

On Labour

Marcel Stoetzler, script of talk given at Maumaus, Lisboa, May 25, 2013

“Twelve hours of work a day, that is the ideal of the philanthropists and moralists of the eighteenth century. How have we outdone this *nec plus ultra!* Modern factories have become ideal houses of correction in which the toiling masses are imprisoned, in which they are condemned to compulsory work for twelve or fourteen hours, not the men only but also women and children. And to think that the [French workers] ~~sons of the heroes of the Terror~~ have allowed themselves to be degraded by the religion of work, to the point of ... proclaim[ing] as a revolutionary principle the Right to Work. Shame to the French proletariat! Only slaves would have been capable of such baseness. A Greek of the heroic times would have required twenty years of capitalist civilization before he could have conceived such vileness.

And if the miseries of compulsory work and the tortures of hunger have descended upon the proletariat more in number than the locusts of the Bible, it is because the proletariat itself invited them. This work, which in June 1848 the laborers demanded with arms in their hands, this they have imposed on their families; they have delivered up to the barons of industry their wives and children. ... Our epoch has been called the century of work. It is in fact the century of pain, misery and corruption.

And all the while the philosophers, the bourgeois economists – from the painfully confused August Comte to the ludicrously clear Leroy Beaulieu; the people of bourgeois literature – from the quackishly romantic Victor Hugo to the artlessly grotesque Paul de Kock, – all have intoned nauseating songs in honor of the god Progress, the eldest son of Work. Listen to them and you would think that happiness was soon to reign over the earth, that its coming was already perceived. ...

What a miserable abortion of the revolutionary principles of the bourgeoisie! What woeful gifts from its god Progress! ... Far better were it to scatter pestilence and to poison the springs than to erect a capitalist factory in the midst of a rural population. Introduce factory work, and farewell joy, health and liberty; farewell to all that makes life beautiful and worth living. ...

Because, lending ear to the fallacious words of the economists, the proletarians have given themselves up body and soul to the vice of work; they precipitate the whole of society into these industrial crises of over-production which convulse the social organism. Then because there is a plethora of merchandise and a dearth of purchasers, the shops are closed and hunger scourges the working people with its whip of a thousand lashes. The proletarians, brutalized by the dogma of work, not understanding that the over-work which they have inflicted upon themselves during the time of pretended prosperity is the cause of their present misery, do not run to the granaries of wheat and cry: “We are hungry, we wish to eat. True we have not a red cent, but beggars as we are, it is we, nevertheless, who harvested the wheat and gathered the grapes.” They do not besiege the warehouse of Bonnet, or Jujurieux, the inventor of industrial convents, and cry out: “M. Bonnet, here are your working women, silk workers, spinners, weavers; they are shivering pitifully

under their patched cotton dresses, yet it is they who have spun and woven the silk robes of the fashionable women of all Christendom. The poor creatures working thirteen hours a day had no time to think of their toilet. Now, they are out of work and have time to rustle in the silks they have made. Ever since they lost their milk teeth they have devoted themselves to your fortune and have lived in abstinence. Now they are at leisure and wish to enjoy a little of the fruits of their labor. ... Put at the disposal of your working girls the fortune they have built up for you out of their flesh; you want to help business, get your goods into circulation, – here are consumers ready at hand. Give them unlimited credit. You are simply compelled to give credit to merchants whom you do not know from Adam or Eve, who have given you nothing, not even a glass of water. ...” Instead of taking advantage of periods of crisis, for a general distribution of their products and a universal holiday festival, the laborers, perishing with hunger, go and beat their heads against the doors of the workshops. With pale faces, emaciated bodies, pitiful speeches they assail the manufacturers: “Good M. Chagot, sweet M. Schneider, give us work, it is not hunger, but the passion for work which torments us”. And these wretches, who have scarcely the strength to stand upright, sell twelve and fourteen hours of work twice as cheap as when they had bread on the table. ...

If industrial crises follow periods of overwork as inevitably as night follows day, bringing after them lockouts and poverty without end, they also lead to inevitable bankruptcy. So long as the manufacturer has credit he gives free rein to the rage for work. He borrows, and borrows again, to furnish raw material to his laborers, and goes on producing without considering that the market is becoming satiated and that if his goods don't happen to be sold, his notes will still come due. At his wits' end, he implores the banker; he throws himself at his feet, offering his blood, his honor. ... At last the crash comes and the warehouses disgorge. Then so much merchandise is thrown out of the window that you cannot imagine how it came in by the door. Hundreds of millions are required to figure the value of the goods that are destroyed. In the last century they were burned or thrown into the water.

But before reaching this decision, the manufacturers travel the world over in search of markets for the goods which are heaping up. They force their government to annex Congo, to seize on Tonquin, to batter down the Chinese Wall with cannon shots to make an outlet for their cotton goods. In previous centuries it was a duel to the death between France and England as to which should have the exclusive privilege of selling to America and the Indies. Thousands of young and vigorous men reddened the seas with their blood during the colonial wars of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

... These individual and social miseries, however great and innumerable they may be, however eternal they appear, will vanish like hyenas and jackals at the approach of the lion, when the proletariat shall say “I will”. But to arrive at the realization of its strength the proletariat must trample under foot the prejudices of Christian ethics, economic ethics and free-thought ethics. It must return to its natural instincts, it must proclaim the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and more sacred than the anaemic Rights of Man concocted by the metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution. It must accustom itself to working but three hours a day, reserving the rest of the day and night for leisure and feasting.

... given the modern means of production and their unlimited reproductive power it is necessary to curb the extravagant passion of the laborers for work and to **oblige** them to consume the goods which they produce.”

[Paul Lafargue, 1880]

One of the key discoveries, perhaps *the* key discovery by Marx was the double character of labour in capitalist society. Labour in capitalist society plays a historically unique role in mediating social relations: whereas in non-capitalist society, society determines labour, in capitalist society labour determines society. In commodity-determined society, the *same* labour appears twice, as *concrete* useful labour and as *abstract* value-creating labour.

[BRACKET: Not many things are done in contemporary society that are not productive of value, i.e. that are ‘unproductive labour’ in the capitalist perspective: almost anything now is more or less directly instrumental in the production of the chief capitalist commodity, labour-power. We work on it all the time, investing and investing in our most precious product; while the production of material objects, including e.g. food, is done by fewer and fewer workers as well as by workers very far out of sight, and more and more workers are involved in labour processes that are often described as ‘immaterial labour’, such ‘immaterial labour’ is more than ever before directed to the production of a *very* material, embodied commodity, labour power. The fashionable term ‘immaterial labour’ is misleading even on an empirical, surface level: there is not much spiritual about either programming or the labours of love and affection. Apart from the Cheshire cat, we all smile by putting into motion muscles, nerves, sinews. Different muscles nerves and sinews they may be, but this leaves us professional smilers and loviess in the same category as the most hard-working coal miner in China. Labour remains labour. Immaterial labour is a myth invented by some authors of fashionable social theory who fancy themselves as the ‘cognitariat’, as Silvia Federici pointed out,¹ as if typing away on a laptop is in and of itself a more ‘cognitive’ process than making an umbrella or operating a machine in a car factory.]

Abstract human labour is considered the ‘social substance’ common to all particular forms of productive activity. This overall commonality *appears* to be the ‘expenditure of human energy in (any) physiological form’, that is a transhistorical, physiological residue. But being

¹ Federici, 2010, ‘Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint’, in *Variant* 37, 23-25

[http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue37_38/V37preclab.pdf]

the core structure of a historically specific social formation, that of the capitalist mode of production, abstract labour is not a transhistorical substance, but a historically and socially determined one. The statement that, in any society, humans interact with nature is a truism of little explanatory power. The point is *how* interaction constitutes society: '[L]abor as such does not constitute society per se; labor in capitalism, however, does constitute that society' (Moishe Postone).²

Concrete labour is understood hereby as any intentional activity that transforms material in a determinate fashion; *abstract labour* is the *function* of such labours as *socially mediating* activities as specific to the capitalist mode of production, a mediation based on the *assumed* or projected commensurability of all labour activities. In non-capitalist societies, labouring activities are social by virtue of the matrix of personal, qualitatively particular social relations, in which they are embedded. Exploitation and domination – if they exist - are *extrinsic* to non-capitalist forms of labour (such as serf labour), while they are *integral* to commodity-determined labour. In 'traditional'³ social formations, such as feudalism, labour is *bonded*, or 'fettered', as protagonists and apologists of bourgeois revolutions emphasised. In the capitalist mode of production, as opposed to that, (abstract) labour *is the bond*: it performs objective constraints that are 'apparently nonsocial'.⁴

'The working class ... is the necessary basis of the present (society) under which it suffers', according to M. Postone-Lafargue.⁵ 'Ongoing conflicts' about the *rate* of exploitation are 'intrinsic aspects of everyday life in capitalist society'. In this sense, class conflict is 'a driving element' of the historical development of capitalism, which includes its totalisation as well as those moments that facilitate its abolition.

'Class' in this context is a relational category: a class is a class only in relation to other classes. Classes as they occur in the first volume of *Capital* 'are not entities but structurings

² Postone, Moishe 1993, *Time, Labor and Social Domination, A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge (Mas): Cambridge University Press, 157; cp. also Stoetzler, Marcel. 2004. 'Postone's Marx, a theorist of modern society, its social movements and its captivity by abstract labour' in *Historical Materialism* 12:3, pp. 261-83.

³ On the emergence of the problematic concept of 'traditional society' see Mantena, Karuna, 2010, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, Princeton University Press.

⁴ Postone 1993:174

⁵ Actually Postone 1993:357

of social practice and consciousness ... organized antagonistically'.⁶

Commensurability, the ability of two quantities to be measured by the same scale, implies that they are of the same (abstract) essence (value). Without the assumption of this essential identity, different products could not be exchanged as equivalents of equal value. This is true of all commodity-exchanging social formations, not only capitalist ones. Only in capitalism, though, it becomes a totalising structure.

As to labour and to the commodity form, there are an abstract and a concrete side to 'class'. class in the concrete belongs to the overt, concrete, direct social relations 'such as kinship relations or relations of personal or direct domination'. Capitalist society, however, is characteristically structured by a social interrelatedness that cannot be explained in such terms.

The French 'restoration' historians Thierry and Mignet developed a bourgeois theory of class struggle (drawing on Machiavelli and Hobbes) that knew two essential classes in the context of the French Revolution: 'the idle and decadent descendants of the feudal order of Germanic conquerors, and the productive, innovative, and virtuously "active" elements who sprang from the indigenous people'. *Progress*, in this conception, consists in the triumph of the active and creative element of society, the Third Estate that is supposed to become the totality of productive society, *la nation*.⁷ Allowing the active a free hand ('Liberty, Equality, Property and Bentham', in Marx's formula from *Capital*)⁸ results in progress and harmony.

Important elements of this bourgeois line of thinking, though, underlie the ideologies of working-class movements, too, and also their (sometimes not-so-working class) successor movements in the present period. The liberal ideology of sailing with the infallible winds of progress – the productive classes will inevitably, if one only lets them, outdo the idle classes – is being perpetuated in the hegemonic (or 'traditional') forms of Marxism, i.e. what Postone calls 'standpoint of labour' theory. This insight is important for explaining some discriminatory practices and ideologies within the labour movement, such as some forms of socialist racism and antisemitism. The latter arise whenever and to the extent that the labour movement is not a proletarian movement (in the emphatic sense of the word: proletariat as the self-*Aufhebung* [sublation, overcoming, abolition] of the working class). The claim to be speaking 'from the standpoint of labour' can be understood in this perspective as an element

⁶ Postone 1993:321

⁷ Sieyes, *What is the Third Estate?*

⁸ Marx 1991:160

of bourgeois ideology that is incompatible with Marx's critique of political economy (irrespective of whether or not Marx himself ever formulated such a claim).

Central to antisemitism is the fetishisation of productive as against unproductive work. The antisemites imagine themselves as the collective of honest, hard-working producers, the Jews as non-productive parasites who manage to appropriate surplus by domination of the spheres of circulation and mediation in its various modes. [Depending on what the antisemites understand the concepts 'modernity' and 'capitalism' to mean, they imagine these parasites to be very modern or more or less pre-modern, or, to the extent that conceptual clarity is usually not a particular strength of these people, a mixture of both.] Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that '[b]ourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic foundation: the concealment of domination in production' [by 'bourgeois' they probably meant 'pertaining to bourgeois society', in the sense of 'modern antisemitism'].⁹ The antisemitic projection obscures that in reality, specifically capitalist exploitation takes place in the sphere of production. This crucial aspect of modern antisemitism first emerged in the context of what Marx attacked as 'utopian', i.e. petty-bourgeois forms of socialism. The forms of naïve 'anti-capitalism' that look for the evil to be extirpated not in the capitalist mode of production itself but in Wall Street, its greedy bankers who inhabit the East coast and direct the Zionist Occupied Government, are unable to recognise, let alone overcome the still surviving traditional antisemitism of European (non-Marxian) socialism that are imbued with a legacy of Christian, anti-Jewish imagery.

The dichotomy of *material wealth* and *abstract value* is rooted in the double character of labour in the capitalist mode of production as abstract and concrete labour. The productivity of labour is based on the social character of labour as *productive activity* (concrete labour); it is nothing other than historically developed forms of social organisation and social knowledge. Value, though, is based on the opposite dimension of capitalist labour: it is the objectification of labour as *socially mediating activity* (abstract labour). This means that value, on the one hand, does not directly reflect productivity and the production of material wealth, whereas wealth, on the other hand, is not exclusively and not even necessarily bound to the expenditure of human labour. This implies that a society based on the measurement of value – the society of capital – will never be able to radically and globally reduce the expenditure of 'brains, hands, muscles, nerves', even if this society would potentially be able to do so and let forces of nature and machines do all or most of the work. This society

⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno 1997, p. 173.

condemns itself to never ending drudgery: ‘With advanced technological production, ... [the] expenditure of direct human labor time no longer stands in any meaningful relationship to the production of [material] wealth.’ This is the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist mode of production: the value-form as a core structure of society becomes increasingly anachronistic. Material wealth becomes more and more independent from direct expenditure of labour: productivity, historically accumulated human knowledge and experience, the worldly afterlife of thousands of past generations, works increasingly for the living and could, for the first time in history, free them from most of the drudgery. Only the capitalist mode of production, based as it is on the measurement of riches not as material wealth but in the form of abstract value, materialised in money, depending on the consumption of living human labour, keeps that golden age in the bottle.

Machines *as such* increase wealth but not value. As a machine, as such, *reduces* the production of value in that it replaces living labour, a capitalist enterprise will only implement it if it is instrumental to an *overall* strategy of *increasing value*, that is, increasing exploitation. One can expect that, within the framework of the capitalist mode of production, only such machines will be developed and implemented that increase exploitation. No material wealth can be produced beyond what can be valorised, i.e. what serves the transformation of value into more value.

Modern society’s dynamic drive towards totalisation is a unique and extraordinary fact. ‘Only capitalism – not the history of humanity – reveals a totalizing logic’. Although the logic of modern history is a ‘progressively less random’ one, the essence of the totality that constitutes itself in this process is contradictory, and thus implies its own negation as a possibility:

It is because this present is logically determined as a totality of a contradictory essence that it logically points beyond itself to the possibility of a future form, whose realization depends upon class struggle. The choice becomes socialism or barbarism – and this depends upon revolutionary practice.¹⁰

The element of freedom and choice that ‘revolutionary practice’ refers to is directed *against* the totalising tendency whose product it is: with necessity and domination, the contradictions

¹⁰ Postone, Moishe; Reinicke, Helmut. 1974. ‘On Nicolaus “Introduction” to the Grundrisse’, in: *Telos* 22:130-48, here: 137.

grow; the possibility of freedom, that is, of the negation of the totality, grows, *too*.

Two key modern categories that are related to the concept of ‘revolutionary practice’ are also ‘constituted with the development and consolidation of the commodity-determined form of social relations’, in particular, wage-labour: universality and equality (in their modern formulations at least, it should be added).¹¹ Universalising and equalising *practice* is the root of the – philosophical, political, social – *ideas* of universality and equality. Just as these practices are ever historically specific, so are the concomitant ideas: the *specific* form of the idea of equality as it arises in the context of the capitalist mode of production is based on the opposition of the universal and the particular (and values the former to the detriment of the latter); the universal is an abstraction from the particular. Marx’s critique is directed neither against the one nor the other, but *against their opposition* and ‘points to the possibility of another form of universalism, one not based upon an abstraction from all concrete specificity’ (Postone).¹² In Adorno’s term, it would aim at their ‘reconciliation’.

The Fordist model of a reasonably well-paid, securely employed male breadwinner who can afford a housewife to provide reproductive and affective services at no additional cost was dissolved in the post-Fordist period that allowed a relaxation of the sexual order. In the *current* stage of post-Fordism in which wage-labour is increasingly precarious and not necessarily anymore the main form of household income – which is how things had been before Fordism, and never stopped being in those areas that were never dominated by the Fordist model in the first place – is accompanied by efforts by state and society elites to restore the sexual order to its previous form where marriage is the norm and ‘national cultural traditions’, infused by nationally interpreted readings of more or less fundamentalist theology, regulate family life.¹³

¹¹ Whether this argument can be extended to antiquity where ideas of universality and equality first emerged (but were not societally structuring concepts) depends on an evaluation of Sohn-Rethel’s respective contributions.

¹² Postone 1993: 164.

¹³ Cooper (2012:651) quotes here Ian Duncan Smith, the British Secretary of Work and Pensions (Cooper, Melinda. 2012. ‘Workfare, Familyfare, Godfare: Transforming Contingency into Necessity’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111:4, 643-61). The passages from her very inspiring article that refer to (‘post-’[?]) [Maoist-]ish leftists are the following:

‘[T]he permanent contingency of labor’ is complemented by ‘the unbreachable covenant of faith-based workfare’ (Cooper 2012:653) as propagated by ‘red Toryism’, ‘Blue Labour’, soft/post-Leninism/Maoism (Žižek, Badiou and dedicated followers of fashion) or the Muslim Brotherhood (which has long been supported by the [British] SWP [‘Cliffites’] and

‘Today political philosophers from Jürgen Habermas to Alain Badiou and Mario Tronti are laboring under the illusion that faith in some absolute theological truth is what will save us from the purportedly desacralizing influence of late capitalism’ (Cooper 2012: 10). ‘Perhaps the most condensed, although no doubt unwitting, philosophical translation of the theology of workfare can be found in the Pauline messianism of Badiou, for whom labor itself is an act of faith in the face of radical contingency. Having acknowledged the historical obsolescence of a certain style of Leninism, Badiou’s new militantism no longer looks to the party or the state as the agent of revolution but rather to the armies of the faithful, “coworkers in the labor of truth,” whom he charges with the task of reinstating a certain kind of sexual order. For the later Badiou, it is not the partystate but “love” (Badiou’s translation of *agape*, or charity) that will perform the work of salvation. Truth is no longer to be found in the “law” of the state, but rather in the “law beyond the law” of sexual difference, which the armies of the faithful will uphold against the dedifferentiating logic of the general equivalent. It is through the labor of faith, Badiou insists, that the subjective contingency of experience becomes amenable to the necessity of universal truth. In this, Badiou’s philosophy perfectly encapsulates the law of value in its contemporary form’ (Cooper 2012: 13). ‘The familialist tendencies of the last two decades of workfare reform should make us wary of the proposition that post-Fordism has destroyed the proper hierarchies of sexual labor and should therefore be countered with a return to moral orthodoxy. It is this restorative proposition that unites the otherwise disparate anticapitalisms of the social democratic sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, the ultraorthodox Catholic Milbank, and the Maoist/Leninist revolutionaries Slavoj Žižek and Badiou. Reformist, ultratraditionalist, or messianic, what these theorists share in common is an essentially conservative critique of capitalism—a critique that should itself be considered as internal and structural to capitalism’s double movement’ (Cooper 2012: 13-14). Cooper references Badiou’s book on St. Paul and Žižek’s two coedited volumes (with John Milbank and others) on *Theology and the Political* (2005) and *Paul’s New Moment* (2010).

its theoreticians like Callinicos).¹⁴

I would like to let my talk die down slowly with two concluding digressions that seem to me more or less relevant to the question of labour. In the first I would like to remind you briefly of the conception of the different forms of household incomes developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, one of the more inspiring practitioners of the academic discipline of sociology, as I think it can help putting the concept of the ‘precariat’ into perspective, and in the second I would like to show you and share my thoughts on the recent issue of a Berlin based street newspaper called *Strassenfeger* that I was sold last week when I visited Berlin and that happens to be given over to a discussion of the concept of labour.

On Wallerstein:¹⁵

Definition of household: ‘A typical household consists of three to ten persons who, over a long period (say thirty years or so), pool multiple sources of income in order to survive collectively.’ Not usually egalitarian; not unchanging; involves an obligation to provide income. [Larger income-pooling entities than this tend to be dysfunctional for capitalism]

Wallerstein distinguishes five kinds of income in the modern world system:

- 1) wage, occasional or regular; usually in money-form
- 2) subsistence activity: increasing in the modern world, except in its rural form which is declining. Cooking, household, assembling furniture (IKEA), emailing (instead of dictating to a secretary...)
- 3) Petty commodity production: made in the household, sold on market (often called ‘free-lancing’) (e.g. in the case of the currently highly popular ‘cup-cakes’ this involves de-skilling, de-differentiation, de-sublimation of artisan patisserie)
- 4) Rent: income from ownership rather than from work

¹⁴ See on this for example Camila Bassi, 2010, ‘The Anti-Imperialism of Fools’: A Cautionary Story on the Revolutionary Socialist Vanguard of England’s Post-9/11 Anti-War Movement’, in: ACME 9:2, pp. 113-137 [<http://www.acme-journal.org/vol9/Bassi10.pdf>]

¹⁵ Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. ‘The Modern World-System as a Capitalist World-Economy: Production, Surplus Value, and Polarization’ in: *World-System Analysis: An Introduction*, Duke University Press.

5) Transfer payments: gifts, loans perhaps by moral or other form of obligation; insurance; redistribution schemes (welfare state being only one example)

In what Wallerstein calls a ‘proletarian household’ more than 50% of income from wages – i.e. these other forms of income are also all present. ‘Precariat’ is normal situation for proletarian households, not to mention ‘semi-proletarian’ ones.

The members of semiproletarian household can be paid below the ‘absolute minimum wage’: ‘the other producers of income in the household are in effect transferring surplus-value to the employer of the wage-earner over and above whatever surplus-value the wage-earner himself is transferring, by permitting the employer to pay less than the absolute minimum wage’.

Capitalists prefer semiproletarians therefore; but semiproletarians tend to struggle to become fully proletarianized. More complete proletarianization is functional for capitalists when they [think they] need to increase demand by increasing wages. ‘Rather than think of proletarianization as a capitalist necessity, it would be more useful to think of it as a locus of struggle, whose outcome has been a slow if steady increase’.

Furthermore: ‘Households serve as the primary socializing agencies of the world-system.’

‘A household that is certain of its status-group identity – its nationality, its race, its religion, its ethnicity, its code of sexuality – knows exactly how to socialize its members.’ Households can socialize their members towards conformity and/or towards rebellion [also antisystemic socialization can be useful to the system as an ‘outlet for restless spirits’ but this has its risks too says W.]

On STRASSENFEGER:



[this is a newspaper with a circulation of 21000; there are no notes for this part of the talk.]

http://www.strassenfeger.org/strassenfeger/ausgaben/Ausgaben_2013/Ausgabe_09_2013.html

End:

Adorno writes that ‘sensual happiness is the ‘condition for a right life’; materialism yearns for the ‘resurrection of the flesh’; the good society will be one that has replaced ‘process, doing, fulfilling’ with ‘lying on the water and looking peacefully at the sky’ because in this society no-one ‘go[es] hungry anymore’.¹⁶

¹⁶ From *Minima Moralia*