Abstract labour: Against its nature and on its time

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Abstract
Recent debates on abstract labour have highlighted Marx's ambivalent conception of this important term. This article criticises current physiological definitions of the term, and against the background of earlier debates in Capital & Class, develops abstract labour as a specifically capitalist form of labour which entails a specific conception of social labour time—a time made abstract. The political implications of these rival accounts are formidable.

Keywords
abstract labour, time, capital, value, materialism, social form, exploitation, money

Introduction
Numerous critical studies on abstract labour have appeared in recent years. Apart from three articles in Capital & Class by de Angelis (1995), Arthur (2001), and Kicillof and Starosta (2007a), notable contributions have come from Heinrich (1999), Kay (1999), Kicillof and Starosta (2007b), Murray (2000), Postone (1996) and Starosta (2008). In place of transhistorical conceptions of abstract labour as the physiological expenditure of human energy, or as homogeneous labour that is generally adaptable to the changing demands of capitalist production, the emerging consensus in the contemporary debate conceives of abstract labour as a socially determined, specifically capitalist form of labour that ‘depends on exchange’ (Bellofiore, 2009: 183). This insight was fundamental to earlier debates on value and abstract labour in Capital & Class (see Himmelweit and Mohun, 1978; Eldret and Hanlon, 1981; de Vroey, 1982).

Their conceptualisation of abstract labour as a specific capitalist form of labour goes back to Isaak Rubin's work on value, which was rediscovered in the early 1970s. Rubin had argued,
For Eldret and Hanlon (1981: 40), the ‘determination of abstract labour as a physiological expenditure of labour-power leads to the crudest understanding of value and the loss of the socially specific character of value-creating labour. The abstractness of value-creating labour is determined by the exchange process, which accomplishes the abstraction from the multifarious concrete labours objectified in commodities.’ Similarly, De Vroey (1982: 44) rejected physiological conceptions of abstract labour as being a ‘naturalistic deformation of the social reality of capitalism’. If it is physiologically understood, abstract labour defines Man’s productive relationship to natural objects in general, as a generic presupposition of historically specific forms of social relations. For these CSE authors, this notion misconceived of Marx’s theory of value as a refined and improved version of Ricardo’s labour theory of value, which also suggested that Marx’s account evolved logically from classical political economy, especially Ricardo. Yet Ricardo’s labour theory of value did not distinguish between concrete labour and abstract labour, and it treated labour as an undifferentiated category that belonged to production. His account thus ‘lacked historical specificity: historically specific categories are rendered universal and hence natural. It follows that any analysis which uncritically employs these categories will always tend to ascribe asocial, natural, even eternal qualities to what is socially specific to capitalism’ (Himmelweit and Mohun, 1978: 80). In contrast, the CSE authors argued that the examination of value as a specific social form of wealth entailed the understanding of abstract labour as a specific capitalist form of labour.

In this context, Axel Kilillof’s and Guido Starosta’s stance is distinct. They argue against social form analyses of abstract labour, and instead offer a vigorous defence of its physiological conception. At the same time, however, they treat value as a specifically capitalist category. They see abstract labour as a transhistorical category that in capitalism is ‘represented’ by the value form. This article examines Kilillof’s and Starosta’s intriguing contention. Marx’s notion of abstract labour is ambivalent. He defines it in asocial physiological terms, and insists that it is a specifically capitalist form of labour. With this in mind, the paper starts with an account of Kilillof and Starosta’s physiological reading of abstract labour and examines their critique of the contributions by de Angelis and Arthur, who, for different reasons, see abstract labour as a specifically capitalist category. These three contributions represent the spectrum of debate about abstract labour. Notwithstanding the ambivalence in Marx’s own text, the paper then explores Marx’s social form account of abstract labour. It argues that abstract labour is a specific temporal form of capitalist labour. The conclusion maps the political implications of these distinct conceptions.

**Abstract labour and its social form**

For Kilillof and Starosta, abstract labour is the material foundation of the human metabolism with nature. Man has to exchange with nature, and they characterise this exchange as the ‘generic determination of labour’ (Kilillof and Starosta, 2007b: 23). However, the
circumstance that Man has to exchange with nature does not say anything about the mode of production. Nor is labour in the abstract possible. They therefore argue that the transhistorical nature of abstract labour expresses itself differently in distinct modes of production. Thus, in capitalism, abstract labour entails 'both a generic material determination and a historically-specific role as the substance of value' (2007b: 23). The transhistorical materiality of abstract labour obtains through specific historical forms. They thus argue that 'the real “genuine” object of the critique of political economy [is] not the pure realm of social forms, but the contradictory unity between the materiality of human life and its historically-determined social forms' (2007b: 24). Since abstract labour is a natural condition of human existence, and since one cannot subvert or revolutionise nature, the revolution of abstract labour has to do with its capitalist form; that is, with the way in which it is socially 'represented' in the form of value (cf. Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 20). Their exposition focuses only on the capitalist form of abstract labour, which provides the illustration for both its historically specific application as substance of value, and its natural, transhistorical materiality.

Their approach, then, begs the question of whether it reveals abstract labour as an ontological presupposition of human existence or whether it naturalises capitalist economic categories. Yet despite Marx's biting critique of 'the economists’ attempt at naturalising economic categories, which, he argues, allows them to smuggle them into their analysis as the ‘inviolable natural laws on which society and history in the abstract are founded’ (Marx, 1973: 87), their argument is on strong textual grounds. On the one hand, Marx conceives of abstract labour as ‘a purely social reality’ that can only appear in the social relations of 'commodity to commodity' (Marx, 1983: 54); and on the other, he defines it physiologically as 'productive expenditure of human brains, nerves, and muscles' (Marx, 1983: 51). As physiological expenditure, abstract labour comprises expenditure of bodily energy—in production, in exchange with nature, indifferent to concrete purposes, a mere expenditure of 'corporeal power' (Starosta, 2008: 31).

If abstract labour really is expenditure of bodily energy, then it can indeed be defined without further ado in precise physiological terms. That is, 'muscles burn sugar' (Haug, 2005: 108). Muscles have burned sugar since time immemorial and will continue to do so, indifferent to historical development—and in this way, expenditure of bodily energy appears indifferent to concrete purposes and distinct modes of production. Like Haug, Kicillof and Starosta hold that physiological determination is the 'only meaningful definition of abstract labour, which, as much as its concrete aspect, is a purely material form, bearing no social or historical specificity. And yet, when performed privately and independently, and once congealed in the natural materiality of the product of labour, that purely material form acquires the form of value of the commodity, i.e. a purely social form that embodies "not an atom of matter"' (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 34–5). Their critique of Rubin's form analysis is thus easily understood. Rubin did not ask how, in capitalism, labour 'in the physiological sense becomes specific in terms of value'. His mistake was thus to 'surrender to the self-evident fact that the identity between different concrete labours contains a physiological or material determination' (2007b: 22). There is thus a need to trace the social form of abstract labour back to its natural determination, which bears no social and historical specificity.

Kicillof and Starosta therefore argue that the conception of abstract labour as substance of value 'does not answer the question about the “specific social character of the
labour which produces” commodities’ (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 22). It merely tells us about ‘the material determination … of that which is socially recognised in the form of value’. In short, ‘the analytical reduction of value to its substance’ (2007b: 22) reveals only the capitalist representation of abstract labour—it does not tell us anything about its ‘generic materiality’ (2007a: 16). In their view, Marx discovered this materiality in the opening pages of Capital, which tell us that ‘in any form of society human beings productively expend their corporeal powers’ (Starosta, 2008: 31). At the start of Capital, Marx is therefore not concerned with the ‘common property in commodities. Rather, he is searching for (i.e., not yet unfolding) the specific determination defining the potentiality of the commodity as a historical form of social wealth’ (2008: 25). That is, Marx is said to search for the general properties of labour and is said to find these in abstract labour—the worker’s labour obeys the laws of nature, and expenditure of labour is expenditure of human energy. Thus, Marx ‘[discovered] abstract labour as the substance of labour in the first pages of Capital’ (2008: 21). This ‘analytical discovery of (congealed) abstract labour’ in the first chapter of Capital ‘revealed … the material determination of that which in capitalist society is socially represented in the form of value’ (2008: 16). In other words, before developing the capitalist categories, Marx first sought to ‘discover’ their generic material presupposition, and found this presupposition in ‘productive labour in its general character, or abstract labour’ (2008: 28). Marx is thus said to have discovered the substance of value in something that is not specifically capitalist in character: the apparent generic materiality of labour, its nature, its general existence as ‘homogeneous human labour, i.e., human labour expended without regard to the form of its expenditure’. Once this generic materiality was established, Marx was able to develop the commodity form. Its development entails analysis of ‘the very social determination of the revolutionary action of the working class’ (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 41).

In distinction, both de Angelis and Arthur argue that abstract labour is a specific social form of labour that has no transhistorical validity. Massimo de Angelis emphasises abstract labour as a form of class struggle. Like Kicillof and Starosta, he disputes Rubin’s critical value theory, which argues that abstract labour is established through exchange (de Angelis, 1995: 120). He holds that the abstract character of labour is ‘a direct consequence of the character of labour in capitalism’ (de Angelis, 1996: 18–9). Abstract labour is expended at the point of production, and is ‘imposed’ on workers (de Angelis, 1995: 111). Class struggle over the imposition of abstract labour has led towards an increasing homogeneity of concrete labouring, by means of deskilling and replacement of living labour by machinery. De Angelis thus conceives of abstract labour as homogenised expenditure of labour in production. He also conceives of it as an abstraction from the lived experience of workers in that it relates to subjective feelings such as boredom at work. De Angelis is—rightly—criticised for confusing concrete labour with abstract labour. Chris Arthur (2001) argues similarly in his assessment of Braverman’s (1974) notion of abstract labour as monotonous, repetitive, homogenised labour. Abstract labour is not concrete labour, however homogenised, monotonous, repetitive, senseless and boring it might be. That is, boring assembly line work is boring concrete labour, not abstract labour.

Kicillof and Starosta agree with de Angelis on the centrality of production, as opposed to exchange, and commend him for his critique of Rubin. They criticise him
for failing to connect properly abstract labour to class struggle. Since de Angelis conceives of abstract labour as a result of class struggle, he is accused of ontologising class struggle (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 22). According to Kicillof and Starosta (2007b: 34), class struggle rests on and develops the fundamental contradiction between transhistorically conceived ‘materiality and social form’. Class struggle has thus to do with the contradictory unity between the materiality of human life and its historically specific forms. As they see it, the ‘materiality of the abstract character of human labour negates its generic role’ (2007b: 35), seemingly because the ‘material specificity of [capitalism] … consists, precisely, in the development of the human productive capacity to organise social labour in a fully conscious fashion’ (2007b: 36). It seems as if the (transhistorically conceived, or in any case naturally determined) forces of production rebel against the socially posited relations of production. Class struggle expresses the ‘contradictory unity between materiality and social form’ (2007b: 34; see also p. 24). This formulation is reminiscent of ontological conceptions of historical materialism, according to which, as Murray (2005: 64, fn 21) put it, ‘the “forces of production” are not social-form-determined but, on the contrary, are the ultimate determinant of the “relations of production”’.9

Chris Arthur develops abstract labour in the context of debates on the ‘New’ or ‘Systematic’ dialectic. He holds that ‘there is not only a split between form and content, but the former becomes autonomous and the dialectical development of the structure is indeed form-determined’ (Arthur, 2004: 81). He thus sees the value form as expressing the abstract essence of capitalism, that is, value. Value is essence and essence appears in the value form. Given this perspective, Arthur prefers to leave aside any discussion of labour from the opening chapters of Capital (2004: 85). Instead of labour, he argues that the ‘ontological foundation of the capitalist system’ is the material reality of abstraction in exchange (value). This process generates an ‘inverted reality’ in which commodities ‘simply instantiate their abstract essence as values’ (2004: 80). The human participants in this process become the bearers of this determination of the value form—they do not know it, but they do it.

Kicillof and Starosta dismiss as pure formalism Arthur’s account. It ‘overlooks the materiality of value-producing labour as a historical form of development of human productive subjectivity’ (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 17). In their view, Arthur’s stance is indifferent to material contents and disconnects abstract labour from the material world of production, class and struggle. His is thus a purely formal account of abstract labour. It renders material production socially and empirically insubstantial.

Arthur’s ontological conception of value does not interest us here.10 His delivery of abstract labour as a specific social form reveals important insights. In particular, his point ‘that capitalist production posits living labour processes as abstract activity, pure motion in time’ (Arthur, 2001: 23) opens up a novel, temporally conceived conception of abstract labour that overcomes not only the (false) dichotomy between production and exchange.11 It also posits the materiality of abstract labour as a specifically capitalist materiality, a materiality of social labour time.

Marx developed the connection between abstract labour and motion in time in his Critique of 1859. Capital is not as explicit on this connection, but in my view, it presupposes it. He quotes from his Critique in Capital, Volume 1: ‘As values, all
commodities are only definite masses of congealed labour-time' (Marx, 1983: 47, quoting Marx, 1987a: 272). In his Critique, he argues, 'On the one hand, commodities must enter the exchange process as objectified universal labour time, on the other hand, the labour time of individuals becomes objectified universal labour time only as a result of the exchange process' (Marx, 1987a: 286). 'Time is money,' said Benjamin Franklin, and one might add that therefore money is time. If, then, capitalism reduces everything to time, an abstract time, divisible into equal, homogeneous, and constant units that move on from unit to unit, dissociated from concrete human circumstances and purposes, then time really is everything. If 'time is everything, [then] man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcase' (Marx, 1976: 127). Marx expresses the same idea in Capital, arguing that the worker is 'nothing more than personified labour-time' (Marx, 1983: 233).

In short, Arthur's argument points towards abstract labour as a specific historical form of social time—a time made abstract. This time, as Debord (1992: 87) put it, 'has no reality apart from its exchangeability'. Abstract labour is the substance of value not because it has a special utility ... but because it is exerted for a definite time' (Marx, 1983: 194). The substance of value is socially necessary labour time, not abstract expenditure of muscles, brain and nerves. It is expenditure of muscle within time and measures by time. If talking about value, we are talking about the expenditure of 'definite masses of crystallised labour time' (1983: 184). That is to say, 'labour time is the living state of existence of labour ... it is the living quantitative aspect of labour as well as its inherent measure' (Marx, 1987a: 272).

Abstract labour as social form
Social categories and nature

Ordinarily, the distinction between generic materiality and social form is discussed in terms of a separation between first nature and second nature. First nature is the so-called general metabolism with nature. Here, labour is a natural presupposition of every production process, regardless of history. Second nature comprises distinctive historical substantiations of natural necessity. The orthodox tradition kept these two 'natures' analytically distinct. It argued that capitalist social forms can be traced back to some natural basis, which however does not exist in pure natural form. It always subsists through distinct modes of production. One thus cannot find in history 'pure manifestations' of posited nature or, in our context, of abstract labour as 'a purely material form'. The appearance of natural necessity is one of manifold historical overdeterminations.

In distinction, social form analysis says that capitalist economic categories do not have a transhistorical validity. They belong to the society from which they spring. Capitalist laws of social reproduction are thus conceived as finite, transient products of the finite and transient reality of capitalism. It rejects the notion of transhistorical laws of development, and argues instead that historical materialism is the critique of things understood dogmatically. Capitalist economic categories manifest the laws of necessity of capitalistically constituted forms of social relations. From this perspective, the orthodox Marxist tradition represses the whole problem of social constitution, and instead gives historically specific social laws the status of laws of history in general, as if posited by nature. It thus conceives of capitalist social relations as developed nature.
In distinction, the form analytical approach argues that social categories are socially constituted. What does this hold in relation to labour? In relation to use-value producing concrete labour, its social constitution is easily understood, despite the fact that 'use-values ... constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth' (Marx, 1983: 44). Use values are the 'basis of all social progress' (1983: 181). The increase 'in the quantity of use-values is an increase of material wealth' (1983: 53). Nevertheless, although 'hunger is hunger ... the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and a fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth' (Marx, 1973: 92). For the labourer to produce commodities, s/he has to produce use-values for others—'social use-values'. That is, use-value is 'historically-specific [in] character' (Marx, 1962: 370; see also Marx, 1983: 48). Lastly, concrete labour 'is not the only source of material wealth' (Marx, 1983: 50). Nature produces use values, too. However, the labour that is decisive in the production of capitalist wealth, value, is abstract labour. This labour is the substance of capitalist wealth. The measure of this specific social substance is socially necessary labour time. Concrete labour creates material wealth that in capitalism exists as a mere depository of exchange value. In this context, Marx's physiological definition of abstract labour contrasts sharply with his conception of abstract labour as a 'specific social form of labour' (Marx, 1987a: 278).

For Marx, the distinctiveness of capital is the double character of labour. As he put it in a letter to Engels,

The best points in my book are (1) (this is fundamental to all understanding of the facts) the double-character of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the First Chapter; (2) the treatment of surplus value independent of its particular forms as profit, interest, rent, etc. (Marx, 1987b: 407)

Similarly in Capital, the fetishism of commodities 'has its origin ... in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them' (Marx, 1983: 77). The peculiar social character of labour in capitalism comprises the existence of private labour as 'directly social in its character'. The point of departure is thus not individual production, but 'socially determined individual production' (Marx, 1973: 83).

Concerning the fetishism of the commodity, then,

the fact, that in ... the production of commodities, the specific social character of private labour carried on independently, consists in the equality of every kind of labour, by virtue of its being human labour, which character, therefore, assumes in the product the form of value. (Marx, 1983: 79)

In short,

so far therefore as labour is a creator of use-value, is useful labour, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life. (1983: 50)
As use values,

the bodies of commodities are combinations of two elements—matter and labour. If we take away the useful labour expended upon them, a material substratum is always left, which is furnished by Nature without any help of Man. We see, then, that labour is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labour. (1983: 50)

In contrast, the 'value of a commodity represents human labour in the abstract' (1983: 51), which comprises 'a purely social reality'. Indeed, if we abstract from the useful labour expended on a product, we do not discover the so-called 'generic materiality' of abstract labour. What we find is matter, something for use, furnished by Nature.

In capitalism, the concrete labour that produces use values is valid only by means of abstract labour. Against Adam Smith, Marx emphasises that this labour is an abstraction 'forcibly brought about' by exchange (Marx, 1987a: 299). What Marx means here by exchange is not 'exchange with nature' but the exchange of commodities in capitalist society. Abstract labour is the substance of value. Value cannot be the substance of a single commodity. It is a relationship between persons 'expressed as relations between things' (Marx, 1983: 80, fn. 1). Exchange value expresses a social relationship and the 'labour which posits exchange value is a specific social form of labour' (Marx, 1987a: 278). Marx thus argues that Smith and Ricardo analysed the commodity by means of an undifferentiated notion of labour, as 'productive activity of human beings in general, by which they meditate the material metabolism with nature, divested ... of every social form and determinate character' (Marx, 1992: 954). What does productive activity in general mean? In distinction to transhistorical, and in any case ontological conceptions of natural necessity, Marx rejects the idea of production in general as a 'mere phantom, an abstraction that taken by itself, does not exist at all' (1992: 954). The notion that abstract labour, as the transhistorical materiality of all labour, assumes different social forms in distinct societies transposes, therefore, 'the truth of the law of appropriation of bourgeois society ... to a time when this society did not yet exist' (Marx, 1987c: 463, translation amended). Similarly, Marx argued that Ricardo failed to 'investigate ... the specific form in which labour manifests itself as the common element of commodities (Marx, 1972: 138). Ricardo regards 'the bourgeois form of labour ... as the eternal natural form of social labour' (Marx, 1987a: 300).

**Concrete labour and abstract labour: On difference and equivalence**

Marx praises classical political economy for its analysis of value and the magnitude of value, and its discovery of the hidden content of forms, 'however incompletely'. Yet, he continues, not once did it ask why 'labour is represented by the value of its product and labour-time by the magnitude of that value' (Marx, 1983: 85). For Marx, then, labour is the material content of social forms, and he asks, 'why does this content take that form' (Marx, 1979: 95). This passage suggests that labour has to be analysed as the 'content of that form'. Furthermore, he suggests that political economy, especially Ricardo, nowhere expressly and with full consciousness, distinguishes between labour, as it appears in the value of a product and the same labour, as it appears in the use-value of that product. Of course, this
distinction is practically made ... But he has not the least idea, that when the difference between various kinds of labour is treated as purely quantitative, their qualitative unity or equality and therefore their reduction to abstract labour, is implied. (Marx, 1983: 84, fn. 1)

Marx does not differentiate between a general 'labour that is represented by value' and a general labour that is the material content of social forms.15 There is only one social labour and this labour doubles into concrete labour and abstract labour. As use values, qualitatively distinct products are the natural form of concrete labour. At the same time, they are qualitatively indistinct commodities because 'human labour is accumulated in [them]' (Marx, 1983: 58). It is this 'equivalence between different sorts of commodities that alone brings into relief the specific character of value-creating labour' (1983: 57). Abstract labour comprises relations of equivalence. It is not some substance that hides in individual commodities. It is a 'social substance', which can be expressed only by means of exchange in relation of one commodity to another (1983: 54). This exchange is 'evidently an act characterised by a total abstraction from use-value' (1983: 45). That is to say, 'one sort of wares are as good as another, if the values be equal' (1983: 45). Exchange cannot take place without equality, and equality not without commensurability. Equality, too, becomes abstract in that it is indifferent to quality, distinction, specificity, purpose, and indeed judgement and reason. 'There is no difference or distinction in things of equal value. An hundred pounds' worth of lead or iron, is of as great value as one hundred pounds' worth of silver or gold' (1983: 45). This equality is the equality of labour in the abstract, of a homogeneous labour that can be divided into equal units, each 'the same as any other' (1983: 46).

This objective existence of equality as abstract equivalence is 'a purely social reality' (Marx, 1983: 54). It comprises a substance that although common to all commodities 'cannot be either a geometrical, a chemical, or any other natural property of commodities. Such properties claim our attention only in so far as they affect the utility of those commodities, make them use-values' (1983: 45, emphasis added). What the commodities have in common therefore is human labour in the abstract, and this labour comprises a purely social reality. No chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economic discoverers of this chemical element, who by-the-by lay special claim to critical acumen, find however that the use-value of objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view, is the peculiar circumstance that the use value of objects is realised without exchange, by means of a direct relation between the objects and man, while, on the other their value is realised only by exchange, that is, by means of a social process. (1983: 87)

For example, Smith 'mistakes the objective equalisation of unequal labours forcibly brought about by the social process for the subjective equality of the labours of individuals' (Marx, 1987a: 299, translation amended). As values, commodities are all the same as 'crystals of this social substance'; that is, 'mere congelation of homogeneous human labour'. They consist thus 'of the same unsubstantial reality' (Marx, 1983: 46).
Value’s unsubstantial reality has to do with the double character of labour. The real existence of labour is always concrete. Every physiological expenditure of labour is expenditure of concrete labour. That is, physiological expenditure of labour entails a specific productive application, and is thus concrete. The productive power has reference, of course, only to labour of some useful concrete form, the efficacy of any special productive activity during a given time being dependent on its productiveness...

Muscles do not burn sugar in the abstract. Labour is concrete labour, not labour in the abstract. What, then, is specific about capitalism is not abstract labour as such, but the circumstance that concrete labour has to take the form of its opposite, undifferentiated human labour, to count as socially necessary labour. The ‘labour which creates exchange value is thus abstract general labour’, and ‘as exchange values all commodities are merely definite quantities of concealed labour time’. This ‘reduction of exchange value to labour time’ entails abstract labour as a ‘specific social form of labour’ (Marx, 1983: 271, 272, 278).

Abstract labour is not a substance that one can touch, see, smell or eat. As use values, commodities do not contain exchange value. And as exchange values, they do not contain an atom of use-value (Marx, 1987a: 45). Their natural form is their concrete existence as use values. ‘Commodities come into the world in the shape of use-values, articles, or goods … This is their plain, homely, bodily form’ (1983: 54). They are commodities ‘only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form’ (1983: 54). Finally, ‘the value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition’ (1983: 54). On the other hand, commodities acquire a purely social reality in so far as they are expressions ‘of one identical social substance. Viz, human labour … it follows as a matter of course that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity’ (1983: 54). That is to say, no single commodity has value-objectivity for itself, but each has it only in so far as it is a common objectivity. Outside their relation to each other—outside the relation, in which they count as equal—neither coat nor linen possess value objectivity as concealed human labour as such. (Marx, 1987d: 30)

Marx has great trouble in expressing value objectivity as a social relationship between things. Its reality is both sensuous and super-sensible, a real abstraction, and he not only speaks of a ‘phantom-like objectivity’ (Marx, 1990: 128) or ‘purely fantastic objectivity’ (Marx, 1987d: 32), but also says that value is ‘invisible’ (Marx, 1987d: 820) in commodities. Or as Bellofiore (2009: 185) put it, strictly speaking, value ‘is a ghost.’

**Ghost and vampire: On time**

What does it mean to say that value is invisible, like a ghost? What expenditure of abstract labour are we dealing with? This section argues that abstract labour is a real abstraction. It projects the ‘ghost of value’ that achieves validity in the form of money, back into production—where the ghost turns into a vampire (cf. Bellofiore, 2009) that sucks living labour dry, reducing it to a ‘time’s carcase’.
Actual labour is always labour ‘in motion’; that is, ‘actually expended’ (Marx, 1983: 57, 58). ‘Just as motion is measured by time, so is labour by labour time ... [it] is the living quantitative reality of labour’ (Marx, 1987a: 271–72, translation amended). This is the time of abstract, constant, and equal time units, measured by clock time. ‘Direct labour time is the decisive factor of wealth’ (Marx, 1973: 704). Each commodity

objectifies general social labour time, a specific quantity of general labour time, is expressed in its exchange value in a series in determinate quantities of different use-values, and conversely, the exchange value of all other commodities measure the use-value of this exclusive commodity. (Marx, 1987a: 288)

Clock time is dissociated from the actual human affairs that it measures in homogenous, equal, divisible, constant, temporal units. Yet, however dissociated, it appears as the substance of the very same activity that it measures. Thus ‘time appears simultaneously as a measure of value and as its substance’ (Bensaid, 2002: 80). From the tick to the tock, clock time measures human activity regardless of specific contents. In clock time, the expenditure of labour does not occur in its own good time. It occurs within time—a time made abstract, and imposing.

Conventionally, this conception of time is defined as linear time where time exists as an independent framework for motion, events and activities, and that devoid of content moves forward relentlessly ‘into time’. Time measures activities, but is dissociated from them. ‘Homogeneous time is empty time’: it measures what it is not, it measures concrete expenditure whatever its content (Bensaid, 2002: 82). It is also a reified time in that it appears timeless, without beginning or end, immanent to itself, purely abstract. As timeless time it is nothing—yet it appears as a being whose passing ticks and tocks human activity. Labour time, which is always concrete as an activity in time, appears as its opposite—as infinite time that is founded on itself and passes by itself (see Krahl, 1984: 29). It is not Man who meets her needs in time. Rather, time subsumes Man, as if by fate or natural necessity, and organises her labour according to an economy of time that never stands still. It is restless, in constant motion, encompassing no playfulness and lacking in a federated present, from the tick to the tock it measures the duration of labour time ‘in hours’ (Marx, 1983: 46).

The reduction of use values to depositories of objectified social labour time is an abstraction that is made on a daily basis in every social production process. The dissolution of all commodities into labour-time is no greater an abstraction, but no less real than that of all organic bodies into air’ (Marx, 1987a: 272). This dissolution is the condition of the social existence of material wealth in capitalism. That is, with reference to use-value, the labour contained in a commodity counts only qualitatively, with reference to value it counts only quantitatively, and must first be reduced to human labour pure and simple. In the former case, it is a question of How and What, in the latter of How much? And How long a time? (Marx, 1983: 52)

Concrete labour takes place in time, and has a concrete temporality. In order for this labour to count as social labour, it has to manifest itself as valid value in exchange. That is, its concrete labour time has to occur within ‘homogenous time’. Its measure is socially
necessary labour time. Concrete labour time is compelled to occur within the time of its abstract measure. If it does not, it is nothing, valueless.

In sum, the labour spent on commodities 'counts effectively only in so far as it is spent in a form that is useful to others. Whether that labour is useful for others, and its product consequently capable of satisfying the wants of others, can be proved only by the act of exchange' (Marx, 1983: 89). Expenditure of labour is expenditure of concrete labour within a certain time frame. In order to be valid, and to count as such concrete labour, it has to be objectified as abstract labour in exchange. Thus, the real value of a commodity is its 'social value; that is to say, the real value is not measured by the labour-time that the article in each individual case costs the producer, but by the labour time socially required for its production' (1983: 301). The magnitude of value is measured by 'the quantity of the value-forming substance, the labour, which it contains. This quantity is measured by its duration, and labour-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days, etc.' (1983: 46, translation amended).

The measure of value is socially necessary labour time. Marx's familiar definition—'socially necessary labour time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the prevailing socially normal conditions of production and with the prevalent socially average degree of skill and intensity of labour' (1983: 46)—expresses the social character of individual labour. 'Only because the labour time of the spinner and the labour time of the weaver represent universal labour time and their products are thus universal equivalents, is the social aspect of the labour of the two individuals represented for each of them by the labour of the other' (Marx, 1987a: 274). In this sense, the individual characteristics of the labourers are obliterated. As Marx put it in his Critique, 'labour, which is thus measured by time, does not seem, indeed, to be the labour of different subjects, but on the contrary the different working individuals seem to be mere organs of this labour ... [of] human labour in general' (1987a: 272). Different labours appear thus as different expenditures of the same social labour time (see 1987a: 273–74). Objectified social labour is the objectified labour of a working individual, an 'individual indistinguishable from all other individuals' (1987a: 274, translation amended). 'The total labour power of society, which is embodied in the sum total of the values of all commodities produced by that society, counts here as one homogeneous mass of labour-power composed though it be of innumerable individual units' (Marx, 1983: 46). In so far as all individual labour units are mere organs of social labour time, 'each of these units is the same as any other, so far as it has the character of the average labour-power of society ... no more time than is needed on an average, no more than is socially necessary' (1983: 46–7). Labour time is objectified only once, in the use values of commodities. This labour time 'is both the substance that turns them into exchange values and therefore into commodities, and the standard by which the precise magnitude of their value is measured' (Marx, 1987a: 272). The circuits M...C...M' and M...P...M' encompass this reality of labour time. The elementary form, M... M', encompasses it, too, as a mortgage on the future appropriation; that, is, theft of surplus labour time, or as presently fictitious wealth.17

Labour time as the measure of the magnitude of value is not fixed and given. The 'labour time that yesterday was without doubt socially necessary for the production of a yard of linen, ceases to be so to-day' (Marx, 1987a: 109). That is to say, whether the concrete expenditure of time is rendered valid as socially necessary labour time can only
be established post festum. The expenditure of concrete labour is thus done ‘in the hope, rather than the assurance, that the labour they perform will turn out to be socially required’ (Smith, 1990: 69). Our capitalist, this personification of ‘value in process, money in process, and as such capital’, is thus spurred into action, frantically seeking to make the expenditure of concrete labour time under his command count socially as expenditure of necessary social labour time. There, he expropriates unpaid social labour time; here, he seeks to make his fortune as a seller of objectified social labour time. Labour time as the measure of wealth is also the substance of wealth. That is to say, time as a measure of its own substance ‘must itself be measured’, in the form of profit, the rate of return on expropriated unpaid labour time (Bensaid, 2002: 75).

For the labourer, the consequences are formidable. That is, ‘the time occupied in the labour of production must not exceed the time really necessary under the given social conditions of the case’ (Marx, 1983: 183). How much labour went into it? How long a time did it take? Time is money. No time to waste, more time to catch. This, then, is the ‘nibbling and cribbling at meal times’ as ‘moments are the elements of profit’ (Marx, 1983: 232, 233). Pace de Angelis, abstract labour is imposed: work has to be performed not in its own good time, but within time. Work that is not completed within time is wasted, valueless, regardless of the usefulness of the material wealth that it has created and the needs that it could satisfy. From the appropriation of unpaid labour time to the endless struggle over the division between necessary labour time and surplus labour time; and from the ‘imposition’ of labour time by time theft—this ‘petty pilferings of minutes’, ‘snatching a few minutes’ (Marx, 1983: 232)—to the stealing from the worker of atoms of additional unpaid labour time by means of great labour flexibility, the life-time of the worker is reduced to labour time. The worker then appears as ‘nothing more than personified labour-time’ (1983: 233)—a ‘time’s carcass’. That is to say, capitalist wealth is based on ‘the theft of alien time’ (Marx, 1973: 705).

**Conclusion**

Marx’s account of abstract labour is ambivalent. On the one hand, he defines abstract labour in physiological terms, arguing that value is the crystallisation and congelation of the expenditure of human muscles, etc. On the other, he treats it as a specifically capitalist form of labour, arguing that commodities are such crystallisations only because they objectify socially necessary labour time. Kicillof and Starosta explicate the first aspect with great clarity and, against form-analytical approaches that stress the veracity of the latter, purport this second aspect to be a capitalist objectification of the former. They think that the physiological definition is the only meaningful one, and characterise it as ‘a purely material form, bearing no historical specificity’ (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 34–5). I have argued instead that abstract labour is a specific capitalist form of labour. The materiality of abstract labour is socially constituted—a materiality of labour conceived in abstraction from capitalist social relations is one of those ‘theological quirks’ that give commodities their ‘mystical character’ (Marx, 1983: 76). Kicillof and Starosta say that the representation of abstract labour in capitalism is a fetish form of social relations. Yet by defining abstract labour as a purely material form that bears no social or historical specificity, they themselves fetishise it. That is, they identify abstract labour as an enduring, ahistorical generative mechanism that underlies
distinct modes of production, and they therefore challenge the capitalist modality of abstract labour in terms of its class-specific social appearance. It seems that in capitalism, abstract labour is the curse of the dependent masses, whilst in its socialist modality, it might well be equality accomplished.

Physiologically defined labour does indeed appear as the ontological foundation of all existence. Exchange value is the determination of the commodity, and seems to belong to it as if by nature. This ‘nature’ is, however, socially specific—it is a capitalist nature. This historically specific necessity does appear objective, transhistorical, and natural. Postone (1996) and Reichelt (2008) argue that Marx’s physiological definition of abstract labour is the first step towards his subsequent explication of the fetishism of commodities. They thus deny that Marx’s account is ambivalent—its veracity might be hidden, and needs to be deciphered by means of critical reconstruction (see Reichelt, 1995). Heinrich (1999, 2009), in contrast, accepts that Marx’s account is ambivalent. He argues that Marx’s revolutionary break with classical political economy is marked by the pains of transition, leaving a multilayered argument, so that in our case, the social determination of abstract labour overlaps with naturalistic definitions. Instead of critical reconstruction, Heinrich argues for the further development of the revolutionary aspects of the critique of political economy. I have argued that the physiological definition of abstract labour presumes that a biological condition—muscles burn sugar—is the ontological foundation of social existence. Such an account naturalises economic categories ‘as if the [imagined] individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin’ were an actual fact, posited by nature, not arising historically in the midst of bourgeois development (Marx, 1973: 83). History, not nature, is the point of critical departure. In distinction to the orthodox differentiation between the naturally conceived generative mechanisms of the forces of production and their historically specific modality in the determinate social relations of production, the forces of production and social relations of production are ‘two different sides of the development of the social individual’ (1973: 706).

In capitalism, Marx argued, every social progress turns into a calamity. Every increase in labour productivity shortens the hours of labour, but in its capitalist form, it lengthens them. The introduction of sophisticated machinery lightens labour; but in its capitalist form, it heightens the intensity of labour. Every increase in the productivity of labour increases the material wealth of the producers, but in its capitalist form, makes them paupers. Most importantly of all, greater labour productivity sets labour free, makes labour redundant. But rather than shortening the hours of work and thus absorbing available labour into production on the basis of a shorter working day, liberating life-time from the ‘realm of necessity’ for the ‘realm of freedom’, those in employment are exploited more intensively, while those made redundant find themselves on the scrapheap of a mode of production that sacrifices “human machines” on the pyramids of accumulation’ (Gambino, 2003: 104). Capital is thus ‘the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth’ (Marx, 1973: 706).

Two issues follow. The transhistorical treatment of abstract labour turns upside down the critical insight that the double character of labour is specific to capitalism. Transhistorically conceived, abstract labour becomes the ontological foundation of all social life. In this round-about way, concrete labour would figure as a specifically capitalist form of labour! Rejecting this (absurd) notion would mean that concrete labour, too,
be treated as a condition independent of all forms of society. The double character of labour would thus cease to be capitalism's determining characteristic, and akin to Ricardo's undifferentiated category of labour, all labour processes would in fact be similar in all societies. The differences in the modes of production would thus be reduced to distinctions in the social organisation of undifferentiated labour, say, from the capitalist organisation of abstract labour to its socialist organisation, or from the capitalist implementation of Taylorism to the Soviet implementation of Taylorism. When posited as natural, abstract labour appears as a force of nature, legitimising existing social relations as developed nature and delineating possible futures as idealised derivatives of the existent. Both depend on the deadly notion that 'freedom is recognition of necessity' (Engels, 1983: 106). Yet nature has nothing to do with it.

Distinct conceptions of abstract labour entail different political implications. For the orthodox tradition, abstract labour accounted for the magnitude of value, and labour was thus seen as an economic resource that a socialist state could plan and allocate, ostensibly on behalf of workers. Rubin's (1972) turn towards a critical theory of value argued against its transhistorical naturalisation and in favour of its determination as a specifically capitalist form of labour. Politically, this turn rejected socialism as a well ordered republic of labour. Despite their attempt to expunge orthodox political consequences from their argument, Kicillof and Starosta's transhistorical treatment of abstract labour does not lend itself easily to alternative political outcomes. Their understanding of 'capitalism as transition to communism' (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 37, citing Chattopadhay) remains mired in the illusionary certainty of transhistorical laws of development, which on closer inspection seems in every respect to be tied to capitalist realities, from the enduring centrality of material labour (Marx, 1970) to the philosophy of history (Benjamin, 1968).

It is not the existing historical form of abstract labour that needs to be abolished in favour of its socialist substantiation. I am not convinced that abstract labour in the physiological sense, as productive expenditure of brains, muscles, nerves and hands, is the material substance of communist wealth. What needs to be abolished is abstract labour. This, then, is the idea of communism in which the substance and measure of wealth is disposable time, beyond that used in immediate production (cf Marx, 1973: 706)—time freed from the realm of necessity is the very content of life. The time of freely associated producers who organise the realm of necessity through the realm of freedom is different from a conception of time which holds that time is money. Discussion of the time of capital and the time of the commune falls outside the scope of this essay, but see Benjamin (1968), Debord (1992), Marcuse (1958, Part 2), and Tischler (2005), who argue that human emancipation is the practical negation of a time made abstract; and, one has to add, the creation of relations in which concrete labour is directly social.

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**Endnotes**

1. See, for example, Dobb (1940) and Mandel (1971). For a critique, see Postone (1996: 43–58).

2. The anonymous referee contested this and argued that ambivalence is brought to Marx’s work by ambivalent commentators. To err is human.


4. In his manuscript ‘Additions and Revisions’, Marx states clearly that ‘[t]he reduction of different concrete private labours to this same abstract labour manifests itself only in exchange, which renders equivalent distinct products of labour’ (1987d: 41). This decisive sentence can also be found in the French translation of *Capital*, which was the last edition that Marx prepared himself. I owe this reference to Heinrich (2004: 48).

5. Haug’s transhistorical conception of abstract labour does not differ in any way from Kicillof and Starosta’s. His biological reference to sugar-burning muscles is apt, to the point, and simple in its nature. On Haug, see Bonefeld (2009b).

6. This is a trivial discovery by any standards. It is of course ‘much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of these relations. The latter method is the only materialist one, and therefore, the only scientific one’. The former method belongs to the abstract materialism of the natural science ‘that excludes history and its process’ (Marx, 1983: 352, fn. 2).

7. Schrader (1980) argues that Marx developed the category in his critique of Benjamin Franklin. Unlike the category of labour *sans phrase* in the *Grundrisse*, the later category of abstract labour would thus refer to the equalisation of qualitatively distinct concrete labours in terms of value. This is what Franklin was after, and following Schrader, it was in this context that Marx left aside his earlier conception of general labour, or labour *sans phrase*, and instead developed the category of abstract labour. See Marx (1983: 57, fn. 3). I owe this reference to Reichelt (2005).

8. See Kay and Mott (2004) for a neat account of the circumstance that abstract labour has no concrete—labouring—existence. See also Vatin (2004).

9. The idea of a historically active ontological force can be found across the board, from the orthodox conception of historical materialism to Lukacs and Meikle’s notion of historical essence; and from Negri’s biopower to Althusser’s idea that *Capital* delivers the capitalist anatomy of transhistorical laws of economic necessity. For critical theorists, notably Adorno, such views are impermissible: History has no mission that is immanent to itself; it neither possesses and conquers nor reveals posited nature. It is made. For a critique of ontological conceptions of historical materialism, see Gunn (1992) and Bonefeld (2009a).

10. There is only one reality, not two, and content is the content of forms, however split reality might seem. There is no two-world distinction between the sensuous world of contents and the super-sensible world of value-things. Rather, the sensuous world subsists through the super-sensible world and belongs to it (cf. Reichelt, 2005). Arthur’s ontological conception of value is similar to Adorno’s negative ontology; that is, the self-moving essence of value is the
The social necessity of a negative world. Its necessity appears like a force of nature. Yet it is solely a social necessity. On this, and its implications for praxis, see Bonefeld (2009a).

11. Arthur's 'process of abstract activity' does not connect with de Angelis's reading of abstract labour. The former conceptualises the movement of the world behind the backs of its producers; the latter describes a specific concrete labour.

12. One anonymous referee suggested that I acknowledge that abstract labour is the substance of value and that time measures the magnitude of value. I agree, but would stress that there is no substance without measure. Expenditure of labour is a temporal category, and it is time in the form of socially necessary labour time that decides whether labour expended in production achieves value-validity in exchange. In this sense, then, 'capital posits labour time ... as sole measure and source of wealth' (Marx, 1973: 706).


14. One external reviewer held that Joe Fracchia's (2004) defence of transhistorical abstractions demolishes my argument. Fracchia maintains that the object of Marx's critique is socially determined material production; that the term 'labour' in general emphasises elements that are common to all production processes, such as exchange with nature; and that abstract labour does not derive from general labour. Rather, for Fracchia, abstract labour is historically specific. Political economy rests on this general abstraction of labour. Put crudely, it derives socially specific categories from the circumstance that Man has to eat, thus conceiving and legitimising capitalist categories as developed nature. For Fracchia, such naturalisation of social categories is impermissible—it elevates historically specific categories into transhistorical ontological ones. Capitalist social categories do not derive from nature, do not have their origin in nature, and do not represent developed nature. The circumstance that Man has to exchange with nature in order to eat says nothing about the capitalist mode of production, nor does capitalism derive from it. See also Marx's *Notes on Adolph Wagner*, where he argues that 'man' in general has no natural tendency, needs, consciousness, etc. Man has needs only as concrete Man and that is, the 'determinate character of this social man is to be brought forward as the starting point, i.e. the determine character of the existing community in which he lives' (Marx, 1962: 362). Also, cf. Marx (1973: 85) with Marx (1983, ch. 7, sect.1). For Fracchia, transhistorical abstractions promote normative judgements on the desirability of the capitalist satisfaction of human needs. See also Fracchia (2010).

15. This point draws on Reichelt (2008: 97—98). On the face of it, it seems to clash with Murray's (2000) observation that Marx operates with different concepts of abstract labour, which non-recognition leads to what he calls 'Rubin's dilemma': Rubin's value-producing abstract labour is a socially specific labour. His rejection of physiological labour explanations of value ignores Marx's different types of abstract labour. Rubin seems to throw out the baby with the bath-water. For Kicillof and Starosta (2007b: 24, fn. 49), 'Murray's remarkable merit is to grasp the importance of highlighting the materiality of abstract labour whilst making clear that this does not necessarily lead to an asocial perspective on the value-form'. Yet Murray (2000: 54) states that his 'position is substantially in agreement with Rubin': he declares that 'Capital is about the capitalist mode of production from the start' (2009: 175), calls 'social form analysis the central concept of *Capital* (2005: 64), insists that social form 'reaches all the way down' (ibid.: fn. 21), and says that the substance of value is congealed abstract labour of a particular social type' (ibid.: 72). Murray (2000: 41–61) distinguishes between (1) abstract ahistorical labour akin to Marx's conception of labour as general exchange with nature (see Marx, 1983:
173–80; and the previous section, Social Categories and Nature); (2) homogenised general labour—that is, abstractified concrete labour of the sort discussed by de Angelis; and (3) ‘practically abstract labour’. This last is equivalent to value-producing labour, and is what Rubin calls ‘abstract labour’. See also Eldret and Hanlon (1981), who term it ‘abstract associated labour’. For Murray, ‘practically abstract labour is ‘truly social’ in character—it is valid only in commodity exchange. Value form analysis, and here Kicillof and Starosta have a point, risks abandonment of the relations of production. I see my approach as being a deepening of Murray’s concept of practically abstract labour—see Ghost and Vampire, below.

16. On the invisibility of value, see also De Vroey (1982: 41). The money form makes it visible (see ibid.; Bellofiore, 2009).


18. See also Carchedi (2009: 149–52), whose robust assertion of the physiological definition of abstract labour leads him to argue that calories are the measure of value. For any ‘embodied labour’ theory of value, this view makes good—Ricardian—sense.


References


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