

# Abstract and Concrete Labour

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The reproduction of society requires the production and distribution of the mass of products which forms the material basis of its existence. This in turn means that each society must somehow ensure that its available social labour time is regularly directed, in particular quantities and proportions, towards the specific applications needed to ensure social reproduction. As Marx points out, 'every child knows that a nation which ceased to work . even for a few weeks, would perish' (Marx, 1867a).

The above implies that all labour has two distinct aspects. As a part of the general pool of society's labour, it is merely one portion of the human energy available to the community. In this respect all labour is essentially the same, representing the expenditure of 'human labour-power in general' in its capacity as simply one part of the division of general social labour. This is labour as *social labour*. *But at the same time*, individual labour occurs in the form of a specific activity aimed at a specific result. Here it is the particular quality of the labour, its determination, etc. which is relevant. This is labour as concrete *labour*, related to the concrete result of its activity.

Although the dialectic between concrete and social labour is a necessary part of social reproduction, their inter-connection is hard to discern within societies which produce things-for-exchange (commodities), because in this case individual activities are undertaken without any apparent consideration for the necessity of a social division of labour. All useful objects now appear to be naturally endowed with quantitative worth in exchange (*exchange value*), and this apparently natural property in turn seems to regulate the actual division of labour.

It is at this point that Marx introduces two crucial questions. What precisely is a commodity? And more importantly, why does it become socially necessary to attach an exchange value to it? He begins his answer by observing that as a useful good a commodity is simply a concrete bundle of different socially desirable properties. In this respect it is similar to particular, qualitatively distinct useful objects in all social forms of organization. **But as** an exchangeable good, its

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salient property is that it is treated socially as being qualitatively *identical to every* other commodity. This is manifested in the fact that when commodities are assigned differing quantities of exchange value, expressed in some common measure, they are thereby being socially regarded as qualitatively alike, all reducible to the same homogeneous measure of quantitative worth. A commodity is therefore a doublet of opposite characteristics: a multiplicity of concrete useful Properties (use value) on the one hand, and a single magnitude of homogeneous quantitative worth (exchange value) on the other.

The double character of a commodity is strikingly reminiscent of the previously noted duality of labour as particular concrete labour and as general social labour. Indeed, in commodity producing society the various concrete labours 'only count as homogeneous labour when under *objectified husk*', that is, when they 'relate to one another as human labour by relating *their products to one another as values*'. The concrete labours are thus counted as social labour only when they are *valorized*, and the necessity of exchange value lies precisely in the fact that it is through this device that a society containing apparently independent private producers comes to grips with the social content of their individual labours. To answer Marx's second question, exchange value is the particular historical mode of expressing the general necessity of social labour.

The notion that exchange value is a historically specific way of accounting for social labour time does not imply that the terms of exchange of commodities always reflect the quantities of valorized social labour time that went into their respective production. Indeed, Marx distinguishes between the case in which particular useful objects are produced for direct use and only accidentally or occasionally find their way into the sphere of exchange, and the case in which goods are produced *in order* to be exchanged. In the first case, when for example otherwise self-sufficient tribes occasionally barter a few of their products, the relation between concrete labour and social labour is effectively determined within each social group, and exchange merely serves to create a temporary equivalence between the respective social labours involved. Because the objects in question are produced as useful objects and become commodities only when they enter exchange, the labours involved are valorized only in exchange itself. Moreover, since these activities do not depend fundamentally on exchange (and hence on the valorization of their labour), the precise conditions of exchange can in turn be decided by a variety of factors, ranging from broad structural influences to merely conjunctural or even accidental ones.

At the opposite extreme is the case of goods produced solely for exchange. Now, the particular labours involved are *aimed* at producing exchangeable goods, and the valorization of these labours is an intrinsic part of their reproduction. As producers of commodities, these labours create not only bundles of useful Properties (use-values), but also amounts of abstract quantitative worth. In the former aspect, they are of course concrete labours; but in the latter, they are *value creating* activities whose content as social labour is manifest only in-and-through the abstract quantitative worth of their products. To emphasize this particular historical form of the duality of labour, Marx identifies that labour

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which is engaged in the production of commodities as being both concrete (use-value creating) labour, and *abstract* (value creating) labour.

Three further points must be briefly mentioned. First of all, Marx argues that abstract labour time not only stands behind the production of commodities, but that the magnitudes of these labour times actually regulate the exchange relations of these commodities. To this end, he defines the quantity of abstract labour 'socially necessary . . . to produce an article under the normal conditions of production' as the (inner) *value* of the commodity, since it is the 'intrinsic measure' of the exchange value. Secondly, he distinguishes between the conditions under which the exchange relations of commodities are dependent on their (labour) values, and the conditions in which they are controlled by them. It is only in the latter instance, in which capitalism has effectively generalized commodity production, that the reproduction of society is regulated by the law of value. Lastly, he notes that once commodity production is indeed generalized, so that social labour appears only under an objective husk, then the social relation among producers is actually regulated by the mysterious value-relation between their products. In this topsy-turvy world, a social relation among persons appears in their eyes to be in fact a relation among things. This is what Marx calls the Fetishism of Commodities which is characteristic of capitalism.

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