



Research Article

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Critical Labour in *Capital*: A Reading of Marx's Life in His Work

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Abstract: This essay proposes a reading of Marx's *Capital* that considers the correlation between life and labour, between material existence and productive activity, as essential to the book's critical project. It argues that there is a critical and paradoxical moment in the plexus of this relationship that academic discourse should consider: if *Capital* argues that capitalism constitutes a system of organization of life, inscribing human labour as labour power, that is, as commodity or market goods, then how can we extract critical labour itself from this totalizing structure? In other words, what kind of labour is critical labour and what function should it represent in a world in which all labour would already be inscribed within the logic of capital? Drawing on biographical, anecdotic and circumstantial considerations about Marx's labour while writing *Capital*, this essay traces the conditions of existence of the author and creates a reading position that explores the relationship between life and work, between Marx and *Capital*, and thus questions critical labour itself as a productive activity and the material life it contains.

Keywords: Marx's *Capital*, Labour, Life, critical thinking

Marx discovered the law of development of human history:
the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology,
that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing,
before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.
Frederick Engels' Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx, 1883

I would like to propose a reading of Marx's *Capital* that challenges, a century and a half after its publication, a certain analytical rigidity that still operates in academic discourse when confronting this book. This reading addresses the correlation between life and work, between material existence and labour, as an essential moment in the critical project the book articulates. There is a paradoxical moment in the plexus of this relationship that academic discourse should consider: if, in *Capital*, capitalism constitutes an organisational system of life, inscribing human labour as labour power, as commodity, then how do we extract criticism itself from this totalizing drift? How do we extricate that particular mode of labour which consists of producing a space (symbolic, practical) of revolutionary de-inscription? In a more precise way: what type of labour is critical labour and what function should it represent in a world in which all productive activity would already be inscribed within the logic of the capital?

Along this line of thought, I will outline a series of biographical, anecdotic and circumstantial considerations that, put in a certain critical perspective, are ultimately useful to position a general reading context for this book which is so essential to critical thought. This context will allow me to confront a certain canonical sensibility that comes from a "materiality" irreducible to the text and that implies the organization of the conditions of existence of the author. In other words, of someone who produces and puts among men something they would not have, but on condition of pure and simple "expenditure of human

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labour power” (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I 31). Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to build a reading position that traces the relationship between life and work, between Marx and *Capital*, and questions critical labour itself as productive activity and the material life it contains.

In a July 31, 1865 letter addressed to Friedrich Engels, Marx writes that “Whatever shortcomings they may have, the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole” (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 42* 173). They are an “artistic whole” not only in the sense of the unity or coherence preserved under the singularity of the name (the individual subject, which supposes a political space of inscription: the signature *Karl Marx*), but also in regard to the controlling gesture that maintaining that unity implies when faced with the material demands of life itself, with the vicissitudes of a concrete existence. We must maintain coherence throughout life, but we must also maintain life (and the lives of others, like family members, for example) thru the rigours and ordeals that besiege the artistic will. At the origin of all, there would be a dialectical moment showing the crossroads of the act of preserving existence and the act of thinking the conditions that make this preservation possible. Nearly all of Marx’s biographers (Berlin, McLellan, Nicolaevsky & Maenchen-Helfen, Sperber, Wheen) agree on this point: Marx’s life conditions while labouring on his work not only leave an imprint on him about the totalizing crudeness of capitalism, but they also allow him to deduce its structure of domination and its logical fundamentals.

In retrospect, we would have to ask: while searching for a thematic unity that allows him to solve this essential contradiction, when does Marx begin to labour on *Capital*? When does the work he has been idealising to establish the fundamentals of the social regime in which he lives begin to be (to be done, to be worked on)? There is no precise date nor biographical point to situate the origin of his enterprise. There is no single direction in terms of style (tone), topics, or geographical scope since Marx writes as he is being persecuted. Drawing on the extensive quantity of manuscripts, reading notations and notebooks that gravitate around his work, we can maintain that the first volume of *Capital* started to be announced in what we now call the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and more explicitly when Marx started writing *The German Ideology* in 1845 together with Engels, a book that further sealed an unconditional and fructiferous friendship. *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), *Wage Labour and Capital* (1849) and *A Contribution to the Critique of Cultural Economy* (1859) complete a structurally coherent cycle that is also itinerant: Paris, Cologne, Belgium, London. As we can see, the start of Marx’s critical production encompasses a long-term process. More than a specific period of time, this is a temporality that implies a life experience, whose hypothetical reverse is the “idea” of a book that will condense the intellectual experience Marx has been accumulating.

However, in the aforementioned 1865 letter to Engels, Marx adds another idea: that the *artistic whole* “can only be achieved through my practice of never having things printed until I have them in front of me *in their entirety*” (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works, Vol. 42* 173). However, when does his work get finished? When does the labouring on the work end? Even with the understanding that this could respond to an individual method, or to a sovereign decision, can we determine the precise moment in which a “direct producer” finishes his labour, and thus be able to calculate the total vital force enclosed in the work? How can we determine the time of production for a critical work like the one Marx has been writing in those years?

Marx is around 47-years-old and living in London. He is exiled, sunk in poverty, without steady income to ensure his material existence and that of his family in the industrial epicentre of capitalism. “He lives in one of the worst and cheapest neighbourhoods in London,” reports a Prussian spy that managed to get into his house during the years his family lived on Dean Street: “He occupies two rooms. There is not one clean or decent piece of furniture in either room, everything is broken, tattered, and torn, with thick dust over everything... manuscripts, books and newspapers lie beside the children’s toys, bits and pieces from his wife’s sewing basket, cups with broken rims, dirty spoons, knives, forks, lamps, an inkpot, tumblers, pipes, tobacco ash -all piled up on the same table” (qtd. in Berlin 180). In a city of eternal winters, Marx has lost three children in the same space in which he arduously labours on what, as he has been systematically announcing, will be his “fundamental work.” But cycles of haptic disease, skin sores and quotidian urgencies keep interrupting his labour and impede him from finishing. “As soon as peace is restored,” he writes to Engels in a June 22, 1863 letter, “I shall devote myself to the fair copy of the beastly book” (Marx

and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 41 481). During those years, in dialectical manner, the demands of Marx's self-imposed method impede the closure (once and for all) of his aesthetic unit, the final coherence of his discourse.

It is also true that those were years of relative material stability. Marx had been acquiring notoriety among liberal editors, awakening interest to publish him, especially after the circulation of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and of his columns and articles in international newspapers (Marx was a sharp reporter for the *New York Daily Tribune* in the 1850s, with memorable articles about the political and social situation in Europe). There was certainly interest in him, in what he had been publishing and, particularly, in the way he was being read. Marx already had a name forged through years of rigorous labour in which he freely exercised critical inquiry and militant activism, which even set him up as a member of the General Council of the First International Workingmen's Association (1864). Though political repression in the 1840s removed him from the public stage and confined him to his "study room," by the 1860s Marx began to come out with a critical conviction that was, in his words, "the outcome of conscientious research carried on over many years" and "can be summarized as follows":

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, "Preface")

A group picture from that period shows the Marx family and Engels in a London garden. They pose outside, outfitted for a party, with Marx's daughters Jenny, Laura and little Eleanor seated and dressed according to the bourgeois canon of the period. Behind them, the well-dressed Marx and Engels look to the camera with easy-going attitude. Marx stands next to Jenny, his eldest daughter, holding a feathered hat and walking stick. The radical singularity in which the picture detains Marx does not reveal anything about the book he is unable to finish, a "nightmarish burden" (Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 42 175) that keeps him labouring for a vast number of hours in a single room shared with his whole family, over a table that, like the one that emerges from the fetishist character of merchandise, results from a surprising "instability." The facticity of the photo only allows us to read a moment that is as precise as it is inexact: Marx looks vigorous and varnished in his middle-age. It could be an outing in honour of the friend who visits them in Manchester on a Sunday afternoon, and the cane could be a sign of that infirmity that every so often blocks the continuity of the project he intends to finish. From a certain point of view, the unfinished work that hounds Marx creates a *punctum* in this photo which organises, from a certain outward appearance, this scene within the biographical flow and gives it meaning. In negative form, there is a subjective disposition captured in the photo which can be subtracted from the family scene, putting Marx in critical relation to that "artistic whole" for which, during that time, he uses his body.

In that sense, what has been obliterated from this technical image, and from all biographical coherence, would be the complex point juxtaposing what the work has of living labour (*Lebendige Arbeit*) and what that productive activity extracts, which remains an abstract, theoretical entity, no less real nor alive, but excluded from the world of concrete things. That potency not only constitutes the deployment of physiological energy but being in the body is more than the body, because it originates the initial impulse around which the labour is made. It is that portion of "life of the body" that is not strictly corporal: that which we call thinking, the fulminating outburst, "the stroke of lightning" that unleashes style, the force of inscription of an unrepeatable occurrence of expression. It is that subjective potency that is updated in the work, but always precedes the work, because it has the shape of theoretical obstinacy, of persistence in labour, submitted to the concrete rigour of daily critical production. Inside that tension, we cannot deduce the moment of production of discourse only as a moment that oscillates between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, the writing and the reading, between the conditions of possibility that allow the emerge of a critical work as concrete product. We must also consider the labour deployed by a life to ensure the presence of that product in the objective world,

simultaneously assuring the material conditions of its existence. However, how can we account for that junction or tension that inhabits *Capital*, which has been the product of a vital potency of inscription of critical labour, just around the time in which that life starts to enter the “world of labour massively”? In the winter of 1850, Marx gets permission from the British Museum to access the *blue books*, the registers from factory inspectors overseen by British parliamentarians. Although they facilitate his working conditions, Marx cannot attend because he has pawned his frock coat and the cold weather makes the trip impossible. He needs money to recover his coat and thus begin to research the origins of industrial capitalism. Between 1850 and 1860 Marx frequently pawns his coat. With that pawn money, he feeds his family, buys coal, tobacco, candles, ink, paper. He writes on bed all day, relying mostly on memory. When he recovers his coat, Marx goes to the museum to study the fundamentals of capitalism (for more on this, see Stallybras and Galende). This recurrent turn of events, this mechanical repetition, seems to summarise the way in which the “producer” enters the machinery of the extraction of capital, while at the same time, precisely due to its recurrence, he understands the cycle of oppression in which his existence is inscribed. It does not matter if a distinguished man or Marx himself carries the coat, its value of use “lives” independently from its capacity to circulate within the realm of merchandise.

But if that is the case, what is the sense of deploying energy in the production of a work that reveals, deciphers and critiques the fundamentals of a system of production whose peculiarity would be confined to the same relationships with which this system determines the lives of those who labour? If all display of labour force is already susceptible to appropriation by capitalism (even in the very fundament of the distinction between “manual labour” and “intellectual labour”), then how do you extract from that possibility of capture the (free) “critical” impulse contained in the work, which always represents a waste of time on a product of social exchange? Or rather, how does this critical event (*Capital*) occur which, while freeing itself from the valorisation of labour and from the inscription of the “social division of labour,” nonetheless continues to be productive labour, and therefore a waste of pure vital force, of life?

Marx is not a salaried worker, neither a public servant nor an academic. He has lived essentially from writing, which has allowed him to sign contracts as an independent author. His family has also lived from that intense, private labour and from his creditworthiness to friends and close ones. But is critical labour really *labouring*, properly speaking? Marx would have had the conviction that it is; that the practical life, submerged in the immediacy of the private existence, does not manage to deduce the general order that organizes it: “whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless, we do it” (Marx, *Capital* 49). The industrial worker, immersed in his own production relations, selling his work as undifferentiated force, would be unable to understand the concrete space in which historical forms are executed. Marx can, since in some way he is excluded from the rigour with which individuals are obligated to sell their labour power to ensure the conditions that keep them producing. Workers need to know about that space, and that is only possible through an activity that compromises life to a unique process of production, which supposes a deployment of human energy in the material world, but which will not be simply reduced to the logic of the market. It would resist from within the process of production itself, defying its naturalised logic. Now then, how much of *Capital*’s symbolic efficacy comes from this economy of life, from the private administration of an existence subjected to the wage organisation of the industrial city as “counter-economy”? Ultimately, life and work, material existence and labour, are essential to the critical project *Capital* articulates. It is not a matter of whether that “artistic whole,” the labour invested in the critical production, is structurally dependent on that private economy, but rather why does this type of production enable or authorise a critical moment like this one. It is a critical labouring around the general idea that capitalism does not constitute only a mode of production based on the structural disequilibrium of a society of individual agents organised over the basis of the exchange of goods. Instead, in essence, critical labour constitutes a mode of production of life itself, whose logic of reproduction consists of socially organising human labour, organising the material existence of those who labour.

At this point, it would be worthwhile to interrogate that vital energy Marx extracts from his own material conditions of existence to produce an overwhelming critique in the centre of industrial capitalism

in the form of a work (*Capital*), which first and foremost is always a product of crystallised human labour. It would be worth contrasting that vital energy, for example, with the contemporary academic, scientific or techno-scientific labour, in which the general process of critical research can be summed up as a concrete economic activity: the sale of labour time in exchange for a salary. And, along this line of thought, it would be worth assuming the fact that the production of specialised, academic, scholarly knowledge is precisely that: an “act of production” made by private individuals, and thus susceptible to be put in circulation and exchange relations under the logic of capitalism. Then, how can we extract the work out of the life, if this concrete and material existence depends on producing the means of livelihood inside an increasingly abstract system of control, whose structural function consists in extracting value with the labour of the other, devaluing labour itself?

In a brief 1867 letter, written a few months before sending his definitive proofs of *Capital* to his editor, Marx advises Engels to read two stories by Honoré de Balzac: “The Unknown Masterpiece” (“Le Chef d’œuvre inconnue,” 1831) and *Melmoth Reconcié* (*Melmoth Réconcilié*, 1835). On the eve of concluding his critical project, Marx found them “full of delightful irony.” The first one, which became famous after Marshall Berman’s critique of Jarrold Siegel’s biography *Marx’s Fate*, deals with a painter who spends years labouring on his studio painting a masterpiece that will revolutionise the aesthetic perception of the world. He shows it to his students who cannot understand it and judge him, leading him to sacrifice his life. It is not too difficult to see Marx represented in the master painter who, seeking to portray reality in its true form, ended up constructing an intelligible chaotic whole.

The second story, less referenced by biographers and critics, deals with a bank cashier who is swindled by Melmoth, the Faust figure by Irish writer C.R. Maturin, who transfers the infernal power of having everything in exchange for a contract purchasing his soul. But the cashier conceives a formula to get rid of the contract: to find another person in need, who in turn will put the document in circulation until it melts away in the exchange. There are many people in need, and the contract disappears in the hands of a gullible man who dies from a mercury overdose. It is harder to locate Marx in this story, even though the demonic origin of the immense private debt in 19th Century Paris relates them with regard to certain critical configuration. However, at the end of the story, Balzac introduces a curious character: a German demonologist that tries to solve the mystery of the contract, but he is unable to, ending his participation with some pietistic maxims about the essentiality of labour for life. Perhaps, Marx thinks, no matter how profound and concrete the formulations he is about to publish about the capitalist production regime may seem, his critical tone will always seem like a foreigner who, faced with the mystery of a commercial contract (*das Geheimnisvolle der Warenform*) would speak like a radical Lutheran, like a “Hegelian.”

What we should retain here, however, is the relationship that these stories establish with the ironic destiny of the products of private labour: that which the work that, once the productive activity is finished, the direct producer can no longer determine. What will others do with the labour objectified there? How will they read the work that has just been signed, in other words, estranged from itself, thrown to public scrutiny?

Given that “men make their own history, but ... they do not make it under self-selected circumstances” (Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 5), *Capital* is finally published in Hamburg, by the Verlag von Otto Meissner publishing house, in German, on September 14, 1867. Marx concludes his work. He has certainly spent 20 years writing and rewriting the same book, doing the same labour, reformulating the same critical system, preserving his “artistic whole.” But the labour does not end there. On November 2, 1867, Marx writes to Engels: “The silence about my book makes me fidgety. I have had no news of any kind. What good fellows the Germans are! Their achievements in the service of the English, French and even the Italians in this field would indeed entitle them to ignore me and my affairs” (Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 42 458).

In the general framework of this concern, I would like to hold on to the issue of publics, which are primarily national publics: the German public (“*De te fabula narratur!*” *Capital* 6), the French public (“always impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connection between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions,” *Capital* 9), the English public, the Russian public, etc. I would also like to hold on to the issue of readers, and of the writers and editors that both Marx

and *Capital* itself begin to accumulate. Indeed, Marx was always extremely concerned about the way in which he was read. He had an acute sensibility in the face of public interpretation—at least from what we can see in his writings, which are vast. Hence Marx’s adherence to control the “whole,” even the civilian consumption of his sensibilities: a public unable to comprehend the intensity of the intellectual labour that his work has entailed. It also a demanding public, heterogeneous, not necessarily academic though educated, characteristic of the 19th century: readers with critical judgement and faith in the “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*) as reading apparatus. We could call it, with some license, a “Kantian public.”

Among the publics that would affect *Capital* were political economists, the specialists. One first aspect that should be pointed out is that, while it comprises of an investigation describing the general process of capitalist production, *Capital* is also a critique (a pronouncement, a plea) against the political economy. That simultaneity has a strictly analytical character here as if there were two levels or two spaces of interpretation that, even though they turn out to be not dissociable in the book’s argumentative line, can be distinguished in many interpretative contexts that suppose different conceptual strategies. In fact, Marx has been distinguishing between the classical political economy and the “vulgar economy,” but the critical interest lies in abstracting the shared fundamentals and operate with them to explain the concrete process of production. The move is complex and requires “a dialectical reader.” It is not the same to describe the concrete totality which defines exchange relationships between men than to disprove the mode in which they explain to themselves the concrete fact of economic exchange.

A second aspect that must be noted has to do with the very conditions of the possibility of an effective critique of political economy, a critique that tries to dismantle the hegemonic conceptual apparatus with which the existing relationships of production are read. There are historical and material conditions. The matter is complex since the structural limit of the critical effectiveness would not be governed by the author, but by the historicity in which it would be situated. In this way, if the very development of the productive forces driven by capitalism are the ones that determine the state of development that criticism can achieve, then to define industrial capitalism as a historically determined order of production would suppose designing a more compelling and interlinked context of discussion than the one that implies showing the theoretical vices, the logical inconsistencies or the order of the premises of the scientific understanding of capitalist society.

In strictly epistemological terms, Marx’s critique would then consist in a radicalisation of political economy rather than a change of focus to the interior of its essential tenets. It is not a matter of correcting the general order of the theory nor of putting another theory before it, but to assume the fundamentals that are characteristic of the system and lead them to a direct confrontation with what they suppose: “*if you like*,” Marx writes in 1858, “[the work] is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system” (“Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle in Düsseldorf”). Marx is very methodical about this. The emphasis is on the reiteration: What does it imply (for the very analysis of political economy) that goods have two types of value, use value and exchange value, and that this intrinsic duality defines the way in which these are carried out (put into practice or operated) in the market (under the form of money, for example)? In the first place, it supposes that these two aspects of value are in a *relationship*. The emphasis on the relationship is extremely crucial. Just like unequal exchange, the value is not founded *from* the terms that destine them, but *in* the relationship itself that these terms establish. In the second place, that the content of this relationship defines the logic of exchange, through which all merchandise could remit to an unquantifiable attribute as long as it satisfied a general human necessity, immediately becoming interchangeable for any other. Finally, in this radical conversion human labour is left accumulated in its most abstract form, absorbed in an indifferent drift in which there is no more useful labour, nor simple use, but an amorphous mass, a jelly (*Gallerte*) of wasted life around which the market value organises.

But while this last point should be clear for economists, it should not be so definite for all the publics that this critical work should rouse. And that is because the sensible exchange also “makes” the products of labour, it makes them real to the extent that it puts them in relation to others. In that proliferation of others, there is something with which the work, the “artistic whole,” is put in danger; or rather its authorial identity is challenged from the very web of exchange to which it is directed. If we unfold his economic reasoning, *Capital* as a product of labour achieves circulation affected, traduced, manipulated due to a

public sphere that turns out to be constitutive. Above all, if we consider it, beyond its critical architecture, a text filled with strategies, populated with examples, emphases, empirical facts, metaphorical, literary and mathematical resources, all resources destined to multiply public exchange. Let us say that it is a critical work that is neither chaotic nor unfinished (as it is often contended) but displaced, that continues to be affected in its writing, that continues to be an object of labour, therefore, of permanent appraisal, in a process that accumulates, that proliferates, more than it evolved or develops around a progressive and logical succession. The disarray of the work, the disequilibrium of its systemic condition as the vital moment that remains irreducible to the process of capitalisation that the signature encloses.

But, could this lack of control—which could also be thought of as a “lack of labour,” a counter-economy—dilute or expropriate the artistic work from its signature, of the rubric that seals the deployed life of the producer with the product of his labour? Where does Marx start? Where does he end? That said, when does Engels begin “his” labour? These are all questions made with the understanding that there is such a thing as the original, the defining characteristic of a thought, the historical singularity that resists critical capture, that always comes from outside. But, can the work exist without a community of readers? The act of reading has that complexity. It is intimate, solitary, private, but at the same time, in a paradoxical manner, it has the gift of building community, of establishing a “socius,” connections among those who read. “The fraternity of readers,” around which the work or the author are determined as such. A fraternity that, like all of them, turns out to be heterogeneous, crossed by contradictions or antagonisms characteristic of that civil or political community that presumes those who read, since in this community of “republic” not only the traditional, illustrated reader or the reader for pleasure exists, but also the editor or the censor, who reads with the administrative sensibility of calculating if the public should read this or that work or not. From a certain perspective, what in modern times we call the author, that one who, owing to that community, imagines from his desk a certain scene of the reception of his work, would even be a reader; perhaps, in a privileged manner, the author would be the first reader in that community, thus included in that web of heterogeneous sensibilities. Is it not this community that keeps the work current, that turns out to be constitutive as long as it conserves it, protects it from oblivion? Is it not “Marxism,” to use a polemical example, the historical determination of the works (the labour) of Marx, in the sense that all reading configures a critical distance, a space that is irreducible to the interpretive activity itself, which always turns its exterior, inauthentic in relation to the Karl Marx signature, but that, simultaneously, belongs to him as material condition, that becomes consubstantial to the extent to which it institutes an act of productive, reproductive appropriation?

I would insist on this line of inquiry, given that it is an act that, being able to be political or philosophical, always implies labour, a cost in the material order of existence. And that is precisely that cost of life, confronting that other cost of life, the one that makes the work proliferate beyond itself, putting it to work in its petrified immediacy.

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