

The “Concreteness” of Abstract Labour An Objection to Michael Heinrich

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Abstract

In his reconstruction of the monetary theory of value, Michael Heinrich rejects both readings that rely on a weakened concept of abstract labour, causing it to fall back into a concreteness that is incompatible with a coherent monetary theory of value. In this paper, I will argue that, according to Marx's text, concrete labour is to be understood as labour of different kinds, producing different use-values, and not as the physiological dimension of labour. This corresponds to the Marxian thesis that the commodity does not represent two different kinds of labour, but two aspects of the same labour. I will also object that the monetary theory of value as formulated by Heinrich may not have adequately taken into account the unity of concrete and abstract labour, and the corresponding unity of the labour process and the process of valorisation.

Keywords

Abstract labour; Concrete labour; Monetary theory of value; Karl Marx; Capital.

1. Introduction

It seems to me that Michael Heinrich's book, which we are discussing here, has a unifying thread or an all-embracing interpretive key that runs through its various parts, namely the theme of Marx's break with the theoretical field of political economy. This *leitmotif* underpins the various sections of the text and serves as a criterion for taking a position both on the development of Marx's thought from his early works to his maturity, and for focusing on the structure and conceptual passages of the theory of value, as well as for assessing its consequences and misunderstandings on the more strictly political terrain.

One of the merits of the reading proposed by Heinrich is that it overcomes two interpretative and, indirectly, militant attitudes: on the one hand, the para-dogmatic postulation of the coherence and soundness of Marx's theory of value and economic analysis; on the other hand, the validation of Marx's theory of value as a general theory of society and as a premise for political praxis, based on the dismissal of his economic analysis as a flawed and negligible appendage. In other words, Heinrich's work opposes two contradictory but also synergistic tendencies: the first, that of glossing over the potential inconsistencies of the theory of value; the second, that of disentangling the critique of political economy as social theory from economic critique in the proper sense.

The rupture with the epistemological field of classical political economy and the inauguration of a different *problematique* takes place essentially through the foundation of a monetary theory of value that goes beyond conceptions – particularly Ricardo's – that rely on the identification of the substance of the value of commodities outside of a necessary connection with the form of value, or, in other words, on the attribution of values to individual commodities as the products of a certain physical and temporal expenditure of labour, outside the relationship between commodities and the reciprocal expression of their values, which must find its instantiation in the money-form¹.

¹ Marx's monetary theory of value also allows a refutation of later neoclassical and marginalist theories, according to which, to put it very roughly, value is formed in exchange, but consists in the attribution of a value to individual

Borrowing a now-classic theme in the interpretation of the theoretical development of the critique of political economy, based mainly on the manuscripts of 1861-1863², we could say that Marx uses Ricardo against Bailey, i.e. the labour theory of value against the conception of value as use-value (thus situating his analysis of the commodity and his distinction between use-value, exchange-value and, from a certain point onwards, value *tout court*, as a critical development of classical political economy), but also, and just as importantly, if not more so, Bailey against Ricardo, i.e. against the substantialist theories of value which ignore the premises and the implications of the exchange relationship.

Although he echoes Althusser’s approach, both in locating the epistemological rupture that inaugurates the materialist and no longer humanist conception of history, and in framing the further rupture that inaugurates the critique of political economy as the field of an entirely new “problematic”, Heinrich does not attempt to rescue the method and content of Marx’s investigation by attributing the “lacunae” to his inadequate self-understanding and by investing theoretically precisely in the lacunae as knots of theoretical expressiveness that stand out before the interpreter³. For Heinrich, it is not primarily a matter of arguing that the Marxian method, in its objectivity, would be valid beyond the self-understanding of Marx himself. Whatever the various connotations of Marx’s method may look like, Heinrich is concerned with questioning the actual ambiguities of the categories and their deduction, and with exploring in detail the ambivalences of Marx’s conception, which is always on the verge of falling back into a pre-monetary theory: “it is not only Marx’s self-understanding that is lacking: it is also his categorial development, which remains ambivalent in some critical passages”⁴. The ambivalences depend on the insufficient elaboration of the heritage of classical political economy: when “the elements of the classical discourse are integrated into the new terrain, they undermine the fundamental categories and generate specific problems”⁵.

From the general viewpoint of a history of Marxism, it would be relevant in this regard to ask Heinrich to situate himself in relation to the open Marxist, post-Marxist and neo-Marxist currents that have developed since the 1970s and 1980s. If, for a certain period, it seemed important and functional to define oneself as Marxian rather than Marxist, implying some degree of dissociation both from the prevailing interpretations of Marx’s economic doctrine and from the historical-political outcomes of twentieth-century communism, on the other hand, nowadays, one might perhaps have to finally take up the invitation to go with Marx beyond Marx⁶, especially if one is willing to renounce (as Heinrich seems to do) the salvific idea of a Marxian coherence obscured by the distortions of Marxism.

2. A new “new reading” of Marx

The emphasis on the monetary character of Marx’s theory of value places Heinrich in a certain continuity, which at first glance could be mistaken for a genuine overlap, with the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, which developed from the work of Hans-Georg Backhaus⁷. However, a point (among others) that essentially distinguishes Heinrich’s approach from the interpretations that first systematically emphasised the monetary character of Marx’s theory of value is the thesis of a continuity, within the first chapter of *Capital*, of the theory of value with the analysis of commodity,

commodities on the basis of their use-value, mediated by the interweaving of psychological propensities and the scarcity or abundance of different goods.

² Cfr. Marx (1979, 1313 ff.).

³ See Althusser et al. (2016).

⁴ Heinrich (2023, 99, translation my own, in all quotations from this text).

⁵ *ibidem*

⁶ Though in a different theoretical context, this was the fortunate title of Negri (1992).

⁷ See Backhaus (1997, *passim*).

and of the chapter on money (chapter 3) with the first two chapters devoted to commodity and exchange. According to Backhaus, it would not be possible to derive the necessity of the monetary expression of value from the mere unfolding of the analysis of commodity. The dialectical deduction would be interrupted, or rather necessarily interpolated by the appearance of money, which cannot be derived entirely from the development of previous categories. For Heinrich, this is not the case: that is, there is no substantive, pre-monetary theory of value which then becomes suddenly monetary in the paragraph on the value-form and/or in the third chapter, thus marking a somewhat new beginning of the categorial exposition. The transition from the analysis of the commodity to the development of the form of value is seen as fairly consistent. The logical necessity of the monetary expression of value and of money itself are, after all, proven by Marx.

Apart from the questions concerning the unity and coherence of Marx’s exposition, the focus of Heinrich’s inquiry is on Marx’s fluctuation between a monetary and a pre-monetary theory of value. Some of Marx’s formulations do suggest indeed that the magnitude of value can be measured independently of its form, by means of a substance of value that is available before it acquires a particular expression, and ultimately a monetary expression. Instead, the “objectuality” of value is not inherent in the single commodity outside their mutual relation. Commodities are values, i.e. shares of a common substance, only as a collective, “social” substance (and “social” here is to be understood in a twofold way: as the relation between commodities, presented in the form of value, and as the “socialization” of private, individual labours through exchange in the sphere of circulation)⁸.

Even if it has been made clear that the values of commodities, including their substance and magnitude, exist only within a certain form, i.e. in the relationship between commodities expressed in money, the danger of falling back into a pre-monetary theory reappears as soon as one tries to qualify the substance and magnitude of value as a quantity of time in which labour is expended and ultimately “incorporated” in the commodities through a series of mediations. Heinrich argues that we cannot even simply take at face value the phrase “value is constituted” in production, for it is not yet value until it has a value form. One may well agree with this statement, but the question arises as to whether it is compatible with the idea that value is extracted in production, and with the non-formal character of this extraction.

An eminent case of this difficulty is, in my view, the formulation of a monetary theory of exploitation. If it turns out that the theory of exploitation is inextricably linked to pre-monetary or non-monetary assumptions (insofar as the difference between the monetary magnitudes of wage and profit is to be attributed to the difference between the value of labour-power and the amount of value constituted during the working day⁹, both measured in terms of the physical unit of time and in terms of an ontology of abstract labour extracted from concrete labour performances), the demonstration of the monetary character of Marx’s theory of value and capital runs the risk of leaving us without a coherent theory of exploitation, unless one identifies, both in Marx’s pages and beyond them, a genuinely monetary theory of exploitation, uncompromised by physiological quantities of any kind. One should, as an alternative, disentangle the acquisitions of the monetary interpretation of the theory of value from an excessively rigid opposition between concrete and abstract labour.

3. Reintegrating physiology in the notion of abstract labour

The famous “common element”, to which, for Marx, the values of commodities must be traced back¹⁰, remains in fact an inescapable tenet in the theory of value, or at least in the theory of

⁸ See Heinrich (2023, 316 f.).

⁹ Regardless of the preferred solution to the “transformation problem” and the explanation of income distribution.

¹⁰ See Marx (2016, 127): “The exchange values of commodities must be reduced to a common element, of which they represent a greater or a lesser quantity”.

valorisation (and hence of exploitation), which is supposed to take place through the subsumption by capital of a particular commodity that becomes its component, which is able, once it is consumed, to add value rather than merely transferring the value already incorporated in it. As can be guessed, this set of issues calls into question the perennial problem of the theoretical definition of abstract labour.

Abstract labour, understood as homogeneous labour expended within a given period of time, is the concept most susceptible to an interpretation in pre-monetary terms, and thus in danger of being the inexorable pre-monetary intruder that invalidates the entire scaffolding of the theory of value. Heinrich¹¹ argues that in Marx’s earliest formulations abstract labour is still overlapping with simple labour, an abstraction that exists as average, homogeneous, labour (be it a trans-historical, physiological notion of human or an even more “concrete” notion of simple or automated labour). Therefore, it is not yet abstract labour, which by definition should not coincide with any kind of determinate labour, however unskilled, mechanical and generic.

According to Heinrich, the labour theory of value in its later formulations is not intended to demonstrate that the substance of value is labour-time. Rather, it is a step or a moment in the deduction which seeks to clarify the form and process by which the social character of labour subsists and functions in the epoch of capitalist production. The object of explanation, then, is not value, but rather the capitalist production of commodities as a whole, i.e. a set of social relations of production, or, in other terms, a form of socialisation and validation of private labours, which only “on the surface” are mediated exclusively on the basis of propensities to buy and sell, which relate to the use value of the commodities produced¹². Indeed, Marx considered his fundamental contribution to be the analysis of the *form* of value, way more than the clarification of the substance, which he deemed to be more or less achieved by classical political economy, albeit incompletely and without relation to its form and to the reasons for the necessity of its expression in a certain form, and in general from a bourgeois and inherently apologetic viewpoint.

Through a detailed analysis, Heinrich exposes the “physiological” residues that render Marx’s formulations ambiguous. But what to do when we come to the inevitably concrete component of labour and its empirical aspects? There are two elements that cannot be avoided if we are to remain within a Marxian framework, namely the measurement of abstract labour in units of time and the definition, albeit metaphorical, of values as “jellies” [*Gallerten*]¹³ of equal labour and of constituted value as a “coagulation” of human labour¹⁴. It is not only Heinrich’s, but Marx’s own problem to decide whether abstract labour is concrete labour that simply counts as abstract in the theory of value, or whether it is really abstract in a more meaningful sense. In the latter case, both the theory and its interpretation must meet the twofold requirement of letting labour remain genuinely abstract, i.e. of conceiving the reality of abstraction without making it coincide with any of the possible aspects of concrete labour, but also of accounting for its expenditure, extraction and coagulation in the “supersensible” materiality of value.

The requirement of abstraction could seem better satisfied by time as the unit of measurement of labour than by simple-concrete labour. But like homogeneous-concrete labour, Heinrich argues, homogeneous-concrete time is not a good candidate for taking part in a genuinely monetary theory of labour-value: “if abstract labour is conceived as a certain social relation between private labours, it is not possible to declare the duration of the consumption of labour-power to be a measure of the quantity of abstract labour”¹⁵.

Heinrich emphasizes the risk that a temporal conception of substance and magnitude undermines the adequacy of the analysis of form, thus dissolving the specificity of Marx’s critical contribution.

¹¹ Heinrich (2023, 310 ff.).

¹² *ivi*, 301.

¹³ Marx (1983, 46, transl. my own).

¹⁴ Marx (2016, 142): “Human labour-power in its fluid state, or human labour, creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value in its coagulated state, in objective form”.

¹⁵ Heinrich (2023, 319).

Underlying this concern, in my view, is a *sequential* reading of the substance-magnitude-form triad, which instead needs to be understood in a *synchronic* way. Labour time is a measure of value within a specific conception of value as a system of relations between commodities, thus ceases to be a valid unit of measurement only if commodities are considered individually. It is the fact that commodities relate to each other as values that requires an explanation of their commensurability, and this is accomplished both “forwards” through the concept of money as a form of equivalent, and “backwards” through the thesis that the substance of value lies in the socially necessary average labour time. And in both cases value means the value of commodities in reciprocal relation.

It is to be noted, however, that Heinrich himself seems to agree with this kind of solution when he writes:

To speak of time as a measure of abstract labour only makes sense to the extent that for the two exchanged commodities a part of the total labour time of society, disbursed in the various spheres of production, has been employed. [...] ‘Labour time’ as a measure of the magnitude of value is as little immediate labour time as abstract labour as a substance of value is immediate, i.e. concrete, labour. Abstract labour cannot therefore be measured simply by labour time, but only by ‘abstract labour time’, so to speak¹⁶.

As a corollary, the extraction of value during the working day is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the constitution of value. Value is constituted in production, but not only in production. In this regard we could say, extending a well-known Marxian image, that just as there is a larva of capital that must become a butterfly through the valorisation process¹⁷, there is a larva of value in the process of its constitution, that must confirm itself through the various stages of the process of circulation. I reckon that the thesis that value is reducible to socially necessary average labour time may be valid for Heinrich, with the proviso that value is neither determined nor fully constituted outside of exchange and monetary expression.

While Heinrich certainly tries to distil a rigorous notion of abstract labour, one might contend that his book does not place adequate emphasis on the idea that abstract labour is “distilled”, so to speak, from concrete labour. It is an aspect, a dimension of labour that coexists with concrete labour, in the womb of the same phenomenon. It is true that the greater or lesser degree of homogeneity and automation of concrete labour processes does not define the abstract character of abstract work. But securing the abstract character of labour within a monetary theory of value does not necessarily imply the elimination of any residue of concreteness, particularly of the “physiological” one. Marx is quite explicit on this point:

On the one hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour power, *in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities*. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values¹⁸.

In this passage, the physiological expenditure of labour is even equated with the abstract labour that forms the value of commodities. While we should not take at face value Marx’s phrasing *ex auctoritate*, nonetheless this formulation suggests, in my opinion, that some caution should be used before expunging the physiological character of labour from the concept of abstract labour. The formulation laid out in the first edition of Volume I is a bit clearer, despite being (or rather, because it is) more dialectical:

¹⁶ *ivi*, 320.

¹⁷ Marx (2016, 269).

¹⁸ *ivi*, 137, my italics.

It is not at all the case that two different kinds of labour are contained in the commodity, but rather that the same labour is determined differently and is opposed to itself, depending on whether it is referred to the use-value of the commodity as its product or to the value of the commodity as its merely objective expression¹⁹.

Furthermore, the concreteness of labour should not be identified with its physiological aspect. The concrete dimension of labour is synonymous with the differentiation of various labour processes that produce different commodities or parts of them, not with their physiological character. Thus, the distinction between abstract labour and concrete labour does not entail making abstract labour coincide with unskilled labour, nor seeking an abstraction that has nothing to do with the physiological aspect of labour processes. Perhaps, a semantic distinction between “labour” and “production” could add any indication regarding Marx’s position:

We now see that the difference between labour, considered on the one hand as producing utilities, and on the other hand as creating value, a difference which we discovered by our analysis of a commodity, resolves itself into a distinction between two aspects of the production process. The production process, considered as the unity of the labour process and the process of creating value, is the process of production of commodities; considered as the unity of the labour process and the process of valorization, it is the capitalist process of production, or the capitalist form of the production of commodities²⁰.

Physiologically equal labour does not imply the empirical coincidence of different concrete processes, but is precisely their common element, the genus that persists through the differentiation of the species of labour. Just like in the values of commodities an abstraction from their use-values is performed, in the labours that produce those values an abstraction is made from their useful form²¹. The argument according to which we need to historicise abstract labour by arguing that abstract labour in the naturalistic-physiological sense is common to all societies and therefore says nothing specific about bourgeois society, is in my view misleading²². Rather, the point is to understand how, according to Marx, abstract labour, including its “naturalistic” component, becomes the regulating principle of bourgeois society, in which human beings are *reduced* to the bearers and dispensers of generic labour, both in the metaphorical sense (the simplification and standardisation of concrete labour) and in the specific sense of abstract labour (according to the definition I have tried to highlight), while performing their differentiated and even complex works²³.

As a result of the considerations made so far, I do not think that Heinrich’s book succeeds in proving that a monetary theory of value needs to rule out every non-monetary and yet structural aspect of abstract labour in order to remain remaining coherently monetary. I reckon that a monetary theory of value and production²⁴ could ultimately incorporate a notion of abstract labour containing elements of “concreteness”, even physiological ones, without automatically leading to a physiological labour theory of value of Ricardian kind, and thus without causing Marx’s theory of value to relapse into a pre-monetary one.

¹⁹ Marx (1983, 26 f.).

²⁰ Marx (2016, 304).

²¹ Marx (2016, 135).

²² Misleading, I mean, as an argument within an attempt at defining abstract labour. I am not arguing that the distinction between the trans-historical aspects of human labour and its historically determined social form should be dismissed.

²³ It is in this sense, I think, that Marx (2016, 135) argues that “different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement”.

²⁴ For the notion of “macro-monetary theory of production” see, though with different premises and results, Bellofiore (2002), Moseley (2016).

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