Chapter 12

Marx contra Negri

Value, Abstract Labor, and Money

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Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that Marx’s “labor theory value” (a term Marx never used) cannot be reduced to the problem of labor time alone, as these terms indicate a specific mode of how society is constituted as a whole [Vergesellschaftung]. We need, therefore, to make distinctions between value and value form, money and money form, capital and capital form, and so on. Consequently, I do not believe that Marx’s main concepts are, as Negri indicates in several of his works, “completely bankrupt,”¹ the consequence of which is, as I demonstrate, that we should be cautious about some of Negri’s conceptual innovations. In order to make my case, I recover and sharpen three of these concepts: I first discuss the concept of form (value); second, I treat the substance of labor (abstract labor); and third, I analyze the necessary form in which value is realized (money). I argue that a proper understanding of these three concepts ultimately leads to a more precise concept of capitalist social relations, which recognizes that they are tied together through the money form.²

Form

Negri defines historical materialism as a radical historicist notion: “Every result is only appreciable a posteriori; nothing is preconceived. [. . .] there
is no *a priori*, no preceding intelligibility: there is only *a posteriori* truth of what comes to pass.”\(^3\) With this statement, he tries to underline two things: (1) that there are no intrinsic laws to the development of capital, as all of these developments ultimately depend on the labor class, that is, the antagonism between labor and capital; and (2) that we are unable to determine historical developments in advance through internal “dialectical” or logical structures of the historical process. Here are three initial responses: (1) though capital indeed depends on the labor antagonism, it can certainly not be reduced to it, as we need a frame in which the antagonism becomes conceptually intelligible; (2) though it is true that historical materialism is a nonteleological discipline, it can be reconstructed teleologically *a posteriori*, as Marx outlines in the introduction to *Grundrisse*; and (3) though the intelligibility of capitalism cannot come from an a historical point of view, capitalism must be intelligible from within, otherwise we would not be able to find its internal workings. As a consequence of the last point, with Marx, we need to develop a strong notion of *form* in order to speak about “the” capitalism or “the” capitalist mode of production. The rejection of the concept of form as such would lead to the dissolution of the theoretical perspective, which includes the attempt to offer a systematic reconstruction of the capitalist mode of social relations as a totality that is ultimately determined by the value form of labor. This historically specific form of labor allows us to speak of capitalism as an epoch. In *Capital* Marx writes:

> The historical conditions of its existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It arises only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power. And this one historical pre-condition comprises a world’s history. Capital, therefore, announces from the outset a new epoch in the process of social production.\(^5\)

What we find here is, admittedly, the controversial relation between the history of capitalist social relations and their systematic conceptual framework. Only both, the coming into being of capitalism as a historical process *and* the systematic horizon, that is, the “epoch,” defines Marxist reconstruction of society. Totality is here understood not only as conceptual relations that are systematically reconstructed, but also as the historical process *from which* they are reconstructed. The historical process, therefore, is not beyond form, because otherwise we would no longer be able to speak of “epochs,” “the” capitalism, “capital,” and so on. Negri’s radical immanentism
no longer allows us to systematize the social form as a whole, that is, as that which develops. Though it is true that we are unable to posit and speak from a universal and historically neutral position (which Marx denounces as the ideological position of classical political economists), we nevertheless need to claim that we have internal access to the form under which our theoretical standpoint becomes possible. The form that labor takes on in a system in which all social relations are determined by capital is the value form. Consequently, as I discuss in the next sections, Negri’s claim that we are no longer able to operate with the concept of value has the consequence that we are no longer able to see the specificity of labor and its relations under capitalist social relations. The relation between form and content is nicely expressed in Marx’s famous letter to Kugelmann:

Every child knows that any nation that stopped working, not for a year, but let us say, just for a few weeks, would perish. And every child knows, too, that the amounts of products corresponding to the differing amounts of needs demand differing and quantitatively determined amounts of society’s aggregate labour. It is self-evident that this necessity of the distribution of social labour in specific proportions is certainly not abolished by the specific form of social production; it can only change its form of manifestation. Natural laws cannot be abolished at all. The only thing that can change, under historically differing conditions, is the form in which those laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour asserts itself in a state of society in which the interconnection of social labour expresses itself as the private exchange of the individual products of labour, is precisely the exchange value of these products.

What Marx has in mind is relatively clear: the goal is not to argue for a labor theory of value; rather, according to Marx, it is self-evident that labor is the substance of any society. We do not need a theory that demonstrates that labor is the substance of social wealth. Instead, the goal is to understand the historically specific form under which labor appears in a capitalist society. The goal of a Marxist social theory, accordingly, is not a universal theory of labor, economy, and social form; rather, it is the attempt to make evident the social conditions of its own theorizing, which in our epoch is the interconnection of all social relations through private exchange, which means that all social relations are mediated in their thing-like form.
and no longer appear *as* social relations. Though a general economic theory, accordingly, should be rejected, we nevertheless need to claim that the historical process allows us to reconstruct it in its form(s). But Negri’s rejection of the concept of form as a historical a priori implies that we give up on any intelligibility of these conditions and pushes us back to an empty universalism. In fact, as soon becomes clearer, Negri universalizes most of his concepts, such as labor, creativity, and love, neglecting some of Marx’s most important insights.9 Taking away the concept of form, accordingly, leads to two tendencies in Negri’s work: on the one hand, he is forced to ontologize his concepts (mainly through Spinoza and an ontological reading of Marx); on the other hand, in order to keep up with his promise to be truthful to history, he needs to claim that his ontological concepts are the description of real social phenomena. As I point out in the next section, I find this duality dissatisfactory, as it leads both to the loss of social mediation and to a problematic diagnosis of our contemporary social situation.

Furthermore, Negri’s claim that we are thrown back to a radical a posteriori position contradicts his own ongoing attempt to justify the introduction of certain categories, such as immaterial labor, as objective “tendencies” of our current epoch. Here, one might ask: What allows us to speak of a tendency toward something, if we do not assume, at least, an intrinsic intelligibility of the form under which this tendency can be observed? For example, in the case of immaterial labor, it is clear that Negri and Hardt are unable to justify their diagnosis on empirical grounds, as the majority of labor on our globe is still traditional labor. In addition, as Camfield has pointed out, the “development and global expansion of capitalism makes wage-labour a tendentially world-historical social form of labour. But no single socio-technical configuration of wage-labour [. . .] is ever globally dominant.”10 Speaking of historical “tendencies” and the determining and underlying role of immaterial labor, accordingly, is a highly speculative procedure, and is precisely not won a posteriori, as Negri claims.11 Indeed, as a projection into the future it is, instead, based on an a priori access to those “tendencies,” even if the a priori should not be understood in the Kantian sense.

Labor

The return to universalist concepts, especially to a universalist concept of labor, is visible in Negri’s and Hardt’s theory in two ways: on the one hand,
Negri and Hardt claim that labor in a post-Fordist society became immediately socialistic (which Negri calls “cooperative”)\(^2\); on the other hand, Negri turns to a concept of labor as “constituent power” that is immediately political in its creative and productive potential. In *Constituent Power*, he writes:

The theme proposed by Marx is that of the all-expansive creativity of living labor. Living labor constitutes the world, by creatively modeling, *ex novo*, the materials it touches. […] In this process living labor transforms itself first of all. Its projection on the world is ontological, its protheses are ontological, and its constructions are constructions of a new being.\(^3\)

This Spinozist concept of labor as the world producing “being” and constituting power (any form of which is thought of as a negation and limitation) is, however, highly doubtable, as it leads to a removal of any historical and social mediation from the theory of labor.\(^4\) The catchword here is *ex novo*, for even in the authoritative text for the constitutive function of labor in the early Marx, *The German Ideology*, Marx does not develop an account of labor as being *immediately* the source of social reality; rather, his theory of social labor is based on the claim that for the reproduction of human life the reproduction of the *means* of life—labor itself and nature—are presupposed. Importantly, this does not allow us to speak of labor as *ex novo* productivity. The fact that life is unable to reproduce itself through its own means makes its mediation by something outside of the activity itself necessary; either in the form of past activity, such as the use of tools and other forms of external memory, or in the form of the earth. In both cases, however, we are forced to think of labor as a social relation, which leads to the further consequence (developed against Feuerbach) that all social reality is mediated by its own objectivity [gegenständlich vermittelt]:

The production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a “productive force.”\(^5\)
As is visible in these remarks, Marx develops a concept of productivity that is not simply reducible to an “economic” category; rather, it is economic in a universal sense of social reproduction, which includes social, self, and natural relations. The difference with Negri’s conception, however, is that life cannot reproduce itself without it being mediated by its products and something external to itself (earth, history, and others). Cooperation, hence, can never be immediate, as the “mode of cooperation” depends on the mode—or “form”—of social reproduction. As Marx puts it in the first of his Feuerbach-Theses, “Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity.” With “objective activity” Marx does not mean, as Negri does, that our subjective acts (such as perception or thinking) are creative; rather, he wants to say that all subjective activities are mediated through their own products. As this “contains” the relation to the earth, the relation between productive activity and product cannot be reduced to a subjective relation. Instead, productive activities are objective [gegenständlich]. Perception of objects, for example, is perception of produced, that is, social and historical objects, which turns the act of perception into a social, historical, and natural act. Speaking of a relation, therefore, precisely means that labor is mediated by the labored (and the laborers). In contradistinction to Marx, according to Negri’s Spinozist vision, however, labor is immediately productive, and, therefore, in regard to capitalist social relations, it is not or no longer constituted by the value form. Negri confuses, in other words, value as that which is formed [gebildet] by labor and the form of labor under which this formation is possible. Statements such as “the world is labor” are therefore deeply ambiguous, for Marx’s concept of labor does not allow us to turn it into a speculative concept of an absolute identity of labor and reality. With the Marx of the Grundrisse, however, we should also point out that labor, understood as production, cannot be reconstructed without circulation and consumption. Marx’s claim that (abstract) labor is the substance of value therefore means neither that it is identical with the world nor that it is immediately creative.

Negri claims (without real argument) that the distinction between production and circulation “loses every importance” because in postindustrial societies “production is subsumed within circulation.” In my view, this claim is based on an ultra-objectivist reading of Marx, which claims that Marx argued that production somehow takes place “before” circulation; however, a more careful categorically inspired reading of Capital permits us to understand that in the moment when money becomes “processing money,” simple circulation turns into capital circulation and, because this
presupposes capitalized and monetarized labor, circulation is a necessary expression [Darstellung] of labor.

Negri’s and Hardt’s attempt to make labor immediately productive is combined with their claim that in our postmodern societies labor in fact has lost the value form: “These new forms of labor are immediately social in that they directly determine the networks of productive cooperation that create and re-create society.” They put the claim that labor is immediately creation is tied together with the claim that we find this type of labor in our contemporary post-Fordist reality. Accordingly, Negri and Hardt argue that we are living in a system in which the productive forces are communist and the social relations capitalist. This concept, however, falls back onto an anthropological level, as it forces Negri to think about network cooperation, communication, and creativity as simply human creativity, without reference to its social form and labor as being mediated. Given that even in a postmodern labor situation transportation, communication, and cooperation are mediated by technology as a specific historical form of social relations, the identification of communist productive forces with “human” forces is doubtful, insofar as even a communist organization of labor that would leave its value-form behind would need to have a social form instead of simply being “human.” The consequence of Negri’s universalizing concepts is that he falls back onto an older Marxist vision that identifies communism with a return to an authentic realization of what it means to be human. This would be true even if Negri would reject the concept of humanity and speak of “singularities” that have no shared identity.

In contradistinction, I argue that the necessity of social form cannot be overcome, even if we admit that the antagonism between the “social character of production and the private character of appropriation” has increased in cognitive capitalism. Negri’s move away from the value form is supported by the attempt to show that in post-Fordist societies labor moves out of control sites, such as the factory, and turns into immaterial labor, that is, the immediately productive nature of humans in their communications, creations, and thoughts. This development, according to Negri, is twofold: on the one hand, labor becomes increasingly independent of disciplinary mechanisms of capital; on the other hand, labor becomes increasingly immediately productive. “The growing immateriality,” as Negri puts it, “does not eliminate the creative function of labor, but rather exalts it in its abstraction and its productivity.” The becoming identical of social reality and labor leads Negri to the assumption that labor as the substance of value is more important “than the forms which this may assume.” As Hardt and Negri argue, immaterial labor is intrinsically cooperative,
and, consequently, no longer needs capital to be organized. “Cooperation is innovation, richness, and thus the basis of the creative surplus that defines the expression of the multitude.”26 Cooperation and the multitude move outside the immediate control of capital. “This combination of autonomy and cooperation means that the entrepreneurial power of productive labor is henceforth completely in the hands of the post-fordist proletariat.”27 Negri’s problematic thesis about the becoming immediate of labor is connected to another conceptual shift, namely, the reinterpretation of “abstract labor.”

Abstract Labor

In line with feminist critiques of Marx’s value concept, Negri and Hardt argue that today all productive activities, especially activities such as reproductive and care work (mainly done by women), should be “recognized as labor.”28 In my view, this universalization of productive labor is based on an incorrect identification of concrete and abstract labor. For example, no one would argue that reproductive labor is not concrete labor; rather, Marx’s argument is that, as long as certain social activities remain outside of realized value, that is, outside of exchange and circulation, labor is not value-creating, which is what is meant by abstract labor within capitalism. For value creating labor is labor that takes on the value form, that is, the money form, thereby making it abstract as opposed to concrete labor. In capitalism, only labor that becomes part of the M-C-M circulation, that is, part of “processing money.” Put simply, only surplus value production is productive under capitalism (which includes the reproduction of social members that are indirectly paid). As long as it is not subjected to the money form, labor cannot be exploited for surplus value, and, hence, it remains concrete labor that only indirectly takes part in the valorization process. Put simply, as soon as labor takes on the money form, that is, becomes paid, valorized, and universally exchangeable, labor becomes subjected to “processing money” and, through its entrance into the general commodity and money circulation, it becomes what Marx calls “abstract labor.” This important distinction between concrete and abstract labor no longer makes sense within Negri’s universe because with the end of the value form the distinction between concrete and abstract labor becomes obsolete. As value is not a natural property of things, but, instead, it is considered as purely social, “abstract” does not refer to a property of concrete use things producing acts. Put differently, abstract labor is not a form of concrete labor. If Negri’s position is correct, however, abstract labor would collapse into
concrete labor, which then would turn into the “substance” of value. Under capitalism, however, as Marx claims in *Capital*, the substance of value is not labor as such, but, instead, abstract labor, which is labor that has its use value in producing surplus value, that is, labor that has become subsumed under the universal form of all social relations through capital. This can only occur through abstract labor’s exchangeability. Sadly, Negri’s usage of these important terms is at times confusing. For example, by “abstract labor” Negri understands “labor in general, labor without respect to its specific form,” which he then interprets at times as immaterial labor (e.g., communication) or as “living abstract labor.” This take on abstract labor is, however, precisely the opposite of what Marx has in mind with the introduction of this term in *Capital*, inasmuch as the term functions here to indicate the specific way in which the social synthesis [Vergesellschaftung] is being established in capitalist societies. Abstract labor is therefore not without form, because its apparent “formlessness” is its form, namely, commodified labor. In capitalism independent and private labor is synthesized through its exchangeability (that is, the total value form), which includes the money form and exchange. Therefore Marx says the following: “It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility.” Alternatively, as Marx puts it in the fetishism chapter of *Capital*: “by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour,” which is to say that the real abstraction that occurs in our daily exchange praxis and within circulation establishes a society, namely, in which all concrete properties of labor disappear behind their thinglike form, that is, as money in our pockets. This necessary realization of the value form in exchange and the constitution of abstract labor as the “substance of value” is only possible once capital (that is, processing value) has established itself as the primary form of labor, which then, in turn, leads to the yet invisible inclusion of labor in the circulation process of commodities and money. On the surface of circulation, the genetic constitution of the circulation process turns upside down and its traces, as Marx puts it, disappear in their results. Curiously though, the concept of fetishism has almost no place in Negri’s philosophical world, for with the collapse of value in our postmodern societies the objective turn of social-relations into natural properties and thing-like relations falls away. For Negri, then, the whole social mechanism and the constitution of social reality in their totality must be transparent to its members, as only with the value form can the true wealth of social production show up in a perverted, that is, opposite form, insofar as the
value form determines now how sociality is constituted, namely, as producers that produce independently from each other. Social totality, accordingly, constitutes itself unconsciously and independent from its producers. As a consequence, then, with the downfall of the value form the “topsy turvy” effects are no longer in place, and an ideology critique à la Zizek and the Frankfurt School becomes superfluous in Negri’s philosophical universe (which he shares with some classical forms of Marxism).

Moreover, the concept of surplus value only makes sense as long as we can make a distinction between necessary labor and surplus labor. Labor, as Marx puts it,

[C]an satisfy the manifold needs of the individual producer himself only insofar as every particular kind of useful private labour can be exchanged with, i.e. counts as the equal of, every other kind of useful private labour.36

But Negri’s thesis about the total transformation of all labor into productive labor implies that the distinction between labor and nonlabor no longer exists, which, as Henninger pointed out, is logically incoherent; for, with the total transformation of all human activity in productive activities the concept of surplus value would fall away and, accordingly, the concept of necessary labor, too. In addition, the thesis that the difference between paid time and unpaid time would be eliminated—to say the least—it would be empirically doubtful. A better interpretation of the phenomenon of the apparent extension of labor into all human activities, such as communication and affections, might include the observation that we are currently witnessing the return of absolute surplus value production through the implicit extension of the workday: professors write articles after dinner, respond to email from their students while checking their email in bathrooms; managers take their work folders home in order to work during the weekend, and so on. Consumers even work without payment for Google. Precarious workers are forced to take on several jobs. The retirement age increases. As Karl Reitter has pointed out, the constitution of surplus value and capital is intrinsically related to the class conflict because only the class conflict determines the relation between socially necessary labor and socially unnecessary labor through the extension of labor time (absolute surplus value) and the intensification of labor productivity (relative surplus value). As we are at a point (at least in a few Western countries) where the production of relative surplus value comes to certain limits, we move...
back to the attempt to extend the labor time itself, especially within the lower classes. Negri’s thesis that all labor is productive and creates value under the condition of post-Fordism, hence, does not make much sense, because this would imply that we no longer produce surplus value, which is not only theoretically hard to argue for, but makes no sense empirically. Consequently, Negri’s turn toward control and power leads to a mystification of the economic structures involved. He writes:

*Value has everywhere escaped capitalist control. Or rather, it has overflowed and its presence is fully and widely felt: it circulates among the factories and in the metropolises, and even in the tropical areas hitherto untouched by industrialization.* [. . .]

Capital can only control the process if in the globalization of capitalist relations of production, i.e., the establishment of a world market [. . .], if such a control is political in nature. The capitalist elite is a political elite, and as such it forges technological instruments which are adequate both for the extension and for the intensity of the control which is to be exercised.40

Though it might be true that in some areas of our informational knowledge economy it becomes increasingly difficult for capital to directly control the labor process, to conclude from this observation that value somehow escapes capitalist control because labor in the form of immaterial labor increasingly becomes socialized labor seems to go too far,41 because the form of value is still in place and the valorization process is still determined by the distinction between socially necessary labor and surplus labor. Speaking of classes, even if the multitude is conceived to be the new universal “class” (which, according to Negri, is external to any form42), it is still tied to the systematic difference between value and surplus value, that is, the value form of labor. As long as this is in place, the labor of the multitude cannot be placed outside of or external to capital. The class relations seem to be the ground of the capital-labor relation; in truth, however, the classes are the result of the value form and, hence, cannot be thought of as an independent category. Finally, if capital would be external to labor, then it could not be defined as the valorization of labor. Negri tends to reify “capital,” as if it would be the case that we first labor and then capital (as a thing or money in someone’s pocket) parasitically subsumes labor. This thesis, however, is incorrect because the way in which we labor is already structured by capital as a social relation.
Value Form

In Marx, the form of value refers to a concept that conceptualizes the social totality of capitalism. So it is not reducible to a “pure” economic concept. Indeed, the concept of value-form, as Reitter has argued against Negri, refers to relations of the capitalist mode of production. Marx’s attempt to render visible the genesis of the money form is based on his attempt to show that universal exchangeability determines capitalist social totality. As Philipp Metzger has underlined, Negri defends an “ultra-substantialist” theory of value, that is, a theory that takes value to be constituted independent of exchange, money, and capital. This strong position has come increasingly under attack by recent Marxist discussions, such as the new German readings of Marx created since the 1970s. As communication—instead of labor—the laboring process has the same extension as the social, Negri argues that value can no longer be defined outside of exchange: “there is no possibility of anchoring a theory of measure on something extraneous to the universality of exchange.” The irony of this position, as we have already pointed out, is that Marx himself argues that the value form cannot be developed without exchange, as exchange is the necessary realization of the value form—which goes along with the newer reception of Marx that dates from the 1970s in (West-) Germany. It is wrong to claim that we “first” have a value form and “then” exchange; rather, as the value form is the form of labor under capitalism, labor takes on a universal exchangeability and therefore, as I pointed out earlier, it becomes abstract. The abstractness of labor is precisely the effect of it taking on a form that is totally independent from its natural properties. Value realizes itself exclusively “as a social process,” which does not mean that the exchange and circulation process (as long as we do not understand that it already contains exchanged labor) produces value; for, value cannot exist without exchange and, ultimately, capital circulation. What Marx calls “objectivity of value” [Wertgegenständlichkeit] is a specifically social objectivity. Expressed in Lukacsian terms, value is the expression of the relationship between each social element and the social totality. Value, put differently, is the form of capitalist objecthood [Gegenständlichkeit]:

[T]his relation determines the objective form [Gegenständlichkeitform] of every object of cognition. Every substantial change that is of concern to knowledge manifests itself as a change in relation to the whole and through this as a change in the form of objectivity itself.
Accordingly, it does not make much sense to claim that the “limit of Marx’s considerations consists in his reducing the form of value to an objective measure,”52 as the “form of value” is independent from the problem of how to determine the magnitude of value. Value theory and the so-called labor theory of value are not the same. In fact, the term “measure” does not appear in Capital before the chapter on money. However, as long as we assume that people labor for the reproduction of their existence, we need to assume that there is a socially necessary labor time that is needed for this reproduction, which includes the reproduction of all goods, knowledge, transportation, communication, technologies, and so on. Any attempt to extend the time that is used in addition to this time of reproduction and any attempt to reduce socially necessary time through the intensification of labor is the attempt to produce surplus value. Furthermore, Negri’s claim “that the form of value is the very ‘communication’ which develops among productive forces”53 is imprecise, because, even if we assume that the new substance of value would no longer be abstract labor but would, instead, be “communication” or “collective intelligence,” this would not imply that this new form of labor would not be subjected to universal exchangeability, that is, to the form of value, according to which (to repeat the point) all labors become equalized, given that they are taken to be identical through the exchange process.54 As a consequence, the “measure” of value cannot be reduced to labor time alone; rather, the measurement becomes money, as it is money that realizes the total value form and the possibility that all commodities can express their value in the same equivalent.55 The subjectivist concept of value that Negri favors against Marx, as a consequence of the foregoing, leads to paradoxes. For example, Negri and Hardt claim that “what counts as labor, or value-creating practice, always depends on the existing values of a given social and historical context.”56 However, we must acknowledge that it is precisely the other way around: value determines what counts as labor under its form.

Money Form

From the foregoing we can conclude that the establishment of the value form is only possible through the money form. Exchange value, as Marx clarifies it in his Notes on Adolph Wagner, is the form of appearance of value: the same, the universal, is worth. Exchange presupposes the sameness of what we exchange (quality), that is, in their relationality C – C needs to be the same (social substance), which cannot be a natural property of C. This
sameness, however, is asymmetrical, as only one C can be in the position of being an equivalent for the other. Their sameness and exchangeability, consequently, is the result of the social process and not, as agents believe in their daily interactions, a property of the thing that they exchange (e.g., commodity or money). Commodity fetishism, accordingly, is objectively established through the commodity form and it is not a “mental” or “conscious” relationship that individuals have toward things. I do not claim, in line with Marx, that labor is the “source” or “cause” of value; rather, value is the way in which labor exists and unfolds itself.\(^57\) Put differently, we do not have “first” labor and “then” value as its product. Only if the substance of value is abstract labor and only if labor constitutes itself as monetized labor, then the social reality constituted by abstract relationships and universal exchange of things through which all individuals are mediated exists. Questions about form imply, hence, an investigation of the object of economics, that is, of social synthesis. This point, as I pointed out already in the last section, remains vague in Negri’s theory. In Marx’s words:

The general form of value, C, results from the joint action of the whole world of commodities, and from that alone. A commodity can acquire a universal value-expression [\textit{Wertausdruck}] only by all other commodities, simultaneously with it, expressing their values in the same equivalent; and every new kind of commodity must follow suit. It thus becomes evident that since the thinglike character of value [\textit{Wertgegenständlichkeit}] is merely the social reality [\textit{Dasein}] of these things, as this social reality can be expressed by the totality of their social relationality alone, and consequently that the value form must be a socially valid form.\(^58\)

Put differently, the form of value indicates that (1) each C is related to all Cs; (2) the universal relationability must be expressed (in money); (3) the value form is the form of social relations. Sociality itself is therefore the object of economic theory. Value and its universal expression, processing money (capital), is the object of Marxist philosophy because value is the form of sociality in capitalist societies. Marx notes,

As the dominant subject [\textit{übergreifendes Subjekt}] of this process, which it alternately assumes and loses the form of money and form of commodities, but preserves and expands itself through these changes, value requires above all an independent form by means of which its identity with itself may be asserted. \textit{Only in the shape of money does it possess this form.}\(^59\)
The last sentence of this quotation is decisive, as it helps us see that the money form is not some inessential addition to the value form, and that it is, instead, its essential realization. Given that Negri’s interpretation of Marx is based on an “ultra-substantialist” concept of value, he leaves the money form—and, if we take into account that capital is self-related money, also the capital form—aside. Negri’s position is made clear in the following passage:

Money no longer functions as mediation between labor and commodity; it is no longer a numeric rationalization of the relationship between wealth and power; it is no longer a quantified expression of the nation’s wealth.60

Though it is true that in recent decades even (neo)liberal economists and philosophers are becoming increasingly skeptical about monetary expressions of social wealth, it is wrong to claim that money is the mediator between labor and commodity, the thesis of which is to be found, rather, in standard economic accounts of exchange. Instead of being the mediator between labor and commodity, money is the form through which (potentially) all entities and all social relations become, not only ideally but also in reality, equalizable, and as money is the truly existing universal, they therefore become expandable. Both money and labor, valorized labor, is the necessary condition and the core of the dynamic nature of capitalism, even under conditions of intelligent production. Given Negri’s extensive discussions of the *Grundrisse*, the reduction of money to a mediator between labor and commodity is even more astonishing.

Social reproduction, in other words, cannot be appropriately grasped if we reduce it to simple exchange, as in our times this exchange has a capitalist form: commodities are only commodities if they are universally in exchange, that is if they can express their value in one universal equivalent, which, in turn, presupposes that all social relations are (in principle) related to the universal equivalent. This universal and ongoing movement, however, are only possible if commodities take on the money form. Money establishes itself as the identical and universal in all exchange, and, because the capitalist mode of production determines social reality, ultimately, for all entities. The money fetish is, hence, the source of all other fetishized relations. As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*,

With money on the other hand, its substance, its materiality, is itself its form, in which it represents wealth. If money appears as the general commodity in all places, so also does it in all times.
It maintains itself as wealth at all times. Its specific durability. It is the treasure which neither rust nor moths eat up. All commodities are only transitory money; money is the permanent commodity. Money is the omnipresent commodity; the commodity is only local money.\(^{61}\)

This durability, omnipresence, and permanence of money can only be infinitely established once capital literally moves money and turns it into a self-feeding circle. As Tony Smith puts it, “unlike previous modes of production, capitalism is not merely a system in which money is used. It is a monetary system [. . .] \[M\]oney forms the center of the social universe,”\(^{62}\) which leads to a universal subordination of (potentially) everything, including the earth, to the money form, even ideals, human wants, desires, and so on. This is to say that the goals that are supposed to ideally “guide” capitalism (such as freedom, liberty, justice, and human flourishing), according to its past and current noncritical liberal social-political philosophers, are not realizable.

To be fair, Negri does discuss the problem of money in some of his early works\(^{63}\) and in his remarks on financial capital. In his remarks on the problem of money, Negri implicitly confirms the popular opinion that the financial sector has separated from production and the “real” economy. Money, as Negri puts it, is now the “opposite of labor,”\(^{64}\) insofar as labor in the form of immediately productive and creative individuals (social worker) has moved outside the economic reach of capital, which, in turn, can only politically control labor. According to Negri, the international bourgeoisie “now expresses itself only through financial command, in other words, through a command that is completely liberated from the demands of production.”\(^{65}\) Independent from the need to discuss reified concepts such as “labor versus capital,” we should note that the claim about the total separation of labor from money does not make sense as long as we assume that there is capital, because capital can only exist as valorized labor, which, in turn, is only possible through monetized labor. Labor can only enter the circulation process because it is monetarized. To repeat the point, monetarization renders the distinctions between value and surplus value as well as between relative and absolute surplus-value possible. The claim that money, especially in the form of financial capital, is the “opposite” of labor, that is, is independent from production, in fact, is a form of what Marx calls “capital fetishism,” because it requires the assumption that capital can “work on its own.” The observation that the financial sector operates increasingly autonomously is correct, but this distance is only
possible because the financial sector and the investment sector are based on a temporal extension of the present toward the future. Put differently, the present financialization is in truth a financialization of the future, that is, of future productivity. Fictitious capital, we could say with Marx, is based on claims that express expectations about future labor. Consequently, fictitious capital is not opposed to capital; rather, it is its extreme realization, as it takes on non- (not yet) existing productivity.

General Intellect

I already offered some remarks about the return of “speculative sentences” in Negri’s philosophy. Similarly, the discussion of the general intellect and the status of the “machine fragment” in recent Italian radical philosophy is based on the idea that “production is already completely communication,” insofar as the general computerization and the ever growing transformation of productive relations into scientifically based knowledge relations seem to lead to the bankruptcy of traditional notions of production. Negri nicely summarizes,

What is the project which capital imposes on this moment of development? A) It is, first of all, the destruction of the factory, and in particular the liquidation of the hegemony of the Taylorized process of labor. The analysis of labor is deepened and its organization becomes progressively more decentralized spatially. It is instead focused on social knowledge, on the capitalization of the social laboring networks: in short, it concentrates on the exploitation of a working figure which extends well beyond the bounds of the factory. We call this figure the social worker. B) The project also involves the computerization of society, and in particular the productive use of communication and the transfer of the program of control of society from the outside (the factory) to the inside (communication) of society itself.

As is well known, the origin of these ideas about communication and knowledge can be found in Marx’s so-called machine fragment and in his reflections on the general intellect in connection with a possible break down of capitalism through the role of knowledge in the Grundrisse. Though a full reconstruction of this long debate is not within the scope of this chapter, I offer some final remarks regarding this issue. The tendency
to idealize knowledge and the general intellect in connection with the thesis about production and communication (which I discussed earlier)—“the labor of the cyborg”71—leads to a mystification of knowledge, especially as Negri (and Hardt) do not offer an analysis of the production of knowledge, which would lead to the insight that all of knowledge production becomes increasingly possible and depends on surplus-value production, or, put differently, it takes on the value form. Additionally, identifying knowledge with the “sciences” is naive:

When labor is recognized as immaterial, highly scientific [. . .] (when [. . .] it is defined as a social function of the community), we can see that from laboring processes follow the elaboration of networks of social valorization and the production of alternative subjectivities.72

The hope expressed here is that not only knowledge in general, but scientific knowledge in particular, is a form of human activity that can no longer be controlled by capital. Though there might be some truth to this claim, it tends to romanticize brainpower. For, instead of claiming that production determined by knowledge becomes external to capital, one could argue the exact opposite, namely, that the general intellect becomes increasingly dependent on valorization. As Reitter has pointed out, instead of focusing on the capitalized process of knowledge production (through research institutions and companies) postoperaists tend to reduce this relation to a linear process in which capital subjects knowledge after it has been produced.73 Put in Negri’s dualist expression, capital became “absolutely parasitical, in principle and in practice.”74 As almost all knowledge nowadays depends on technologies that need to be produced by large-scale industries, knowledge production is from its beginning intermingled with the overall circulation of capital.75 Monsanto is just around the corner as bioscientists research new genetic configurations that not only lead to better crops but also lead to the next generation of biochemical weapons. In addition, the sciences became themselves marketable. In this vein, it is my impression that Negri does not acknowledge that with the immense increase in productivity in recent decades the productivity in the sciences became increasingly dependent on investment into military research and the health system (broadly understood). Negri and Hardt’s attempt to reduce war to a political (capital) category fails, accordingly, as they overidealize knowledge and network socialization without taking into account how the real production of these networks come about. Indeed, scientific knowledge
has close ties to war and destruction. With the latter aspects taken into account, we can acknowledge that knowledge production is deeply embedded within the capitalist state and its coercive apparatuses, which are needed to secure that society reproduces itself on the current economic level. In this way, knowledge is not a public good, as Moulier-Boutang claims. It is, hence, too easy to say that it could be a public good, especially because this would repeat the old myth about the neutrality of technology in the field of knowledge production. Do we need to remind ourselves that right at the beginning of his analysis of the valorization of labor in *Capital*, Marx points out that the valorization of living labor depends on the extension of the valorization process beyond a life time, that is, beyond the finite limit of labor time in individuals, toward the inclusion of the “next” generation of laborers? The limitless valorization process, in other words, posits the finitude of life as an inner limit to be overcome. The important role of health and the increasing role of medical research as a state-run task are closely related to the economic reproduction of society, to its members as productive individuals, and to death, which, in addition, is linked up with the development of technology and knowledge production through high-powered research processes. Finally, as the expansion of capital starts to subsume all natural and biological sources in order to make them productive, the role of knowledge and the general intellect is deeply ambiguous, which Marx himself was unable to foresee.

Consequently, the “liberating” and emancipatory potential that Negri sees in the general intellect is the cause of wealth disparities, class structure, ecological devastation, and exploitation. The investments into research lead, as we can see especially in the U.S. system, and even within the academic system, to a class system of a few elite institutions and a mass of average educational “facilities,” a neo-feudalist professorial upper class and an abject class of precarious teachers and low-level academic workers. In addition, this leads to the reproduction of extreme wealth disparities through what is in some places called “advancing knowledge; advancing lives.” Finally, the increase of productivity and the advances of the sciences lead, at the same time, to a disproportional exploitation of the earth, especially of energy and the biosphere. Virtually all advances in the sciences lead to technologies that disproportionally increase energy consumption. These ecological problems, which Marx intentionally does not call “nature,” but, instead, earth, are not really addressed in Negri’s philosophy, and it is my impression, as I argued in the first part of this chapter, that the ecological dimension is not addressed in his work because this would entail a substantial reconceptualization of Negri’s notion of immediately productive labor, which leads to a concept
of labor that is intrinsically tied to its naturalness and to the earth as the extension of the living individual. If it is indeed true, as Negri states, that freedom is a “productive force,” 79 then it seems to be too abstract to identify this freedom with the production of knowledge, labor “as such,” and the multitude as the carrier of this abstract labor capacity, especially if we take into account that the “free” productive force is intrinsically tied to the earth as the second source of wealth. The earth, conceived in its social-material form, however, remains external to productive life.

Conclusion

Antonio Negri is certainly one of the most inspiring political philosophers of our time. Even if one does not agree with some of his ideas and concepts, his apparently limitless creativity, his joyful optimism, and his sensibility for what is “in the air” in our contemporary times are truly admirable. The critique of a few selected concepts of Negri’s philosophy that I developed in this chapter, therefore, should not be taken as hostile comments. The opposite is the case: thinking about Negri not only helped me go back to some fundamental concepts that determine the Marxian legacy, but also determine the extent to which they are still useful today. Though I find Negri’s political philosophy, especially his ontology of constituting power, very productive and intellectually challenging, particularly because we find in it an alternative to the now-dominant liberal framework for thinking about law, democracy, and society, as we saw, I have doubts that his overall attempt to free himself from the Marxian background is successful. In sum, we should remain doubtful of Negri’s claim that we already live in “a” society that “that no longer bases the production of wealth on the exploitation of labor time.” 80

Notes

4. Marx demonstrates that the historical process is not teleological (a position he already reached in *The German Ideology*; for this see Andreas Arndt, *Karl Marx: Versuch über den Zusammenhang seiner Theorie* [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011], 68–73), but that categories that already appear during the course of history, such as money, can be historically reconstructed from within more complex societies: “Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1993), 105. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 1990), 183–184. (I quote the Penguin editions of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, and the German edition of *Werke*. All other translations can be found online at www.marxists.org. I have indicated where I have altered the translation.)


6. According to Negri, though, labor “itself” is in post-Fordist societies more important “than the forms which this may assume” (Negri, “Twenty Theses on Marx,” 152), as for him already in his Spinoza interpretation the concept of form is a negative concept. For this, see Karl Reitter, *Prozesse der Befreiung: Marx, Spinoza, und die Bedingungen eines freien Gemeinwesens* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot 2011), 353.


8. Sabine Nuss in her excellent work on intellectual property raises a similar point against Negri. She argues against Negri that historical changes of labor do not necessarily imply form changes. Moreover, she demonstrates that our contemporary “knowledge society” cannot be reconstructed without taking a Marxist conception of private property relations into account. See Sabine Nuss, *Copyright and Copyriot: Aneignungskonflikte um geistiges Eigentum im informationellen Kapitalismus* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006), 209.

9. I have criticized Negri’s and Hardt’s concept of love in a forthcoming essay entitled “Against Essentialist Conceptions of Love: Towards a Social-Materialist Conception of Love,” in *Symposium: Canadian Journal for Continental Philosophy*.


11. At some point, Negri seems to acknowledge the tension between his immanentist position and the claims that come out of this position. He tries to justify the conceptual reconstruction through what he calls “common ethical consciousness” and “common ethics of responsibility,” but it remains unclear how this is related to the historicist positions he seems to defend in other works. (See Antonio Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, trans. Ed Emery [London: Polity, 2008], 61.) In addition, whereas Marx assumed at least an “average” concept of capitalism as the object of
his theoretical reconstruction of our social reality, Negri no longer gives any justi-
ification of how he develops his concepts methodologically, from his observations to
his theoretical reconstructions.

12. Negri's use of the term “cooperative” is confusing, as Marx uses the term
for the organization of the labor process under the command of the capitalist (his-
torically this can change): “When numerous workers work together side by side in
accordance with a plan, whether in the same process, or in different but connected
processes, this form of labour is called co-operation.” Marx and Engels, Werke, vol.
23, 344; Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 443.

trans. M. Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 326.

14. Similarly, the concept of the multitude is conceived in terms of absolute
constitution: “Focusing on the making of the multitude, then, allows us to recognize
how its productive activity is also a political act of self-making.” Antonio Negri and


16. This rather Aristotelian schema is still visible in Capital. Even before Marx
describes the labor process, he already indicates that concrete labor always depends
on “materials” (Stoffe); for the translation problems of materielle, sachlich, dinglich,
and stofflich, see Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Das ’Kapital’ lesen: Aber wie? (Berlin: Argument
Verlag, 2013), 188–189.


18. Negri and Hardt, Labor of Dionysus, 11; my emphasis.


21. As Negri puts it (differently): “I believe that the value of the socialized
worker’s labour—and thus his/her power—is to be attributed to the substance of
laboring cooperation which s/he represents. S/he represents cooperation, commu-
nication and created value.” Antonio Negri, The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto

22. Carlo Vercellone, “Vom Massenarbeiter zur kognitiven Arbeit: Eine historische
und systematische Betrachtung.” Über Marx hinaus, eds. M. van der Linden


25. Ibid.


27. Antonio Negri, “Constituent Republic,” Radical Thought in Italy: A Poten-
tial Politics, eds. P. Virno and M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota


29. To be more precise: abstract labor is constituted through exchange, that
is, through and behind the back of social agents. For this, see Marx and Engels,


33. Ibid., 88; ibid., 167.


35. See Haug, Das 'Kapital' lesen, 195, where he argues against Harvey's subjectivist concept of fetishism.

36. Marx and Engels, Werke, vol. 23, 87; Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 166. Consequently, the so-called law of value that simply counts labor time expended is misguided inasmuch as only concrete labor can be measured in time. Abstract labor cannot be measured in time, as it establishes itself behind the back of social agents in the realization of value. For this see Michael Heinrich, Die Wissenschaft vom Wert: Die Marxische Kritik der politischen Oekonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2011), 209.


41. In addition, as Sayers has pointed out against Negri and Hardt, immaterial labor is as material as ever: “Symbolic labor is no exception: it involves making marks on paper, agitating the air and making sounds, creating electronic impulses in a computer system, or whatever. Only in this way it is objectified and realized as labor. In the process, it affects—creates, alters—subjectivity. All labor, it should be noted, does this.” Sean Sayers, “The Concept of Labor: Marx and His Critics,” Science and Society, vol. 71, no. 4 (October 2007:445).

42. For Negri's struggle with this concept as something that is beyond form, see Antonio Negri and Cesare Casarino, In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 93–98.


45. It remains unclear why communication—even if we would agree with Negri that communication in post-Fordist societies is the most central category—would be opposed to labor (instead of taking it as one form of labor).

46. Negri, “Twenty Theses on Marx,” 152. The fact that in post-Fordist societies the factory no longer is the center of production is not an argument against the value form or the law of value, for the factory is only one way in which capital can organize labor. See Reitter, Prozesse der Befreiung, 109.

47. Negri, “Twenty Theses on Marx,” 152.


53. Ibid., 152.
54. The claim that communication is the new form of labor is shared among radical Italian philosophers and economists; for example, see Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Virno and Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 137, and Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 20.

57. To repeat the point, even if we would assume that labor somehow lost its value form (as Negri claims), we could not conclude that all of a sudden labor would return to its “immediate” productivity or use value production. Making this claim repeats the old Marxist error of assuming that use value production is universal and could be realized as communism (somehow stripping away the history of production and returning to some abstract “human” production).

59. Ibid., 169; ibid., 255; my emphasis.
64. Negri, "Constituent Republic," 216.
65. Ibid.
68. The reduction to and, ultimately, the identification of labor with, communication, however, is a logical claim, for it posits an identity between two activities as the “super-subject” of reality.
71. Negri and Hardt, Labor of Dionysus, 10.
72. Ibid., 13.
73. Reitter, Prozesse der Befreiung, 134.
75. I do not want to dismiss the intellectual force of Negri and Hardt’s argument, as I agree with the general intuition behind their claims, namely, that the possibility of emancipation needs to be found within the capital-labor relation. These tendencies, however, seem to be more ambiguous than they admit, however. A similar idealization of scientific knowledge can be found in one of the strongest supporters of Negri and Hardt. According to Moulier-Boutang, “Science and knowledge, in their mechanisms of production and in their positive effects, are quasi-public goods” because the “brain power” that we find in networks, computerized markets, and the development of immaterial goods, such as brands, is a form of “collective intelligence,” which sounds like the return of the Hegelian world spirit onto the postoperaist scene. Yann Moulier-Boutang, Cognitive Capitalism, trans. Ed Emery (London: Polity, 2012), 30.
77. Negri and Hardt deal with this aspect through their concept of “biopolitics.” My comments in this section remain somewhat broad and are overall dissatisfactory. I simply want to point out that an analysis of knowledge production and its system of social relations is more important than Negri seems to acknowledge.
78. Marx does not reduce the sciences to “pure” sciences (finding laws, chemistry, basic physics, etc.). For example, in Capital, we find an extensive discussion of how the capitalization of agriculture destroys the earth, but he did not see the sciences turning themselves into a system that takes on an industrial character. His claim that the capitalist acquires knowledge “for free” (see Marx and Engels, Werke, vol. 23, 407) seems to be wrong, if applied to the current situation, as investments need to be made into the sciences, which—if they are public—take away possible profits. I find Reitter’s position contradictory on this score, as on the one hand, he
claims that state-run programs threaten logical capital, but, on the other hand, he
argues for science as an unproductive part of production. See Reitter, *Prozesse der
Befreiung*, 128 and 134.

79. Antonio Negri, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism: Antonio Negri in Conversation
80. Ibid., 53.
Chapter 13

The Risk of Subjectivity

Negri beyond Adorno

Timothy S. Murphy

The work of Antonio Negri, in both its scholarly and militant forms, can be understood as an enormous running wager, with continuously increasing stakes, on the persistent viability of collective social transformation. This particular wager is one that many influential contemporary theorists consider a sucker’s bet. Consider Jean-François Lyotard’s judgment, from *The Postmodern Explained*:

The promise of emancipation was rekindled, championed, and expounded by the great intellectual, that category born of the Enlightenment, defender of ideals and the republic. Intellectuals of today who have chosen to perpetuate this task in ways other than a minimal resistance to every totalitarianism, who have been imprudent enough to nominate the just cause in conflicts between ideas or powers—the likes of Chomsky, Negri, Sartre, Foucault—have been tragically deceived. The signs of the ideal are hazy. A war of liberation does not indicate that humanity is continuing to emancipate itself. Nor does the opening of new markets indicate humanity’s increasing wealth.1

The wager on emancipation or social transformation is “imprudent” in that it seems to be based on what Lyotard considers the “tragic deception” of idealized progress or development, the grand meta-narrative whose critique is Lyotard’s most widely recognized contribution to contemporary theory.