

## III The substance and magnitude of value

What is striking in the present crisis is not the rise in unemployment — that was a major characteristic of both the Great Depression and the recessions of the 1950s. It is rather the inflation which has accompanied the unemployment: the general rise in prices of almost every commodity we buy. Rising prices affect all people, whether they have a waged job or not. Whatever the form of one's income, inflation undercuts its real value. For the working class in particular, inflation has the direct effect of reducing the value of the one commodity that class has to sell: its labour-power.

For the capitalist class it is the reverse. Since they own the commodities whose prices are rising, their wealth, embodied in those commodities, tends to rise with the prices, and, therefore, so does their income derived from the sale of those commodities. Other factors assumed to be equal, inflation tends to reduce the income of the working class and increase that of capital — causing a shift of value from one class to the other, especially when rising unemployment has the effect of further reducing nominal working-class income.

The second striking feature of the crisis is its global character. Inflation today is not a national phenomenon, confined to certain countries while others deflate; it is an international phenomenon whose major elements are no mystery: the dramatic rise in food and energy prices that has occurred in the 1970s. These food and energy crises, involving price rises in the developed world and absolute unavailability in parts of the underdeveloped world, have been the result of explicit government policies. In the case of energy, it is well known how the OPEC countries dramatically raised their

prices of crude oil beginning in 1973. It is less well known in the United States how the American government also encouraged this move.<sup>1</sup> It is also not well known that the Soviet Union and China have followed the OPEC lead by raising their prices both at home and for export.<sup>2</sup> In the case of food, the sharp increases in prices in the United States, and hence in much of the international food market which the United States dominates, were also the result of government policy. A combination of export promotion, production restrictions, devaluation, and special sales to the Soviet Union in 1972 and 1975 drove food prices up and kept them up, causing reduced real income in the West and contributing to widespread famine in parts of Asia and Africa.<sup>3</sup>

These rising prices and supposed scarcities of food and energy have forced us to contemplate many aspects of these commodities as well as their price. Since commodities are allocated in capitalist society according to price, its increase has meant a reduction in availability and this has raised the quantitative question of scarcity — a concern which has been spurred on by the limits to growth literature. Is there, will there be, enough food, enough energy? Such questions necessarily lead to a fundamental questioning of the origin of commodities and the basis of their production. At the same time, questions that had been raised previously over the quality of these ‘goods’ have been given a new urgency by their growing expensiveness. What are we getting for our money? Are these commodities what we want? Are they safe for us, for our environment? If not, why not?

Along with this increased political awareness and questioning has grown a wide variety of struggles around these issues. The continued growth of consumer action groups, the ecology movement, and the antihunger movement are all outgrowths of these changes. Among those hardest hit by rising prices and lowered availability there has been growing militant direct action to counter the inevitable reduction of their income. They have passed from anger to direct appropriation and violent protest. Throughout the United States, business losses (and working-class gains) from shoplifting have been rising steadily as more and more of the lowest-paid workers refuse to pay the rising prices.<sup>4</sup> In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, stealing from the state has continued to grow.<sup>5</sup> In places as diverse as Turin, Italy, and Crystal City, Texas, workers have refused to pay rising gas and electricity bills and have practised what has become known as the ‘self-reduction’ of prices.<sup>6</sup> Ripping off Ma Bell has become a widespread practice in the United States. The ‘Black Christmas’ that occurred

<sup>1</sup> See V H Oppenheim’s article, ‘Why Oil Prices Go Up [1] In The Past We Pushed Them’, *Foreign Policy* 25 [Winter 1976–1977]: 24–57.

<sup>2</sup> ‘OPEC Oil Price Change and COMECON Oil Prices’, Radio Free Europe Research, RAD Background Report/244 [Eastern Europe] November 1929, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> See Cleaver, ‘Food, Famine and the International Crisis’: 32–53.

<sup>4</sup> See the two US Department of Commerce publications, ‘The Cost of Crime against Business’ and ‘Crime in Retailing’. On a related form of direct appropriation, see Jerry Adler, ‘Employee Thievery: A 6 Billion dollar Hand in the Till’, *Sunday News Magazine of the New York Daily News*, September 11, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Whoever Steals, Lives Better’, *New York Times*, April 13, 1976. Not only is stealing from the state endemic in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but also, in the periodic explosions [e.g. Poland in June 1976], two favourite actions of protesters seem to be burning the Communist Party headquarters, on the one hand, and looting state stores on the other.

<sup>6</sup> Ramirez, ‘The Working Class Struggle against the Crisis’; Dick Merkel, ‘Crystal Citizens Rejoice: Zavala Judge Blocks Cutoff’, *San Antonio Express and News*, September 3, 1977: 1.

in New York during the recent power failure showed the widespread willingness to collectively bypass price entirely when possible.<sup>7</sup> Where workers have been able to identify the national government as responsible for price rises, they have attacked it, often violently. The events in Poland in June 1976 and Egypt in November 1976 are two of the most dramatic cases in which violent upheaval forced the government to reverse decreed increases in food prices.<sup>8</sup> In the United States, the beef boycott, the coffee boycott, and the refusal of dockworkers to load wheat for the Soviet Union were all actions undertaken to slow price rises.<sup>9</sup>

In such a period, when a critical area of class struggle turns around the prices, quantity, and quality of commodities, it is evident that an adequate analysis of what commodities are, who they serve, and what their prices represent takes on a new urgency. Workers feel under attack, and rightly so. What is essential is to understand the nature of the attack and how can it be counteracted. We will see that Marx's analysis does give us a beginning for understanding the class struggle of which these changes are an element. We will gain further insight by applying his analysis to the various individual commodities which play an important role in the crisis, for example, food and energy whose price rises have played the biggest role in the current inflation and labour-power whose value has been undercut by that inflation.

### The commodity has two aspects: use-value and exchange-value

Marx begins his dissection of the commodity by analysing it into its two characteristics. He points out that each commodity has a dual existence. It is both a use-value and an exchange-value. Taking the first part of Figure 2, we have:



A commodity is a use-value because it has a value in use — a usefulness, or utility, it 'satisfies human wants of some sort or another'. It also is an exchange-value because it has a value in exchange; that is, it can be exchanged for something else.

The use-value and the exchange-value of a commodity are not just two different determinations, or aspects; they are contradictory determinations. A commodity is a use-value only if it is immediately useful to whoever has it. It is an exchange-value only if it is not immediately useful but is used only for exchange to get something

<sup>7</sup> See many articles describing and analysing the events of July 13–14 in the *New York Times*, July 14–20, 1977. Black Christmas was only the most recent dramatic example of this kind of activity. The widespread direct appropriation during the big-city uprisings of the mid 1960s led to their being termed 'commodity riots'. See Russel Dynes and E L Quarantelli, 'What Looting in Civil Disturbances Really Means', *Transaction Magazine* 5, No 6 [May 1968]: 9–14. For an overall analysis of that period, see Paolo Carpianno, 'US Class Composition in the 1960s', *Zerowork* 1 [December 1975]: 7–31.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary analysis of the Polish events, see Cleaver, 'Food, Famine and the International Crisis': 58–60. On Egypt, see *New York Times* articles 'Thousands in Egypt Riot over Price Rise', January 19, 1977; 'Cairo Eases Prices, but Rioting Goes On', January 19, 1977. 'Egypt's Cities Seem Calm after 2 Days of Price Riots', January 21, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Cleaver, 'Food, Famine and the International Crisis': 37–40.

else. Exchange-value is thus not only different from use-value; it is exactly its opposite; they are defined by their contradictory position with respect to each other. Yet they are only the twofold aspects of the commodity, and the commodity is the unity of these opposites. The strange combination of unity and opposition, in which the opposites only have their meaning vis-à-vis each other and are thus inextricably joined, is exactly what Marx means by a contradictory relation.

Yet this seems to be an impossible situation, because to be a use-value a thing must be used and not exchanged. And to be an exchange-value it must not be used but must be traded off. This contradictory situation, which Marx analysed more fully in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, can find its solution only in the actual exchange process: the exchange process must comprise both the evolution and the solution of these contradictions.<sup>10</sup> Marx calls the realization of the two contradictory aspects that occurs in the circulation process the metamorphosis of the commodity. Before a commodity is sold and consumed, use-value and exchange-value have only an abstract and potential existence. Once it is sold, exchanged for money ( $C-M$ ), then its character of exchange-value has been realized. But in this exchange the form of its exchange-value appears as the money that realized it. When that money is then exchanged for another commodity, which is consumed ( $M-C$ ), its exchange-value metamorphoses again into its other aspect as use-value, which is then realized. Because the complete analysis of this process requires an understanding of value, which is only developed later in Chapter One, as well as exchange, which is analysed in Chapter Two, Marx's discussion of how this solution can actually occur is presented in Chapter Three. In Chapter One we have only the abstract juxtaposition of use-value and exchange-value. Marx illustrates these relations with a variety of apparently innocuous commodities: linen, iron, watches, and corn (wheat). I say apparently because most of these commodities played a key role in the period of capitalist development which Marx analysed: linen in the textile industry, iron in the production of machinery and cannon, watches in the timing of work, wheat as the basic means of subsistence of the working class. To be just as careful in this exposition, I suggest that we focus on the key commodities of the current period: labour-power, food, and energy.

By focusing on the commodity labour-power, whose use-value and exchange-value Marx analyses in Parts II and III of Volume I of *Capital*, we go directly to the heart of capitalism. We saw in the previous chapter that labour-power, or the capacity to work, is a commodity because throughout the world the working class has been forced to sell its strength and abilities to capital. The use-value of labour-power, as Marx shows in Chapters Six and Seven, is its ability to work and to produce value and surplus value. Its exchange-value is the value the working class gets in return for its sale. The use-value and exchange-value of labour-power are clearly contradictory because labour-power can only be exchange-value for the working class (because it has no means of production) and not use-value. Yet the same labour-power does have use-value for the capitalists who buy it and put it to work.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: 44.

In the case of that part of food which is produced as a commodity, an analysis of its twofold character is also revealing. Much food consumed in the United States and Western Europe today is produced by large capitalist agribusiness firms at home and abroad: the giant corporative wheat farms of the plains states, the banana plantations of Central America, and the beef ranches of the Argentine pampa are all capitalist producers selling their goods in an international market. By the time it reaches the table, that food includes not only the paid and unpaid labour of production and transport workers but also the labour of the cooks — mainly housewives. The use-value of food is generally said to lie in its nutritional and aesthetic qualities. Its exchange-value lies in the money that the agribusiness corporations and middlemen receive from its sale. As with labour-power and all other commodities, the realization of the two aspects is resolved through exchange.

These illustrations bring out something deeper in the commodity-form. The two categories of use-value and exchange-value are not just abstract concepts arrived at by mental reasoning with the tool of analytical abstraction. They do not exist only in the passage of the commodity through the exchange process. *These two aspects also express the two-sided contradiction characteristic of the class relations in capitalism.* Use-value and exchange-value are opposed in a contradictory unity in the same way that capitalist and working classes are opposed and united. Each is the opposite of the other but at the same time exists, as such, only in the relation. We can see how the class relation includes these aspects of the commodity-form and how the commodity-form is itself at least partially appropriate for this kind of class society.

Moreover, we can see how *the two aspects suggest two different class perspectives.* Most fundamentally, the view of the commodity as use-value is the perspective of the working class. It sees commodities (e.g. food or energy) primarily as objects of appropriation and consumption, things to be used to satisfy its needs. Capital sees these same commodities primarily as exchange-values — mere means toward the end of increasing itself and its social control via the realization of surplus value and profit. Yet the example of labour-power shows that these perspectives are not so simple and fixed. For, in the context of capital, we have seen the working class discover its own labour-power as an alienable commodity which can have only exchange-value for it, and not use-value. Similarly, capital's primary interest is not in the exchange-value of labour-power but rather in its use-value. But, since capital is interested in surplus value it must simultaneously be interested in the use-value of labour-power — the amount of value it can produce — and its exchange-value — the amount of value it must be paid. Similarly, the working class also takes an interest in the use to which its labour-power is put as it struggles over the conditions of work.

Returning to food, while the working class is primarily concerned with the use-value of food, the fact that food does have an exchange-value, a money price that limits workers' access to it, means that they must also be concerned with that exchange-value. Moreover, capital, if it would sell its products, must pay some attention to the use-value. Rotten food rarely sells; miracle rice must have an acceptable taste; bread must be white or dark depending on the group of workers to whom it is sold. We can

see how each perspective depends on the other. It is exactly because workers have needs (and no means of producing what they need) that capital can sell those use-values and realize the exchange-values it desires. It is exactly because labour-power is a use-value for capital that it is an exchange-value for labour.

This leads us to two further observations. First, for each class the significance of each commodity is not just one-sided but includes both use-value and exchange-value. The preoccupation of the working class with exchange-value and the preoccupation of capital with use-value, however, are both the outgrowth of capital's success in imposing its social system. Second, because the significance of a commodity differs for the working class and capital (being primarily a use-value for the one and primarily an exchange-value for the other), the meaning of the use-value and exchange-value of any given commodity is not the same for capital and for the working class. This brings to the fore the relevance of the approach outlined in the Introduction — the need to bring out the two-sided character of each category, the need to discover the two-class perspective on each category of analysis. We must see how the meanings of use-value and exchange-value differ for any commodity according to the perspectives of the two classes.

Let us examine these questions in the case of our three commodities. First, let us take labour-power. If we look at the question of the use-value of labour-power from the two class perspectives, we can see that they give quite distinct results. On the surface, the use-value of labour-power belongs entirely to the capitalist who has bought it and who consumes it in the productive process. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the ultimate use-value of work, which is the use-value of labour-power, is its role as the fundamental means of capitalist social control. For the capitalist to be able to impose work is to retain social control. But the use-value of labour-power for capital is also its ability to produce value and surplus value. Control and value, however, are not separate use-values. As we will see shortly, the substance of value is work and work is the means of social control.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, surplus value is not only surplus labour but also the aim of capitalist production and an index of its success in imposing itself as a social system.

But, even though the use-value of work is formally the domain of capital, that is only from capital's viewpoint. From the working-class point of view, work can also have certain kinds of use-values for it. If we put aside the politically dangerous romantic notion that the working class gets a use-value out of work itself — a notion perhaps appropriate to a bygone era of craftsmen — we can still see how the working class tries to turn the work which capital imposes on it to its own advantage. To the degree that the workers get some part of the product they produce, then, at least indirectly,

<sup>11</sup> To separate the concept of value from that of social control under capital is, perhaps unintentionally, to reintroduce the dichotomy between economics [value] and politics [control]. This seems to be the thrust of Montano's discussion of capital going 'beyond value', due to the decline in productive labour, to work as 'political control in its purest form' ['Notes on the International Crisis': 57–58]. This problematic formulation is also employed by Christian Marazzi in his 'Money and the World Crisis: The New Basis of Capitalist Power', *Zerowork 2* [Fall 1977]: 94–95. What both authors forget, and what is a basic point of the present work, is that the substance of value [work] and of money [as the quintessential expression of value] is always social control — social control through forced labour.

the use-value of their work to them is as useful labour, labour that produces use-values which satisfy their needs. More directly, the combination of workers in factories provides an experience in joint action in which they learn to turn against capital through their organization as a class. Marx: 'as the number of the co-operating labourers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital.'<sup>12</sup>

The exchange-value of labour-power is, as we have seen, the money which the working class receives for its sale. Yet for the working class this exchange-value is at once income and a source of power in its struggle with capital, while for the latter it is a cost and a deduction from total value produced, a threat to surplus value and thus to capital's power. Because of these differences there is often a struggle over the form in which the working class will receive the exchange-value of its labour-power: money wages, wages in kind, social services, welfare, unemployment benefits, pensions, and so forth.

Let us now turn to food as a commodity and apply the same approach. For the working class, the use-value of food is above all its role as our fundamental consumption good — nourishment to live. Because of our need for this use-value of food, capital understood early on that its control over food as a commodity gave it control over workers. This was why the most basic means of production stripped from workers in the period of primitive accumulation was land — the traditionally necessary precondition for producing food. Thus the fundamental use-value of food for capital is the power to force the working class to work to get it. The need of the working class for this use-value has thus led capital to make scarcity — hunger — a basic ingredient of its social order. 'Everything therefore depends upon making hunger permanent among the working class.'<sup>13</sup> This is a very basic point which has immediate bearing on the current crisis, in which hunger is playing a deadly role in the struggle between the classes. Because food plays this role in capital's strategy against the working class, it means that the working class, too, recognizes in food a fundamental requirement for the development of its power against capital. Especially among the least-powerful sectors of the class, those on the lowest rungs of the income hierarchy, the use-value of food in its struggles is critical. It is not surprising that peasant struggles often turn to crop or land seizures. It is generally only on the basis of an adequate supply of food that such struggles can move to other levels.

These observations serve to clarify the importance of the two class perspectives on the exchange-value of food. As with other commodities, its exchange-value for capital is a source of surplus value; but for the working class the exchange-value of food, relative to the exchange-value of labour-power, determines its access to food and the use-values of nutrition and power it provides. Thus the exchange-value for food both undermines working-class income and power and strengthens capital's position in terms of both profits and control. Indeed, short of absolute scarcity, price (the money form or exchange-value) is capital's key weapon in making hunger permanent. When, as in the current crisis, it undertakes to engineer a global rise in

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 13: 331 [International Publishers Edition].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 25, Section 4: 646.

the exchange value of food, it is not only increasing its profits but also increasing its power vis-à-vis the working class. Thus it should not be surprising that the response of various sectors of the working class to such an attack is a function of their power. Where they have little power, they cannot avoid starvation, as in the Sahel; where they have more power, they may be successful in rebuffing or limiting the impact of such attacks, as in Egypt, Poland, or the United States.

And what about energy, that other commodity whose price rise seems to be playing such a key role in the crisis? A class analysis of the use- and exchange-values of energy brings out a number of important relations. The kinds of energy which we usually think of as commodities are those like oil, gas, electricity or, in less-developed countries, wood, charcoal, or dung. When we question the nature of the use-value of these commodities from the two class perspectives we get some interesting results. From a working-class point of view some of these are commodities which are consumed more or less directly: electricity to power household appliances, lights, or heating equipment; natural gas, coal, wood, or dung to provide (in certain situations) energy for heating, cooking, and lighting; gasoline to provide energy for lawnmowers, boats, and, above all, automobiles. Like food they are consumption goods whose use-values lie in their ability to reduce work and make life more pleasant. There is also an apparent hierarchy of sorts in the usefulness of these energy commodities; they vary in their versatility and aesthetic value. Although ranking may vary for different uses and vary by culture, we can generally see that electricity or natural gas gives greater versatility and is easier to handle than say charcoal or dung.

At the same time it is also clear that several energy commodities are not commodities consumed by workers but are rather intermediary products that have a use-value of raw material only for the capitalist who has the means of production necessary to employ them. This is the case with crude oil, or uranium, or certain kinds of coal. They are used only to produce other kinds of energy commodities like gasoline or electricity which are then sold to workers. But, here again, it is obvious that great amounts of these energy commodities are not sold to consumers directly at all but are sold to other capitalists as intermediate inputs into the production of all kinds of commodities. In both cases energy appears as constant capital whose use-value for capital lies in the value it transfers to the product — a necessary step in the production of surplus value. This constant energy capital may not produce surplus value but it is necessary for its production.

But this brings out another facet that must be understood. In so far as energy is a substitute for human strength in the production process, and in so far as the working class has an interest in the expenditure of its own labour-power as use-value (in its struggles over the conditions of work), then it also can see in the energy commodity the use-value of reducing the required expenditure of human sweat. In other words, for the working class energy has the use-value not only of reducing work at home but also of reducing work in the factory. However, if the use-value of energy for the working class is its ability to reduce work, it is quite the contrary for capital. Historically, as Marx shows in Chapter 15 of *Capital*, the fundamental role of nonhuman energy in production



has been to render possible the creation of the machine and thus of the complex systems of machinery on which modern industry is based. On the one hand, the use-value which capital derives from this use of energy to power machinery lies in the rising productivity it produces. When this raises profits and investments it amounts to the conversion of rising productivity into a source of more work and more social control. Moreover, we can see that the increasing use of energy to power machinery has meant the creation of a 'productive organism that is purely objective, in which the labourer becomes a mere appendage to an already existing material condition of production'.<sup>14</sup> Here we see the use-value of energy to capital as allowing a reorganization of control over workers. In fact, as Marx points out in considerable detail, energy has been, over and over, the key to the decomposition of working-class power which threatened capital: 'According to Gaskell, the steam-engine was from the very first an antagonist of human power, an antagonist that enabled the capitalist to tread under foot the growing claims of the workmen, who threatened the newly born factory system with a crisis.'<sup>15</sup> What was true of steam engines then is equally true of internal combustion or nuclear engines more recently. And essential to the development of these weapons has been the continual development of new sources of energy commodities.

These observations should be enough to point beyond the current debate over the energy crisis in which the only alternative to capital's seemingly endless demands for more energy has been a back-to-the-land movement which has, often on ecological grounds, vaunted a reduction in energy usage in favour of a return to labour-intensive methods of production. The choices are not between sweat and toil versus wasteful plundering of natural resources; they are rather between a use of energy in the interests of the working class and a use of energy in the interests of capital. It is not necessary to reject automobiles — which do have a real use-value to workers — in order to reject the gas-guzzling, model-changing creations of capital which are aimed only at turnover and profit. It is not necessary to reject the use of energy to reduce toil in agriculture in order to reject the wasteful use of inorganic fertilisers that primarily benefits the oil companies.

This analysis of the differing use-values of energy commodities for the two classes also helps unravel the differing perspectives on their exchange-values. To begin with, it is clear enough that the increase in the exchange-value of energy, like that of food, has meant an increase in the profits of the sellers of energy commodities (e.g. the oil companies, coal companies) through a decrease in the exchange-value of labour-power for workers. This has occurred two ways: directly, in the case of energy purchased for consumption, and indirectly, in the case of energy used as an input in the production of other consumer goods. Because of this indirect effect, the reduction in the value of nonfarm wages due to rising food costs has not always meant a rise in farmer income. Rather, their income has been reduced by the rising exchange-value of the energy and energy-derived inputs into farming. In this way, increasing the

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 15, Section 1: 386.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 5: 436.

exchange-value of energy has been a powerful weapon for capital to attack the income of the working class and to devalue labour-power both off the farm and on.

But the implications of this manipulation of exchange-value (for what we have here is a case where price is dramatically severed from value) go beyond the direct attack on the wage. We just saw that one fundamental use-value of energy for capital was as a substitute for labour-power, as constant capital in a rising organic composition of capital. But, in the post-World War II period, the versatility of that weapon was at least partly predicated on a low exchange-value of energy commodities. The ready availability of cheap oil fuelled the reconstruction of post-war Europe and generally made possible the reorganization of industrial labour and the expansion of capital in the Western World. How then can rising exchange-values of energy commodities serve capital's interest? In the first place, we must remember that this is a strategy of crisis — that capital has adopted the strategy of rising energy prices, not out of choice but out of necessity. In the second place, the rise in the price of energy is being used in at least two important ways which follow from our previous analysis. I have already examined the way it allows a massive transfer of value from the working class to capital. At the same time, it concentrates surplus value in the energy sector — especially in oil and petrochemicals — a sector which, along with American agriculture, already has the highest organic composition of capital in industry. There is thus a shift of capital from low to high organic composition within the existing industrial structure — a move which has some of the same effects as raising the organic composition through investment. Finally, it means that surplus value in the form of 'petrodollars' is funnelled and concentrated in a way that allows the planning of the pattern of capitalist expansion to a unusually high degree (through the control of recycling mechanisms).

In this way we can grasp at least some of the critical aspects of the current crisis by analysing food and energy as commodities in terms of the two class perspectives on their use-values and exchange-values. By undertaking such a political reading of these concepts in the particular historical situation, we can see that not only does the meaning of the use-value and the exchange-value of each commodity depend on the class perspective, and phase in the exchange-process, but also the class perspectives are contradictory. The use-value (or exchange-value) of an object for capital is not the same as the use-value (or exchange-value) of that same commodity for the working class. Exchange-value is generally recognized as a socially determined category. But even in the case of use-value it cannot be said to be given by its intrinsic properties (physical or otherwise) — it must be seized in the context of the class struggle at any given moment.

This should make clear one reason why some of Marx's comments on use-values in the *Contribution* should be interpreted with care and a grain of salt. Use-values, he says at one point, 'do not express the social relations of production'.<sup>16</sup> At another point he also says that 'use-value, as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic form, lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy. It belongs in this sphere only when it is itself a determinate form.'<sup>17</sup> Now, it is undoubtedly true

<sup>16</sup> Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

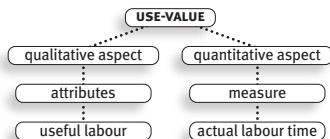
that use-value does not express the social relations of capital the same way exchange-value does. Nor is there any doubt that the latter is central to capital. Yet, as we have just seen, use-values are in many ways ‘determinate forms’. Their nature and role definitely can express social relations. In *Capital* Marx discusses this in several ways: (a) the varying use-values of labour-power in the division of labour, (b) the particular use-value of means of production, and (c) the characteristics of the use-values produced and sold to the working class. Later on, in Volume II, we discover the important role of the distinctions between use-values in the reproduction schemes of part III. In Volume III is the discussion of the cheapening of the components of raw materials and many other places where the analysis of use-value plays an important role.

In his ‘Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner’ (1879), Marx himself explicitly rejected as ‘drivel’ the interpretation that use-value has no place in his analysis beyond being one aspect of the commodity. He explicitly cites at least three different ways use-value enters into the analysis: (a) behind use-value is useful labour, one aspect of the twofold character of labour which produces commodities (see Chapter IV below); (b) ‘in the development of the value form of the commodity ... the value of a commodity is represented in the use-value of the other [commodity]’ (see Chapter V below); and (c) ‘surplus value itself is derived from a ‘specific’ use-value of labour-power... etc., etc.’ He concludes: ‘thus for me use-value plays a far more important part than it has in economics hitherto.’<sup>18</sup>

## The qualitative and quantitative aspects of use-value and exchange-value

The inflationary aspect of the current crisis, including the dramatic rise in food and energy prices, has meant that most of us have found ourselves buying both fewer commodities and consequently a smaller variety of commodities. Mealtime menus have become more narrower with smaller amounts of expensive foods like meat. The rising cost of gasoline cuts into the number and extent of trips and vacations. In general, consumption is restricted both quantitatively and qualitatively. These circumstances can only make the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of commodities immediately important.

We have just seen in the previous section that Marx analysed commodities first into use-value and exchange-value. And we saw that those categories embody certain aspects of the class nature of capitalist commodity-producing society. He then proceeds in Section 1 of Chapter One to further analyse each of these two aspects into a qualitative and a quantitative determination through the same process of abstraction. Taking the next step of Figure 2, we have:

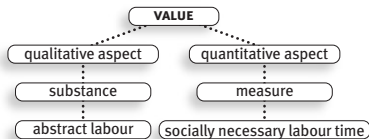


<sup>18</sup> Marx, ‘Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner’, in *Value: Studies by Karl Marx*, ed. Albert Dragstedt: 214–216.

The qualitative determination of use-value is expressed by attributes (e.g. physical attributes like weight, social attributes like control). The quantitative determination of these attributes is given by their magnitude and measure (e.g. tons, degree). Behind these particular attributes, or qualities, we later discover, lies the particular concrete, useful labour which produced them. Behind their amount, the actual labour time employed in their production.

The immediate quantitative aspect of exchange-value appears to be expressed by the 'proportion in which values in use of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort'.<sup>19</sup> But this remains vague and apparently accidental because the qualitative aspect of exchange-value has not yet been analysed. Because this requires further analysis of exchange-value, strictly speaking we cannot speak of the two aspects of exchange-value at this point. We can, however, make some preliminary comments on the meaning of these two aspects of the commodity-form in terms of use-value and exchange-value, keeping in mind what is to come.

First, we can note that these two determinations are not independent nor is their relationship random. With use-value, quality precedes quantity in the discussion. With exchange-value, the order at first seems reversed, but the 'quantitative determination' in fact remains veiled in mystery until the qualitative foundation is later revealed. When it is, we discover that the question was badly posed and that both the qualitative and the quantitative aspects of exchange-value are really those of value for which exchange-value is only the form of appearance. At that point we also realize that the commodity's two sides are actually those of use-value and value. In the analysis of value, as with use-value, consideration of its quality (substance or abstract labour, taken up in the next section) comes before that of its quantity (socially necessary labour time, taken up below in section 4).



The reason for the order is logical. To have a quantity, one must have a quantity of something, of some quality. Before we can speak of ten tons of wheat protein, or of forty tons of coal, we must first have grasped the qualities that make wheat protein or coal what they are — otherwise the measure is meaningless. Yet at the same time it is also clear that quality without quantity is meaningless. We can never confront wheat, coal, or value without confronting some quantity. The measure of that quantity is thus the combination of both quality and quantity.

Second, as with use-value and exchange-value, these qualitative and quantitative aspects are not simply two logically determined categories; they, too, *embody the*

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, Section 1: 36 [International Publishers Edition].

*complex dialectic of two class perspectives and their struggle.* Some of this was implicit in the foregoing discussion of class perspectives on use-value and exchange-value, but I will elaborate. At first, the *working-class perspective is primarily a qualitative one.* That is, the working class is basically concerned with the acquisition of certain kinds of things: food, clothing, housing, music — all those things which allow us to live the kind of life we desire. The quantity of the given qualities of use-values is secondary — not unimportant at all, but secondary. Certainly, one wants at least one whole house, two shoes, three meals a day — quantity is obviously a necessary ingredient; but the focus is first on the kind of life — protected feet, being sheltered, eating — and not its measure.

*The perspective of capital is primarily quantitative.* Capital is basically unconcerned with the particular qualities of the commodities it produces — except that they be exchange-values and carriers of surplus value. The other qualities are secondary. Whether a home is well built or poorly built, whether food is pure or adulterated are secondary, even if often functional, to how much exchange-value and profit can be realized. *More* would appear to be capital's byword, not *what kind*. What kind comes into play only inasmuch as it is necessary to produce such and such kind of commodity in order to sell more of it. The same is true in the case of the commodities capital buys as means of production. Here the primary concern is that the exchange-value of this constant capital be kept low so that the rate of profit will be high. Certain particular qualities of the means of production will obviously be required but they are means to an end.

It would, however, be erroneous to stop here, to romantically see the working class as having a monopoly on quality and to see capital as concerned only with the vulgar and quantitative. Within the class struggle the confrontation of perspectives is more complex. In its struggle with capital the working class is forced to become directly concerned with quantity. The struggle over wages, the length of the working day, and the intensity of labour are all over how much work will be done in exchange for income. The working class could not care less about value *per se*. What we want is a larger quantity of a larger variety of use-values for less work. Quantity becomes important only because it is through these quantitative struggles that we gain access to those particular qualitatively distinct commodities that we desire and to the time necessary to enjoy them. The quantitative limitation on the exchange-value of labour-power, necessary for capital's realization of surplus value, produces a qualitative limit on working-class consumption and thus is resisted.<sup>20</sup>

On the other side, as we saw earlier, capital in its efforts to maintain its control over the working class must become closely concerned with the nature of the labour-power that it sets to work, as well as with the structure of the industrial process through which it controls and plans that labour-power. Outside the factory it pays attention to the qualities of commodities it sells and through their use-values seeks to organize the social factory as a whole. As an example of these two concerns, we can

20 Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook II: 283.

note Marx's extended analysis of the role of the expansion of the qualities of commodities and of the production process in the production of relative surplus value. That production, he shows, requires both the quantitative expansion of existing variety of consumption and the production of new qualitatively different needs and use-values, which in turn implies the expansion of 'the circle of qualitative differences within labour'. Thus Marx shows how capital is driven by the working class's quantitative attack on labour time and absolute surplus value to explore all of nature in order to discover new, useful qualities in things and hence to cultivate 'all the qualities of the social human being'.<sup>21</sup> This is exactly that side of capital — the way it expands the variety of existence as it creates bourgeois society — which Marx saw as its historically positive side, in as much as it both represented an advance over previous societies and laid the basis for post-capitalist society.

But Marx did not stop with these general views on the implications of the dialectic of quantity and quality in the class struggle. He went on to show much more precisely how the contradictions of this process both developed capital and worked toward its dissolution. This was the process I discussed at the end of Chapter II above in which the quantitative increase in the amount of constant capital, especially machinery, per worker leads to a qualitative transformation of the capital/working-class relation and ultimately to the possibility of its destruction. This is the process in which the quantitative extension of work beyond necessary labour qualitatively transforms it into surplus value. The reinvestment of that surplus value in productivity-raising machinery tends to increase work both in intensity and through time. But the natural, and especially the social, limits to this extension (by working-class power) ultimately lead to a reduction in work time. As previously discussed, the very essence of productivity is to increase the amount of output from a given, and hence a lesser, amount of work. The quantitative reduction of necessary labour time as more and more machinery, science, and technology are brought to bear on the production process must ultimately lead to its qualitative transformation as labour 'in the direct form' ceases 'to be the great well-spring of wealth'. Under such circumstances, where the factory, or social factory, can no longer provide the space for the imposition of work the quality of that work as value is undermined.

The same crisis for capital, and opportunity for the working class, can be seen from the other side. The quantitative reduction in labour time is also a quantitative increase in disposable time. Capital's perpetual problem is to convert this expanding potential free time into work time. The processes mentioned above make this more and more difficult and the imposition of work, of surplus work, and thus of its qualitative control over society becomes more and more difficult. The very development of a capitalism that is founded on the imposition of work thus creates the 'material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high'.<sup>22</sup>

To pose this analysis in more concrete terms we can look at the development of capital in food-producing agriculture and in the energy sector. In both of these sectors

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Notebook IV: 408–409.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Notebook VII: 706.

the development of technology and the substitution of constant for variable capital are among the most advanced — in at least the leading subsectors: American grain and meat production and the oil-petrochemical industry. In each case, analysis of these developments brings out, first, how the development and reorganization of production technologies have been in large part a response to the need to counteract working-class power and, second, how the exclusion of labour from production has created sectors which are decreasingly able to provide the work that capital needs for its social control. More generally these two sectors are prototypical of the factory as a whole. As the limits to the ability to impose factory work at profitable wage rates have grown more apparent in the United States and Western Europe, capital has sought two major solutions. One has been the multi-nationalization of labour-intensive sectors which have been reallocated to areas of the Third World (and increasingly to the socialist countries) where working-class power is weaker. The other is the restructuring of the rest of the social factory in order to expand the imposition of the work of reproducing labour-power. The depth and pervasiveness of the current crisis show how the struggles of both waged and unwaged have posed critical limits to these strategies — limits which capital has yet to find new strategies to circumvent.

This analysis of the dialectic of qualitative and quantitative in the class struggle helps clarify the political nature of the working-class attack on capital which produced the crisis. One way in which the old dichotomy between politics and economics has often been posed has been to label as ‘economism’ struggles by workers which are deemed solely quantitative, for example, more wages, shorter workday, and so on. These struggles are said to be within capital, which is itself essentially quantitative. ‘Political’ struggles are only those that challenge the ‘quality’ of capital itself, that is, that threaten the ‘revolutionary’ overthrow of capital via the seizure of state power. From what we have seen already, it should be apparent that struggles over the length and intensity of the workday (how much the commodity-form is imposed) are at once quantitative and qualitative: quantitative because they concern the amount of work that will be done for capital, qualitative because they put into question the realization of enough surplus value to maintain capitalist control. The ‘quantitative’ struggle over income also raises the question of the realization of surplus value and capital’s survival.

The grain of truth about ‘purely quantitative struggles’ lies in the productivity deal. If increases in working-class income are successfully tied to increases in productivity, then the struggle is indeed bound within capital (see Chapter IV below). But even here, the rise in productivity, and the reorganization of the working class which it entails, creates a qualitative change in the class relations. Similarly, the growth in workers’ access to wealth through the productivity deal expands the absolute base on which future struggles can be fought. It is exactly upon these qualitative changes that the working class developed the power to rupture the productivity deal and throw the system into a profound ‘political’ crisis.

Similarly, some workers’ struggles that appear to be qualitative risk developing, rather than overthrowing, capital. For example, the strategy of ‘workers’ control’ of the

factory can be seen to lead to workers' control of themselves, as well as of the means of production, for capital. Witness capital's strategy of participation in France, of co-determination in Germany, or of workers' control in Yugoslavia. As long as social control leads to more imposed work and accumulation, it hardly matters to capital whether the management has white collars or blue. Marx himself saw that capitalism could not be abolished simply by replacing the capitalist managers with worker/socialist managers: '...the idea held by some socialists that we need capital but not the capitalists is altogether wrong. It is posited within the concept of capital that the objective conditions of labour — and these are its own product — take on a *personality* toward it, or what is the same, that they are posited as the property of a personality alien to the worker. The concept of capital contains the capitalist.'<sup>23</sup> This passage shows Marx's understanding that there was no real difference between a 'capitalist' accumulation of capital and a 'socialist' accumulation of capital, once capital is understood as a class relation of work imposed through the commodity-form. Marx's primary experience in fighting such 'workers' control' strategies was in his conflicts with the Proudhonist plans for co-operatives. The implications in the case of present-day 'socialist' countries and present-day 'socialist' strategies for the working class are much wider. The class struggle, which is today at once economic and political, has both a quantitative and a qualitative side. Any attempt to forget one side or the other, or to fail to grasp their interrelation, is bound to lead to dangerous results.

### **Not exchange-value but value — whose substance is abstract labour**

The process through which Marx shows how value lies behind exchange-value is another analytical exercise in abstraction. In order for there to be a quantitative equivalence in the exchange

1 quarter corn =  $x$  cwt. iron

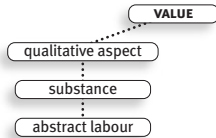
there must exist in the two different things something common to both so they can be compared quantitatively. As we saw above, in order to measure or compare quantities we must be clear about the quality which is being measured (and quantitatively compared). Before we can understand the quantitative comparison of '1 quarter' and ' $x$  cwt.', we must first discover that common quality in corn and iron which allows them to be equated in exchange at all. In order to discover this common element, Marx makes abstraction from what makes them different: the particular use-values of corn and iron. 'As use-values commodities are, above all, *different* qualities.' When Marx goes on to say 'as exchange-values they are merely *different* quantities', he is saying they are different quantities of some common quality.

But to make abstraction from their use-values is to make abstraction from their particular attributes. That, in turn, is to make abstraction from the special characteristics of the human labour which created those attributes and made them different from

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Notebook V: 512.



other commodities: grain farming and smelting. In abstraction from their material reality as use-values and as products of particular forms of useful labour, these commodities emerge as only products of human labour in abstraction from any particularity. This human labour that is common to them Marx calls abstract labour. As products of abstract human labour they are qualitatively equivalent and as such he calls them *values*.



In Marx's terminology these products of abstract labour *are* values. Just as those commodities *are* use-values and exchange-values when they *have* the same, so too *are* they values when they *have* value. However, to say that a commodity *has* value does not involve a subjective evaluation. It is to say simply that it is the product of abstract labour and that it will be exchanged. Another way of stating the relationship between value and abstract labour is to say that the *substance* of value is abstract labour. As we will see, the quantity of value may be more or less, but this concerns the measure of its essential quality, or substance: abstract labour. Similarly, the substance of value can be expressed more or less completely through different forms of exchange value. Its form and its measure are necessary to value but both must be differentiated from substance. This means that to recognize that value is the qualitative aspect of exchange-value means more than just one quality. Abstract labour is the essence of value — that which cannot be altered without losing the concept itself. Abstract labour is the substance, or essence, of the form of value: exchange-value. Or, inversely, Marx says that exchange-value is the phenomenal form, or the form of appearance of value — the mode through which value acquires a recognisable expression in capital. In other words, work for capital only has meaning and only appears as a social relation when it is embodied in a product that is exchanged (and, ultimately, that earns surplus value).

Marx began the analysis of the commodity on the level of appearance. He has moved analytically to the essence of exchange-value. He summarized this process in his 'Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner': 'That [the commodity] is what I analyse, and first of all to be sure in *the form in which it appears*. Now I find at this point that it is, on the one hand, in its natural form *a thing of use-value*, alias *use-value*, and on the other hand that it is *bearer of exchange-value*, and is itself an exchange-value from this point of view. Through further analysis of the latter I discovered that exchange-value is only an appearance-*form*, an independent mode of manifestation of the *value* which is contained in the commodity, and then I approach the analysis of this value.'<sup>24</sup> How exactly this essence is manifested in appearance through exchange-value is

<sup>24</sup> Marx, 'Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner': 214.

shown in Chapter IV below, which analyses Marx's discussion of the form of value in Section 3 of Chapter One.

This analysis, this mental process of abstraction, through which we isolate a single determination, is not, however, a process outside the world. Nor are the concepts with which we denote those determinations. 'Abstract' labour is not simply an abstract concept, because the concept denotes the very real social quality of work under capitalism. This is not very clearly pointed out in Chapter One because of the degree of abstraction associated with Marx's mode of exposition. In order to adequately discover the complex class relations that lie behind 'abstract labour', we need to examine other parts of Marx's writing. What we discover is that he shows quite lucidly how the process of abstraction is not one which occurs only in our fancy. Quite the contrary, abstract labour is semantically meaningful as a concept but not because all human labour is basically alike, not because some common element is necessary for and revealed by equivalence in exchange. It is meaningful because capital itself, in its continual struggle with labour to create and maintain the division of labour which is the basis for commodity production, exchange, and social control, tries to continually make labour more malleable to its needs. This it must do by a continual shifting and displacement of labour to overcome workers' struggles. The goal is a flexible, adaptable labour supply in which any specific aspect of labour, for example, strength or skill, becomes less and less important. With the development of capital, labour is increasingly 'abstract' precisely in the real sense that it has fewer fixed determinations. In other words, a malleable labour force effectively amounts to a homogeneous mass, any part of which can be applied whenever capital needs it in the industrial machine. Perhaps Marx's clearest statement of this is in the Introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

This abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference toward specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society — in the United States. Here, then for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category 'labour', 'labour as such', labour pure and simple, become true in practice.<sup>25</sup>

Abstract labour thus designates the homogeneity of labour that capital seeks to achieve through its growing division and control of work.

At this point, it is of the utmost importance not to forget our approach to this study. We must also see that there is another side to this attempt by capital to reduce labour to abstract labour. That is the activity of the working class. The creation of an increasingly

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*: 104–105.

homogeneous working class is not simply the result of capital's manipulations. It is also the outcome of the working class's struggles to achieve its own unity vis-à-vis capital. In their struggles for such common goals as the reduced working day, better conditions of work, minimum wages, and so on, workers gain cohesiveness as they act more and more as a distinct class-for-itself. The resulting homogeneity grows more and more dangerous to capital because it is a fundamental basis of working-class power. The unity sought by the working class is not the unity of abstract labour within capital but a unity outside and against it.

As a result of these contradictory meanings of homogeneity for the two classes, the only way for capital to achieve its need for the controllable homogeneity of abstract labour is, paradoxically, through the imposition of heterogeneity, through the division of workers. It is only by dividing and pitting one group of workers against another that capital can prevent their dangerous unity and keep the class weak enough to be controlled. The *contradiction between capitalist efforts to unify the class as labour-power through division and workers' efforts to overcome these divisions to unite against capital is one of the most fundamental and most important characteristics of the class struggle.*

In the application of its divide-and-conquer strategy, capital has always used historically given divisions that it inherited from the past, for example, divisions between races, between sexes, between age groups, between ethnic or nationality groups. At the same time, it has transformed, developed, and added to these divisions in innumerable ways. For example, all the so-called technical divisions of useful labour are also divisions of the working class, designed to keep it under control. Thus, we discover in Chapters 13 to 15 of Volume I of *Capital* that the key to capital's success in maintaining control over the productive power of co-operation — of the collective labourer in the factory — is its ability to impose a hierarchical wage division on workers that is associated with a certain division of useful labour and that pits them against each other. Similarly the larger divisions of labour, such as the division between town and country, the colonial division of labour, and the division of labour between industrial branches, all serve to divide the working class and help control it. The 'division of labour in manufacture', Marx writes, 'on the one hand it presents itself historically as a progress and as a necessary phase in the economic development of society, on the other hand it is a refined and civilized method of exploitation.'<sup>26</sup>

The wage hierarchy, which is critical to capital's control of the factory, also plays a crucial role in the larger social factory. Because the money wage as the exchange-value of labour-power is the most fully developed form of exchange between capital and labour, its presence or nonpresence is fundamental to determining both the relation of various parts of the working class to capital and the relations among those parts themselves. The work by *Wages for Housework* has brought out that in the discussion of the reserve army in Chapter 25 the basic division between the 'active' and 'reserve' sectors of the class is a division between a waged sector and an unwaged sector.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 14, Section 5: 364 [International Publishers Edition].

Marx's own discussion of the key role of the unwaged reserve army in controlling the waged labour army shows how the waged/unwaged division is fundamental. Further work has brought out how all the so-called non-economic divisions, such as racial, sexual, or national divisions, are also hierarchical divisions and basically wage divisions (in this sense even the hierarchical income divisions of the unwaged are 'wage' divisions).<sup>27</sup>

Capital maintains its control through the dynamic manipulation of these divisions. For example, the success of one sector of the working class in achieving higher wages is used by capital, where possible, to accentuate the wage hierarchy. In this process we can see the intensely political character of this issue within the class struggle. Again and again Marx pointed out how capital quite consciously uses these divisions to maintain control over work as abstract labour. One of his most instructive discussions of this process is worth quoting at length.

Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he regards himself as a member of the *ruling* nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists *against Ireland*, thus strengthening their *domination over himself*. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the 'poor whites' to the Negroes in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker both the accomplice and the stupid tool of the *English rulers in Ireland*.

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. *This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class*, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this.<sup>28</sup>

The immediate contemporary relevance of this analysis can be found throughout the global capitalist system. Marx's analysis of the relation between the immigrant Irish and the English workers exemplifies recent attempts by capital to pit immigrant workers against local workers in North America, Northern Europe, and most recently the OPEC countries. Mexicanos or Puerto Ricans in the United States, Italians or Filipinos in Canada, Algerians or Portuguese in France, Turks or Italians in Germany, and South Koreans in Iran and Japan all can easily be seen to be the counterparts of Marx's Irish in England. And the lesson is not limited to national divisions but is equally applicable to various divisions within countries: blacks/whites, men/women.

Yet, to recognize the immediate relevance of this analysis for today is also to necessarily see the other side again — to see the working-class activity within and against these divisions. On the one hand, the international mobility of labour has

<sup>27</sup> See James, *Sex, Race and Class*.

<sup>28</sup> Marx to Meyer and Vogt, April 9, 1870, *Marx–Engels Selected Correspondence*.

been to a large degree an autonomous movement on the part of workers demanding more income and less arduous work — first a refusal of unwaged work and a demand for the wage, then in the struggle against waged work a tendency to break the tie between work and income and to convert the wage into a one-sided transfer of resources from capital to labour. On the other hand, one of the most important elements of the cycle of working-class struggles that created the current crisis for capital was the working class's ability to overcome these divisions and achieve new levels of its own kind of homogeneity against abstract labour.

The dynamic struggle between these two classes over the question of division/homogeneity can be fruitfully conceptualized through the concepts of composition, political recomposition, and decomposition. Grasped as a particular structure of power within the class, the division of labour is seen not technically but politically, as a certain composition of the working class. From capital's point of view a composition is desired that will sufficiently weaken the class to give capital control. For the working class that same composition is an obstacle. Its overcoming is designated as a political recomposition of the class in which the structure of power is recomposed more favourably for workers.<sup>29</sup> Such a political recomposition on the basis of a given division of labour undermines the usefulness of that division to capital. Capital in turn is forced to attempt to decompose the new level of workers' power through the imposition of a new technical or social division of labour through a process of repression and restructuring.

We can discover many examples of this process during the present crisis. If the new power achieved by immigrant workers during the last cycle of struggles was based on a political recomposition in which they overcame their division from local workers, then the current widespread capitalist attacks on immigrant labour must be seen as a new attempt by capital to decompose that level of power through mass deportations and global restructuring of the pattern of investment. Thus, we find efforts to expel workers from the United States and Western Europe and to either return them to their status of latent reserve army (Mexico) or dispatch them to new areas of capitalist development (e.g. the influx of workers into Eastern Europe and the Near East OPEC countries). Similarly, we find within particular sectors of production, such as agriculture and energy, attempts to introduce new technology and new work organization to decompose the growing level of working-class power. In the United States, for instance, we have the continuing effort to mechanize certain crops in the face of farm-worker struggles (both local and multinational workers). We also have the attempt to restructure the energy sector, especially with relation to oil and coal, in order to undermine the power of coal miners in Appalachia and the growing power of workers in the Middle East. In Europe we find similar examples in the attempts of the *Mansholt* plan to eliminate a recalcitrant peasantry, of the Soviet planners to industrialize meat

**29** In *Zerowork 1*, the definition given of political recomposition is: 'By "political recomposition" we mean the level of unit and homogeneity that the working class reaches during a cycle of struggle in the process of going from one composition to another. Essentially, it involves the overthrow of capitalist divisions, the creation of new unities between different sectors of the class, and the expansion of the boundaries of what the "working class" comes to include.' [p 4; and *Midnight Notes*, *Midnight Oil*: 112]

production, of Italian capital to restructure its petrochemical sector, and of Europe generally to shift to nuclear energy in a great leap forward in the substitution of constant for variable capital.<sup>30</sup> In all these examples capital counters the working class's political recomposition with its own new level of organic composition.

The same processes are underway outside the factory as capital responds to the recomposition achieved in the 1960s by unwaged groups like students, the unemployed, welfare recipients, and housewives. Through new plans for restructuring education, unemployment benefit schemes, welfare programs, and the labour market open to women, capital seeks to reimpose new links between income and work. Thus we are confronted by the fiscal crisis of higher education, the expansion of industrial training programs, the growth of adult education recycling programs, the attempts to tie foodstamps and other welfare payments to work programs, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

This analysis of the struggle over abstract labour as the substance of value — capitalist-imposed work — provides a perspective from which we can avoid the usual pitfalls of seeing the divisions of the working class either as a sociological stratification in which the emergence of a 'middle class' has destroyed the relevance of Marx's analysis of a two-class struggle or as the one-sided outcome of an omnipotent capitalism which simply manipulates workers like pawns in a segmented labour market.<sup>32</sup> In both cases the study of the growth of workers' power is neglected. Instead we can see the actual pattern of stratification or labour-market segmentation as the outcome of a real and often violent class struggle in which both classes have autonomous power.

Once this fundamental process is understood, the particular configuration of divisions can be understood within the context of historically specific circumstances. For example, to understand the fact that male labour is generally rewarded more highly than female labour requires a historical analysis of the male/female hierarchy already present in the societies in which the commodity-form was imposed, as well as an analysis of how that hierarchy was reinforced or changed by the new order. The continuing existence of this division, as well as its particular structural evolution, can only be grasped adequately by analysing the pattern of working-class struggle and capitalist response discussed above. This kind of analysis does not reduce the phenomenon of sexism (or racism) to that of capitalism exactly because it requires some recognition and explanation of both the respective relation of men and women to capital and the fact that this division is based on male dominance over women and not vice versa. Similarly, it reduces the analysis neither to one of capital's manipulations nor to that of the struggles of the working class as a whole. Quite the contrary, an examination of the processes of political recomposition and decomposition involves the analysis of the autonomous activities of the various sectors of the class and the way they interact in order to confront capital as a class.

<sup>30</sup> See the articles in *Zerowork 2*, Serafina *et al.*, 'L'Operaia Multinazionale in Europa'; and Bologna, 'Questions of Method for Analysis of the Chemical Plan'.

<sup>31</sup> See the articles in *Zerowork 1* and *2* and compare with the discussions of the same programmes in Council of Economic Advisors, 'The Economic Report of the President: 1978'.

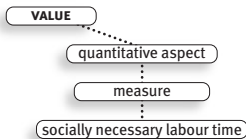
<sup>32</sup> Michael Reich, David M Gordon and Richard C Edwards, 'A Theory of Labour Market Segmentation', *American Economic Review*, May 1973: 359–365.

The political importance of grasping the class nature of abstract labour and the processes which engender it cannot be overemphasized. By focusing our attention on the homogeneity that the working class opposes to capital's abstract labour and on the processes of political recomposition through which that homogeneity is achieved, this approach brings out the class politics of abstract labour and the division of labour on which it is based. By studying these actual processes, we leave behind the ideological world of class consciousness and the leftist party to discover how the working class is working out its own unity as well as the strengths and weaknesses of its strategies and tactics.

Some basic aspects of working-class organization are suggested by this analysis. Because the divisions are hierarchical ones, there are always dominant and dominated sides. In these circumstances the divisions have worked where capital has been able to play on the dominant side's profiting from the division. The divisions are not imaginary or simply ideological ones that can be overcome with 'class consciousness'. Men do benefit from women's work; whites do benefit from blacks' lower status; local workers do benefit from immigrant workers' taking the worst jobs. Therefore, the struggle to destroy the divisions generally finds its initiative in the dominated group, since the other side cannot be expected to always work to destroy its privileges. The efforts to overcome racism, sexism, imperialism, or the exploitation of students in the 1960s were led by the struggles of blacks not whites, women not men, peasants not Americans, students not professors or administrators. It was on the basis of these autonomous efforts that the struggles circulated to other sectors of the class, recomposing the structure of power. To subvert the autonomy of such sectors, as the Left and the unions generally try to do by dissolving them into their own hierarchical organizations, can only act to perpetuate the divisions useful to capital. The actuality of autonomy complicates the meaning of working-class homogeneity against capital. It suggests that working-class unity must be understood as being indirect like the homogeneity of capital (malleability through division). In other words, working-class unity is often achieved only indirectly through complementarity in the exercise of power against capital by different sectors of the class involved in the struggle, not in terms of the illusory kind of direct homogeneity of Leninist institutions.

## **Measure of value is socially necessary labour time – value**

So far, Marx has shown us that value is the key to exchange-value and that the qualitative substance of value is abstract labour – which is to say work under capitalism. He then turns to the question of the measure of value in order to be able to carry out a quantitative as well as a qualitative analysis.



To measure value must mean to measure its substance: abstract labour. Marx argues that to measure the magnitude of abstract labour can only mean to measure the time during which it is performed. 'The quantity of labour ... is measured by its duration.' Now the measure of time requires some unit, or quantum, of magnitude. Such a unit can apparently be selected according to convenience since we have many standard units of time: week, day, hour, minute. But the measure of abstract labour, its time, must be understood to be as much a social concept and phenomenon as is abstract labour itself. It is thus not directly measurable by clock or calendar. As with abstract labour, labour time must be grasped within the totality of capital. The measurement of abstract labour time can only be done within the framework of the total social mass of homogeneous, abstract labour time coerced from workers unit by 'innumerable unit'. But, even recognizing this we must be very careful how we approach this concept. Unfortunately, many tend to think that the magnitude of value of a commodity is determined by the amount of abstract labour time incorporated into it by the worker who produced it. But, to conceive of the value of a commodity as being the direct result of the work of producing that individual commodity is to lose the social character of value and to see it instead as some metaphysical substance that is magically injected into the product by the worker's touch. Such a theory of value is akin to the old chemical theory of phlogiston in which the principle of fire was conceived as a material substance incorporated into inflammable objects. A phlogiston theory of value leads to such bizarre and politically dangerous results as identifying 'value-producing' workers only as those who do physical work directly on the product. From here it is only one step to the ritualistic categorization of 'real' workers and 'unproductive' workers and the political positions usually associated with such an approach.

Marx shows us at least two ways to avoid this trap. In Chapter One he invites us to consider the fact that the quality of labour always varies from person to person. There are always hierarchies of productivity among workers due to variations in skill and equipment in producing the same commodity. Thus, at any point in time the 'homogeneity' of labour is actually reached only at the level of the social average in terms of both quality (abstract labour) and quantity (time) of labour. Marx writes: 'The labour-time socially necessary is that required to produce an article under the normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time.'<sup>33</sup> In Chapters 14–16 on manufacture and modern industry, and in the 'unpublished 6th chapter', Marx later introduces an explicit discussion of the 'collective' or 'aggregate' worker that also leads us away from any phlogiston theory of value. In Chapter 16 Marx spoke of this with reference to the question of productive (value-producing) labour: 'In order to work productively, it is no longer necessary for the individual himself to put his hand to the object; it is sufficient for him to be an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions. The definition of productive labour given above, the original definition, is derived from the nature of material production itself, and it remains correct for the collective

<sup>33</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, Section 1: 39 [International Publishers Edition].



labourer considered as a whole. But it no longer holds good for each member taken individually.<sup>34</sup> In the ‘unpublished 6th chapter’ Marx spoke of this even more vividly in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

...the *real level* of the overall labour process is increasingly not the individual worker. Instead, *labour-power socially combined* and the various competing labour-powers which together form the entire production machine participate in very different ways in the immediate process of making commodities, or, more accurately in this context, creating the product. Some work better with their hands, others with their heads, one as a manager, engineer, technologist, etc., the other as overseer, the third as manual labourer or even drudge ... If we consider the *aggregate worker*, i.e. if we take all the members comprising the workshop together, then we see that their *combined activity* results materially in an *aggregate* product which is at the same time a *quantity of goods*. And here it is quite immaterial whether the job of a particular worker, who is merely a limb of this aggregate worker, is at a greater or smaller distance from the actual manual labour.<sup>35</sup>

These very important concepts should lead us once and for all away from any tendency to try to grasp value in terms of individual cases.

In understanding the measure of value the key distinction to see is that between the useful labour that produces commodities as use-values and the abstract labour that produces them as values. The direct measure of actual labour time can only be the measure of useful labour and never that of value. Between that useful labour time and value lies the social mediation which appears as an averaging. In other words, while the actual amount of useful labour time required to produce individual commodities of a given type may vary in different places, value expresses the social average which will give the ‘normal’ conditions of production prevalent in any given period. As always with Marx, the social determination is central; the individual particularity, derivative — the part is meaningful only within the framework of the whole. This means that the value of a commodity produced in one place, because it is determined by the socially necessary labour time, will be the same as those produced elsewhere even if it actually contains more/less useful labour time because the labourers producing it have a lower/higher productivity than the average.<sup>36</sup>

Although this social averaging appears at this point only as a conceptual necessity, it must also be understood as an actual social process of considerable importance in the development of several key capitalist strategies. It is an actual social process in the sense that capital has a tendency to redistribute itself from areas of low productivity to areas of high productivity (when this differential leads to a difference in profits). Such redistribution tends to produce a social average in fact as well as in principle. The mechanisms of such redistribution range from expanded corporate investment in plants of high productivity and the closing down of those of lower

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 16: 508–509.

<sup>35</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Appendix: Results of the Immediate Process of Production, Section II, part 5: 1039–1040 [Ben Fowkes translation, Penguin edition].

<sup>36</sup> ‘Productivity’ always refers to the amount of commodity produced by a given amount of useful labour with a given ‘degree of skill and intensity’. See Chapter IV of this book for more discussion of this.

productivity to intercorporate competition and the dissemination of similar productivity-raising innovations across an industry.

At the same time, we also discover in Marx's analysis of relative surplus value and the introduction of machinery that labour time is actually increased in two different ways. First, the minimization of operating costs with machinery often calls for continuous twenty-four-hour operation so that a tendency is created both to lengthen the workday and to create night work. Second, the smooth regularity of machine operation tends to force the workers to work more continuously, thus 'filling up the pores of the workday'. This is a process that may be understood both as working harder and as eliminating the moments or minutes of respite that workers could otherwise steal during their work time. Both of these phenomena, by changing the amount of useful (and indirectly value-'producing') work done in a given period of time, change the nature of that time by making it 'produce' more value. Such 'heightened tension of labour power or condensation of labour' means more sweat, harder toil, and, often, increased accidents for the workers involved.<sup>37</sup>

This brings us to some further considerations on the nature of time itself under capitalism. So far we have seen the impossibility of conceiving of time simply in terms of the direct chronological time of production — because of the 'social average' character of abstract labour. We have also just seen that an increase in the intensity of labour certainly changes the meaning of a given period of work. But Marx's analysis of labour time suggests more than this. It is an exposition of one of the basic political elements of the class relations of capitalism. The labour time we have been examining is above all completely within the context of the structure of capitalist production. It is the only time that counts from the viewpoint of capital. In capital's perspective, 'labour time' is the only living time because that time makes money. More labour time means less loss or more surplus value and so capital seeks by every means it can dream up to increase it. Any time spent by the working class that is not work — exactly the time workers fight to increase — is dead time for capital. (I shall return shortly to how capital tries to convert such dead time to work time.) For the working class, on the other hand, labour time is time lost. It is, after all, something it has been forced to sell to the capitalist; it belongs to the capitalist and is time lost to the worker. Thus, in contradiction to capital, labour time is dead time for the worker. It is only during nonwork time that the worker is free to live and develop his or her own life.

Capital tries to convince us that time is universal and just a physical entity. But we know it is not. One hour of work time is not equal to one hour of free time by any

<sup>37</sup> To say, as is often done, that workers 'produce' value is misleading. It makes value sound like some metaphysical substance — a phlogiston of some sort. As we have seen, work under capital is the substance of value. The more work that is performed in a given time, the more value there is [assuming as always that the products of that work also take on the form of value, exchange value, through sale]. The same linguistic problem exists where we speak of constant capital 'transferring' its value to the product. The point is that the constant capital is necessary for production and requires a certain amount of labour to be produced. The final 'value' of a new product  $c+v+s$  is simply equal to the sum of the [abstract] labour required to produce the constant capital [c], plus the new labour which has transformed the constant capital into that new product  $[v+s]$ . There is nothing metaphysical about these relations, and language which suggests that there is should be avoided.

means. One particularly vivid example of workers' consciousness of this fundamental fact is cited by Marx in the *Grundrisse*:

The *Times* of November 1857 contains an utterly delightful cry of outrage on the part of a West-Indian plantation owner. This advocate analyses with great moral indignation — as a plea for the re-introduction of Negro slavery — how the *Quashees* (the free blacks of Jamaica) content themselves with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this use-values regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good; how they do not care a damn for the sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations but rather observe the planter's impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure.<sup>38</sup>

This is one basic reason why time is a fundamental terrain of class struggle. Clocks have become tools of oppression within capital because minutes of labour time are gold for capital. While it is true that clocks cannot measure work directly because value is determined by the social average, they are nevertheless tools to extract as much labour time as possible in each work place — which indirectly, as we have seen, determines the amount of value produced.

The struggle over time between capital and the working class, which Marx later analyses in some depth in Chapter 10 on the working day, proceeds in the workshop in many ways. Some of those I discussed in the previous chapter — the open struggle over the 'normal' workday, for instance. Others, which Marx discusses, include both the struggle over the intensity of work time, which we just examined, and the 'nibbling' of the workday whereby capitalists (and workers — though Marx dealt less with this) seek to increase (or decrease) the amount of work at every opportunity: at the beginning and end of the day, at lunch breaks, restroom breaks, and so on. In Chapters 20 and 21 on time and piece wages, we also learn how capital tries to manipulate the form of payment of variable capital in order to increase the amount of work time, say, by keeping hourly or piece rates low. Today, when the question of the amount of work that capital can force workers to do is once again a major factor of conflict, we find much experimentation with new time — manipulation patterns, such as the four-day week or flexitime, in which both classes seek to improve their position.

But while the struggles over time in factory or office, over the time of waged work, are many and varied, it is the question of the struggle over time outside the 'official' working day which is the most problematic. In the nineteenth century, when Marx lived and wrote, the amount of time that workers had off the job was very short. Such time as they had was barely enough to achieve their reproduction as labour-power. In such circumstances activities like eating, sleeping, and sexual relations, which might normally be thought of as 'free-time' activities for the workers' enjoyment, were reduced to the work of patching up the damage (physical and psychological) incurred in the factory. In his discussion of simple reproduction in Chapter 23, Marx saw this as a situation in which 'the working class, even when not directly engaged in the labour process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the ordinary instruments of labour.'<sup>39</sup> Already

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook III: 325–326.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 23: 573 [International Publishers Edition].

the ‘working day’ included both factory work and ‘free’ time. In these conditions, Marx concluded that ‘the capitalist may safely leave its [the reproduction of the working class] fulfilment to the labourer’s instincts of self-preservation and of propagation.’<sup>40</sup>

Now, as we saw in the discussion of the commodity-form, Marx also perceived how the continual rise in productivity tended, by reducing socially necessary labour time, ‘to reduce labour-time to a minimum’, and how this tendency gets stronger and stronger with the progress of science and technology. This tendency to reduce labour time is at the same time a tendency to ‘create disposable time’ — free time for workers. Capital’s recurring problem is to find ways to convert this free time into work time. Because of the rapidity of this development, Marx could see the fundamental crisis that it would eventually pose for a system based on the imposition of work. He could see that, when workers would ‘themselves appropriate their own surplus labour’, then ‘disposable time would cease to have an antithetical existence’ and would become the true measure of wealth. What he could not foresee, and this is apparent again and again in *Capital*, were the many ways capital would seek to restructure society as a whole, both in the factory and without, both during ‘work’ time and during ‘free’ time, in order to try to convert all time into work time. When Marx thought about capital’s attempts to recuperate disposable time and convert it into work time, he thought about industrial expansion and the creation of new factory and office jobs. The only exception to this was the case of the reserve army, in which he clearly saw that ‘free time’ was integral and necessary to the functioning of capital’s ‘labour market’. But while this insight is fundamental, he never developed an analysis of the struggle over the content of free time between capital and the working class.

As we saw in the Introduction, the historical development of capital that came after Marx, and which he could not foresee, was the expansion of capitalist control in order to structure all of society into one great social factory so that all activities would contribute to the expanded reproduction of the system. When Marx wrote, for example, in Chapter 15, Section 3, on the employment of women and children, he saw these persons being drawn ever deeper into the industrial machine to be chewed up daily and left to recuperate at night in the same fashion as male workers. There was no need for any special theory about the family, housework, or schoolwork, because these constituted negligible parts of the day. But later, with the expulsion of women and children from the mines and the mills and the factories, with the creation of the modern nuclear family and public school system by capital, such a theory is vital. Today, we must study how capital structures ‘free time’ so as to expand value. We must see how housework has been structured by capital with home economics and television to ensure that women’s time contributes only to the reproduction of their own, their husbands, and their children’s labour-power. We must see the desire for the reproduction of life as labour-power behind capital’s propaganda that it is in the interest of the individual or the family to have a ‘nice’ home or a ‘good’ education.

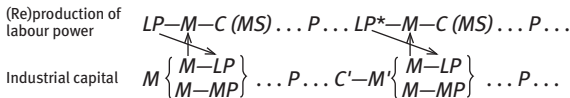
We must see how it developed home economics, not to teach future houseworkers

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.: 572.

how to use the wealth (both commodities and free time) of society for their enrichment, but how to make do with what little they have. It is true that workers demanded easier access to education. But we must also see how capital shaped ‘public’ education, not for the ‘enlightenment’ of workers’ children, but to meet its own need for particular skills, for new technology, for new social control strategies, and, above all, to inculcate discipline. Both housework and schoolwork are intended to contribute to keeping the value of labour-power low. The more work done by women in the home, the less value workers must receive from capital to reproduce themselves at a given level. The more work students do in the school, the less value must be invested in their training and disciplining for the factory (or home). Because of this, an increase of housework or schoolwork, by decreasing the amount of variable capital necessary for the reproduction of the working class, can contribute to the expansion of surplus value (or, inversely, a decrease can undermine that expansion — see below). In fact, we must see how the ‘social’ factory has emerged from workers’ efforts to escape the industrial factory and from capital’s social engineering — how it encompasses today virtually all of what the Critical Theorists call the ‘cultural’ sphere of life. Capital tries to shape all ‘leisure’, or free-time, activities — language, literature, art, music, television, news media, movies, theatres, museums, sports — in its own interests. Thus, rather than viewing unwaged ‘non-labour time’ automatically as free time or as time completely antithetical to capital, we are forced to recognize that capital has tried to integrate this time, too, within its process of accumulation so that recreation is only the re-creation of labour-power. Put another way, capital has tried to convert ‘individual consumption’ into ‘productive consumption’ by creating the social factory. When Marx formulated the circuit of labour power as  $LP-M-C$ , in which labour power ( $LP$ ) was exchanged for the money wage ( $M$ ), which was then exchanged for consumption commodities ( $C$ ), workers’ consumption appeared as the end product of the circuit. The effort to make that consumption ‘productive’ seeks to structure it as a production process whose product is labour-power. This is a situation perhaps better symbolized as a circuit of the reproduction of labour-power:

$$LP-M-C (MS) \dots P \dots LP^*$$

where  $C (MS) \dots P$  represents consumption as involving the work of producing the labour-power ( $LP^*$ ). The asterisk on  $LP^*$  indicates change. Despite the fact that the work of child bearing and child rearing increases the population, work (e.g. housework) in  $P$  still implies a smaller value per capita and thus  $LP^* < LP$ . This has a positive impact on surplus due to the level of variable capital being lower than it would be otherwise. Capital’s new organization of the social factory can thus be represented by the following diagram in which circuits of industrial capital and of the reproduction of labour power are interrelated:



If the circuit of individual capital is one producing consumption goods, then it will further interlock with the circuit of the reproduction of labour-power by selling its output  $C'$  to the workers as their means of subsistence  $C(MS)$  in exchange for their wages ( $M$ ), which become its revenues ( $M'$ ).<sup>41</sup>

In this pattern of development, which has spread so rapidly in the twentieth century, we recognize both capital's eternal tendency to generalize and universalize itself (see the discussion of the expanded form of value below) and its response to the growing difficulty of finding factory work to impose as the means of social control. Marx foresaw the contradiction. He could not foresee this form of socialization of work forming at least a temporary solution.

However, here, as in every other aspect of capital, we must see that there are still two sides, there is still a struggle that has never been completely integrated. As I argued in the Introduction, we must avoid the blindness of those contemporary Marxists who see and analyse the various forms of capitalist domination in the cultural sphere but who fail to see how working-class struggle has repeatedly thrown that domination into crisis. Yes, capital plans all of social life; but we are not in the Brave New World. The working class has forcibly and repeatedly asserted its autonomy. Just as the working class's struggle in the factory has forced capital to reorganize itself, so, too, has its struggle in the 'cultural' sphere forced capital again and again to seek new ways to avoid complete loss of control. The history of 'cultural' revolt is a long one involving all spheres of community life, the family, education, art, literature, and music. What is vital to see is that capital's response has more often resembled a desperate search for a new tactic than the smoothly orchestrated process of assimilation visualized by the prophets of 'bourgeois cultural hegemony'.

The contemporary proof of the true autonomy of working-class struggles in these spheres has been their key contribution to the current crisis of capital. The family, one of the fundamental organizational units of capital's social factory, has been increasingly ripped apart because the struggles of women, children, and even men escaped all efforts to 'integrate' them. Capital is now seeking desperately for ways to either bind the family back up or find alternative institutions. The public school system, another of those fundamental institutions of 'cultural' hegemony, is also in almost complete disarray. The crisis of the schools, part of whose roots lie in the crisis of the family, which was so obviously a basic component of the cycle of struggles of the 1960s, continues. Capital is funding experiment after experiment to find methods of reshaping 'education' in ways adequate to control students. These are only two of the most obvious examples of the breakdown in the social factory, 'cultural' institutions of capital; there are many, many others. And as these institutions of control, these institutions which convert free time into work time, collapse, the working class gains more and more unstructured time in which to develop its struggle independent of capital. The collapse of such institutions thus not only is the sign of success in this conflict but also opens new space for expanded struggle.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.: 572.

There is no longer any need to preach against the 'work ethic', that 'strange affliction' which Paul Lafargue thought he saw infecting the working class years ago.<sup>42</sup> Workers have already rejected capital's definition of living time as work time and have not only demanded the 'Right to Be Lazy' but have also been increasingly achieving it. The twenty-four-hour workday (remember sleep 'learning') has become only a nostalgic dream for capital and a fantastic illusion for those Critical Theorists blind to the comprehensive character of the crisis. Capital has sought to become identical with society, but that identity has been rejected by the working class and that rejection now threatens the very existence of capital itself. In a period such as this, when high productivity makes possible the satisfaction of all the needs of the working class, and the crisis makes clear that capital will not do so, the refusal of all work, both in the factory and without, continues to be a major factor in the class conflict. Factory workers' demands for less work and higher pay are not integrable if their struggle against work keeps wages rising faster than productivity. School dropouts and the disruption of education cannot be seen as an element of capitalist development when lack of discipline permeates the schools, the unemployment lines, and the factory. In ways like this we can see that time always has content and there is a struggle over that content and its duration. Time appears as an increasingly important element in the class struggle and conflict over time has raised again the basic questions about the nature of both work and free time.

The emergence of increasing amounts of free time during the crisis, by providing the basis for expanded struggle, has shown itself to be antithetical to work time but still as much within as against capital. Ultimately, the working class, in the revolutionary overthrow of capital, will move beyond both work time and free time. For free time, as we have seen, is time that is free *from* work as much as it is free *for* the working class. Here Marx's term of disposable time perhaps carries fewer confusing connotations of some abstract 'freedom'.

These considerations of capital's socially necessary labour time and of the working class's struggle against it and its demands for free time can teach us much about the nature and limits of various political strategies. For example, there is not even any real disposability of time when the struggle is converted into political work. It is here that the party emerged as a basic institution within capital because, like the unions and so many other institutions, it structures 'free time' in ways which ultimately contribute to the reproduction of the system, albeit in a reorganized form. At the same time the integrative aspects of 're-creation', of leisure time, show the limits of the simple 'free enjoyment' of free time, of 'play'. It is true that workers fight for time to live, time to love, time to play. But we have seen how that time can be structured by capital and turned against them. As with factory work, it is never a question of whether one enjoys it or not, but rather one of whether the activity is imposed and structured to ensure the reproduction of the system. It is through linking confrontation with capital during all periods of time that time can be most effectively turned against capital. Partial demands can be met if capital can find ways to compensate. A shorter workday (and

<sup>42</sup> Paul Lafargue's essay, 'The Right to be Lazy', was originally published in 1883 as an attack on the slogan 'Right to Work'.

hence more free time) can be provided if productivity rises and if that free time is structured. What is so exciting about the current crisis is just such convergence and complementarity of working-class attacks against the totality of capital's social factory. Not only are all kinds of workers demanding less work time, but also they are refusing to compensate for it. They not only are working less in the factory but they are also using free time to de-create their own labour-power. Those with full or part-time jobs use their 'free time' to gain strength, not to work, but to further refuse work. Those who are 'unemployed' and who are supposed to be doing the work of looking for work, of using their free time to make the labour market function, are instead using their time to avoid work and increase their demands for unemployment benefits, welfare payments, and so on. Here is the real danger to capital: the working class is saying, 'We want everything, including all our time — no more work time and thus no more free time, just life to be lived as we see fit.' Such a demand is totally unassimilable within capital, whose crisis continues because it has not yet found a strategy to defeat it.

### **Use-values and commodities as social processes**

The final point, which is emphasized by Marx in the last paragraph of Section 1, is that 'commodity' is a social category. Marx's comments are not simply formalistic or definitional: that commodities are only commodities in so far as they are the unity of use-value and exchange-value implies that a product must be both exchanged and consumed in order to be a commodity. This is certainly true, but the main point is that the commodity-form must never be reified; it is never a thing. We do speak of commodities as things or things as commodities, but only because they pass through a specific series of social interactions. In this passage they are not things but social processes. As the analysis should have made clear by this point, things are things (use-values) only in their particular properties. Marx now points out that in order to be commodities these properties must be such as to make them social use-values. Even so, they are only latently use-values and they do not become actual use-values unless they are indeed consumed. 'Nothing,' Marx says in the last two sentences, 'can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as [abstract] labour, and therefore creates no value.' So all the categories are those of process. We have now seen that use-value, exchange-value, abstract labour, value, and socially necessary labour time are all social categories designating particular determinations of the commodity-form, which is fundamental to the most basic social process of all: the class struggle.