

2. Abstract Labour as a Historical Reality

The present chapter presents the *pars construens* of my interpretation of the theory of abstract labour. It begins with an elucidation of the Hegelian notion of the employment contract as an agreement for the exchange of a commodity. Hegel's view, according to which this kind of contract must be likened to the Roman institution *locatio operis*, is wrong. Marx, however, develops an alternative vision that evokes the *locatio operarum*, an agreement whereby workers take on an obligation to obey their employers. These issues are dealt with in section 1 of the present chapter.

In section 2, I argue that Marx's alternative vision is based on the notions of "subordination" and "subsumption", which are used in *Capital* but are better investigated in *Results of the Direct Production Process* and in the *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*. With the employment contract, a worker renounces his decision-making freedom in the labour process by entering into a relationship of subordination to the capitalist. This enables capital to subsume workers' capacities and use them to secure surplus value.

Then, in section 3, I define abstract labour on the grounds of the notions of subordination and subsumption. Here, abstract labour is no longer a natural object. Rather, it emerges from a historically determined social relationship. By virtue of this characteristic, it turns out to coincide with the time spent by the wageworker in the production process.

2.1. The Labour Exchange: From Hegel to Marx

The idea of labour exchange as a commodity exchange is already present in the contract theory Hegel develops in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Section 80 of this work contains a classification of the different types of contracts used in modern societies, and all cases—be it sale, donation, renting, or agency—are envisaged as agreements for the alienation of a thing: to be precise, “a single external thing” (sec. 75). The internal attributes of individuals, like their labour capacities, cannot be alienated. Thus, the exchange of labour is reduced to the *contract for services*, with explicit reference to the Roman institution *locatio operis*,¹ an agreement by which the worker sells a service produced with her labour ability.

This is a mistake, for the modern *employment contract* is equated not to *locatio operis* but to *locatio operarum*. The *locatio operis* is a contract whereby, for example, I ask a mechanic to sell me a car repair service and temporarily place the car at his disposal. The *locatio operarum* has a completely different meaning: it is the agreement used by the mechanic, as an employer, to hire an employee. It is a relational contract by which a worker-lessor (*operarius-locator*) alienates, not a good consisting of a labour service, but the authority (*potestas*) the worker has over herself. She does so by temporarily placing herself at the employer’s disposal. In fact, *operarum* may be interpreted both as the plural genitive of *opera* (a day’s work)—so that *locatio operarum* implies the hiring of labour time in general and not of specific services—and as the irregular plural genitive of *operarius* (labourer), in which case *locatio operarum* means the hiring of workers. From the worker’s point of view, these two meanings are conveyed by the expressions *locatio operarum sui*, the letting out of one’s own labour time, and *locatio sui*, the letting out of oneself (Martini 1958). Both meanings are present in the modern institution of the employment contract.

Hegel does not admit the *locatio operarum* since he postulates the endowments that constitute a person are inalienable (sec. 66). And

1 Hegel (1991, 112) uses the odd expression *locatio operae*, which he oddly translates as *Lohnvertrag* (*wages contract*). In any case, he defines it as the “Veräußerung meines Produzierens oder Dienstleistens”, that is, “alienation of my output or service”, which corresponds to *locatio operis*.

when he provides examples of the “alienation of personality”, he refers to cases like slavery or serfdom. He does not recognise that the employment contract is a case of partial alienation of personal freedom. Nonetheless, he does seem to have grasped the idea when he observes that I can alienate certain particular bodily and spiritual attitudes to someone else, and that “I can give him the use of my abilities for a restricted period” (sec. 67). This is on the right track because, in the kind of rule of law prevailing in modern capitalism, the principle of the inalienability of personal freedom implies the prohibition of slavery but does not rule out the possibility that a worker signs a contract of *subordinate* employment. However, Hegel insists on the idea that what is actually alienated in such a case is only an array of single products, not a part of one’s personal freedom. He maintains that waged workers would not lose their freedom in the production process since the use of their force is different from the force itself. But then, why is it necessary to clarify that the sale of personal abilities is admitted only for a limited time? Such a qualification is necessary if the contract is intended as an agreement by which workers are surrendering their *potestas* and not yielding only single services. With the sale of *potestas* not limited in time, it would be an enslaving contract.

Hegel’s argument is reproduced almost literally by Marx (1985b, 128) in *Value, Price and Profit*, where he says that a “maximum time is fixed for which a man is allowed to sell his labouring power. If allowed to do so for any indefinite period whatever, slavery would be immediately restored”. Also, in *Capital*, Marx (1996, 178) says that “the continuance of this relation demands that the owner of labour power should sell it only for a definite period, for if he were to sell it rump and stump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave”. More explicitly than Hegel, Marx sometimes argues that a worker is the owner of labour power and sells a certain quantity of it as a commodity. However, Marx’s qualification of the temporariness of the sale is only plausible when the employment contract is understood as establishing a relationship of subordination.

Marx is certainly not afraid of bringing to light the slave-like nature of wage labour, nor is he afraid of recognizing that the worker with the employment contract “sells at auction eight, ten, twelve, fifteen hours of his life, day after day” (1977, 203). And he insists on the idea

that wageworkers sell themselves. For instance, in a letter to Abraham Lincoln he says that, compared to the black slave, who is “mastered and sold without his concurrence”, the white worker boasts the higher prerogative “to sell himself and choose his own master” (1985a, 20). This idea grasps the meaning of the employment contract better than the theory that reduces it to commodity sale.

The comparison Marx suggests between slavery and wage labour reveals the distance he takes from Hegel on a decisive issue. This paves the way for the development of a theory of the employment contract as an institution that generates the authority relationship required to implement capitalist exploitation.

2.2. The Subsumption and Subordination of Labour

To comprehend abstract labour as resulting from a social relation of production, it is necessary to understand the way capital appropriates living labour. In an illuminating passage of the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1986a, 205) says that, in the exchange between capital and labour,

the use-value of what is exchanged for money appears as a *particular economic relationship*, and the specific *utilization* of what is exchanged for money constitutes the ultimate purpose of both processes [that in which the workers get the money and that in which the capitalist appropriates labour]. Thus there is already a distinction of form between the exchange of capital and labour and simple exchange [...]. The difference of the second act from the first—the *particular process of appropriation of labour* on the part of capital is the second act—is EXACTLY the distinction between the exchange of capital and labour and the *exchange of commodities* as mediated by money. In the exchange between capital and labour, the first act is an exchange and falls wholly within ordinary circulation; the second is a *process qualitatively different from exchange* and it is only BY MISUSE that it could have been called exchange of any kind at all. *It stands directly opposed to exchange.*

The words I have italicised convey three original ideas: 1) in exchange for the wage paid to the worker, the capitalist obtains the establishment of a relationship, not a thing; 2) such a relationship serves to prompt the process of the utilization and appropriation of labour; 3) this process is qualitatively different from the exchange of commodities and is its

direct opposite. The employment contract determines an “exchange” that is a “non-exchange” for the capitalist:

The exchange between capital and labour, the result of which is the price of labour, even though for the worker is a simple exchange, must for the capitalist be non-exchange. He must receive more value than he has given. From the point of view of capital, the exchange must be merely apparent, i.e. an economic category other than exchange, or else capital as capital and labour as labour in antithesis to it would be impossible (247).

In what sense is this transaction, which appears to the worker as an exchange, a “non-exchange” for the capitalist, or a “merely apparent” exchange? Marx (1994, 444) answers this question in *Results of the Direct Production Process*, where he says that the worker as “the owner of labour capacity figures as its seller—irrationally expressed, as we have seen”. Why irrational? Because that is how the worker appears, although not how he really is. Instead, the worker is a “direct seller of living labour, not of a commodity”. Then Marx explains that “with the development of capitalist production all services are converted into wage labour, and those who perform these services are converted into wage labourers”, even unproductive workers. This fact “gives the apologists [of capitalism] an opportunity to convert the productive worker, because he is a wage labourer, into a worker who merely exchanges his services” (446). In reality, no commodity consisting of a worker’s service is exchanged in the “labour market”. Rather, a social relationship is shaped that transforms the producer into a wageworker. Then the apologists of capitalism present the worker as a seller of services, and in this way, they make the “non-exchange” of labour appear as an exchange of commodities.

To my knowledge, Marx is not acquainted with the notion of a “contract for services”. Yet he is very clear in rejecting the labour ideology, still entertained by many economists today, that represents a wageworker as the seller of labour services or, all the same, as the seller of a commodity resulting from labour activity:

What the capitalist buys is the temporary right to dispose of labour capacity [...]. Labour *belongs* to the capitalist after the transaction, which has been completed before the actual process of production begins. The *commodity* which emerges as product from this process belongs entirely

to him. He has produced it with means of production belonging to him and with labour he has bought and which therefore belongs to him [...]. The capitalist's surplus arises precisely from the fact that he buys from the labourer not a commodity but his labour capacity itself (Marx 1989a, 212–3).

In *Results of the Direct Production Process* and the *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, Marx clarifies the notions of “subordination” and “subsumption”.² These also appear in the final version of *Capital*, but not with the disruptively innovative strength they have in the *Results*. Sometimes Marx uses the two words as synonyms, sometimes as distinct terms. In any case, it is important to keep them separate and to understand the differences in their meanings. The term “subordination” denotes a relation between the capitalist³ and the worker as employer and employee, a “relation of domination” (Marx 1994, 431) in the production process. The term “subsumption” refers to the arrangement whereby the productive power of labour becomes “a productive power of capital” (429). The firm is the legal embodiment of capital, and the productive forces deployed in the production process pertain to it, even though labour activities are executed by the workers. The firm's ownership of a worker's productive capacity originates from the

2 The *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63* is the second draft of *Capital*. The chapter *Results of the Direct Production Process* was intended to appear with the third draft, written in 1863–4. The version of *Capital* finally published comes from a revision of the third draft, from which, however, the chapter on the *Results* was deleted. Several scholars have raised the question of why Marx made this choice. See Murray (2016, chap. 11) for a critical survey. Skillman (2013) puts forward an appealing answer: Marx must have realised there was some inconsistency between the “value-theoretic account” of surplus value production, as expounded in the final version of *Capital*, and the “historical account”, as developed in the *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63* and the *Results*. My opinion is that there is indeed an inconsistency between the explanation of exploitation based on a labour theory of value holding under “commodity production in general” and the explanation based on a historically determined social relationship, namely, the capitalist forms of subsumption and subordination—and this might be the reason why the *Results* remained unpublished. Moreover, Marx must have sensed that it is difficult to reconcile the theory of the employment contract as an agreement establishing an authority relationship with the theory (expounded in part 2 of *Capital*, volume 1) presenting it as a transaction for the sale and purchase of a commodity.

3 Subordination also occurs in pre-capitalist systems. With the passage to a capitalist mode of production a change of form takes place, as I clarify below.

“subordination to capital of the labour process” (439).⁴ This ownership gives foundation to the employer’s undifferentiated property of the product of work activity.

Marx (1988b 93) defines *formal* subsumption and subordination as follows: “This formal subsumption of the labour process, the assumption of control over it by capital, consists in the worker’s subjection as worker to the supervision and therefore the command of capital or the capitalist. Capital becomes command over labour [...] in the sense that the worker as a worker comes under the command of the capitalist”. The subsumption is formal, insofar as the individual worker, instead of working as an independent commodity owner, now works as a labour capacity belonging to the capitalist and therefore under his command and supervision (262).⁵

Here the adjective “formal” evokes the way in which, in Hegel’s philosophy, a kind of contract determines a relationship only formally. That is to say, abstracted from its substantial content, from the specific characteristics of the object of exchange, and from the personal identities of the parties (Benhabib 1984). In this sense, a type of contract is an institutional condition that determines the form of a social relationship. Subsumption and subordination are formal in that they are based on

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- 4 As far as I know, Marx is the first modern economist to think of the employment contract as an institution establishing an authority relationship. He does so with the theory of the *subordination* of wagedworkers. See Coase (1937) and Simon (1951) for two important neo-institutional elaborations of this theory. For a refined juridical treatment, see Kahn-Freund (1972). Ellerman (1992) expounds a view based on a natural rights theory of property. Screpanti (2001) develops a Marxist formulation. Marx is also considered a precursor of the competence-based theory of the firm (Hodgson 1998). Indeed, the theory of *subsumption* of labour capacities is crucial in accounting for the prerogative of a capitalist company to appropriate and mould the workers’ abilities and transform them into the firm’s competences. In fact, with subsumption, “the social productive powers of labour all present themselves as productive forces, as properties inherent in capital [...]. The social combination of the individual labour capacities [...] does not belong to the workers, but rather confronts them as a capitalist arrangement” (Marx 1994, 455–6). The capitalist contributes to building organizational competences while governing individual competences in the labour process, just as a conductor determines the performance of an orchestra.
- 5 Murray (2004, 257) notes that Marx tends to use the expression “formal subsumption” with two different meanings: a general notion defining the constitution of the wage relationship as a legal presupposition of real subsumption; and a specific notion of *merely* formal subsumption, conceived as a historical phase preceding that of real subsumption. Clearly, the first meaning is the most important from a theoretical point of view.

the form of contract by which wage labour originates in a capitalist economy: "There is already a distinction of form between the exchange of capital and labour and simple exchange". The employment contract is the institution that enables two parties endowed with legal personality to establish voluntarily a relationship of subordinate employment: "If the relation of domination and subordination replaces those of slavery, serfdom, vassalage [...] there takes place only a change in their form" (Marx 1994, 432–3). The employment contract, i.e. "wage labour and its employment by capital", is the "dominant relation" in a capitalist mode of production (Marx 1988b, 112).

Once capital has taken control of labour, it governs labour activity in view of its goals, so that subsumption becomes real, involving the capitalist's regulation of the labour process. In fact, "The formal subsumption of labour under capital [...] is the condition and presupposition of its real subsumption". In other words, formal subsumption "is the general form of any capitalist production process" since it establishes the social relation by virtue of which "the labour process is subsumed under capital (it is capital's own process) and the capitalist enters the process as its conductor, its director" (430, 424). What the capitalist gets in exchange for the wage is the prerogative to start the second "act" or "process" of the exchange, which takes place in the factory. The employment contract creates the legal conditions for the utilization of living labour in the production process, as the contract sanctions "the appropriation of the ability to dispose over the labour" or "the appropriation of the title to its use" (Marx 1987, 506). Such title is acquired by the capitalist by virtue of the obligation to obedience taken on by the worker through the contract, and this ensures that "there develops within the production process itself [...] an economic relation of domination and subordination" (Marx 1994, 430).

The function of command in the labour process is necessary to realizing the exploitation of workers. This is so even in pre-capitalist economic forms, but there is a specifically capitalist mode of establishing the subordination of labour. In pre-capitalist economic forms, command over labour is based on relationships of "personal" bond, enforced by institutions of an eminently political and policing nature. In the capitalist mode of production, any kind of personal bond is overcome, and workers are recognised as citizens endowed with the freedom

of contract. What is it, then, that ensures workers' subordination to capitalists?

The basic features of formal subsumption are these:

(1) The purely money relation between the person who is appropriating the surplus value and the person who provides it; to the extent that subordination arises, it arises from the particular content of the sale, not from a subordination pre-posed to the sale, which might have placed the producer in a relation other than the money relation (the relation of one commodity owner to another) towards the exploiter of his labour, as a consequence of political conditions etc. It is only as owner of the conditions of labour that the buyer brings the seller into a condition of economic dependency; it is not any kind of political and socially fixed relation of domination and subordination. (2) Something implied by the first relation—for otherwise the worker would not have to sell his labour capacity—namely the fact that the objective conditions of his labour (the means of production) and the subjective conditions of his labour (the means of subsistence) confront him as capital (Marx 1994, 430).

In the market, a worker is legally free. The ideology of capital induces in him “the consciousness (or rather the idea) of free self-determination, of freedom”, and this renders him a “much better worker” (Marx 1994, 435).⁶ In the *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63* and in *Results of the Direct Production Process*, Marx tries to deconstruct such an ideology. He argues that, by virtue of that idea, a worker believes himself to be free, and hence justifies to himself the acceptance of the employment contract. But in reality, he is not free; rather, “he has a choice [...] as to whom he sells himself to, and can change MASTERS” (437). In other words, workers are “free” to submit to the power of their exploiters. The paradox of the employment contract is that it sanctions the formally free choice of workers to surrender their real freedom for a certain number of hours. The material condition of this paradox resides in the fact that the workers are “free” of any wealth, that is, they do not own the means of production and subsistence that would enable them to choose autonomously how to earn a living.

Once the contract is signed, workers enter the factory, where their freedom of choice is *in principle* nil and labour activity is “imposed” on

6 The word “idea” appears in the Penguin edition (Marx 1976, 1031); in the International Publishers edition, the word is “notion”.

them (De Angelis 1996, 18–9). The workers cannot decide how to work, what to produce, how to cooperate with other workers, how to use the machines, and so on. These prerogatives pertain to the capitalist, who has used the employment contract to transform the freedom surrendered by the workers into his own power. *In practice*, the employer's authority can be limited to some extent by laws, customs, the contract itself, and especially the workers' resistance. In fact, not only the wage negotiation but also the labour process is a field of class conflict, as I will clarify in the next chapter. The struggle in the labour process is about the use of labour capacities.⁷ This use pertains to the capitalist, who utilises labour power by giving instructions to the workers. The implementation of the instructions pertains to the workers, who can use collective action and information asymmetries to reduce their fatigue and exploitation (Screpanti 2011b).

Summing up, the basic scientific innovation resides in the idea that formal subsumption and subordination are necessary conditions for the extraction of surplus value in a capitalist production process. Subsumption means that the exploiter has a title to use labour capacities. Such a title is acquired by virtue of subordination, i.e. the obligation of the exploited worker to obey the exploiter's commands. This is the case in all social systems based on exploitation. In slavery, for instance, the workers' subordination is what enables a master to compel slaves to overwork. Masters have the power to use the labour capacities of their slaves to produce a surplus product because slaves are obliged to obey. What characterises a capitalist system is that subordination and subsumption are ensured by the wage relationship, as established via an employment contract.

2.3. Abstract Labour as Resulting From a Social Relationship

The absence of the expression "abstract labour" in *Results of the Direct Production Process* merits particular reflection. Despite the expression's omission, Marx deals with this concept extensively in that work. For

⁷ De Angelis (1995; 1996) perceptively accounts for class struggle in the production process by referring it to the character of abstraction taken by wage labour as subordinate activity.

instance, when he reconstructs the historical transformation process of the artisan labour relationship into a capitalist relationship, he observes that the capital of a master artisan “is tied to a particular form of use-value”. The capitalist firm, in contrast, involves “the removal of all these barriers [...]. Capital (money) can be exchanged for any kind of labour” (Marx 1994, 434–5). Subsequently, he says that “in North America, where the development of wage labour has least of all been affected by the old guild system, etc., this variability, this complete indifference to the specific content of labour [...] is shown particularly strongly” (438). He explains that in a capitalist economy labour is only productive if it produces surplus value, arguing that it “has absolutely nothing to do with the particular content of the labour, its particular usefulness or the specific use-value in which it is expressed” (448).

When talking about “abstract labour” in *Results of the Direct Production Process*, Marx never uses this expression. Rather, he speaks of “undifferentiated, socially necessary, general labour, entirely indifferent towards any particular content” (401), hence outlining the phenomenon by specifying its economic and social properties rather than its physical ones. These expressions refer to two characteristics of labour that need to be clearly distinguished: on the one hand, it is socially necessary; and on the other, it is indifferent or general.

The notion of “socially necessary labour” refers to a situation of productive efficiency. Labour with “socially normal” intensity (396) is employed in the factories in the quantities and qualities required by the technique in use. This notion shares with that of “abstract labour”—as a natural abstraction—the characteristic of being a productive force but not that of being abstract. In fact, the material base of socially necessary labour consists of concrete labours, specified in relation to production techniques. For instance, so many hours of bricklayers’ labour to build houses, so many hours of engineers’ labour to build cars.

The notion of “indifferent or general labour”, in contrast, must be interpreted as meaning “indifference towards any particular content”. It is abstracted from concrete labours and shares with abstract labour the characteristic of being quantifiable. Marx clarifies that the fundamental reason why labour becomes a quantifiable magnitude is that the worker’s activity is carried out under a relation of subordination. Consequently, his productive forces, being subsumed under capital, are no longer attributes of labour. The labour characteristic of being quantifiable is

intimately linked to its historicity: capitalist subsumption occurs only in a production system based on wage labour. In this way, the properties of naturalness and historicity are separated. The former pertains to the technological structure of socially necessary labour, the latter to the social structure that ensures exploitation.

In the *Grundrisse* quote I reported at the beginning of the preceding section, Marx accounts for the historical appearance of the wage relationship by arguing that capital is interested in exchanging with labour, and that the ultimate purpose of this exchange is to obtain the title to the appropriation and utilization of labour. He later makes clear that “the social productive powers of labour all present themselves as productive forces, as properties inherent in capital [...]. The social combination of the individual labour capacities [...] does not belong to the workers, but rather confronts them as a capitalist arrangement, it is inflicted upon them” (Marx 1994, 455–6).

The subsumption of labour capacities under capital is the real fact that engenders the firm’s indifference toward concrete labours *from the standpoint of accountancy*. In the determination of a commodity value, wage costs are calculated in terms of the quantity of money paid per labour hour, disregarding the workers’ productive forces. This is the crucial point, and Marx is fully aware of it: the wage is determined independently of labour productivity. Capitalists are very involved in the use of labour skills, as far as the management and organization of the labour process are concerned. However, in recording labour costs, they are unconcerned about the specific use values of labour, not because they are not interested in the workers’ concrete abilities, but because the productive capacities associated with these abilities belong to capitalists once the employment contract is signed. What is bought, what is paid for, is not the set of these abilities and not even a generic labour capacity. It is another thing, and a truly abstract one indeed: labour time, meaning the time during which a worker undergoes the capitalist’s control in the production process.

The close relationship between workers’ subordination to capital and the independence of the wage from workers’ specific skills and competencies can also be seen from another angle. With real subordination, capitalists exert command in the labour process, and thence the power to determine all its aspects: the method and organization

of labour, the choice of techniques, the investment decisions, the use of science, and so on. This implies that capitalists also have the power to reallocate workers among various tasks in relation to technical change and even the power to reskill workers at their will. They demand from their employees a certain degree of malleability, meaning not only a willingness to obey orders but also pliability toward their exigency to reshape abilities. This is made possible by the workers' indifference to the use of their concrete labour. In fact, the workers' competences have become the firm's competences, so that it is "in the nature of the wage labour subordinated by capital that it is indifferent to the specific character of its labour and must submit to being transformed in accordance with the requirement of capital" (1998, 194).

Now it should be easier to understand why the wage is commensurate to a purely quantitative magnitude and why it is reasonable to use the concept of abstract labour to denote this magnitude, but only after purging it of any characteristic of naturalness and productiveness. Precisely this abstraction makes exploitation possible. Once the price of labour time is fixed, and once capital has subsumed the workers' capacities, it is a capitalist prerogative to manage the production process in such a way as to obtain commodities whose value added is greater than the wage paid. Capitalists' power enables them to extract a higher or lower surplus value from production; their organizational and managerial abilities determine labour productivity and therefore the intensity of exploitation. In fact, the capitalist compels the worker "to ensure that his labour possesses at least the socially normal average degree of intensity [and] will try to raise it as much as possible above this minimum and extract from him over a given period as much labour as possible, for every [increase in the] intensity of labour over the average degree creates [a bigger] surplus value for him" (Marx 1994, 396).

Remember that a *contract for services* involves the exchange of a labour *service*, a commodity, whose productivity is supposed to be known *ex-ante*, i.e. before the transaction is concluded. On the ground of this productivity, the market determines the service price as that which equalises demand and supply. On the contrary, labour productivity is not known *ex-ante* in an *employment contract*, and the "market" determines only the price of labour *time*, without any connection with labour productivity. This is determined *ex-post*, in the factory, and is

a function of the exercise of the capitalist's power within the labour process. It is this power that enables the capitalist to extract a surplus value from labour activity.

The contract itself and the parties' bargaining powers set the price of labour time. By establishing the worker's obligation to obedience for a prearranged length of time, the contract fixes a wage that is commensurate to that time. So, to be precise, the wage is the price of freedom, a payment for obedience, and not the value of a commodity. "The more [the workers] wish to earn, the more must they sacrifice their time and carry out slave-labour, completely losing all their freedom" (Marx 1975b, 237). In the exchange with capital, workers alienate their own freedom. "What [they] receive as the price is the value of this alienation" (Marx 1986a, 248).

At last, we can understand why abstract labour is "practically true" in a social and historical sense, but cannot be so in a natural sense. This is because a historically determined social relationship enables the capitalist to treat labour *as if* it were a homogeneous input and to measure its quantity in time units. Since it is typical of the capitalist mode of production, abstract labour emerges in all its simplicity only in the most modern economic form of human evolution:

The simple abstraction which plays the key role in modern economy, and which expresses an ancient relation existing in all forms of society, appears to be true in practice in this abstract form only as a category of the most modern society [...]. The example of labour strikingly demonstrates that even the most abstract categories [...] are, in the determinateness of their abstraction, just as much a product of historical conditions and retain their full validity only for and within these conditions. Bourgeois society is the most developed and many-faceted historical organization of production. The categories which express its relations [provide] an understanding of its structure (Marx 1986a, 42).