1. Abstract Labour
as a Natural Substance

In the 1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that scientific investigation starts from the historical and empirical data the scientist assumes as “effective presuppositions”. These data are a complex representation of concrete reality and are what has to be explained. Scientists, by means of abstraction, posit simple categories that identify the profound essence of the surface appearance of things. They then use these abstractions to posit and explain concrete facts, going from the essence back to its phenomenal manifestations. Explanation works as a theoretical reconstruction, based on abstract categories, of the many determinations of effective presuppositions. “But”, Marx asks, “have not these categories also an independent historical or natural existence preceding that of the more concrete ones?” (1986a, 39).

His answer is: “Ça dépend”. He thinks that some abstract notions may correspond to real facts and that in capitalism this possibility is attained in the category of “abstract labour”. “Labour”, he claims, “seems to be a very simple category … Considered economically in this simplicity, ‘labour’ is just as modern a category as the relations which give rise to this simple abstraction” (40). He is quite explicit about the real existence of abstract labour: “In the most modern form of the bourgeois society … the abstract category ‘labour’, ‘labour as such’, labour sans phrase, the point of departure of modern economy, is first seen to be true in practice” (41).
Now, if certain categories have “an independent historical or natural existence”, then abstract labour could be considered real in a natural sense. For example, it may be described as a generic material activity implemented by labour in the transformation of nature (Kicillof and Starosta 2007a, 23; 2007b, 16). Thence, the physiological force expended in production is a natural abstraction that becomes social when commodities are exchanged (Robles-Bàez 2014, 295). Interpreted like that, the theory of abstract labour seems to give rise to a sort of a physicalist metaphysics as it postulates that the category “labour”, posited by a process of logical abstraction, is incarnated in a natural substance capable of positing its own presupposition in the real world. Heinrich (2004, 2) stigmatises this as a “substantialist-naturalist theory of value”.

However, if real abstraction is interpreted as the result of a historical process (Finelli 1987; 2005; Toscano 2008), it is not such an arcane thing. Abstract labour here becomes a presupposition of capitalist production, implying an overcoming of the social relationships based on personal bonds (slavery, serfdom) and the establishment of wage labour as a fundamental institution of capitalism.

In the present chapter, I seek to resolve the “ambivalence” or “ambiguity”\(^1\) of Marx’s characterization of abstract labour. I show the inconsistencies caused by attributing natural properties to it, and criticise what Postone (1978; 1993) defines as a “trans-historical” account of abstract labour. This is the \textit{pars destruens} of my interpretation.\(^2\)

In section 1, I reconstruct the method Marx uses to identify abstract labour in the first two parts of \textit{Capital}, volume 1. In part 1, he defines abstract labour by distinguishing it from concrete labour and treating it as a productive force, that is, a substance that creates the value of commodities. However, he determines abstract labour within a system of “simple commodity production” that abstracts from capitalism and the wage relationship. In part 2, he introduces capital and the wage and treats abstract labour as a substance supplied by workers in a capitalist production process. This substance is appropriated by capitalists

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2. The \textit{pars construens} is expounded in the next chapter. These two chapters re-elaborate arguments already developed in Screpanti (2017).
by the purchase of a commodity, the use value of labour power. The
employment contract, in part 2, is seen as an agreement involving
commodity exchange.

I deal with the notion of labour as a substance in section 2, where
I argue that it can be considered a “natural” substance only when it
is investigated within a model of simple commodity production or
production in general. This substance is often regarded as a flow
emanating from a stock of labour power embodied in the worker’s
organism. Thus, it is characterised as a natural force. I contend that the
very attempt to treat it in this way makes it prisoner of concrete labour.

Then, in section 3, focusing on the notions of “value substance” and
“value form”, I observe that Marx’s use of the Aristotelian notions of
“substance” and “form” does not aid the understanding of abstract
labour as a concept. Moreover, the idea that labour creates value
sometimes induces Marx to use certain metaphors in an inaccurate way
and to improperly postulate a causal relationship between the substance
and the form of value.

Finally, in section 4, I argue that the treatment of abstract labour as
a productive force is the main reason behind the inconsistencies which
emerge in the transformation of labour values into production prices.
Since labour values are determined by abstracting from capitalism,
they are unable to measure correctly the capitalist exploitation of
wageworkers.

1.1. The Double Abstraction

Marx (1996, 48) develops an analysis of abstract labour as a “value-
creating substance” in part 1 of the first volume of Capital in particular,
where he identifies it on the grounds of two abstraction procedures: a
methodological and a substantive one.

Value is defined at the highest level of generality, that is to say, by
referring it to simple commodity production, a “mode of production
in which the product takes the form of a commodity, or is produced
directly for exchange”. This is supposed to be “the most general and
most embryonic form of bourgeois production” (93). In reality, as
highlighted by Lippi (1979), Marx postulates a hypothetical system of
“production in general”, a production process “common to all social
conditions, that is, without historical character” (Marx 1986a, 245–6). In this system, capital is not yet a social relationship but “appears to be a mere thing, and entirely to coincide with the matter of which it consists” (437) or with its labour content.

Such a notion of “production in general” occurs in various works, especially the Grundrisse and A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Sometimes Marx uses it to criticise theories of value that abstract from capitalism and history. However, he himself resorts to this abstraction procedure to define value and even to determine the value of capital as labour embodied in the means of production:

The relation of capital, in accordance with its content, to labour, of objectified labour to living labour—in this relation where capital appears as passive towards labour, it is its passive being, as a particular substance, that enters into relation with labour as creative activity—can in general only be the relation of labour to its objectivity, its physical matter—which must be dealt with already in the first chapter which must precede that on exchange value and must treat of production in general (224–5).

Thus, Marx (1996, 70) builds a model of society in which “the dominant relation of man with man is that of owners of commodities”. In other words, a model of society based on the production and exchange of commodities, but not on capitalist exploitation: “Commodity production in general” is production “without capitalist production” (Marx 1987, 159). In a letter to Engels, Marx (1983, 368) clarifies that, at this level of analysis, he abstracts from capital as a social relation: the “instalments [of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy] contain nothing as yet on the subject of capital, but only the two chapters: 1. The Commodity, 2. Money or Simple Circulation”. Consequently, he also abstracts from the wage: “Wage is a category that, as yet, has no existence at the present stage of investigation” (Marx 1996, 54n).

In other words, Marx uses this method to isolate the determination of value from capitalist social relations. There is an explicit methodological purpose: to study value and labour at the highest level of generality. Yet the real motive is another one: to identify abstract labour as the sole productive force capable of producing value; as the sole value-creating substance. In fact, Marx believes that this level of analysis is necessary to ascertain that value is produced not by exchange but by abstract labour in the production process. In another section below, I recall the problem in Ricardo’s value theory that induces Marx to use the methodology of
abstraction based on “commodity production in general”. Meanwhile, note that this approach defines the real abstraction of labour by reducing social activity to commodity exchange (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 20, 26; Toscano 2008, 281), and it determines value as a generic variable pertaining to the reproducibility of commodities (Ahumada 2012, 844).

Within this level of analysis, Marx delves into another procedure of abstraction; one that is substantive rather than methodological. The exchange value of commodities does not depend on the concreteness of their use values. Thus, labour as its substance cannot consist of concrete labour. Yet it cannot be a merely conceptual abstraction. Since value is an objective reality, the labour that creates it must also be a real abstraction. Abstract labour so defined is a value-creating substance in that it is a productive force. Productive labour in general (Starosta 2008, 28) is the sole productive force that produces new value:

If the special productive labour of the workman were not spinning, he could not convert the cotton into yarn, and therefore could not transfer the values of the cotton and spindle to the yarn. Suppose the same workman were to change his occupation to that of a joiner, he would still by a day’s labour add value to the material he works upon. Consequently, we see, first, that the addition of new value takes place not by virtue of his labour being spinning in particular, or joinering in particular, but because it is labour in the abstract, a portion of the total labour of society; and we see next, that the value added is of a given definite amount, not because his labour has a special utility, but because it is exerted for a definite time. On the other hand, then, it is by virtue of its general character, as being expenditure of human labour power in the abstract, that spinning adds new value (Marx 1996, 210–1).

Thus, abstract labour is defined by ignoring the specific qualities of the workers’ labour activities, their skills, competencies, and performances. It is seen as a purely quantitative magnitude. Concrete labours are accordingly characterised in qualitative terms. They differ in various aspects, which can be reduced to three dimensions: (1) differences in the kinds of competencies (e. g., between those of a carpenter and those of a bricklayer), (2) differences in the complexity of competencies (e. g., between those of a bricklayer and those of an architect), and (3) differences in the degrees of performance efficiency (e. g., between the work a of carpenter who produces a table in one day and that of a carpenter who produces one in two days).
Capital and the wage are not introduced until part 2 of *Capital*, volume 1. Chapter 6 focuses on the employment contract, defining it as an agreement for “the sale and purchase of labour power”:

In order that our owner of money may be able to find labour power offered for sale as a commodity, various conditions must first be fulfilled. The exchange of commodities itself implies no other relations of dependence than those which result from its own nature. On this assumption, labour power can appear upon the market as a commodity, only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour power it is, offers it for sale, or sells it, as a commodity. In order that he may be able to do this, he must have it at his disposal, must be the untrammelled owner of his capacity for labour, i.e. of his person (178).

Under this type of contract, the worker receives the value of labour power as payment. He is the owner of a real asset, “labour power or capacity for labour”, a thing consisting of “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being” (Marx 1976a, 270). He sells the use value of this asset, which thus acquires a new characterization. Besides being a substance that creates the value of commodities, now it is a commodity in itself. As such, it has an exchange value and a use value. “Its use-value consists in the subsequent exercise of its force” (Marx 1996, 184). Note, incidentally, that what Marx usually labels “labour power” (Arbeitskraft) he occasionally calls “labour capacity” or “capacity for labour” (Arbeitsvermögen, Arbeitsfähigkeit). Moreover, he sometimes uses “labour” as an abbreviation for “labour capacity”.

### 1.2. Labour as a Natural Abstraction

In another definition, the use value of labour power consists of the capacity of abstract labour to “crystallise” or “congeal” into the value of a good (50, 55, 61, 200) so that “all surplus value […] is in substance the materialization of unpaid labour” (Marx 1994, 534). This use value

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3 This quotation is from the Penguin edition of *Capital*, which gives a better translation than the International Publishers edition, from which I take most of the other quotations. The original phrase is: “Unter Arbeitskraft oder Arbeitsvermögen verstehen wir den Inbegriff der physischen und geistigen Fähigkeiten, die in der Leiblichkeit, der lebendigen Persönlichkeit eines Menschen existieren”. From here on, when the Penguin edition provides a better translation, I quote from it.
1. Abstract Labour as a Natural Substance

ensues from an expenditure or use of the labour power owned by a worker. In fact

productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz., the useful character of the labour, is nothing but the expenditure of human labour power […]. The value of a commodity represents human labour in the abstract, the expenditure of human labour in general […] It is the expenditure of simple labour power, i.e., of the labour power which, on average […] exists in the organism of every ordinary individual (Marx 1996, 54).

It is evident that Marx is talking about a flow when he defines this use value as “human labour power in its fluid state, or human labour” (Marx 1976a, 142) and when he observes that it “manifests itself only in the actual usufruct, in the consumption of the labour power” (1996, 185). In fact, “the purchaser of labour power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter becomes in actuality what before he only was potentially, labour power in action” (187). Marx is meticulous in arguing that “the owner of the labour power […] must constantly look upon his labour power as his own property, his own commodity, and this he can only do by placing it at the disposal of the buyer temporarily, for a definite period of time. By this means alone can he avoid renouncing his right of ownership over it” (178). Obviously, the worker can remain the owner of labour power, notwithstanding his sale of it, only if it is a stock. What is actually sold is the usufruct of a flow.

This flow seems to be endowed with a creative power:

Human labour creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object. In order to express the value of […] linen as a congelation of human labour, that value must be expressed as having objective existence, as being a something materially different from the linen itself, and yet a something common to the linen and all other commodities (Marx 1996, 61).

Thus, considering the various definitions introduced so far, abstract labour turns out to be: a flow emanating from a labour power that is a physical thing; a fluid that congeals into an objective form; a power that creates an objective value. Hence, the flow itself is an objective magnitude. Is it objective in a physical sense? Alas! Abstract labour is often characterised as a physical force, and the use value of labour
power as the “exercise of its force” (184). For instance, it is defined as “a productive expenditure of human brains, nerves, muscles” and an expenditure of the simple labour power that “exists in the organism of every ordinary individual” (54); as “an expenditure of human labour power in a physiological sense” or “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being” or the “labour power which exists only in his living body” (Marx 1976a, 137, 270, 272).

Understandably, some commentators have used these definitions to reduce the value-creating substance of abstract labour to the expenditure of bodily energy (Kicillof and Starosta 2007b, 17). They are in good company, since Marx (1986a, 393) himself declares that “what the free worker sells is always only a particular, specific measure of the application of his energy. Above every specific application of energy stands labour capacity as a totality”. According to this view, abstract labour is the supply of human energy in productive activity (Kicillof and Starosta 2007a, 20). After all, “muscles burn sugar” (Haug 2005, 108; see also Starosta 2008, 31).

However, the most careful theoreticians of the value form have stigmatised such interpretations, observing that the definition of abstract labour as the expenditure of a physiological force leads to a rough understanding of value and to the loss of the social character of labour activity (Eldred and Hanlon 1981, 40). In plain English, “muscles do not burn sugar in the abstract” (Bonefeld 2010, 266). According to Sraffa, the “conception that attributes to human labour a special gift of determining value” is “a purely mystical conception”; the theory of value must do “away with ‘human energy’ and such metaphysical things”.

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4 This assessment is expounded in different ways by Rubin (1972, 132n), Himmelweit and Mohun (1978, 80) and De Vroey (1982, 44).

5 Unpublished papers (D3/12/9: 89 and D3/12/42: 33). See Kurz and Salvadori (2010) and Gehrke and Kurz (2018). The former of the above criticisms is raised against Marshall, the latter against Ricardo and Marx. What is stigmatised, in both cases, is a Ricardian vestige. In a letter to Tania Schucht for Gramsci, dated 21 June 1932, Sraffa (1991, 74) writes that “Ricardo, contrary to the philosophers of praxis [i.e. the Marxists], never bent to historically ponder his own thought. In general, he never takes a historical point of view and, as it has been said, he considers the laws of the society in which he lives as natural and immutable laws. He was, and ever
At any rate, an energy theory of abstract labour is incongruous. In fact, the supply of energy or force—or the expenditure of brains, nerves and muscles—pertains to concrete labour, exactly the stuff from which abstraction is done. And it is easy to see that two workers who carry out different concrete labours of the same degree of complexity, and who therefore receive the same hourly wage—for instance, a call centre operator and a mechanical fitter—supply different kinds and quantities of energy and different forms and quantities of brain, nerve and muscle expenditure. Yet their abstract labours must have the same magnitude. To sum up, several definitions which Marx puts forward in part 1 of *Capital*, volume 1, lead to a characterization of abstract labour as a physical reality, a natural substance. This, however, pertains to properties of concrete labour.

### 1.3. Value Form and Substance

In chapter 1 of *Capital*, Marx refers to Aristotle’s conception of the relationship between matter, or substance, and form. Abstract labour is the substance of value and value is a form; the substance creates something that takes the form of value. He acknowledges the scientific merits of Aristotle’s analysis of value and his intuition that money is a development of the simple value form. However, he also ascribes to the Greek philosopher a shortcoming: Aristotle did not understand that a common substance underlies the value equivalence among different commodities. Marx justifies him by arguing that he could not understand this truth since there was no abstract labour in the slave economy in which he lived. In fact, the common substance is none other than the abstract labour that “materialises” itself into the value form.

According to Engelskirchen (2007a; 2007b), who overtly follows an Aristotelian approach, the “structural cause” or “material cause” of the value form is the market system by which the products of labour are

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6 Some confusion may arise because Marx often uses the term “substance” with the meaning Aristotle gives to “matter”. But “matter” is only one aspect of “substance” for the Greek philosopher; another aspect is “form”, and a third is the union of matter and form (see Suppes 1974; Gill 1989; Kincaid 2005).
exchanged as commodities. This interpretation, however, only accounts for the reason why commodities have an exchange value and does not clarify that value is created by abstract labour. The latter is an important proposition for Marx, but it raises two problems, as it seems to postulate: 1) an identity relationship between value and embodied labour, 2) a causal relationship between the substance and the form of value.

Regarding the first problem, see chapter 4 below. Here, I limit myself to a few remarks. According to some interpreters, Marx’s analysis of the value form aims to prove that abstract labour is the substance of value. The reasoning seems to go as follows: if two commodities have the same exchange value, it is because they have a common substance; this can only be the abstract labour used to create their value, as would be proved by the fact that the value magnitude of the two commodities coincides with the quantity of labour contained in them. In a few words, “products can only be measured by the measure of labour—by labour time—because by their nature they are labour” (Marx 1986a, 532).

Now, the fact that 20 kilos of coffee exchange for 10 meters of fabric does not imply that the two commodities have some substance in common. It only means that coffee and fabric are exchanged at the ratio \( p_f/p_c = (20 \text{ kg coffee})/(10 \text{ m fabric}) \), from which \( p_f(10 \text{ m fabric})=p_c(20 \text{ kg coffee}) \), where \( p_f \) and \( p_c \) are the prices of fabric and coffee. The denomination of value in terms of money does not change this fact. In theory, money can be an arbitrarily chosen numeraire: the dollar, the price of gold, of wheat, and so on. It can be the price of labour, \( w=1 \), in which case it might happen that \( v_c(20 \text{ kg coffee})=(40 \text{ h labour}) \), where \( v_c=2 \), is the labour embodied in a kilo of coffee (with zero profits) or the labour commanded by it (with positive profits). Here, the identification of the value magnitude as a quantity of embodied labour is a result of the restrictive hypothesis of zero profits. Therefore, the proposition that abstract labour is, in general, the substance of value is not proved. It has to be assumed axiomatically (Arthur 2001, 34), and Marx assumes it in the first pages of Capital, in which the zero-profits hypothesis is implied by the model of simple commodity production.

With regard to the second problem, can the relationship between the substance and the form of value be a proper causal relationship? The answer is no. One could say that the “material cause” of a table as a concrete object is the timber it is made of, meaning that timber is the
1. Abstract Labour as a Natural Substance

matter (or the substance) of the table (Reuten 2005, 84). But is it sensible to argue that timber is the “efficient cause” of the table? That is, that timber is the cause of a process that produces the table as an effect?

What one can say is that the concrete labour of a carpenter produces the table in the labour process. Then, one could wrongly believe that it is possible to use a metaphor that presents abstract labour as an action that produces the value form as an effect. Actually, Marx sometimes expresses the substance-form relationship in terms of the dynamic movement of a substance from “potency” to “act” that results in the production of a form. This appears to occur as the “effect” of a “power” which is its efficient cause: “As an effect, or as inert being, of the power which produced it” (Marx 1986a, 532). Thus, it seems that labour creates value, that the value of a table is created by the abstract labour of the carpenter. Indeed, when he says that labour creates value, Marx metaphorises the labour process into the valorisation process. Yet forcing the notion of “efficient cause” in this way is not correct.

A scientifically valid metaphor must be reducible (Accame 2006). A metaphor is a linguistic construct that uses a signifier taken from another construct. It is reducible when it is possible to single out similitudes between the two constructs that can be decoded in terms of physical or mental operations. For instance, if I say, “an artist creates a picture”, and then, “a carpenter creates a table”, in the second proposition I am using the term “creates” metaphorically. I can reduce this metaphor to observable and comprehensible similitudes between the two propositions: “artist” is likened to “carpenter”, as they have in common the condition of being people who use instruments to transform matter; “picture” is likened to “table” in that they are objects produced by human activity. Therefore, the term “creates” in the second proposition has a comprehensible meaning. This meaning adds to knowledge, for “creates” is not a simple synonym of “produces”: you can say a carpenter creates a table if you mean that he not only produces a rough object of use but also puts a surplus of aesthetic worth into it.

According to Vaccarino (1988), many metaphors are irreducible as they contain a false similitude, that is, a comparison based on the negation of physical or mental operations or characteristics. So, “God created the universe” is irreducible, for “God” is defined not on the ground of characteristics possessed in common with “artist” or “man”
but on the ground of characteristics that negate those of man (eternity, infinity, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc.). These are not reducible to physical or mental operations. The proposition “God created the universe” is a metaphor devoid of any scientifically acceptable meaning.

The metaphor “abstract labour creates value” is irreducible for this same reason. One can say, “the concrete labour of a carpenter creates a table as a concrete object”. However, if one says, “the abstract labour of the carpenter creates the value of the table”, one is using an irreducible metaphor because abstract labour is defined as a negation of concrete labour: no characteristics of abstract labour can be likened to characteristics of concrete labour, and none is reducible to physical or mental operations. On the other hand, if to avoid a purely negative definition of abstract labour, one also attempts an operational definition in terms of energy or physical effort or the expenditure of brains, nerves and muscles, one falls into contradiction. In fact, as already observed, the expenditure of these kinds of effort pertains to concrete labour. Summing up, the meaning of “creates” in the metaphor of value creation by abstract labour is obscure and devoid of any scientific merit.7

1.4. Abstract Labour as a Productive Force

Marx says that “value is a relation between persons […] concealed beneath a material shell” (1976a, 167) and that exchange value “causes the social relations of individuals to appear in the perverted form of a social relation between things” (1987, 275). Again, “the value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an

7 This difficulty cannot be avoided by substituting the term “create” with “posit”, as suggested by Arthur (2001, 40–1). Marx uses different words to convey the idea that labour produces value. On some occasions he uses setzen (posit); more often he uses schaffen (create). In Capital, he also uses bilden, which can be translated with “make”, “form”, “shape”, “establish”, “create”. A problem with the term “posit”, if it is not interpreted as a simple synonym of “create”, is its reference to a logical procedure—like “postulate” or “hypothesize”—so that it tends to generate idealist hypostatization when referring to a real process. At any rate, would this term improve understanding? To say as Arthur does that “the abstract objectivity of value mediates itself in the abstract activity of value positing”, or that “value posits itself as a quantity of negating activity fixed as what is posited”, does not render Marx’s metaphor more reducible, let alone, more comprehensible.
atom of matter enters into its composition [...] the value of commodities has a purely social reality” (1996, 57). These propositions convey the notion of value as a social relation. Labour value, as an essence that manifests itself in the appearance of commodity relations, should reveal to scientific investigation the social relations of production that are concealed by circulation.

However, once determined analytically, labour values are only able to reveal the structure of “socially necessary labour”. That is, the simple technical arrangement of production—precisely what is to be expected if value is determined under a model of production in general. In fact, as I will detail in chapter 4, knowledge of the technical coefficients is sufficient to determine labour values, while knowledge of the rate of exploitation is not necessary. This may vary when the power relations between classes change, but if the technical coefficients do not change, labour values remain unaltered. Thus, the labour theory of value—that is, the theory that determines the value of commodities in terms of the quantity of abstract labour used to create them—is unable to shed light on the fundamental social relationship in capitalism: that of exploitation.

The difficulty also emerges in the problem of transforming labour values into production prices. I take a closer look at this problem in chapters 4 and 5. Here, I only make a few comments. A fundamental tenet of Marx’s reasoning is that the aggregate substance of embodied labour cannot be altered by the transformation, which only modifies the form. After all, the market does not add anything to the quantity of surplus value arising from the production process, since this quantity is none other than crystallised labour. Marx explicitly argues that the market, by determining the profit rate uniformity, merely redistributes surplus value among industries and cannot raise it. Otherwise, prices would not be phenomenal manifestations of the value substance, but value-creating substances in their own right. Marx maintains that there is no surplus-value creation in the circulation process. However, this expectation is frustrated by the solution of the transformation problem. It is logically possible for the overall surplus value, as calculated in a price system, to be higher (or lower) than the overall surplus value as calculated in the corresponding labour value system. The rates of surplus value determined in the two systems do not generally coincide. The reason for this incongruity is profound and significant and resides
in the two valuation systems’ different capacities to express the social relations of production.

Labour values are forms that express the technical conditions of production and only those social facts that affect technical conditions.\(^8\) In contrast, production prices also express social conditions of production: any variation of class relations in the production sphere causes an alteration in production prices. Labour values and production prices exhibit this different capacity to express social relations because the former are determined in a system of simple commodity production while the latter are determined in a system of capitalist production.\(^9\)

Marx’s acceptance of the labour theory of value has been stigmatised as a residue of Ricardian naturalism (Lippi 1979). As also highlighted by some theoreticians of the value form,\(^10\) Marx is unable to fully move on from Ricardo. On the one hand, he argues that value is a social form, on the other, he sometimes reduces the value-creating substance to a physical expenditure of labour power. In such a substantialist-naturalist approach to value, Marx remains prisoner of the classical economists (Heinrich 2004, 3).

To be sure, he tries to correct the view, entertained by some classical authors, that a productive contribution is also provided by land and capital. He argues that land and capital inputs help produce “riches” or “material wealth”—that is, the physical quantities of commodities—and that their impact on the production of new value is nil. The same is true with concrete labour. He holds that only abstract labour produces value, and believes that, to reveal this, he must assert that abstract labour is a productive force. Then, in order to identify labour as the sole value-creating substance, he determines value within a system of production in general which abstracts from profits and wages. In this way, abstract labour as a “productivist motor” (Fracchia 1995, 356) is identified as an ontological and trans-historical category pertaining to a neutrally

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\(^8\) Obviously, technical conditions may be influenced by historical and social facts: productive organization, scientific progress, market structures, etc. However, not all social facts and relations affect technical conditions.


evolving technology (Postone 1993)\textsuperscript{11} in a non-capitalist production system.

Now, in Marx’s theory of history, the “productive forces” consist of the physical means of production, the science incorporated into them, and the individuals who use them in the labour process, in other words, the techniques in use. Thus, the workers’ abilities, as characteristics of concrete labour, should be thought of as part of the productive forces. The “social relations of production”, on the other hand, consist of the institutional setting used to organise production within a historically determined economic form. An institution typical of capitalism is the employment contract. Abstract labour is also typical of capitalism, as it emerges with the wage relationship, and it should therefore be ascribed to the social relations, not to the productive forces.

Why does Marx believe it necessary to abstract from wages and profits to establish that abstract labour is the sole value-creating substance? The reason is that, in Ricardo’s theory, relative values are affected by profit rate uniformity in such a way that they do not coincide with the labour embodied in commodities. This result seems to impair the very Ricardian view that the value of a commodity is determined by the labour expended in its production. To tackle this problem, Marx proposes a thorough rethinking of the theory of value in terms of an abstraction (Himmelweit and Mohun 1978, 72). He defines value in a non-empiricist way, and takes it as the causal determinant of empirical phenomena (Milios, Dimoulis and Economakis 2018, 9). Then he raises the following criticism: “Though Ricardo is accused of being too abstract, one would be justified in accusing him of the opposite: lack of the power of abstraction, inability, when dealing with the value of commodities, to forget profits” (Marx 1989a, 416). In fact, in the first chapter of Ricardo’s Principles, “not only commodities are assumed to exist–and when considering value as such, nothing further is required–but also wages, capital, profit” (393). The latter assumption is inappropriate, according to Marx. Value has first to be determined within simple commodity production. Then–maintaining that “the sum total of [the] cost prices

\textsuperscript{11} Postone (1978; 1993) tries to identify the abstractness of labour as an implication of the historical specificity of capitalist social relations. However, he remains faithful to the universality of the commodity form (see also Kurz 2016). Thus, Fracchia (1995, 368) is right in observing that Postone himself uses some trans-historical categories.
of all the commodities taken together will be equal to their value [and that] the total profit will be = to the total surplus value” (415)–the prices of production, or cost prices, can be determined at a lower level of abstraction.

In another respect, it is well known that Marx (1989b, 36–7) criticises Ricardo for his inability to understand that capital is a “definite social relationship”, namely, “a material condition of labour, confronting the labourer as power that had acquired an independent existence”. Less well known is the fact that the same criticism can be raised against Marx’s way of determining value by assuming commodity production in general.