Part Five

The Production of Absolute and Relative Surplus-Value
Chapter Sixteen: Absolute and Relative Surplus-Value

Our historical survey completed, we can now return to some of the theoretical issues related to the labour process in a more concrete way, so as to develop them.

1 Individual and social labour

Earlier, we defined productive labour abstractly, independently of its historical forms: abstractly, because individualised. But human production is only exceptionally individual: the preceding historical account has precisely been an account of the increasingly social complexity of the labour process, within which the direction is that in which ‘the product is transformed from the direct product of the individual producer into a social product, the joint product of a collective labourer’. We should note here the non-antagonistic nature of solitary labour: ‘just as head and hand belong together in the system of nature, so in the labour process mental and physical labour are united.’ The socialisation of production brings, increasingly so, antagonism, as mental labour becomes separated from physical labour, and as the product is transformed from the direct product of an individual producer into the joint product of a collective of workers.

2 The notion of productive labour

All this supposes both a broadening and a narrowing of the concept of productive labour. The broadening arises from the understanding that ‘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 perform any one of its subordinate functions.’ The narrowing from the fact that, under capitalist production, which is not merely the production of commodities but the production of surplus-value, the productive worker, who produces not for herself but for capital, is productive only insofar as she produces surplus-value, i.e. ‘contributes to the self-valorisation of capital.’ Thus what determines whether or not labour is productive or not is the structure of social relations within which that labour is carried out. ‘The concept of a productive worker therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of

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1 Where I insert my own subheads they appear, as here, in sans serif type.
2 Karl Marx, Capital vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1990) [hereafter C.], p. 287.
3 C., p. 643.
4 C., p. 643.
5 C., pp. 643-4.
6 C., p. 644. Marx’s celebrated and much-quoted statement of the equivalence of the labour of a teacher and that of the worker in a sausage factory is not quite the convincing demonstration of a more developed concept of productive labour that it is taken to be. For the teacher is a productive labourer because ‘he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school’, and the owner of the school is a capitalist by virtue of the fact that he ‘has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory.’ Thus what Marx is saying is that the type – i.e. appearance – of labour is unimportant when it comes to deciding who is productive and who is not: what counts is whether or not surplus-value is produced. It is this second part that has subsequently been so frequently ignored. For what of the teacher who works in a state-owned educational establishment? Here Marx’s argument cannot apply in this form, for there cannot be, outside of certain hypothetical and highly abnormal circumstances that we could imagine, any direct production of surplus-value. Nevertheless, although in this case there is no bourgeois growing fat on the profits from capital invested in a ‘teaching factory’, could we not argue that the teacher in the state education system, insofar as she contributes to the functioning, stability and perpetuation of the capitalist system, contributes indirectly to the process of the self-valorisation of capital? I imagine we could, but, by the same token, this argument would lead us to draw the conclusion that, by this logic, the policeman is as much a productive worker in this sense as the teacher is – if not more so, for, from the point of view of the rule of capital, teachers are in the last analysis more expendable than policemen are.
his work, but also a specifically social relation of production, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the
worker as capital’s direct means of valorisation.7

3 Absolute and relative surplus-value: formal and real subsumption of labour

This point made Marx now returns in more detail certain concrete features of the historically specific character
of capitalist production. He begins with the concepts of absolute and relative surplus-value. He notes that the
existence of the latter logically presupposes the prior existence of the former: the possibility of cheapening
labour-power by cheapening the commodities consumed by the labourer presupposes that that the working day
is already divided into necessary and surplus-labour, i.e. that surplus-value is already being produced. In fact,
while it is the production of absolute surplus-value which forms the general foundation of the capitalist system,
it is the production of relative surplus-value which ‘completely revolutionises the technical process of labour and
the groupings into which society is divided.’8 The production of relative surplus-value requires a ‘specifically
capitalist mode of production’, which arises spontaneously on the basis of the formal subsumption of labour
under capital. This formal subsumption is then replaced by a real subsumption.9

This distinction between absolute and relative surplus-value may appear at first sight trivial, even illusory: after
all, to the extent to which absolute surplus-value demands a development of the productivity of labour sufficient
to permit the restriction of necessary labour-time to only one part of the working day it is also to a degree
relative surplus-value, and to the extent to which relative surplus-value presupposes the absolute lengthening of
the working day beyond the time necessary for the subsistence of the worker it in turn is also to a degree
absolute surplus-value. But the distinction is a real one, something which becomes abundantly clear once the
necessity poses itself of raising the rate of surplus-value. Assuming labour-power to be bought and sold at its
value, the rate of surplus-value can be raised in only one of two fundamental ways: either, in conditions of stable
productivity and intensity of labour through the absolute lengthening of the working day, or, with the length of
the working day fixed, through changes in the either the intensity of labour, the productivity of labour, or both.

4 The historical preconditions of the capitalist mode of production

The historical appearance of surplus labour presupposes a certain level of productivity, for if a worker needed all
her time to produce her necessities of life she would have no more time disposable for performing work to
sustain others. Thus the only sense in which surplus-value can be said to have a natural basis is that which posits
that the possibility of one person lifting from herself the necessity of the labour necessary for her existence finds
no natural obstacle. ‘The capital relation arises out of an economic soil that is the product of a long process
of development. The existing productivity of labour, from which it proceeds as its basis, is a gift, not of nature, but
of a history embracing thousands of centuries.’10

5 The limits on the productivity of labour

Marx notes that, aside from the obtaining level of development of social production, what delimits the
productivity of labour is the prevailing set of natural conditions. These conditions may be divided into two

7 C., p. 644. Of course, it could be argued that this reasoning breaks down into tautology. For if it is the capitalist nature of
the social relations of production which determine whether or not the worker is productive in a capitalist sense (i.e. that
she contributes to the self-valorisation of capital), all this says is that the productive worker where capitalist relations of
production prevail is the one which labours under capitalist relations of production.

8 C., p. 645.

9 C., p. 645. By ‘formal’ here is understood ‘in form’.

10 C., p. 647.
groups: the nature of the people themselves concerned, and the nature of their surroundings. This second
category may in turn be subdivided analytically into means of subsistence and potential instruments of labour.
The further back in history we go, the more important is the former of this subdivision in determining the
relative level of development of societies (Marx cites the example of India and what he calls ‘England’ as an
type of this).

Marx also notes (citing the example of the great building projects of ancient Egypt) that, as a consequence of
fortuitous natural conditions, the more reduced the level of natural requirements needing to be fulfilled the
greater is the potential surplus-labour available.

Marx also notes that it seems to be the case that, assuming capitalist production, and all other circumstances
being the same, while the quantity of surplus labour available will vary in accordance with the natural conditions,
especially with the fertility of the soil, the inverse is not the case — that the most fertile soil is not the most
suitable for the growth of capitalist production. “The mother country of capital is not the tropical region, with its
luxuriant vegetation, but the temperate zone.”

But where does this lead us? Is it the case that surplus labour, the growth of industry, are dependent on the
naturally obtaining conditions? Far from it: natural conditions affect surplus labour only by imposing natural
limits on it, ‘by determining the point at which labour for others can begin,” not whether it does begin. Marx
cites the example of those East Indian islanders (and whether or not the example has real basis in fact is
immaterial for Marx’s point) who have the good fortune to be surrounded by naturally available sago, and who
are thus able to supply their basic necessities with very little labour. From the point of view to an inhabitant of
the islands,

nay’s direct gift […] is plenty of leisure time. [But] before he can apply this leisure time productively for
himself, a whole series of historical circumstances is required; before he spends it in surplus labour for others,
compulsion is necessary. If capitalist production were introduced, the good fellow would perhaps have to
work six days a week, in order to appropriate for himself the product of one working day. In that case, the
bounty of nature would not explain why now he has to work six days a week, or why he must provide five
days of surplus labour. It explains only why this necessary labour time would be limited to one day a week.
But in no case would his surplus product arise from some innate, occult product of human labour.

And Marx immediately concludes, making the important point: ‘Thus both the historically developed productive
forces of labour in society, and its naturally conditioned productive forces, appear as productive forces of the
capital into which that labour is incorporated.’

6 The social character of surplus labour

Surplus labour, its magnitude, and to what end it is expended, are the products not of human labour itself, nor
the natural conditions under which it is expended, but the social conditions, historically evolved and determined,
under which production occurs. Natural factors enter into the matter only by imposing certain external upper
limits beyond which it is impossible to go.

Marx here finishes by directing a few comments at how previous political economy had understood the
problem. Ricardo, he notes, accepts the existence of surplus-value as a natural property, and while he inquires

11 C., p. 649.
12 C., p. 649.
13 C., p. 650.
14 C., p. 651.
15 C., p. 651.
into the causes of its magnitude, never questions the causes of its existence, which he takes as given. In that he proclaims that profit originates from the productive power of labour, however, his account is superior to that of the mercantilists, who can only see profit as originating in the act of exchange.