

# 150 YEARS OF 'DAS CAPITAL': HOW DID KARL MARX UNDERSTAND HUMAN LABOUR?

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is based on the work 'Das Kapital' (1867), the first few chapters of which have been often termed as an expansion of the concepts written by Marx in his notes, published as "Wages, Price, Profit" (1865). The motive of beginning the first part of the book, titled "Commodities and Money", from a 'commodity' which matures till the later chapters to appear as something monopolised by the colonisers and appropriated by the capitalists shows the writing style of Marx. It builds from the abstract to the concrete. Through various mathematical inputs and expressions, what appears to be central to the debate in the initial chapter is the human labour. This human labour becomes value only in its congealed state when embodied in the form of some object. For studying the individual units in this 'world of commodities', there then arises the need for a common scale of comparison or a 'general value'. Further then, the work traces the genesis of money form as this 'general form of value' or what we call today as currency, with a historical understanding.*

The first chapter begins with taking the representative unit of the capitalist mode of production, a commodity which has two features: something external to us, and that which has some utility satisfies human wants of some sort or another. (i.e. use value) Exchange value (E.V), which is the quantitative relationship between two commodities can be expressed as :

$$x(\text{commodity A})=y(\text{commodity B})$$

or, 1 quarter of wheat can be exchanged with x amount of silk or y amount of gold  
Marx then provides two rules for exchange: the valid E.V of a commodity expresses something equal. Secondly, E.V is only the mode of expression and representation, the i.e. appearance of a commodity does not tell us its exchange value but only when it is in motion or in comparison to other commodities. This E.V is a quantitative analysis, not qualitative as two commodities have different physical properties. Marx concludes by saying "As use values, commodities are of different qualities, but as Exchange values, they are merely different quantities and consequently do not contain an atom of use value.

So, the comparison calls for a common "something" which cannot be utility, as usage of one commodity is subjective for two different people. This commonality which is present in all the commodities is that they all are the products of human labour. The human labour (the process of making a commodity) ceases to be the hidden element until commodified into an object, which can be sold, exchanged and measured. This is expressed in the form of value. i.e.- 'socially necessary labour time' (SNLT) On a similar note, Marx in "Wages, Prices, Profit" defines 'value in labour': "Labour power, therefore, is a commodity, neither more or less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter by the scales."

Exchange value then becomes a representation of this value of labour. More labour time or the value in a product, higher will be the exchange value. Value is what is passed on in the process of commodity exchange. Marx defines SNLT as that what is "required to produce an article under the normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time." This productiveness is determined by various circumstances such as the state of science, the degree of its practical application, the social organisation of production, the extent and capabilities of the means of production, and the physical conditions.

The Magnitude of the value (or the extent of value) of any article refers to the amount of SNLT used for its production. The labour forming the substance of value, is homogeneous human labour, expenditure of one uniform labour-power. Commodities, therefore, in which equal quantities of labour are embodied, or which can be produced in the same time, have the same value.

"Exchange," as Aristotle said, "cannot take place without equality, and equality not without commensurability". This knowledge, according to Marx, is incomplete as he failed to identify the common denomination for exchange. Different things can be compared quantitatively, only when those magnitudes are expressed in terms of the same unit, such as weight, speed, height. It is only as expressions of such a unit that they are of the same denomination, and therefore commensurable. Marx reasons that this incomplete theorisation was a result of Aristotle's society itself as Greek society founded upon slavery, had, for its natural basis, the inequality of men and of their labour powers.

He then gives three different cases of commodities

1. Those commodities that have use value but no value or no human labour in it. For instance- Air, water.
2. Those that have use value and value but no exchange value. i.e.- commodities meant for self-consumption
3. Those that have value but no utility. These, Marx says, cannot exist because if the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour and therefore creates no value.

## **LABOUR: ITS VARIOUS FORMS AND SOCIAL DIVISION**

On human labour, Marx provides a distinction between its Concrete form and abstract form. The former employs useful labour, i.e., productive activity of a definite kind and exercised with a definite aim. In this, two different commodities, require two qualitatively unique kinds of labour, like tailoring and weaving. The abstract form connotes the common character of human labour. In this roundabout way, then, the fact is expressed, that weaving also, in so far as it weaves value, has nothing to distinguish it from tailoring, and, consequently, is abstract. Further, In a community, the produce of which in general takes the form of commodities, i.e., in a community of commodity producers, this qualitative difference between the useful forms

of labour that are carried on independently by individual producers, each on their own account, develops into a complex system, a social division of labour.

## **THE FORMS OF VALUE: RELATIVE AND EQUIVALENT**

This section begins by reasserting the point that naturally occurring commodities like iron or corn exist in their bodily form but they also have a value form. There are two poles of the expression of value, namely, Relative form and Equivalent form. For instance, in the value relation expressed in the following equation

$$1 \text{ coat} = 20 \text{ yards of linen}$$

The coat is the relative value and linen is the equivalent value. The bodily form of commodity B, i.e. 'linen' becomes the value form of commodity A, i.e. 'coat' or the body of commodity B acts as a mirror to the value of commodity A.

A single commodity cannot, therefore, simultaneously assume, in the same expression of value, both forms. For instance, 20 yards of linen cannot be compared with itself, i.e. 20 yards of linen. The very polarity of these forms makes them mutually exclusive. Whether, then, a commodity assumes the relative form or the opposite equivalent form, depends entirely upon its accidental position in the expression of value – that is, upon whether it is the commodity whose value is being expressed or the commodity in which value is being expressed.

This relative expression of value, Marx writes, would not exhaustively reflect the changes in the magnitude of value. The relative value of a commodity may vary, although its value remains constant. Its relative value may remain constant, although its value varies; and finally, simultaneous variations in the magnitude of value and in that of its relative expression by no means necessarily correspond in amount.

The Expanded Relative form of value is that value of a single commodity, the linen, for example, which can be expressed in terms of numberless other elements from the 'world of commodities'. Every other commodity now would become a mirror of the linen's value. The Elementary Form of value Through the means of elementary form, the value of a commodity A becomes expressed in terms of one, and only one, another commodity. But that one may be a commodity of any kind, coat, iron, corn, or anything else. Therefore, according to as A is placed in relation with one or the other, we get for one and the same commodity, different elementary expressions of value. The number of such possible expressions is limited only by the number of the different kinds of commodities distinct from it. The isolated expression of A's value, is therefore convertible into a series, prolonged to any length, of the different elementary expressions of that value.

## **GENERAL FORM OF RELATIVE VALUE AND ITS TRANSITION TO MONEY FORM**

The general form of the relative value, embracing the whole world of commodities, converts the single commodity and made to play the part of equivalent into the universal equivalent. The general value form is the reduction of all kinds of actual labour to their common character of

being human labour generally, of being the expenditure of human labour power. This universal equivalent, in one society at a time was linen or gold or silver. But the particular commodity, with whose bodily form the equivalent form is thus socially identified, has become the money commodity or the money form.

## **REFERENCES**

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