity producer realizes this full affirmation of their human personality only at the expense of negating it in their personal impotence to rule the social determinations of their labor. The domination of these determinations confronts them as a potency alien to their labor, which autonomously belongs to the things which are a product of the realization of their generically human being. This implies that the potencies of their own generic human being are presented to them in an inverted form as the attribute of the social potencies of these things, at whose service they must submit their consciousness and will as free persons.

In order to reproduce their human personality, to affirm themselves as persons, that is, to be able to consume as human beings and so consume the use values which are products of social labor, the commodity producers need to have affirmed themselves as personifications of their commodity beforehand. They need to have produced a social use value which bears value. For example, for a father, giving his children to eat affirms him in the personal attributes of being a father; it concerns his personal necessity. But, in the capitalist mode of production, it is impossible to realize this condition as human person without before having properly acted in the condition of personification of the

commodity: to buy the food for the children, he must have first sold another commodity. A little more informally, we could say that it is not possible to exercise the attributes typical of a “good” person without having before acted as a good personification of the commodity, even if this was only at the necessary minimum. Which, of course, does not imply that the inverse relation has equal necessity: one can be an excellent personification of value but a scum as a person. “He who has money does what he wants”, says the popular saying, clearly recognizing that the free exercise of the will is not an attribute that the person has at their disposal by themselves, but that it is an attribute their materialized general social relation reflects in it. When then commodity producer looks at their commodity, they are not simply seeing the material product of their social labor, not even the material product of the exercise of their free consciousness insofar as it rules by itself the determinations of their individual labor: what they are seeing is the objectified form, exterior to them, which the determination of their consciousness as free individuals has and, therefore, what they are seeing is their own alienated consciousness.

This business of being a person whose free consciousness and will are alienated as social attributes of their own material product certainly does not appear as a condition which merits celebration. However, what does the commodity producer owe their condition as free individual to? They owe it to the fact that they are not subject to any personal dependence in the organization of their individual labor; that is, to the fact that they perform their labor in a private and independent manner. So that the unity of the process of social production and consumption of which they are individual organs, is established through the representation of the socially necessary labor individually expended in a private and independent manner as the value of commodities. If it did not establish itself in this mode, it would need to do it through the relations of direct dependence between persons. Only through these relations, could the producers organize their labor in a directly social manner. In which case, far from being free individuals with respect to one another, the producers would carry in their persons a multitude of relations of mutual subjection. The commodity producers owe their free consciousness and will precisely to the fact that they produce commodities, to the fact that they do not perform their labor in an immediately social manner but in a private and independent manner, to the fact that they produce an object which has the social attribute of confronting them as alien to them and consequently controls them. Therefore, the commodity producers owe their free consciousness and will to their alienated consciousness and will. They are free of any personal servitude because they are the servants of the social character of their product. The free consciousness and will of the individual, the individual free of any personal subjection, is far from being an abstractly natural product. It is only born into history as a specific product of commodity production and, therefore, as the product of the alienated consciousness in

them. Such is the objective nature of human freedom. The commodity producer is the first, and so far the only, free human being in history.

The naturalization of free consciousness,
that is, the fetishism of commodities
Part II
Political economy

5.1. Classical political economy

We now come to the terrain of the science whose immediate object is the indirect social relation that the commodity producers establish through exchange, that is, the terrain which has its object the commodity itself, the form of value borne by the products of social labor, the thing in which the alienated consciousness is objectified. This is none other than the starting point of economic theory. Classical political economy penetrates beyond the immediate appearances presented by the exchangeability of commodities, until discovering that exchange value has human labor as its determination. But it stops its advance in the immediate appearance that labor as the determinant of value presents to it, converting this determination into an empty abstraction, not only void of any historical specificity, but even erasing the materiality of the labor in question –that is, abstract labor. It is impossible, then, for it to see the commodity as the concrete form of the general social relation between individuals who lack direct bonds of personal dependence. With this specificity erased, any general social relation is presented to it inverted in a twofold manner: the subjects of classical political economy are free persons who, as such, assign their capacity for social labor on their own account and at their own risk, but that, at the same time, only perform immediate social labor in spite of their lack of any direct personal bonds between each other. This contradiction in terms crudely manifests itself in the presentation of value – and so, the product of private labor- as if this naturally expressed itself in labor time – and, therefore, there existed an authority with the prerogative to organize all social labor. Then, the necessary form of value and, hence, the determination of money as substantivized expression, is reduced to a question of greater “naturalness” and “obviousness”:

It is more natural, therefore, to estimate its exchangeable value by the quantity of some other commodity than by that of the labour which it can purchase. The greater part of people, too, understand better what is meant by a

quantity of a particular commodity than by a quantity of labour. The one is a plain palpable object; the other an abstract notion, which, though it can be made sufficiently intelligible, is not altogether so natural and obvious. [...] It is more natural and obvious to him [the butcher], therefore, to estimate their value [that of his beef,] by the quantity of money, the commodity for which he immediately exchanges them...¹

Through this mix-up of determinations which are incompatible with each other, classical political economy erases the historical development of the organization of social labor. And just like psychoanalytic theory it resorts to the myth of the “murder of the father” to make the distinctive features of the consciousness alienated in the commodity to appear natural, classical political economy resorts to the myth of the “early and rude state of society which precedes the accumulation of capital” to naturalize the commodity as the product of all human labor:

If among a nation of hunters, for example, it usually costs twice the labour to kill a beaver which it does to kill a deer, one beaver should naturally exchange for or be worth two deer. It is natural that what is usually the produce of two days’ or two hours’ labour, should be worth double of what is usually the produce of one day’s or one hour’s labour.²

A naturalization which is completed with the affirmation that “in the initial stages of society” exchange values were produced utilizing tools which constituted the “capital” which was the property of their producers:

Even in that early state to which Adam Smith refers, some capital, though possibly made and accumulated by the hunter himself, would be necessary to enable him to kill his game.³

In summary, for classical political economy, it is in the nature of the use values which are the products of labor to be exchangeable objects, to possess exchange value. Thus, this attribute has nothing to do with any historically specific social relation but with the assignment of the total labor power of society under the different useful concrete forms of labor carried out by each individual. What is, then, the meaning of this

¹ Smith, Adam (1776), *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, University Of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 52-53.

² Smith, Adam, *ibid.* p.73.

³ Ricardo, David, *Principles of political economy and taxation*, Prometheus Books, 1996, p.25.

naturalization? As soon as the commodity is conceived as the natural form of the product of human labor, the historically specific consciousness of the commodity producer is converted into the natural form of human consciousness. And the first thing that stands out from the consciousness of commodity producers is its condition as a free consciousness. Classical political economy halts at this first appearance: the human being appears to it, by nature, as a subject who bears a consciousness and will which are fully free from any external domination on their free individual subjectivity. Any historical form of social antagonism is thus represented as the confrontation naturally established on an equal footing between one subjectivity and another:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.⁴

And, as the general unity of social production and consumption emerges from the apparently independent action of the independent and private producers as free subjects, classical political economy thinks that, no matter how antagonistic these free subjectivities are between them, their confrontation can only result in the natural harmonic unity of social life:

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. [...]he intends only his own security; [...] he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.⁵

Except, of course, that if these free subjectivities violate their natural determination and ally with others, or they support themselves in a power which is conceived as externally given (the state),⁶ they would, in both cases, anti-naturally sacrifice their full individual liberty.

⁴ Smith, Adam, *ibid.* p.30.

⁵ Smith, Adam, *ibid.* pp. 593-594.

⁶ Smith, Adam, *ibid.*, pp. 97-99.

5.2. Neoclassical economics

If someone thinks that it would be impossible to carry the ignorance about human history beyond the limits reached by classical political economy, they have not yet seen what neoclassical economics is capable of. The neoclassical economic theory backtracks in horror from the point reached by the analysis of classical political economy and stops its own analysis at the most immediate appearance, the utility of commodities. But utility is not only an attribute of the products of human labor whatever the modality in which it is socially organized. It is an attribute of any use value for human life, even if its production requires no social labor whatsoever. It is already here that neoclassical economics tries to hide away from sight that what is at stake in the determination of certain use values as commodities is the material allocation of social labor under its different concrete forms. But this is only the first step.

The next step consists in putting the negation of the result of human productive activity, of labor, as a second determinant of value; this is scarcity. To complete the voiding of content, it transforms labor, from activity, into a thing; or rather, into the negation of a thing. According to neoclassical economics, human life has a natural state, “leisure”, the absence of all productive activity. If the religious consciousness conceives that human life is possible after death, neoclassical economics conceives that human life is possible without human life, that is, without the consumption of use values which are the product of labor. In reality, not only does it conceive human life to be possible without its specific productive activity –labor–, but even without any simply animal productive activity.

Here there is not even an attempt at naturalizing the free consciousness of commodity producers, simply a crass falsification. Such is the vulgarity of neoclassical economics, that it proceeds by conceiving “leisure”, not as the negation of productive activity, but as a thing, as the “good” that human beings possess in their natural state. At last, then, appears labor. But not as activity, not as the bodily expenditure that the human being needs to carry out as the first step in its process of metabolism. On the contrary, for neoclassical theory labor is the renunciation to the consumption of the supposed natural good, the sacrifice of “leisure”:

People work only when they value the return of labor higher than the decrease in satisfaction brought about by the curtailment of leisure.[...] we must view leisure as any other economic good [...] Action always is essentially the exchange of one state of affairs for another state of affairs. [...]

An instance: the isolated hunter who kills an animal for his own consumption; he exchanges leisure and a cartridge for food.⁷

On the basis of this objectification of human productive activity, the social organization of this activity, that is, the allocation of the forces of social labor to the realization of the different useful concrete labors by each individual, is presented as if it pertained the opposite of the organization of human action. It is presented as if it was an allocation of things; this allocation of “resources” in which the object of the organization, that is, human labor, appears posited side by side with the allocation of the means of the production which are its instruments.

Neoclassical economics takes yet another step in the erasure of labor as the activity which determines the process of human consumption as such. It does this by conceiving the production of means of production as an “abstention” of consumption, as a “waiting” to consume:

... the spinning is the product of labour of many kinds, and of *waiting*.⁸

In the first place, the means of production are an immediate object of social consumption. It is only that it is not the consumption of the individual, but productive consumption, which results in the use values whose material form makes them apt for human individual consumption. Even if the owners of the means of production believed in neoclassical theory to the letter and resolved to “wait” in order to consume them, to feast on them, they would find they have highly indigestible material forms; for example, that of a lump of iron or cyanide. In which case, it would be a question of pure humanity to free them from such risk, by eliminating their private property over them.

Secondly, animal life consists in individually consuming those useful objects which are to be found in the medium. Insofar as the human being individually consumes the use values that he or she finds in their surroundings, for example, when they breathe normally on the earth’s surface, their life process does not distinguish itself from that of any other animal species. But, no matter how indispensable these consumptions are, human life differentiates itself as a distinct genus with respect to the life of animal species because it supports itself in the multiplicity of individual consumption of use values which are the product of labor.

The asthmatic who is on medication, or the individual who is in an air-conditioned ambient, do not breathe as animals; their breathing is the product of human labor. And

⁷ von Mises, Ludwig, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, Ludwig von Mises Institute, 3rd edition, 2010, pp. 132, 195.

⁸ Marshall, Alfred, *Principles of Economics*, Cosimo Classics, 8th edition 2009, p.487.

human labor supports itself on productive consumption of means of production which human labor has produced previously. In their natural life process, cattle individually consume grass seeds that it finds in the fields. In their natural life process, the human being does not consume “grass”; it sows a seed, it harvests its fruits, grinds them, kneads them, cooks them and individually consumes bread. Therefore, the process of individual consumption of bread contains in itself the process of production of ovens, kneading machines, mills, reapers, sowing machines, which, in turn, and without going further, carry in themselves the process of production of iron, bricks, etc.

When human society spends its labor power in producing means of production, it is not waiting to consume. It is taking its first necessary step in the realization of the process of human metabolism as such. When the human beings produce plows, they are not waiting to consume. They are taking the first step in their consumption process of bread and, therefore, in the determination of themselves as a genus generically distinct with respect to the animal species.

In contrast, neoclassical economics pretends to make the commodity producers believe that human life is possible without the production of means of production: supposing that a generalized anxiety attack to “consume now” took place, human life would continue its course with no vicissitudes other than the disappearance of the production of means of production. Could it be that the neoclassical theoreticians have a secret attraction to live idly and eat grass? Of course, if for the ordinary commodity producer value appears as a natural attribute of commodities, for the wise neoclassical academics who award the Nobel Prize in Economics it appears that, to acquire a scientific consciousness of the historical development of the economic forms of society, it is enough to watch “The Flintstones” on T.V.: according to the Nobel Prize Paul Samuelson,

Rude economies [the primitive community] [...] tend to be high interest states, in which short-time methods are used precisely because of the very "scarcity of time."⁹

Yes, without doubt, interest is paid with “stone-dollars”.

Thanks to the naturalization of the commodity, neoclassical economics makes an abstraction out of the free consciousness of commodity producers and represents it the natural form of human consciousness. But it does not even concern a free consciousness

⁹ Samuelson, Paul, “Understanding the Marxian Notion of Exploitation: A Summary of the So-Called Transformation problem Between Marxian values and competitive prices”, *Journal of Economic Literature*, June, Volume IX, Number2, 1971, p. 401.

which puts itself in relation with others equal to it anymore. Its relation is with useful and scarce things in its own interior, in the process of realizing its full satisfaction:

As all economists since Jevons have known, the optimum conditions of exchange depend only on intrapersonal, not interpersonal comparisons of utility.¹⁰

This maximization of utility through individual free choice cannot but result in the social harmony defined as the “optimal welfare”, in which nobody can improve their level of free satisfaction without the diminution of that of another:

We will say that the members of a collectivity enjoy *maximum ophelimity* in a certain position when [...] any small displacement in departing from that position necessarily has the effect of increasing the ophelimity which certain individuals enjoy, and decreasing that which others enjoy, of being agreeable to some, and disagreeable to others.¹¹

Classical political economy naturalized social antagonism by presenting it as the expression of the free exercise of natural subjectivity, even though it could only result in natural social harmony. In neoclassical economics, social antagonism appears represented as a directly anti-natural phenomenon. Every historical form of social antagonism, and specifically that of the capitalist mode of production, is conceived as the anti-natural attempt of a subjectivity to meddle in the free exercise of another in their relation to things. Once more, neoclassical economics expunges what is evident even for the vulgar consciousness.

Classical political economy is the expression of the scientific advance of the free consciousness as concrete form of alienated consciousness in the way to discover, under the appearance of being an abstractly free consciousness, its own alienation. But it is such an advance only to the point of discovering human labor as the substance which determines the exchangeability of commodities. Once this discovery is made, two roads open before her. The first consists in keeping on advancing scientifically, confronting the subordination of the consciousness and will of the commodity producers with respect to the social attributes of the material product of their own conscious and willful action. For which it is necessary to confront the form of value in which said alienation is objectified, recognizing in it the general social relation between private and independent

¹⁰ Blaug, Mark, *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 586.

¹¹ Pareto, Vilfredo (1906), *Manual of Political Economy*, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971, p. 261.

producers, thus taking the first step in the historical character of the capitalist mode of production. Instead, classical political economy follows the other possible road, which precisely determines as political economy proper. Rather than discovering the historical specificity of the labor which produces commodities, it converts this specificity into a natural determination of human labor. Rather than going beyond the fetishism of commodities, it reproduces it as the product of scientific consciousness itself. Its own scientific method, logical representation, gives it license to do so: it is enough for it to interrupt the analysis and introduce concepts such as, for example, the “primate and rude state of society”, or money as the practical way to resolve the “difficulties” of computing exchange value in labor time. Thus, void of their concrete determinations, labor, money, etc., are reduced to any number of other abstractions. In brief, classical political economy is the form in which a concrete social necessity is realized: that of scientifically advancing in the discovery of the free consciousness as concrete form of the alienated consciousness, reproducing at the same time this appearance (i.e. the fetishism of commodities) as a product of objective cognition.

Neoclassical economics is also a theoretical representation. But, here, the utilization of the constructive logical structure does not have the double purpose still present in the classical theory. It is no longer about advancing in the discovery of the concrete determinations of the organization of social labor in the capitalist mode of production, to the extent that this advance does not transcend the appearance of being the product of a consciousness which advances in the development of its abstract freedom. It is about falling back to the most immediate appearances of the determinations of the commodity as general social relation. Even more, it is about manipulating determinations which content is directly accessible to vulgar knowledge, to the point of presenting them inverted as if the result of this manipulation was the true immediate appearance. The objective of this retrogression and manipulation is to construct a representation which uproots the organization of human productive activity as the content of the economic determinations to conceive the latter as relations between things. The objective of neoclassical economics is to produce a fully alienated consciousness under the appearance of having been the product of a cognition which has followed the road of the consciousness apt to advance in the development of its freedom by objectively knowing its determinations, that is, an objective consciousness.

Therefore, neoclassical economics is the most alienated expression of consciousness as an attribute of the commodity, since, just as it nourishes the appearance of being a fully free consciousness insofar as it is the product of a formally scientific cognition, as the same time it intentionally produces itself as a consciousness which embraces the fetishism of the commodity further than vulgar consciousness itself:

Thus any value in exchange, once established, partakes of the character of a natural phenomenon, natural in its origins, natural in its manifestations and natural in essence. If wheat and silver have *any value at all*, it is because they are scarce, that is, useful and limited in quantity—both of these conditions being natural.¹²

Its mathematical complexity is nothing but the mask of apparent scientific complexity and objectivity behind which it pretends to conceal its purely ideological content as the most developed expression of the consciousness which cultivates its own alienation. Its immanent contradiction between being an apparently free consciousness by supporting itself in a formally objective method and utilizing this method to deepen its own alienation, bursts in the juggling which it needs to resort to in order to sustain the appearance of its logical coherence.

5.3. Neo-Ricardian political economy

Classical political economy and neoclassical economics are the scientific forms with which the fetishist consciousness of the commodity producer confronts the simplest concrete form presented by his or her general social relation, the commodity. For the former, it is a natural attribute of use values which are the product of human labor for them to have exchange value, to be exchangeable objects. For the latter, having exchange value is a natural attribute of useful and scarce objects. Contrary to this, the critique of political economy goes beyond these appearances when it advances reproducing, by way of thought, the necessity which determines commodities as the material product which, at the same time, is the immediate bearer of the organization of social production and consumption when social labor is performed in a private and independent manner. And only because it followed this path was it able to bring forth the fetishist character of economic theory. What is, then, the character of “critical political economy”?

To begin with, there is Neo-Ricardian critical political economy. Its starkest version with regard to the specificity of commodity-producing labor is offered by Robinson:

Whatever inward meaning the conception of value may have for a student of Hegel, to a modern English reader it is purely a matter of definition. The value of a commodity consists of the labour-time required to produce it, including

¹² Walras, Leon, *Elements of Pure Economics: Or, the Theory of Social Wealth*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 69.

the labour-time required by subsidiary commodities which enter into its production.¹³

Robinson believes that the real materiality of abstract labor, and the real allocation of this materiality under its different useful concrete forms when social labor is performed in a private and independent manner, has nothing more than the immaterial and fantastical existence of a “concept”. With which she frees herself of them, to go back to the appearance in which Ricardo had halted: if value is nothing more than labor time *sans phrase*, it is in the nature of all the products of labor to be exchangeable.

Sraffa

Sraffa constructs the most sophisticated Neo-Ricardian version. He takes, as starting point, a technical matrix which represents the unity of social production and consumption through its material elements. That is, it is an input-output matrix formed by the totality of means of production and means of life which constitute the unity of a cycle of the process of social metabolism:

Let us consider an extremely simple society which produces just enough to maintain itself. Commodities are produced by separate industries and are maintained for one another at a market held after the harvest.

...There is a unique set of exchange-values which if adopted by the market restores the original distribution of the products and makes it possible for the process to be repeated; such values spring directly from the methods of production.¹⁴

This is the starting point where the title of the work derives from, production of commodities by means of commodities. The enunciation of the self-reproduction as a starting point itself, makes it a tautological consequence that said “exchange-values” are those adopted by the market. Then, Sraffa performs what he calls a “reduction to dated quantities of labour”:¹⁵ he takes each element of the matrix and decomposes it into the quantity of labor directly necessary to produce it, whereby the means of production utilized in its production are left as a residual. A residual which is, in turn, decomposed in the same manner; he continues thus one after another, until every element of the

¹³ Robinson, Joan (1966), *An Essay on Marxian Economics*, 3rd edition, London, Macmillan, p.15.

¹⁴ Sraffa, Piero, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities: Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.3.

¹⁵ Sraffa, Piero, *ibid.* p.34.

technical matrix is replaced by the corresponding quantity of labor. Whence the relations of proportion initially established between the different material elements are represented as relations of proportion between quantities of labor. He thus concludes:

The labour terms can be regarded as the constituent elements of the price of a commodity.¹⁶

Therefore, for Sraffa, the material unity of social production and consumption determines the value of commodities. But, how is such material unity determined then? Wherever social labor is performed in a private and independent manner, the material unity of social production and consumption is not determined a priori. It only results from the a posteriori, private and independent allocation of each portion of total labor power of society to the realization of the different concrete labors whose products –on condition of being socially useful for the other private and independent individuals- are manifested as social use values when the abstract labor materialized in them is represented as the capacity of these use values to relate with each other in exchange. In commodity-producing society, the unity of social production and consumption, through which the life of society is produced, is not determined in a direct manner. It is realized in said indirect manner. In order for the unity to be able to establish itself a priori, labor would have to be organized in a socially direct manner. But, in that case, social labor would manifest itself as such at the very moment in which it is realized, with no need to be represented, once materialized, as the value of commodities which rules the unity of social production and consumption. Sraffa confuses private labor with directly social labor. He starts by putting the latter in place of the former, to later represent it (private labor) as the natural form of social labor.

The commodities of Sraffa are not the product of private labor but of directly social labor, of a labor organized in a direct manner by a society with the express objective, from the start, to produce “just enough to maintain itself”. So far from private is the labor which produces the commodities of Sraffa, that in his society of supposed commodity producers it is impossible that any other expenditure of labor resulted in an object lacking social use value and, therefore, value. Thus, his model consecrates the apologetic law of Say, pertaining to the impossibility of the divorce between production and consumption in the capitalist mode of production: every supply creates its own demand. If one granted the commodities of Sraffa in the title of the book the benefit of the doubt (of actually being commodities), they certainly are no longer such from the first sentence of the text onwards. Again, the products of human labor are conceived as exchangeable by nature. Again, free consciousness is naturalized, abstracting it from its

¹⁶ Sraffa, Piero, *ibid.* p.37.

specific historical determination as the necessary concrete form of the consciousness alienated in the commodity.