

# **From the negation of the materiality of abstract labor to the abstraction of the revolutionary subject's free will. The case of Michael Heinrich\***

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- *Heinrich (The New Reading of Marx)*

According to Heinrich:

Every act of labor whose product (which can also be a service) is exchanged produces value.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, which may initially appear as a simplification, is the first step in Heinrich's shift towards the inversion of the substance and the form of value. According to him, it's not that labor that produces commodities possesses a socially specific attribute that determines them as values, that is, as bearers of the anti-natural ability to relate to each other in exchange. Instead, for Heinrich, it is the fact that the products of labor are exchanged that determines the latter as a producer of value. The inverted determination of value-producing labor by the fact that its products are exchanged, is then followed by the reduction of value-producing labor to an abstract labor, which is abstracted from its historically specific determination by the private form that social labor takes in the capitalist mode of production. And as is customary, Heinrich makes this abstraction of the abstract labor that produces value by invoking the name of Marx:

Marx therefore speaks of value-producing labor as 'abstract labor.'<sup>2</sup>

Heinrich thus erases the fact that when labor is organized in a directly social manner, the general productive expenditure of the human body, or in other words, abstract human labor, does not produce value. This is precisely why he takes the first step in the inversion: if, at the starting point, labor owes its status as a producer of value to the fact that its products are exchanged,

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\* Taken from *Conocer el capital hoy. Usar críticamente "El Capital"*, Vol. 1: 'La mercancía, o la conciencia libre como forma de la conciencia enajenada' (*Knowing Capital Today, Using "Capital" Critically*, Vol. 1: 'The commodity, that is, free consciousness as the form of alienated consciousness')

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich, Michael, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2012, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

followed by the idea that abstract labor produces value, this erases the possibility of there being abstract labor that does not produce value. Furthermore, the apparent simplicity of Heinrich's phrase contains another step in the erasure of the materiality of abstract labor and its specific social determination as a producer of value by the private character of labor:

Marx therefore describes abstract labor as the “value-forming substance” or as the “substance of value.” The “substance of value” as a figure of speech has frequently been understood in a quasi-physical, “substantialist” manner: the worker has expended a specific quantity of abstract labor and this quantity exists within the individual commodity and turns the isolated article into an object of value.<sup>3</sup>

Not only has the analysis unfolded to discover the specificity of value-producing labor been reduced to a mere “Marx speaks of”, but the discovery of socially necessary abstract labor materialized privately and independently in its product as the “substance of value” is degraded to the status of a mere rhetorical “figure of speech.” In this way, Heinrich turns the substance of value into a purely ideal existence, a pure concept:

Abstract labor is not visible, only a particular concrete labor is visible, just as the concept of 'tree' isn't visible...<sup>4</sup>

Heinrich denies the visibility of a materiality that is immediately visible: the materiality of the fact that when a human being works, they are productively expending their body, regardless of the specific form in which they do so, and materializing that expenditure in their product, whatever it may be. Moreover, when it comes to simple commodity producers, each of them has full control over this expenditure of their body, performing it privately and independently. Thus, his conception of abstract labor, which started by inverting the determination of its historical specificity as a producer of value, closes its inverted circle, presenting the materiality of abstract labor as devoid of its historical specificity due to the private form of social labor, as an abstract mental construct, impotent to account for the historically specific determination of value:

The reduction of various types of labor to labor in a physiological sense, however, is a purely mental abstraction, to which any kind of labor can be subjected, regardless of whether it produces a commodity. Furthermore, this formulation suggests that abstract labor has a completely non-social, natural foundation, and has therefore accordingly provoked “naturalistic” interpretations of abstract labor. [...] Abstract labor, on the other hand, cannot be “expended” at all.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 50.

In summary, where Marx literally expounds his discovery regarding the materiality of abstract labor as the productive physiological expenditure of any human body under any concrete form, common to all forms of society,<sup>6</sup> but that only when performed privately and independently, its materialization in the product represents the latter's attribute to socially relate its producers,<sup>7</sup> Heinrich believes he sees "naturalistic interpretations" of a "concept," resulting from a "purely mental abstraction." The entire secret of the apparent analysis through which Heinrich arrives at this erasure of the substance of value was already present in the initial inversion of that analysis, where labor appeared to owe its status as a producer of value to the fact that its product was exchanged.

Once he has emptied value of its substance, Heinrich aims to present this same substance as emerging from the form of value, that is, from exchange value.

Abstract labor is a *relation of social validation (Geltungsverhältnis)* that is constituted in exchange. In exchange, the concrete acts of expended labor *count* as a particular quantum of value-constituting abstract labor, or are *valid* as a specific quantum of abstract labor, and therefore as an element of the total labor of society.<sup>8</sup>

In light of this conception of abstract labor, the immediate question arises: What is the norm that governs this "relation of social validation", that is, what is the necessity which is realized by taking form in it? In other words, why should the product of a certain concrete labor normally be validated as equivalent to x amount of "abstract labor" and not some other amount? Or, what determines that the product of x hours of concrete labor is normally validated as equivalent to the product of y hours of another concrete labor, insofar as they are "abstract labor"? And, in a more general sense, on what qualitative basis is said "social validation" determined quantitatively? Because, in the real world, exchange still takes the form of a quantitative relationship, the existence

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<sup>6</sup> In Marx's original terms:

The mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determinants of value. For in the first place, however varied the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities, it is a physiological fact that they are functions of the human organism, and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or its form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs. (Marx, Karl, *Capital, Volume 1*, London: Penguin Books, 1982, p. 164)

<sup>7</sup> Again, in Marx's terms:

Something which is only valid for this particular form of production, the production of commodities, namely the fact that the specific social character of private labours carried on independently of each other consists in their equality as human labour, and, in the product, assumes the form of the existence of value, ... (Marx, Karl, op. cit., p. 167)

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

and commensurability of which presupposes the existence of a common quality in both poles of the relationship.<sup>9</sup> Let's examine it:

Value-objectivity (*Wertgegenstandlichkeit*) is not possessed by commodities as objectifications of concrete labor, but rather as objectifications of abstract labor. However, if as we just outlined, abstract labor is a relation of social validation existing only in exchange (where privately expended labor counts as value-constituting, abstract labor) then value also first exists in exchange. What's more, value is not at all a property that an individual thing possesses in and of itself. The substance of value, that constitutes the foundation of this objectivity, is not inherent to individual commodities, but is bestowed *mutually* in the act of exchange.<sup>10</sup>

Heinrich's response skips from the sheer material heterogeneity of concrete labor to the private form in which social labor is organized. This form lacks inherent materiality, as is evident. It leads to an "abstract labor" that, thanks to the leap taken along the way, has shed its materiality to become an abstractly conceptual existence. This existence is entirely devoid of a substance that can be manifested in exchange, since it now turns out that exchange itself generates it.

Private labor is a way of organizing social labor, that is, assigning the materiality of the total labor capacity of society to the various specific and useful forms of labor to be physically carried out by each productive member of society. Without a doubt, this historically specific form of making such an allocation operates by determining the material forms through which social labor is executed. It does so by giving each producer full control over their individual labor and depriving them of any control over its social character. However, this fact does not change in the slightest that the materiality of labor is irreducible to the social form of its organization. Therefore, invoking "private labor" does not resolve the question that, in the equality relationship between quantities of qualitatively distinct use-values, there must be an underlying common quality of the labor privately materialized in them, and that this quality is alien to the heterogeneity of concrete labor.

It is then that Heinrich attempts to evade the issue by turning it upside down: it's not that the exchange reveals that both poles of the relationship possess the same property in equal quantity, but that the realization of the exchange relationship establishes a quantitative proportion abstracted from all qualitative content, resulting in the existence of a common quality. In other words, according to Heinrich, it's not that the exchange relationship reveals that commodities have an attribute that has allowed them to enter it, but that commodities enter exchange devoid of attributes

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<sup>9</sup> It pertains a property inherent to the thing and the necessity that this property carries within itself, by its very determination, to manifest itself in a relative form:

However, the properties of a thing do not arise from its relations to other things, they are, on the contrary, merely activated by such relations. (Marx, Karl, op. cit., p. 149)

<sup>10</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

and emerge from it with the attribute of being “values,” whereas the labor that produced them emerges with the attribute of being “abstract.”

On this basis, Heinrich takes one step further in denying abstract socially necessary labor which is privately and independently embodied in its product as the substance that constitutes the qualitative foundation that is objectified in the relationship of equality that takes form in exchange. He inverts the former as if it were emerging from the very existence of that exchange, so that the determination of value is posited on its necessary form of exchange value:

Only labor-time expended under the average existing conditions of production as well as for the satisfaction of monetary social demand constitutes value.<sup>11</sup>

Even the mere reference to “labor time expended under average production conditions” corresponding to a certain type of commodity reveals the erasure of the material quality of labor that Heinrich has had to resort to in order to reduce it to the abstraction of its pure social quality as “private labor.” The reference to different production techniques converging to form an average quantity of labor spent implies the coexistence of different forms of concrete labor applied to produce the same type of use value. Therefore, the determination of the average amount in question requires the existence of a common quality, not just among different branches but within each of them. The expenditure of human labor power in general, that is, the materiality of socially necessary abstract labor performed privately, sneaks into Heinrich's determination of the exchangeability of commodities, no matter how much he tries to expel it to the realm of concepts.

However, now, even the determination of the “socially necessary” character itself suffers the consequences of denying the determination of the substance of value by the materiality of privately and independently performed abstract labor. It is no longer a matter of how the private allocation of the capacity to perform social labor gives each producer full control over their individual concrete labor at the expense of having no control over the determination of their product as socially useful or useless. As a result, the product of socially necessary labor performed privately can only acquire that condition at the very moment when labor is materializing in it, that is, at the very moment of its production. But the fact of possessing such an attribute, that is, being a commodity, can only manifest itself when that product proves to be a bearer of it by entering into an exchange relationship with another commodity in quantities of whose body it expresses its value, meaning the latter functions as its equivalent. Therefore, the socially necessary character of a certain amount of privately materialized abstract labor will always manifest itself as such in circulation, being confronted as a counterpart with a social need capable of being represented through that equivalent. Correspondingly, the socially useless character of privately materialized abstract labor will manifest its condition as such when attempting to enter into an exchange relationship and being unable to do so because it lacks the necessary attribute. It is the fact that social labor is performed privately which determines that the unity between production and social consumption can only be established in this indirect manner, after production has been completed.

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<sup>11</sup> Heinrich, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

Consequently, this indirect unity takes the form of the relationship between the supply and demand for these commodities in circulation. Once again, it is the substance of value that determines the necessity of its form.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as Heinrich denies the substance of value in order to reduce it to a “social validation” that occurs in circulation, the socially necessary character of value-producing abstract labor is inverted under the form of “*as well as* for the satisfaction of monetary social demand,” which determines the extent of that validation. And once again, the form appears inverted as determining the necessity of the substance. From this inverted perspective, it would be necessary to first understand what money is and what demand is to explain what value is.

From the same inversion, Heinrich subsequently argues that in determining the value of a commodity, the relationship between its supply and demand plays a role. This implies that under any circumstances, commodities are always sold at their value. It also implies, therefore, the impossibility of the existence of a substance of value that determines the exchangeability of a commodity, except for the magnitude of its “social validation” by the very equality established in exchange:

To what extent the privately expended labor was actually necessary to satisfy demand depends on the one hand upon the amount of this demand and on the other hand upon the volume of production of other producers—both of which first become apparent in exchange.<sup>13</sup>

The analysis of this determination requires going beyond the question of the substance of value and its necessary form as exchange value, to advance in the unfolding of its concrete movement in circulation. This implies that we must proceed by reproducing on our own the development that Marx presents in the third chapter of ‘Capital’ regarding the function of money as a means of circulation. Having done this, our exposition is confined here to the specific determination in question.

Heinrich considers that to back up his assertion, it is sufficient to present a quote from Marx. Let’s take this same quote as the starting point for our analysis. Therefore, we transcribe it with greater extension than the portion quoted by Heinrich:

We suppose him to have spent on his product only the average socially necessary quantity of labour-time. The price of the commodity, therefore, is merely the money-name of the quantity of social labour objectified in it. [...] Let us suppose, finally, that every piece

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<sup>12</sup> ‘The exchange or sale of commodities at their value is the rational, natural law of the equilibrium between them ; this is the basis on which divergences have to be explained, and not the converse, i.e. the law of equilibrium should not be derived from contemplating the divergences. ... The real inner laws of capitalist production clearly cannot be explained in terms of the interaction of demand and supply [...] since these laws are realized in their pure form only when demand and supply cease to operate, i.e. when they coincide.’ (Marx, Karl, *Capital, Volume 3*, London: Penguin Books, pp. 289 and 291)

<sup>13</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

of linen on the market contains nothing but socially necessary labour time. In spite of this, all these pieces taken as a whole may contain superfluously expended labour-time. If the market cannot stomach the whole quantity at the normal price [...], this proves that too great a portion of the total social labour-time has been expended in the form of weaving. The effect is the same as if each individual weaver had expended more labour-time on his particular product than was socially necessary. As the German proverb has it: caught together, hung together. All the linen on the market counts as one single article of commerce, and each piece of linen is only an aliquot part of it. And in fact the value of each single yard is also nothing but the materialization of the same socially determined quantity of homogeneous human labour. ... The division of labour converts the product of labour into a commodity, and thereby makes necessary its conversion into money. At the same time, it makes it a matter of chance whether this transubstantiation succeeds or not. Here, however, we have to look at the phenomenon in its pure shape, and must therefore assume it has proceeded normally. In any case, if the process is to take place at all, i.e. if the commodity is not impossible to sell, a change of form must always occur, although there may be an abnormal loss or accretion of substance - that is, of the magnitude of value.<sup>14</sup>

The normality that governs the indirect unity between the social production and consumption of a commodity corresponds to the point at which its producers, collectively, have privately applied a total amount of abstract labor that puts them in a position to dispose of the product of the same amount of abstract labor materialized privately by other producers under the concrete forms from which the commodities that satisfy the needs of the former result. Consequently, the key regarding the question of whether or not the imbalance between supply and demand intervenes in the determination of the value of commodities lies in discovering if, when the former exceeds the latter, the substance of value which is abnormally suppressed in circulation has vanished without a trace. In the inverse case, the key lies in discovering the source of the substance of value which is abnormally added in circulation.

Let's assume that the abstract socially necessary labor required to produce one unit of commodity A is 10 hours, a value substance expressed as \$10, and that the solvent demand - that is, the social need capable of being represented by value - corresponding to this value is 100 units. However, let's assume that the producers of A have produced 110 units, meaning that instead of applying the 1000 hours of socially necessary abstract labor, they have applied 1100 hours. Let's assume that for the solvent demand to expand and reach this quantity, each unit must be sold for \$9. Finally, let's assume that all buyers of commodity A have sold their own commodities for their value, so they have received \$1 for the product of each hour of socially necessary abstract labor they have performed.

When they meet their buyers in circulation, the sellers of A deliver the product of 1100 hours of socially necessary labor, but only receive \$990. They have contributed the product of those 1100 hours of socially necessary abstract labor to social consumption but can only withdraw for

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<sup>14</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital, Volume 1*, op. cit., pp. 201-203.

themselves the product of 990 hours of the same labor. Indeed, from their point of view, 110 hours of socially necessary abstract labor, or value substance, have vanished.

But let's look at the same situation from the buyers' point of view. They have contributed the product of 990 hours of socially necessary abstract labor to social consumption, but have taken from the market the product of 1100 hours of the same labor. In the indirect unity between production and social consumption, the entire product of the 2090 hours of privately performed socially necessary abstract labor has passed into the sphere of social consumption. However, precisely because of the private manner in which this labor has materialized in its product under the respective concrete forms, some producers have applied 1100 hours of their labor to produce for social consumption and received the product of 990 hours of socially necessary labor, while others have contributed to social consumption the product of 990 hours of socially necessary labor and received that of 1100 hours. Far from simply vanishing in circulation, the portion of the value substance in question has been appropriated by those who bought the commodities in which it was materialized by paying below their value.

Let's consider the inverse case. Suppose the producers of commodity A have only produced 90 units and, therefore, applied 900 hours of socially necessary abstract labor. Suppose that for the normal solvent demand to contract to this quantity, each unit must be sold for \$11. Let's continue assuming that all buyers of A have sold their own commodities for their value. Now, the sellers of A deliver the product of 900 hours of socially necessary labor, but receive \$990. They have contributed to social consumption the product of 900 hours of socially necessary abstract labor but withdraw for their own consumption the product of 990 hours of equal labor. From their point of view, the exchange has added 90 hours of socially necessary abstract labor, or in other words, value substance to their product, without them having to lift a finger beyond what is normal for them. But let's place ourselves on the other side of the counter. The buyers of A have contributed the product of 990 hours of socially necessary abstract labor to social consumption, but have only taken from the market the product of 900 hours of equal labor. In the indirect unity between production and social consumption, all the product of the 1890 hours of socially necessary abstract labor carried out privately has been absorbed by social consumption. But while some producers have brought the product of 900 hours of that labor to this consumption and disposed of the product of 990 hours for themselves, others have found themselves in the opposite situation. Far from simply adding new value substance to commodity A in circulation, the portion in question has been originally produced by the socially necessary abstract labor of those who then lost it in favor of the producers of A, by buying it and paying above its value.

But although price, being the exponent of the magnitude of a commodity's value, is the exponent of its exchange ratio with money, it does not follow that the exponent of this exchange-ratio is necessarily the exponent of the magnitude of the commodity's value.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital, Volume 1*, op. cit., p. 196.



No matter how much the prices at which commodities are exchanged may differ from their values, in circulation, no more or less value substance changes hands than what enters it. As the substance of value, abstract labor is not a "validation relationship" that arises in exchange, nor does the relationship between supply and demand enter into its determination:

It becomes plain that it is not the exchange of commodities which regulates the magnitude of their values, but rather the reverse, the magnitude of the value of commodities which regulates the proportion in which they exchange.<sup>16</sup>

The absurdity of pretending that the relationship between supply and demand intervenes in the determination of value is evident, even by simply considering that if it did, commodities would always appear to be sold and bought at their value. In which case, there would never be any deviation from normalcy because it would be a normalcy lacking determination, except for being simply fluctuating at the rhythm of said relationship. Even the average of these "values" would appear to have no necessity other than chance, since if value were that abstract "validation relationship" lacking all substance preexisting the exchange itself, supply and demand would always emerge equal from that same exchange. Thus, producers of commodities would have no way of recognizing whether their action as private individual organs of the process of social metabolism should be modified in one direction or another around a norm.

Curiously, the "new reading of Marx" converges towards the most vulgar neoclassical economics in attributing to the interplay between supply and demand the capacity to determine value. And, like it, it can only be sustained upon its own contradictions. As we have already seen, Heinrich has explicitly told us that:

However, if as we just outlined, abstract labor is a relation of social validation existing only in exchange (where privately expended labor counts as value-constituting, abstract labor) then value also first exists in exchange.<sup>17</sup>

But now he reprimands us for falling into the 'nonsense' of believing him, because it turns out that the very value and, by logical consequence, the 'abstract labor that constitutes value,' already exist in production, an activity that obviously precedes the circulation where the exchange occurs:

However, even the question as to whether value and the magnitude of value are determined in the sphere of production or in the sphere of circulation (the sphere of buying and selling) is the result of a fatal reduction. Value isn't just "there" after being "produced" someplace. ... But value isn't a thing like the bread roll, but rather a social relationship that *appears as a tangible characteristic* of a thing. The social relationship

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<sup>16</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital, Volume 1*, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

that is expressed in value and the magnitude of value is constituted in production *and* circulation, so that the “either/or” question is senseless.<sup>18</sup>

Far from being a materialized social relationship, which as such takes the form of a spectral materiality, what Heinrich presents to us is a kind of production process capable of going back to the future, since it is governed by a value that does not yet exist. Thus, value can go from being "a social relation that appears as a tangible characteristic of a thing" to being the expression of a social relation, that is, something which is not the social relation itself in its entirety, while this social relation conveniently remains with its specificity wholly undefined, and even unnamed. Such ambiguity allows it to be everywhere, even in those places where this same conception asserts that it cannot be.

We have already seen Rubin's reaction to Marx's exposition in *Capital* regarding abstract labor as the generic physiological expenditure of human body applied productively, which only when materialized privately and independently in its product under a socially useful concrete form and under normal conditions, is represented as the historically specific purely social attribute of said product, as the value of commodities. Where Marx discovers this simplest and most fundamental determination of the general social relation in the capitalist mode of production, Rubin sees an incoherent writer who literally wrote sentences incompatible with his own theory of value. And even someone who intellectually regressed from his own previous work, the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "where Marx developed his theory more completely." Heinrich not only shares Rubin's first perspective, but also shows himself determined to fuel the second. Thus, Heinrich sees a Marx whose knowledge of value and its form has reached "emphatic clarity" when writing a draft in preparation for the second edition of *Capital*, only to fall back and end up falling into the abominable assertion, typical of "naturalistic interpretations," of the physiological character of abstract labor in the published text. As he puts it:

The substance of value, that constitutes the foundation of this objectivity, is not inherent to individual commodities, but is bestowed *mutually* in the act of exchange. The most emphatic statement on this by Marx can be found in his revised manuscript for the first edition. There he states that when a coat is exchanged for linen, then both are “reduced to an objectification of human labor per se.” However, it should not be forgotten that “*none of both is in and of itself value-objectivity* [Wertgegenstandlichkeit], they are this only insofar as that this objectivity is commonly held by them. Outside of their relationship with each other—the relationship in which they are equalized—neither coat nor linen possess value-objectivity or objectivity as congelations of human labor per se.” (MEGA, 2.6:30).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 53.

To begin with, the existence of a substance and its expression or objectification are not synonymous. Everyone knows that thought is the substance that is socially objectified in words when one speaks, even though there may be those who seem to speak without thinking. That is, thought exists *per se*, but due to its qualitative determination, it cannot manifest itself on its own, it needs to be expressed as the substance that takes form in words.

But Heinrich goes beyond the identification between substance and objectification. What he does is distort the flow of Marx's text. He attributes to Marx the assertion that it is through exchange, that the coat and the linen are "reduced to an objectification of human labor *per se*". But Marx explicitly reaches that point in his draft through the exposition of the process of *analysis* of the immediate manifestation of the exchange relation. And it is through this process of analysis that he discovers abstract labor as the substance of value. His discovery of the latter, therefore, runs in the opposite direction to the process of unfolding its necessary form as exchange value, that is, opposite to the way Heinrich seeks to present it:

Commodities acquire *value expression* (value form) only in *relation* to one - other. [...] Where does this come from? How does this peculiarity, common to all forms of value of the commodity, arise from the concept of value? We originally found the *concept of value* of commodities as follows: We took an exchange relation like *1 coat = 20 yards of linen*. We said: the coat and linen express something in *common* here [...] This same something is not their use-values or material usefulness [...] In their equation it is abstracted. It is, therefore, their character as *products of labor*. [...] As products of labor, they are the same insofar as they are products of the same labor, i.e. the coat, like the linen, is regarded *as a mere objectification of human labor per se*. This is their *value*. Thus, the coat and linen as values, each one for itself, were reduced to the *objectification of human labor per se*.<sup>20</sup>

From the "none of both..." onwards, what follows in the quote presented by Heinrich, Marx clearly refers to the objectification or necessary expression of value in the form of exchange value, not to the determination of its substance as the objectification of abstract human labor. It is worth noting that because socially necessary abstract labor, which constitutes the substance of value of a commodity, is performed privately and independently, no commodity can present its own body as the objectification of its own value. The value of a commodity can only manifest itself by being objectified in quantities of the use-value of another kind of commodity, thus taking its specific form of exchange value.

But Heinrich adds a second quote from the same draft that he considers decisive:

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<sup>20</sup> Marx, Karl, «Ergänzungen und Veränderungen zum ersten Band des "Kapitals"», in *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)*, Volume 6, Division 2, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1987, pp. 29-30, (JIC translation).

As a consequence, “a product of labor, considered in isolation, is not value, nor is it a commodity. It only becomes value in its unity with another product of labor.” (MEGA, 2.6:31).<sup>21</sup>

However, the apparent forcefulness of the quote has no more support than the selective excerpting of Marx's text (Heinrich's excerpting is underlined):

*The value form of the commodity as given in the value relation of different commodities.*

1) The production of the materializations of labor as values reduces them to expressions of the *same unity*, (to expressions that which they have in common, expressions of that what is the same in them) to *human labor per se* as their *common substance*. This includes: *relation* to human labor as a unity, relation of the commodities to each other, as expressions of the *same unit*. *Or the relation of the products of labor to each other as expressions of this same unity is their value-being*. And it is only through this relationship that mere *products of labor* become useful objects – *commodities*. Therefore, a product of labor, considered in isolation, is not value, nor is it a commodity. It only becomes value in its unity with another product of labor, or in the proportion within which the different products of labor, as crystals of the same unit, human labor, are equated with each other. It follows, therefore, because the *value* of commodities is nothing but their *relation to labor* as their common substance, or their *relation to each other* as an expression of this common substance, that this value of a commodity can also only appear in the *value relation* in which it relates to other commodities, or only in the *value relation of different commodities*. Hence value expression can only be found, or commodities can only obtain value form, in their *relation to other commodities*. This shows us how the value form arises from the nature of value itself. If I say that this product of labor is value because human labor is expended in it, then this is merely the subsumption of the product of labor under the concept of value. It's an abstract expression that encompasses more than it says. For this product of labor is only reduced to this concept of value, in order to reduce it as a *thing of the same substance* as all other products of labor. The relation to other products of labor is therefore implied. [...] The expression, although it says nothing of this relationship, includes it.<sup>22</sup>

At first glance, it may seem that Marx is simply unfolding the formal necessity of the unity between the substance of value and its objectification in exchange. The substance arises in production, where the products of labor acquire the common quality that enables their relationship as materializations of human labor per se. As a common quality of the products of labor, this substance cannot be objectified as a relation between the body of each product and the labor that

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<sup>21</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Marx, Karl, «Ergänzungen und Veränderungen zum ersten Band des "Kapitals"», op. cit., pp. 29-30, (JIC translation).

produced it per se. It can only be objectified through the relationship between the bodies of commodities containing equal quantities of it, that is, as exchange value. But what Marx is truly unfolding is the real necessity of the unity between the substance of value and its form as exchange value. It is only that here, Marx does not directly make explicit the specificity of commodity-producing social labor. That is, he does not directly refer to it as socially useful labor organized privately and independently. But he implicitly introduces this specificity of commodity-producing labor by transitioning from the abstract attribute, which up to this point is only formally common to commodities, to the concrete exercise of this attribute in its determination as the real capacity of commodities to enter into the relation of exchange. This capacity is lacking in products of labor organized in a socially direct manner, despite also being materializations of human labor per se. Therefore, the term "value" is not abstractly reduced to the expression of "materialized abstract labor." It expresses the specific determination of privately materialized abstract labor that needs to manifest its socially useful condition through the entry of these materializations into relations of equality with their equivalents. Hence, the term "value" includes the necessity of the exchange relation, the necessity to express itself in the exchange relation.

It is not in vain that Marx emphasizes that his exposition "shows how the form of value arises from the very nature of value." This is the complete opposite of the inverted appearance that Heinrich attempts to present, with the intention of making it seem as if Marx is saying that the substance of value arises from its form. The "most emphatic statement made by Marx", to which Heinrich appeals in support of his inverted construction, actually demolishes the latter into pieces as soon as the adulteration and selective editing upon which it seeks to rely are exposed.

As is characteristic of a conception in which the form determines the substance of the content, or what is essentially the same, where there is no content other than the form, Heinrich begins by denying the development of human generic essence — defined by himself as 'what separates [real humans] from animals, namely that they developed their potential and ability through labor'—<sup>23</sup> and alienation, as manifest objects of *Capital*.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, he cannot acknowledge that the historically specific form taken by the development of this human generic being in the capitalist mode of production is synthesized in the fact that its subjects confront their own social being as if they lacked it, as individuals mutually free from personal dependence who carry out their social labor privately. Therefore, they confront the development of their generic being as if it were the realization of a power alien to them, as the realization of a power that naturally belongs to the product of their own social labor. Consequently, Heinrich cannot recognize the historically specific determination of the consciousness and will of subjects as free subjects, by virtue of being alienated in the commodity; that is, it is a consciousness and will alienated due to its content, which necessarily takes shape in its opposite, in personal freedom. And he cannot recognize that the fetishism of the commodity is the simplest and most general form of this alienated consciousness. Thus, he also cannot recognize that the necessity to overcome this

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<sup>23</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 22.

fetishism can only arise from the fact that the alienated development of the material productive forces of social labor needs to take shape in a consciousness that advances in its freedom by knowing itself to be objectively alienated.

It is thus that Heinrich ultimately reveals where his inversion of the determinations of value lead. From his inverted standpoint, value is not the simplest content of the general social relation that governs the development of a historically specific material form of the productive forces of human labor. Nor is the determination of individuals as personifications of value the concrete form in which they govern their conscious and voluntary action as individual organs of the process of social metabolism.<sup>25</sup> According to Heinrich, it is the reverse; the existence of value is explained by human behavior. Consequently, the necessity to overcome value is inverted into the abstract possibility of considering how to change that behavior.

the rule of value over humans is not a natural law of society, but the result of a very specific behavior by humans, and this behavior can—at least in principle—be changed. A society without commodities and money is conceivable.<sup>26</sup>

And, in turn, fetishism dissolves into an abstract "structural background" that operates externally by affecting the consciousness and will of individuals, and which they can "penetrate" by opposing it with the exercise of a no less abstractly free consciousness and will:

However, this fetishism is also not a completely closed universal context of deception from which there is no escape. Rather, it constitutes a structural background that is always present, but affects different individuals with varying strength and can be penetrated on the basis of experience and reflection.<sup>27</sup>

As always, behind the conception that value has no content other than its form lies the conception of human consciousness and will as inherently abstractly free by nature.

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<sup>25</sup> As a whole, this is the opposite of:

*The capitalist mode of production thus exhausts its historical reason for being, namely, the development of the material productive forces of society through the transformation of the productive powers of individual free labor into powers of directly social labor consciously organized by the collective worker that carries it out, in the form of the alienation of the powers of this labor as social powers of its material product. (Iñigo Carrera, Juan, El capital: razón histórica, sujeto revolucionario y conciencia, p. 39).*

<sup>26</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Heinrich, Michael, op. cit., p. 185.