

Hats and Men: Marx's Faulty Symmetry

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It is 150 years since Karl Marx published the first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* in 1867, with the two subsequent volumes coming out under the editorship of Friedrich Engels over the next decades. *Capital* is a masterful appraisal of the 'vulgar' defences of capitalism focused on exchange and markets and the more 'scientific' accounts of classical political economy highlighting the distribution of the new value produced between the social classes. From its initial publication, Marx's *Capital* steadily gained prominence within the broad socialist movement as the indispensable point of departure for penetrating the inner workings of the capitalist system, its modes of exploitation and appropriation of the economic product produced by the working classes. *Capital*'s themes remain central to understanding the social divisions of contemporary capitalism – the struggle over the workday and precarious work, the level of wages and the social reproduction of the working class family, the continual drive toward technological change, the production of global armies of surplus labour, the destructive impact of ceaseless competitive pressures to accumulate on the natural ecology, and the social forces polarizing the accumulation of wealth on the one side and poverty on the other.

Yet *Capital* was only the first part of the six-volume plan Marx early envisioned to explore capitalism fully. In his Deutscher Prize-winning book, *Beyond CAPITAL*, Michael Lebowitz argued that the unwritten volume on wage labour would have introduced class struggle into the model in a way that would challenge teleological or mechanical interpretations of the text. Here, Lebowitz argues that Volume I of *Capital* itself is the source of serious problems because of its asymmetry of the determination of the workday by class struggle and the standard of necessity through acceptance of the assumption of classical political economy. The article is published here to contribute to discussions of *Capital* on the occasion of its 150th anniversary.

Michael A. Lebowitz

The Cynicism of Facts

Was Marx a superman or a human being? Joan Robinson once asked a Soviet professor this very question. Of course, Marx was human, he answered. 'Then he could make mistakes?' Yes. 'Would you mind mentioning a mistake that he made?' The Soviet professor changed the subject.[\[1\]](#)

However, 150 years after the publication of Volume I of *Capital*, it is long past time for revolutionaries not to change the subject but to talk seriously about mistakes Marx made in *Capital* and their implications. This article is about one such mistake and how it infected *Capital* and subsequent practice.

Consider the centrality of the argument by analogy at the core of *Capital*. Since labour-power is bought and sold as a commodity, Marx explained, its value is 'determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this specific article.'^[2] Accordingly, as in the case of every other commodity, its value will fall with reductions in the labour-time necessary for its production – i.e., with increases in productivity.

In setting out this principle of the symmetry of labour-power and other commodities, Marx here was following the path of Ricardo, who Marx credited as the first to formulate accurately the relations ('laws') he elaborated in *Capital*.^[3] Ricardo expressed it this way in his *Principles of Political Economy*:

'Diminish the cost of production of hats, and their price will ultimately fall to their new natural price, although the demand should be doubled, tripled or quadrupled. Diminish the cost of subsistence of men, by diminishing the natural price of the food and clothing by which life is sustained, and wages will ultimately fall, notwithstanding that the demand for labourers may very greatly increase.'^[4]

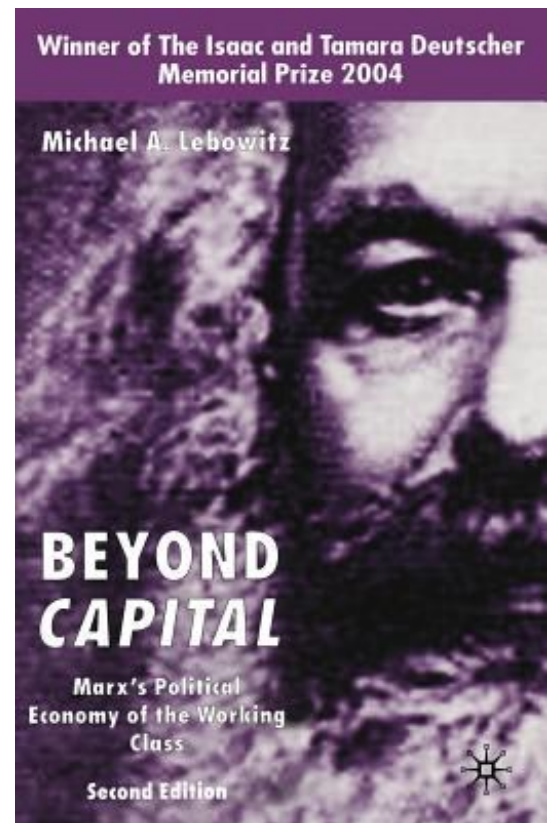
'The cynical Ricardo,' Marx called him in 1844. But he was not commenting upon a personal characteristic of Ricardo; rather, Ricardo's teaching was the perspective of '*English political economy*, i.e., the scientific reflection of English economic conditions.'^[5] This was a perspective that viewed 'man as *worker*, as a *commodity*,' as the product of those economic conditions but that also was indifferent to the production of man as 'a *mentally* and physically *dehumanised* being.' Outside of their direct relation to capital, workers were not recognised by political economy.^[6] But, the cynicism of political economy, Marx explained in his *Poverty of Philosophy*, was simply a statement of 'the facts' in capitalism. Quoting the above passage from Ricardo, Marx commented:

'Doubtless, Ricardo's language is as cynical as can be. To put the cost of manufacture of hats and the cost of maintenance of men on the same plane is to turn men into hats. But do not make an outcry at the cynicism of it. The cynicism is in the facts and not in the words which express, the facts.'^[7]

But, what was that 'cost of subsistence of men' that determined the value of labour-power? It 'can be resolved,' as Marx explained in *Capital*, 'into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence,' and we can assume that set of use-values to be constant: 'the quantity of the means of subsistence required is given at any particular epoch in any particular society, and can therefore be treated as a constant magnitude.'^[8] What precisely was that definite quantity of means of subsistence? Irrelevant, Marx explained: 'whether one assumes the level of workers' needs to be higher or lower is completely irrelevant to the end result. The only thing of importance is that it should be viewed as given, determinate.'^[9]

The Ricardian Default

This assumption of a given standard of necessity was the foundation for the direct link between productivity and surplus value present in Ricardo and also underlies the explanation of relative surplus value in *Capital*. The argument of the 'Ricardian Default' is simple.^[10] If we assume a given set of necessities, productivity increases for those use-values mean that less labour is required to produce the worker and thus, the value of labour-power 'varies with the value of the means of subsistence.'^[11] Further, as Marx explained in Chapter 16, since 'the value of labour-power and surplus-value vary in opposite directions,' an increase or decrease in the productivity



of labour means that 'surplus-value moves in the same direction' as productivity.[12]

From Marx's assumption of the given set of necessities followed not only his theoretical explanation of the generation of relative surplus value but also his stress upon capital's 'immanent drive, and a constant tendency, toward increasing the productivity of labour.' [13] Similarly, the Ricardian Default was at the core of Ricardo's central tendency – his falling rate of profit tendency (more accurately, a falling rate of surplus value). In the latter case, though, the change moved in the *opposite* direction: the reduction in productivity (as the result of diminishing returns in agriculture) generated an increase in necessary labour, reduced surplus labour and thus his explanation of a falling rate of profit.

Characteristic of the Ricardian Default is that any link between productivity and the standard of life of workers is precluded by assumption. As the result of the assumption of a given standard of necessity, in the one case workers cannot gain as the result of increases in productivity and, in the other case, workers cannot lose as the result of decreases in productivity. In both cases, it is by assumption and only by assumption that capital alone benefits or loses as productivity changes.

Marx traced that assumption (and, with it, classical political economy) to the Physiocrats. Precisely because they had made the 'strict necessaire,' the 'minimum of wages,' 'the equivalent of the necessary means of subsistence,' the pivotal point in their theory, Marx declared them to be 'the true fathers of modern political economy.' By treating the minimum of wages as fixed and as a given magnitude, 'the Physiocrats transferred the inquiry into the origin of surplus-value from the sphere of circulation into the sphere of direct production, and thereby laid the foundation for the analysis of capitalist production.' And, this assumption of a fixed set of necessities, of that given subsistence wage, he commented, was followed by Adam Smith 'like all economists worth speaking of.' [14]

Shouldn't we wonder, though, about Marx's acceptance of this classical premise for his discussion of relative surplus value?

The Assumption and 'The Facts'

Despite his acceptance of the classical assumption for his theoretical presentation of the concept of relative surplus value, *outside* of Chapter 12 of Volume I, Marx consistently stressed in *Capital* the ability of workers to expand their consumption of means of subsistence under the appropriate conditions. The fixed character of workers' needs, he indicated in Volume III, 'is mere illusion. If means of subsistence were cheaper or money-wages higher, the workers would buy more of them.' [15] Similarly, in Volume II, he explained that with rising real wages, 'the demand of the workers for necessary means of subsistence will grow. Their demand for luxury articles will increase to a smaller degree, or else a demand will arise for articles that previously did not enter the area of their consumption.' [16] Further, he pointed out in Volume I that, with higher wages, workers 'can extend the circle of their enjoyments, make additions to their consumption fund of clothes, furniture, etc., and lay by a small reserve fund of money.' [17]

Not only was Marx clear that there is not in practice a fixed set of necessities for workers but he also indicated in Chapter 16 of Volume I of *Capital* that rising productivity did *not* necessarily lead to the development of relative surplus value. [18] This was more than a passing observation. As he pointed out explicitly in his *Economic Manuscripts 1861-63*, the scenario offered in his discussion of the concept of relative surplus value in *Capital* was only one of several possibilities. Assuming an increase in productivity, there were *three* possible cases. In the first case, the worker 'receives same quantity of use values as before. In this case there is a fall in the value of his labour capacity or his wage. For there has been a fall in the value of this quantity, which has remained constant.' In the second case, 'there is a rise in the amount, the quantity, of the means of subsistence... but not in the same proportion as in the worker's productivity.' Accordingly, the real wage rises but its value falls – i.e., there is both rising real wages and relative surplus value.

'Finally the third CASE,' Marx continued, where productivity and the standard of necessity rise at the same rate:

'The worker continues to receive the same value – or the objectification of the same part of the working day – as before. In this case, because the productivity of labour has risen, the quantity of use values he receives, his real

wage, has risen, but its value has remained constant, since it continues to represent the same quantity of realised labour time as before. In this case, however, the surplus value too remains unchanged, there is no change in the ratio between the wage and the surplus value, hence the proportion [of surplus value] to the wage remains unchanged.’[19]

In this third case, Marx explained, ‘there would be no CHANGE in surplus value, although the latter would represent, just as wages would, a greater quantity of use values than before.’ Thus, despite his clear understanding that rising productivity could lead to increasing real wages and no relative surplus value at all, only the first case where workers were limited to a fixed set of use-values informed Marx’s explanation of the concept of relative surplus value. Marx’s assumption of the given standard of necessity was contrary to ‘the facts’ that he knew so well – that workers within capitalism can obtain more means of subsistence and thus can be the beneficiaries of productivity increases.

So, why did Marx employ a critical assumption in *Capital* contrary to the facts? Very simply, he always understood it as an assumption – one that must be removed. He explained this to Engels at the very point that he formulated his projected six-book plan for his Economics. Throughout the section on capital in general, Marx indicated, ‘wages are invariably assumed to be at their minimum.’[20] Similarly, he was explicit in the *Grundrisse*: ‘For the time being, necessary labour supposed as such; i.e., that the worker always obtains only the minimum of wages.’[21] As he indicated in his letter to Engels, this was a temporary assumption: ‘the rise or fall of that minimum will be considered under wage labour.’ Further, in the *Grundrisse* he explained that the standard of necessary labour, while treated as fixed, may change and that ‘to consider those changes themselves belongs altogether to the chapter treating of wage labour.’

Nor was Marx’s intention to explore such matters subsequently in a separate study a passing fancy (as is often suggested by some). For example, in his *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, Marx indicated that the question of ‘movements in the level of the workers’ needs’ was not to be explored here ‘but in the doctrine of the wages of labour.’ For now, he insisted that it was essential that the level of workers’ needs be viewed as ‘given, determinate. All questions relating to it as not a given but a variable magnitude belong to the investigation of wage labour in particular.’[22]

Further in that manuscript, Marx noted that his investigation proceeded from the assumption that wages are ‘only reduced by the DEPRECIATION of that labour capacity, or what is the same thing, by the cheapening of the means of subsistence entering into the workers’ consumption’ and that any *other* reason for a reduction in wages was ‘not part of our task’ and ‘belongs to the theory of wages.’[23]

A few years later, Marx repeated the same point. In ‘The Results of the Immediate Process of Production,’ he explained that ‘The level of the necessaries of life whose total value constitutes the value of labour-power can itself rise or fall. The analysis of these variations, however, belongs not here but in the theory of wages.’[24] Nor was this his last reference to the book on wage labour. In Chapter 20 of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx noted that ‘the special study of wage-labour, and not, therefore, to this work’ is where an exposition of the forms of the wage belonged.[25]

But *why* did he postpone his ‘special study of wage-labour’? Because the ‘general capital-relation’ first had to be developed. Variations in the standard of necessity, he indicated in his *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, ‘do not touch its general relationship to capital.’ To understand the nature of capital and the capital-relation, determining the value of labour-power was essential and ‘the only thing of importance’ for this was to treat the standard of necessity ‘as given, determinate’ since its variations do not ‘alter anything in the general relationship.’[26]

As he had indicated in the *Grundrisse*, in his letter to Engels and in his comments on the Physiocrats, all that was needed for the study of capital was to assume that ‘the worker always obtains only the minimum of wages’; changes in the standard of necessity are not part of the study of capital and ‘belong to the investigation of wage labour in particular.’

Certainly, Marx was not following classical political economy by continuing to stress the importance of that special study of wage labour. Rather, acceptance of that fixed set of necessities as the starting point reflected his

dialectical methodology. 'Only by this procedure,' he explained to Engels, 'is it possible to discuss one relation without discussing all the rest.' And, he elaborated his approach in the *Grundrisse*: 'all of these fixed suppositions themselves become fluid in the further course of development. But only by holding them fast at the beginning is their development possible without confounding everything.' What appears fixed and static, in short, is revealed in a dialectical presentation to be fluid and changing. Only 'for the time being' was it assumed that 'the worker always obtains only the minimum of wages'; and this fixed supposition was only held 'fast at the beginning.'

Characteristic of a dialectical presentation is that all sides are not (indeed, cannot be) introduced immediately, and the deficiency and one-sidedness of the starting points only are revealed in the further course of development. In this sense, we may understand Marx's decision to retain the classical assumption as a conscious methodological decision, a moment that would be superseded logically as he proceeded. However, what were the consequences of Marx's assumption for *Capital*? For classical political economy, this assumption was the foundation for the symmetry of hats and men articulated by Ricardo. But did that symmetry belong in Marx's analysis of capitalism?

A Fearful Symmetry?

How can we treat symmetrically the process of producing hats and labour-power? The first is a vertically integrated process of production extending from primary products (which contingently may be interrupted by the equivalent exchange of intermediary inputs). The second, in contrast, is a complex sequence containing (a) the moment of production of articles of consumption, (b) a moment of circulation in which money is exchanged for those articles of consumption and (c) a second moment of production in which those use-values (as well as concrete, uncounted labour) are consumed in order to prepare labour-power for exchange. By treating the two processes symmetrically, only the first of these moments in the production of labour-power is considered: the production of the worker is a footnote to the production of the consumption bundle; the worker disappears and is represented by things. As labelled by a disciple of Ricardo, it is the production of commodities by commodities.

What happens with an increase in productivity? In the case of hats, an increase in productivity at any stage will disrupt the equivalence of embodied social labour and money and will lead to a fall in value of hats ('Diminish the cost of production of hats, and their price will ultimately fall to their new natural price'). In the case of labour-power, similarly, increased productivity in the production of articles of consumption leads directly to a reduction in their value. *And then?* 'Diminish the cost of subsistence of men,' and the immediate effect is *not* a fall in the value of labour-power. Rather, it is a rise in real wages.

How, then, do we go from the fall in the value of articles of consumption to a fall in the value of labour-power? As we have seen, *Capital* did so by assuming the premise inherited from classical political economy that the standard of necessity is a constant magnitude. However, by doing so, Marx brought with him the baggage of classical political economy – in particular, the treatment of money as a veil. Abstracting from money allowed him to move directly from productivity gains to increased surplus value but it also abstracts from the moment of circulation in which workers purchase the use-values they want and thus it obscures specific characteristics of a wage-labourer. In particular, it obscures the difference between a wage-labourer and an instrument of production or a slave.

The slave, Marx explained in the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production,' receives the means of subsistence he requires 'which are fixed both in kind and quantity – i.e. he receives use-value.' In contrast, the wage-labourer receives means of subsistence in the shape of money, and 'it is the worker himself who converts the money into whatever use-values he desires; it is he who buys commodities as he wishes and, as the owner of money, as the buyer of goods, he stands in precisely the same relationship to the sellers of goods as any other buyer.'^[27] Rather than the product of a fixed set of use-values, the wage-labourer here appears as a subject with money and with her own goals. Accordingly, if productivity gains lower the value of articles of consumption and thereby increase the real value of the quantity of money that workers possess, what will workers do? Will they choose to purchase more or different use-values or will they be indifferent? One would not ask this question, of course, in relation to the slave. With its assumption of a fixed set of use-values, rather than turning men into hats, the discussion of relative surplus value in *Capital* turns wage-labourers into slaves.

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A working class that did not struggle 'would be a heart-broken, a weak-minded, a worn-out, unresisting mass.'”

But the ‘facts’ of capitalism are that workers are not slaves. They struggle over wages, the money they receive for the sale of their labour-power. Indeed, in 1853 Marx condemned workers not engaged in the struggle over wages as ‘apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well-fed instruments of production.’ A working class that did not struggle ‘would be a heart-broken, a weak-minded, a worn-out, unresisting mass.’[28] And, he made the same point in 1865: workers who do not struggle over wages are ‘degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past salvation.’ They thereby ‘disqualify themselves for the initiating of any larger movement.’[29] These clearly are not the working class that will be the gravediggers of capital.

Rather, those apathetic instruments of production are the products of capital – deformed as well as exploited within capitalist relations of production. Marx understood quite well that not only is capital produced within those relations but that there is as well a second product, a crippled human product. ‘All means for the development of production’ under capitalism, Marx insisted, ‘distort the worker into a fragment of a man,’ degrade him and ‘alienate him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour process.’[30] And, that was especially true with the development of machinery which, under capitalist relations, completes the ‘separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour.’[31] Thinking and doing become separate and hostile, and ‘every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity’ is lost.

A particular type of person is produced by capital. Producing within capitalist relations is what Marx called a process of a ‘complete emptying-out,’ ‘total alienation,’ the ‘sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.’[32] How else then but with money, the true need that capitalism creates, can we fill the vacuum? Capital constantly generates new needs for workers and it is upon this, Marx noted, that ‘the contemporary power of capital rests’; in short, every new need for capitalist commodities is a new link in the golden chain that links workers to capital.[33]

Is it likely that those people can spontaneously grasp the nature of this destructive system, the precondition for overthrowing it? On the contrary, the workers produced by capital believe that there is no alternative. Capital tends to produce the working class it needs, workers who treat capitalism as common sense. As Marx explained in *Capital*:

‘The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance.’

To this, he added that capital's generation of a reserve army of the unemployed ‘sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker.’[34] The constant generation of a relative surplus population of workers means that wages are ‘confined within limits satisfactory to capitalist exploitation, and lastly, the social dependence of the worker on the capitalist, which is indispensable, is secured.’[35] Accordingly, Marx concluded that the capitalist can rely upon the worker's ‘dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them.’[36]

Guaranteed in perpetuity to be ‘a heart-broken, a weak-minded, a worn-out, unresisting mass’? Marx's description of capital's tendency to produce a working class that looks upon capital's requirements as self-evident natural laws and his conclusion with respect to the perpetual reproduction of the worker's social dependence upon capital are entirely consistent with the disappearance of the worker as subject from Marx's theoretical discussion of relative surplus value.

The Missing Second Product

As I concluded in *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*, missing from *Capital* is what Marx called ‘the worker's own need for development.’ Missing too is the key link of human development and

practice – that workers produce themselves through their own activity, through that ‘coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change’ that Marx articulated so clearly in the ‘[Theses on Feuerbach](#).’

That insight is a red thread that runs throughout Marx's work. From his stress upon the way the struggles of workers against capital transform ‘circumstances and men,’ expanding their capabilities and making them fit to create a new world to his explanation in the *Grundrisse* that in the very act of producing, ‘the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and new ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language,’ Marx was aware that every human activity generates a double product. There are always two products of human activity – the change in circumstances and the change in human beings.[\[37\]](#)

In Marx's introduction of the concept of relative surplus value, however, we have seen that workers there are treated as ‘more or less well-fed instruments of production,’ as slaves who receive means of subsistence ‘which are fixed both in kind and quantity.’ Compare that to ‘the facts’ – that workers are subjects, that they are wage-labourers with their own needs who struggle to realise those needs and produce themselves in that process.

What do workers produce in that process? For success in their struggle to reduce the capitalist workday in length and intensity (in order to have time and energy for themselves) and their struggle for higher wages (in order to satisfy more of their socially generated needs) – and certainly, to succeed in defeating capital's efforts pressing in the opposite direction – workers must fight against their separation, their competition as sellers of labour-power. The General Council of the First International understood this fact, declaring that ‘what the lot of the labouring population would be if everything were left to isolated, individual bargaining, may be easily foreseen. The iron rule of supply and demand, if left unchecked, would speedily reduce the producers of all wealth to a starvation level...’[\[38\]](#) Workers, in short, must organize. In ‘trades without organization of the work-people,’ Engels similarly argued, ‘wages tend constantly to fall and the working hours tend constantly to increase... While the length of working day more and more approaches the possible maximum, the wages come nearer and nearer to their absolute minimum.’[\[39\]](#)

Marx made the same point in *Capital*: the struggle over the workday proves that ‘the isolated worker, the worker as ‘free’ seller of his labour-power, succumbs without resistance once capitalist production has reached a certain stage of maturity.’[\[40\]](#) Workers, in short, succeed in achieving their goals only to the extent that they are able to negate competition amongst them, only by infringing upon the ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand and engaging in ‘planned co-operation.’[\[41\]](#) Indeed, commenting in 1868 about the struggles of workers in New York over the 8 hour day, Marx observed that ‘all serious success of the proletariat depends upon an organization that unites and concentrates its forces,’ and he stressed as well the need to struggle against international competition of workers: ‘Nothing but an international bond of the working classes can ever ensure their definitive triumph.’[\[42\]](#)

Insofar as workers do struggle for themselves and break down the divisions amongst them, they are not simply the products of capital.[\[43\]](#) Class struggle is a process of production; and that process is necessary, Marx told workers, ‘not only in order to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power...’[\[44\]](#) Human beings are the outcome of their own activity – none more so than workers in struggle.[\[45\]](#) Even though they had lost the battle over the Ten Hours Bill, Engels argued, workers had changed significantly in the course of that struggle:

‘The working classes, in this agitation, found a mighty means to get acquainted with each other, to come to a knowledge of their social position and interests, to organize themselves and to know their strength. The working man, who has passed through such an agitation, is no longer the same as he was before; and the whole working class, after passing through it, is a hundred times stronger, more enlightened, and better organized than it was at the outset.’[\[46\]](#)

This is the second product of workers’ struggles, and it is a working class obviously different from capital's second product, that unresisting mass presumed in the discussion of relative surplus value.[\[47\]](#) But this working class is not entirely absent from *Capital*: we do see it briefly in *Capital's* chapter on the workday, where Marx allowed us to hear ‘the voice of the worker which had previously been stifled.’[\[48\]](#) There we see workers as

subjects, struggling against capital for their own goals; and, it is that struggle that determines 'the normal working day.' Unfortunately, those workers *disappear* when it comes to the subsequent chapter on relative surplus value.

Indeed, the 'protracted and more or less concealed civil war between the capitalist class and the working class' over the workday disappears when it comes to the determination of wages.[49] When it comes to introducing the concept of relative surplus value, the worker's voice is stifled, not by the power of capital but by *assumption*. In place of the worker-as-subject, in place of class struggle over wages, *Capital* employs the assumption inherited from classical political economy that treats the worker as an instrument of production without a voice, indeed, as a more or less well-fed instrument of production.

After having introduced workers as subjects in his discussion of the struggle over the workday, though, why did Marx's succeeding chapter on the concept of relative surplus value silence the voice of the worker? What was the effect of not framing this chapter by the same 'antinomy, of right against right,' that struggle between collective capital and collective labour that produced the norm for the workday?[50]

The Consequences of Marx's Faulty Symmetry

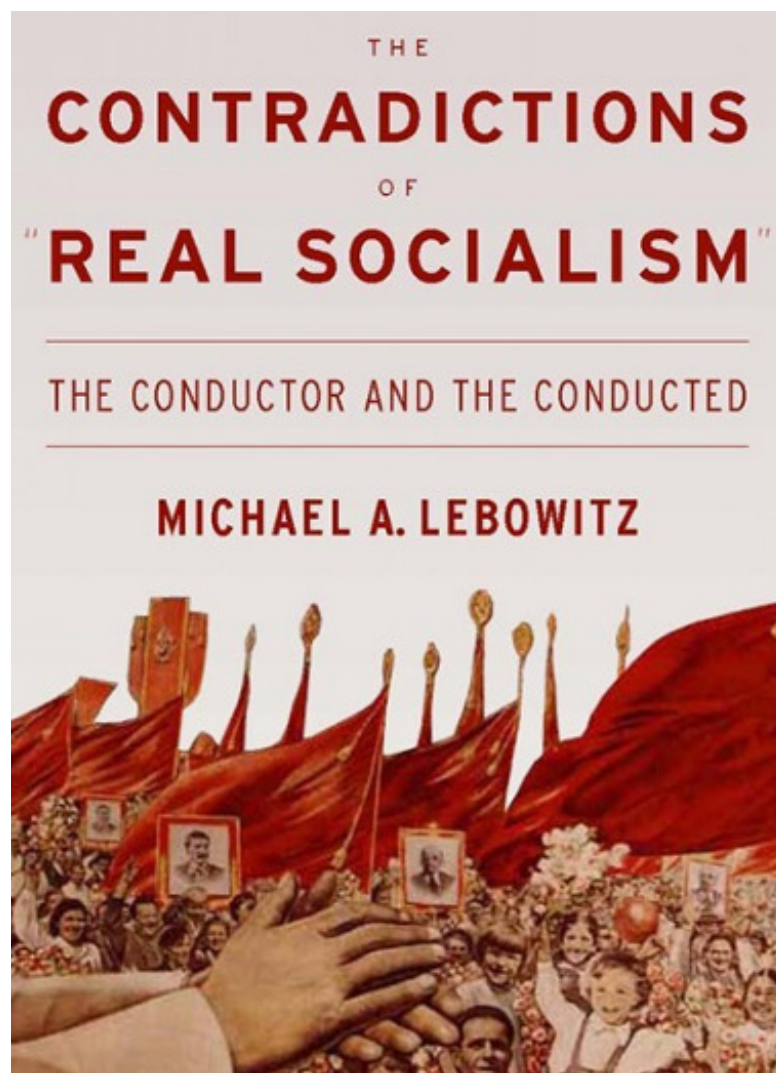
If Marx had not accepted the classical assumption, the basis for relative surplus value and the understanding of capital would be quite different. Revive that working class from where Marx left it in his discussion of the struggle over the workday. When capital faces a working class no longer stifled by assumption but, rather, one that has developed its capacity and organization through its struggles, it faces a working class able to retain the benefits of productivity increases via real wage gains. All other things equal, that unified and organized working class will be the sole beneficiary of the fall in the value of the means of subsistence brought about by productivity increases.

To secure relative surplus value, capital must ensure that all other things are *not* equal. Capital must defeat the working class. As discussed in *Beyond Capital*, just as workers struggle to realise their own goals by combining, capital must *divide* workers. If money values are falling as the result of productivity increases, so too must money wages – and the extent to which capital can succeed in preventing a rise in real wages will determine its ability to secure relative surplus value. Divide the working class becomes the watchword. Every individual capitalist and the class as a whole knows that 'the workers' power of resistance declines with their dispersal.'[51]

So, encourage antagonism between different groups of workers (which Marx called 'the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power'); make changes in the labour process that, rather than strengthening the capacities of workers and opening up a world of 'productive drives and inclinations', suppresses these and turn the relation of head and hand into a hostile antagonism; introduce the machine not as an extension of the power of workers but as their competitor and thus as a weapon used against them. All these have the effect of increasing the degree of separation of workers, and the last in particular expands the competition of employed and unemployed that pushes money wages down.[52]

By dividing and separating workers, capital is able to weaken the working class. But if it does not? If productivity increases were to drop from the sky, what would ensure the generation of relative surplus value rather than an increase in real wages? *It is not the increase in productivity that reduces necessary labour*. Rather, the displacement of workers by machines increases the separation of the working class and ensures that workers are not the beneficiaries of productivity gains. That question, however, Marx explicitly put aside by choosing to assume the standard of necessity constant:

In so far as machinery brings about a direct reduction of wages for the workers employed by it, by e.g. using the demand of those rendered unemployed to force down the wages of those in employment, it is not part of our task to deal with this CASE. It belongs to the theory of wages.[53]



Unfortunately, Marx's decision to postpone this discussion had serious consequences. It left productivity increases as the only explanation of relative surplus value. From this followed the inference that capital's 'immanent drive, and a constant tendency' is that of 'increasing the productivity of labour in order to cheapen commodities and, by cheapening commodities, to cheapen the worker himself.' Once we understand, however, that productivity increases in themselves do *not* reduce necessary labour, the implications are profound: we see that the 'immanent drive, and a constant tendency' of capital is to *divide and separate workers*. Class struggle now takes centre stage.

Productive forces do not drop from the sky. They are never neutral but always reflect the particular relations of production within which they emerge. Within capitalism, the impulse to defeat workers is present in everything that capital does. When capital reorganizes the work place or introduces new productive forces, its purpose is not merely to increase efficiency, but also to defeat workers in order to increase surplus value. Given his conclusion that, within the capitalist system, 'all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers', Marx certainly did not view as neutral those productive forces which degrade the worker 'to the level of an appendage of a machine.'[\[54\]](#)

Nevertheless, given his acceptance of the classical assumption that underlies the Ricardian Default, there can be no surprise that the productive forces introduced in Marx's discussion of relative surplus value were treated as neutral. After all, they were for Ricardo, and Marx followed Ricardo in this respect. Inherent in the classical tradition is the conclusion that *any* increase in productive forces will have the same effect – to 'cheapen commodities and, by cheapening commodities, to cheapen the worker himself.' But that tradition is to be transcended, not accepted.

Asymmetry and the Critique of Political Economy

The symmetry of hats and men that Marx early declared to be the cynicism of the facts and then proceeded to

follow in *Capital* has been sufficiently seductive to preclude questioning of its underlying logic. It has also disguised an important asymmetry in Marx's treatment of the workday and the standard of necessity. The normal workday, Marx indicated, was determined by class struggle. As in the case of the standard of necessity, however, the workday could have been assumed given by historical and moral elements for a given period and given country. This is the other side of the obvious asymmetry between the determination of the workday and the determination of the standard of necessity – between class struggle on the one hand and the classical assumption on the other.

Given the contemporary struggles over the workday, it is easy to see why Marx explained the determination of the workday by the 'protracted civil war between the capitalist class and the working class.' But Marx was also well aware of existing struggles over wages! So why did Marx incorporate class struggle into his theoretical discussion of the former but not the latter? Very simply, Marx did not follow the pre-existing classical assumption to explain the workday because there was none! Classical political economy did not recognise the workday as a variable, and that meant that Marx could draw directly upon the facts of class struggle. In contrast, as we have seen, 'all economists worth speaking of' began with the assumption of a fixed set of necessities, and Marx followed suit. We need to recognise explicitly, therefore, that when it came to discussion of the standard of necessity, *Marx abandoned his critique of political economy and accepted instead the premise of classical political economy.*

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Failing to grasp that the condition of existence of capital is its ability to divide and separate workers means that our understanding of capital is flawed.”

Marx failed, in short, to transcend completely classical political economy, and that has significant implications for the understanding of *Capital*. Failing to grasp that the condition of existence of capital is its ability to divide and separate workers means that our understanding of capital is flawed. Further, reliance upon the Ricardian Default has fostered the treatment of productive forces as neutral and independent of particular productive relations. The theoretical conception of relative surplus value based upon the treatment of workers as slaves and instruments of production without a voice has produced the tendency to think in terms of the autonomous development of productive forces, the neutrality of technology and deterministic and automatic objective laws. As I argued in *Contradictions of 'Real Socialism'*, that tendency has supported a model of society based upon a division between conductors and the conducted.[\[55\]](#)

Marx's abandonment of the critique of political economy was a mistake. And the failure of his disciples to recognise this reveals a lack of clarity as to what precisely constitutes Marx's critique of political economy. Underlying all categories of political economy is the obscure structure of capitalist relations of production, and their critique requires the revelation of those underlying relations. Class struggle must inform every part of that critique. •

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Endnotes

1. Joan Robinson, '[Marxism: Religion and Science](#),' *Monthly Review*, December 1962, Vol 14, No, 8, p. 435. I am grateful to John Bellamy Foster for relocating this article for me.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 274.
3. Marx, 1977: 660.
4. David Ricardo, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (London: Dent. Everyman's Library, No. 590,

1969), Chapter 30, p.260.

5. Karl Marx, 'Critical Marginal Notes on the Article by a Prussian', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* [MECW], Volume 3 (New York, 1975), 192.
6. Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844' in *Ibid.*, 283-4.
7. Karl Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, in *MECW*, Vol 7, (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 125.
8. Marx, 1977: 275-6, 655.
9. Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, in *MECW*, Vol. 30, (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 45-6.
10. See the discussion of the Ricardian Default in Michael A. Lebowitz, 'Trapped Inside the Box? Five Questions for Ben Fine', *Historical Materialism*, 18.1 (March 2010).
11. Marx, 1977: 276.
12. Marx, 1977: 656.
13. Marx, 1977: 436-7.
14. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Vol. 1, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), 44-5, 68, 296. See the discussion of Marx's assumption and his intention to remove it in Michael A. Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
15. Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. III (New York: Vintage Books, 1981b), 289-90.
16. Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. II (New York: Vintage Books, 1981a), 414.
17. Marx, 1977: 769.
18. Marx, 1977: 659.
19. Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63 (Conclusion)* in *MECW*, Vol. 34 (New York: International Publishers, 1994),:65-6.
20. *MECW*, Vol. 40, (New York: International Publishers, 1983), 298.
21. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage Publishers, 1973), 817. By this 'minimum', Marx explicitly explained, he meant 'not the extreme limit of physical necessity but the average daily wage over e.g. one year' (Marx, 1988: 52).
22. Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*, in *MECW*, Vol. 30 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 44-5.
23. *MECW*, 1994: 23.
24. Marx, 1977: 1068-9.
25. Marx, 1977: 683.
26. Marx, 1988: 44-7.
27. Marx, 1977: 1033.
28. *MECW* Vol. 12 (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 169.
29. Karl Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*, *MECW* Vol. 20: (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 148.

30. Marx, 1977: 548, 643, 799.
31. Ibid., 482–84, 548, 607–8, 614.
32. Marx, 1973: 488.
33. Ibid.: 287; Lebowitz, 2003: 32–44.
34. Marx, 1977: 899.
35. Ibid., 935.
36. Ibid., 899.
37. Cf. Chapter 10, 'From Political Economy to Class Struggle,' Lebowitz, 2003.
38. Karl Marx, 'Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association to the Members and Affiliated Societies,' July 9, 1867, *Minutes of the General Council of the First International, 1866-8* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, n.d.), 137.
39. Friedrich Engels, '[Trade Unions](#)' (part I) *The Labour Standard*, 28 May 1881 in W.O. Henderson, *Engels: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1967), 104; Cf. Lebowitz, 2003, Ch. 4, 'The Political Economy of Wage-Labour.'
40. Marx, 1977: 412.
41. Marx, 1977: 793.
42. Lebowitz, 2003: 185.
43. Lebowitz, 2003: Ch.10, Section 1, 'Class Struggle as Production.'
44. Karl Marx, [Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne](#), in *MECW*, Vol. 11 (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 403; Lebowitz, 2003: Ch. 10.
45. Marx discovered the point that every activity in which people engage forms them in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The outstanding achievement of the *Phenomenology*, Marx announced, is that 'Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process'; thus, Hegel grasps real human beings 'as the outcome of man's own labour.' Karl Marx, *1844 Manuscripts* in *MECW*, Vol. 3: 329.
46. Friedrich Engels, '[The Ten Hours' Question](#)' (1850), *MECW*, Vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 275.
47. On the question of the second product, see Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), in particular, Chapter 2, 'The Production of People'. See also Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Imperative: From Gotha to Now* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015.).
48. Marx, 1977: 342.
49. Ibid., 412.
50. Ibid., 344.
51. Ibid., 591.
52. Ibid., 481, 548, 526, 557, 562-3, 643, 799.
53. Marx, 1994: 23.

54. Marx, 1977: 799.

55. See Chapter 8, 'Good-bye to Vanguard Marxism,' in Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Contradictions of 'Real Socialism': The Conductor and the Conducted* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).