

“Marxism aides the capitalist deceit by persuading men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power, censuring the much more radical hypothesis that they could be alienated *as* labor power, as the “inalienable” power of creating value through labor.”

the **Mirror**  
of **Production**

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32: For example, this passage from Marx on the social hieroglyph: “Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value is just as much a social product as language” (*Capital, op. cit.*, I, 74). The entirety of this analysis of the mystery of value remains fundamental. But far from only being valuable for the distributed and exchanged product of labor, it already works for the product of labor (and for labor itself) understood as a “useful object.” the utility (that of labor as well) is already this socially produced and socially determined hieroglyphic abstraction. The entire anthropology of “primitive” exchange forces us to shatter the natural evidence of utility and recreate the historical and social genesis of use value as Marx did exchange value. Only then will the hieroglyph be totally deciphered and the spell of value be radically exorcised.

33. Why not?

## Preface

*In this essay, Jean Baudrillard elaborates a radical critique of Marxism through its deployment of productivity and value (abstract labor, and deductively, useful labor—or Man, “man as labor”—value in general). The two-fold character of labor is a necessary conceptual tool for analyzing the capitalist mode of production, but to the question of how to destroy the capitalist mode of production, it offers little. Rallying behind one form of value does not aide the destruction of the system of value production. As some reactionary economists would have it, exchange value is just a singularity of use value (“Use value is but the horizon for exchange value”). This is not cause for despair, but reason to entertain a more general criticism of value. Baudrillard’s critique is as much metaphysical as it is material, and it will not be as devastating if we are unable to extend it beyond the material considerations of political economy. For example, it shines light on the absurdity of the various CP’s desires to remove the capitalist parasite from labor, restore labor its product, develop the socialist economy, or any other exaltations of use value. But as Baudrillard himself says, “There is not only the quantitative exploitation of man as productive force by the system of capitalist political economy, but the metaphysical over-determination of man as producer by the code of political economy.” We can find the tumors of productivity and functionality even in classic anarchist dogma, with its more “democratic” constitution of man-as-labor, and modern affirmations of identity (as revolutionary subject or virtually any utterance of the term, “People”). It can be glimpsed in Deleuze’s idea of desire as productive, Foucault’s notion of power as productive, or Agamben’s consideration of the profane. When we take up Baudrillard’s critique in relation to other philosophers, especially with those whose thoughts we find great affinity, it’s worth remembering criticism is not negative judgment, but a way to understand, to sharpen our daggers, without at the same time being reduced to a positive epistemological project. Is the content of our criticism (a negative, destructive project) what prevents us from the latter? What else possibly could?*





A SPECTER HAUNTS the revolutionary imagination: the phantasm of production. It sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical thought of the *mode* of production doesn't touch the *principle* of production. All the concepts that it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the *contents* of production; they leave its *form* intact. The form itself reemerges idealized, behind the critique of the capitalist mode of production. This critique does nothing, in effect, but strengthen the revolutionary discourse, through a curious contagion, in terms of productivity: from the liberation of productive forces in *Tel Quel's* unlimited "textual productivity" to the factory-machine productivity of the unconscious in Deleuze (and already, the "work" of the unconscious), no revolution can place itself under any other sign than this one. Productive Eros is the watchword. Social wealth or language, meaning or value, sign or phantasm, there is nothing that isn't "produced" according to some "labor." If this is the truth of capital and of political economy, it is entirely replicated by the revolution: we are going to subvert the capitalist mode of production in the name of an authentic and radical productivity. We are going to abolish the capitalist law of value in the name of a de-alienated hyper-productivity, of a productive hyperspace. Capital develops productive forces, but it slows them as well: they must be liberated. The exchange of signifieds has always hidden the "labor" of the signifiers: liberate the signifier! the textual production of meaning! The unconscious is surrounded by social, linguistic, Oedipal structures: return it to its brute energy, restore it as a productive machine! Everywhere the productivist discourse reigns, and whether this productivity has objective ends or is deployed for itself, in either case, productivity is the form of value. Leitmotif of the system, leitmotif of its radical contestation: a terminological consensus like this is suspect. Perhaps the discourse of production is only a revolutionary metaphor—the reversal and return of a concept, which essentially emanates from political economy and obeys the reality principle of that economy. But this metaphor is dangerous if it is meant to designate a radical alternative. Perhaps the alternative isn't radical and contamination by the productivist discourse signifies more than a metaphoric infection—it signifies a real impossibility of thinking

the over-determination of nature as referent, as "objective" reality, by the code of political economy.

14: Karl Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*. [Unlocatable. *Trans.*]

15: Herbert Marcuse, "On the Concept of Labor" *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973) 11-12.

16: Easton and Guddat, eds. *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Anchor, 1969) 322, 332.

17: Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House) 42-43.

18: *Ibid.*, 177.

19: Engels, always a naturalist, goes on to praise the role played by labor in the transition from ape to man.

20: Marcuse, *op. cit.*, 22.

21: *Ibid.*, 15.

22: *Ibid.*, 25.

23: Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 259.

24: Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy* trans. C. Kerr (Chicago: Kerr, 1917) 9.

25: Insofar as it conceives of man as the union of a soul and a body—which took place, as we know, in an extraordinary "dialectical" flowering during the Christian Middle Ages.

26: This autonomization is the key which turns Marxism toward social-democracy, the key to its present revisionism, and to its total positivist degradation (which also includes bureaucratic Stalinism as well as Social Democratic liberalism).

27: Marx, *Capital*, *op. cit.*, III, 799-800.

28: Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1962) 178.

29: See Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotike: recherches pour une sémantologie* (Paris, Seuil, 1969).

30: Marx, *Capital*, *op. cit.*, I, 43-44

31: *Ibid.*, I, 195.

## Notes



- 1: Marx evidently played an essential role in rooting this productivist metaphor. Marx radicalized and definitively rationalized the concept of production, he “made it” its title if revolutionary nobility. It is in large part through unconditional reference to Marx that this concept pursues its prodigious career.
- 2: Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: Inernational Publishers, 1947) 16.
- 3: *Ibid.*, 7.
- 4: See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* [1972] trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981).
- 5: “Notes on Wagner” in *Theoretical Practice* 5 (Spring 1972) 51-52.
- 6: Pieere Naville, *Le nouveau leviathan* (Paris: Riviere, 1954).
- 7: Karl Marx, *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1904) 33.
- 8: Another great disjunction on which the critique of political economy articulates itself: the technical and social divisions of labor—subjected to the same analysis. Transfiguring the technical division as both sides of the social division, it preserves with the same blow the fiction of an ideal distribution of labor, of a “non-alienated” concrete productivity, and it universalizes the technical mode and technical rationale. Thus the dialectic of productive forces and relations of productivity: everywhere the “dialectical” contradiction ends in a Mobius strip, though in the meantime it has had the time to circumscribe the field of production and to universalize it.
- 9: Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, op. cit.*, 298-299.
- 10: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Pelican, 1973) 527.
- 11: We will come back to this reciprocal neutralization of the theory and the object in relation to the rapports between Marxist theory and the workers’ movement.
- 12: This is not to say they have *never existed*: another paradox to which we will have to return.
- 13: The same for nature: not only the exploitation of nature as productive force,

beyond or outside the general schema of production, which is to say a counter-dependence on the dominant schema.<sup>1</sup>

But isnt this dominant schema, metaphorizing all azimuths, itself a metaphor? Is the reality principle that it imposes anything other than a code, a cipher, a system of interpretation? Marx shattered the fiction of *homo economicus*, the myth that summarizes the entire process of the naturalization of the system of exchange value, of the market, of surplus value and its forms. But he did it in the name of the emergence into action of labor power, of man’s own power to make the value of his labor visible (*pro-du-cere*), and we can ask if there is not an equal fiction, an equal naturalization, which is to say an equally arbitrary convention, a model of simulation destined to *code* all human material, every eventuality of desire and of exchange in terms of value, finality and production. Production in this case would be nothing other than a code, imposing a kind of deciphering, imposing decipherment where there is properly neither finality, cipher, or value. it is a question of a gigantic secondary elaboration which hallucinates in rational terms the predestination of man for the transformation of the world (or for the “production” of himself: humanist theme generalized today: it is not longer a question of “being” oneself but of “producing” oneself, from conscious activity to the wild “productions” of desire). Everywhere man has learned to reflect himself, to assume himself, to *direct* himself according to this schema of production, which is assigned to him as the final dimension of value and meaning. At the level of the entirety of political economy, there is something of what Jacques Lacan described in the mirror stage: accross this schema of production, this *mirror* of production, the human species comes to consciousness *in the imaginary*. Production, work, value, everything through which an objective world appears and in which man recognizes himself objectively—all of this is the imaginary wherein man has embarked on the incessant decipherment of himself through his works, finalized by his shadow (his own end), reflected by this operational mirror, this kind of ideal of the productivist ego—not only in the materialized form of economic obsession with output, determined by the *system* of exchange value, but more profoundly in this *overdetermination by the code*, by the mirror of political economy, in this identity that man dons in his own eyes, when he can

no longer think of himself other than as something to produce, to transform, to make visible as a value. This remarkable phantasm is confused with that of representation, in which man becomes—for himself—his own *signified*, enjoys himself as *contents* of value and meaning in a process of self-expression and self-accumulation whose form escapes him.

It is clear (despite the exegetical prowess of structuralist Marxists) that the analysis of form/representation (the status of the sign, of the language which directs all western thought)—the critical reduction of this form in its collusion with the order of production and of political economy—escaped Marx. Nothing is served by making a radical critique of the order of representation in the name of production and its revolutionary watchword. The two orders are inseparable and, as paradoxical as this seems, Marx didn't submit form/production to radical analysis any more than he did form/representation. These two great, unanalyzed forms imposed their limits on him, the limits of the imaginary of political economy. We understand this to mean that the discourse of production and the discourse of representation are the mirror wherein the system of political economy comes to be reflected in the imaginary and to reproduce itself as determinant authority.

IN ORDER TO GRASP the radicality of political economy, it does not suffice to unmask what is hidden behind the concept of consumption: the anthropology of needs and use value. We must also unmask everything that hides behind the concept of production, of the mode of production, of productive forces, of relationships of production, etc. All the concepts fundamental to Marxist analysis need to be questioned starting from its demand for radical critique and for the transcendence of political economy. What is axiomatic about the generic wealth of man—labor power, about the motor of history, about history itself, which is only “the production by men of their material life”? “The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.”<sup>2</sup>

*political economy is basically completed.* Dialectical materialism has exhausted its contents by reproducing its form. The situation at this level is consequently no longer critique, it is inextricable. And according to the same revolutionary movement as Marx's, we affirm that we must move to a radically different level which permits, beyond its critique, the definitive resolution of political economy. This level is that of symbolic exchange and its theory. And as Marx thought that he should, in order to open the way to the critique of political economy, begin with a critique of the philosophy of law, we think that the preamble to this radical shift in terrain is the critique of the metaphysics of the signifier and of the code, in the entirety of its present ideological breadth—which we call, for lack of something better, the critique of the political economy of the sign.

## *The Critique of Political Economy is Basically Completed*



UNDERSTANDING ITSELF as a rationality of production superior to that of bourgeois political economy, the weapons that Marx thought he seized turn against him and make his theory the dialectical apotheosis of political economy. At a much higher level, his critique falls to his objection to Feuerbach for making a radical critique of the *contents* of religion, but for having made this critique in a religious *form*. Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but he still made it in the form of political economy. Such are the ruses of dialectics. Therein is undoubtedly the limit of every “critique,” a concept born in the West at the same time as political economy, a concept which is perhaps, like the quintessence of Enlightenment rationality, only the subtle, long term expression of the system’s expanded reproduction. Dialectics does not escape the destiny of critique. We will perhaps see that the return of idealist dialectics in dialectical materialism was only a metamorphosis, that it is the logic itself of political economy, of capital and of the commodity which is dialectical and that, in the guise of having produced the internal and fatal contradiction, Marx basically only offered a descriptive theory. The logic of representation, which is to say the redoubling of its object, haunts all rational discursivity. All critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious religion, desire indexed by the construction of its object, negativity subtly haunted by the form even of what it negates.

This is why, after Feuerbach, Marx said that the critique of religion is basically completed (*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*), and that in order to overturn this ambiguous limit beyond which it cannot go (the reinversion of religious form in critique itself), it is necessary to pass resolutely to another level—precisely to the critique of political economy, which alone is radical and which can, by making the true contradictions apparent, definitively resolve the problem of religion. *Today we are at exactly the same point as Marx was.* For us, the *critique of*

The liberation of productive forces is confused with the liberation of man: is this a revolutionary watchword or one for political economy? Almost no one has doubted this final evidence, certainly not Marx, for whom men “begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence”<sup>3</sup> (why must man’s vocation always be to distinguish himself from animals? Humanism is an *idée fixe* that comes to us—it too—from political economy—leave that). But is existence itself an end for man, an end for which he must find the means? These little innocent phrases are already theoretical ultimatums; the separation of ends and means already constitutes the most ferocious and most naive postulate about the human species. Man has needs. Does he (through which he separates himself, as means, from his own ends)? Prodigious metaphors of the system that dominates us; a fable of political economy still recounted to generations of revolutionaries, infected even in their political radicality by the conceptual virus of this same political economy.

## *Critique of Use Value and Labor Power*



IN THE DISTINCTION between exchange value and use value, Marxism assumes its greatest force but also its weakness. The presupposition of use value, the hypothesis, beyond the abstraction of exchange value, of a concrete value, of a human finality of commodities in the moment of their direct relationship of use for a subject, we have seen that this value is only an effect of the system of exchange value, a concept produced by the system, in which the system completes itself.<sup>4</sup> Far from designating a beyond for political economy, use value is but the horizon of exchange value. A radical questioning of the concept of consumption begins on the level of needs and products. *But this critique assumes its full scope in its extension to that other commodity, labor power.* The concept of production then falls under radical critique.

Don’t forget that according to Marx himself the revolutionary originality of his theory consists in unleashing the concept of labor power from its status as an exceptional commodity, the insertion of which, in the cycle of production *un-*

*der the name of use value* carries the X element, the differential extra-value which generates surplus value and the whole process of capital. (Bourgeois economics speculates on simple “labor” as one factor of production among others in the economic process).

The history of the use value of labor power in Marx is complex. Adam Smith attacked the physiocrats and the Exchangists with the concept of labor. Marx in turn deconstructed abstract social labor (exchange value) and concrete labor (use value) in the double concept labor power/commodity. And he insisted on the necessity of maintaining in all their force the two aspects, the articulation of which alone can aid in objectively deciphering the process of capitalist labor. To A. Wagner, who reproached him for having neglected use value, he responds: “... the *vir obscurus* overlooks the fact that even in the analysis of the commodity I do not stop at the double manner in which it is represented, but immediately go on to say that in this double being of the commodity is represented the *two-fold character of the labor* whose product it is: *useful labor* i.e., the concrete modes of the labors which create use values, and *abstract labor, labor as expenditure of labor power*, irrespective of whatever ‘useful’ way it is expended... that in the development of the *value form of the commodity*, in the last instance of its money form and hence of *money*, the *value* of a commodity is represented in the *use value* of the other, i.e. in the natural form of the other commodity; that surplus value itself is derived from a *‘specific’ use value of labor power* exclusively pertaining to the latter, etc. etc., thus for me use value plays a far more important part than it has in economics hitherto, however, that is only ever taken into account where it springs from the analysis of a given economic constellation, not from arguing backwards and forwards about the concepts of words ‘use value’ and ‘value’.”<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that in this text the use value of labor, losing its “naturalness,” recovers a “specific” value that is much greater in the *structural* functioning of exchange value. Also, in that in maintaining a kind of dialectical equilibrium between qualitative concrete labor and quantitative abstract labor, Marx—while granting logical priority to exchange value (the given economic formation), retaining, even in that structure, a kind of concrete precedence, a concrete positiv-

From here, they can only invoke one another, in an indefinite metonymic process: man is historical, history is dialectical, dialectics is the process of (material) production, production is the movement of human existence itself, history is that of modes of production, etc. Scientific and universalist, this discourse (this code) becomes immediately imperialist. All these possible societies are summoned to respond. To interrogate Marxist thought to see if societies “without history” are something other than “pre”-historic, other than a chrysalis and a larva. The dialectics of the world of production is not yet well developed, but you lose nothing by waiting—the Marxist egg is ready to hatch. The psychoanalytic egg, elsewhere, is also already ready, because everything that we have said of these Marxist concepts goes for the unconscious, repression, Oedipus, etc. This even better: the Bororos are closer to the primary processes than we are.

All of this constitutes the most surprising—and the most reactionary—theoretical aberration. There is *neither mode of production nor production itself* in primitive societies. There is *no dialectic* in primitive societies. There is *no unconscious* in primitive societies. All of these concepts analyze only our societies, regulated by political economy. These concepts only have a kind of boomerang value. If psychoanalysis speaks of the unconscious in primitive societies, should we ask what psychoanalysis represses or what repression produced psychoanalysis itself? When Marxism speaks of the mode of production in primitive societies, should we ask to what extent this concept fails to account for even our historical societies—the reason we export it. And there where all of our ideologies seek to finalize, to rationalize primitive societies according to their own concepts, to encode the primitives, should we ask what obsession makes them perceive this finality, this code blowing up in their faces. In place of exporting Marxism and psychoanalysis (not to mention bourgeois ideology, though on this level there is no difference), bring all of the impact, the entire interrogation of primitive societies to bear on Marxism and psychoanalysis. Maybe then we can shatter this fascination, this auto-fetishism of Western thought, maybe we could escape from a Marxism which has become a specialist in the impasses of capitalism much more than a road to revolution, from a psychoanalysis which has become a specialist in the impasses of libidinal economy much more than in the ways of desire.

power: all these concepts by which Marxist theory seeks to shatter the abstract universality of the universality of the concepts of bourgeois thought (Nature and Progress, Man and Reason, formal Logic, etc.) Marxism in its turn is in the process of universalizing them according to a “critical” imperialism as ferocious as that of bourgeois thought.

The proposition according to which a concept is not only an interpretive hypothesis, but the translation of the movement of the universe, raised by pure metaphysics. Marxist concepts don't escape this lapse. Thus, by all logic, the concept of history must maintain itself as historical, turn on and clarify itself by abolishing the context that produces it. In place of this, it is transhistoricized, it is redoubled in itself and thereby universalized. Dialectics, in all rigor, should dialectically surpass and annul itself. Production and modes of production: radicalizing the concept in a given moment, Marx made a breach in the social mystery of exchange value. Thereafter the concept took all of its strategic power from its irruption, by which it deposes political economy from its imaginary universality. But it lost its power, already in Marx's time, by offering itself as a principle of explication. It cancels its “difference” by universalizing itself, returning by the same blow to the form of the dominant code, universality, and to the strategy of political economy. It is not tautological that the concept of history should be historical, the concept of dialectics dialectical, the concept of production itself a product (which is to say judged by a kind of auto-analysis). This simply designates the present, explosive, mortal form of critical concepts. From the moment they assert themselves in the universal, they cease to be analytical: the religion of meaning commences. They become canonical and they enter into the general system's mode of theoretical production. At this moment too—and this is not by chance—they assume their scientific cast (the canonization of Marxist concepts from Engels to Althusser). They set themselves up to express an “objective reality.” They become signs: signifiers of a “real” signified. And if, in the best moments these concepts have been practiced as such, this is to say without taking themselves for reality, nevertheless they have fallen into the *imaginary of the sign*, which is to say into the *sphere of truth*, no longer in the sphere of interpretation, but in that of *repressive simulation*.

ty of use value—still retains something *of the apparent movement of political economy*. He does not radicalize the schema to the point of reversing this appearance and revealing use value *as produced by the play of exchange value*. We have shown this for the products of consumption, it is the same for labor power. The fact of defining objects as useful, and responding to needs, is the most complete, the most internalized expression of abstract economic exchange: its subjective closure. The fact of defining labor power as the source of “concrete” social wealth is the complete expression of the abstract manipulation of labor power: the truth of capital culminates in this “evidence” of man as producer of value. Such is the twist by which exchange value retrospectively originates and logically closes itself off in use value. In other words, here the signified “use value” is still an *effect of the code*, the final precipitate of the law of value. It does not suffice to analyze the operation of the quantitative abstraction of exchange value *starting from* use value, one must still make visible the conditions for the possibility of this operation: to understand the production of even the concept of the use value of labor power, of a specific rationality of productive man. Without this generic definition, no political economy. Therein, in the last instance, lies the foundation of political economy. It is therein as well that one must disrupt it, by unmasking this quantitative—qualitative “dialectic,” behind which the definitive structural institution of the field of value is hidden.

### *What is Concrete about Labor: the Quantitative—Qualitative “Dialectic”*



“THE QUANTITATIVE CONSIDERATION of labor could only come about once it had been universalized during the 18th century in Europe... Until then, different forms of activity were not comparable in their breadth... At first, all tasks presented themselves as diverse qualities.”<sup>6</sup> Qualitative labor, differentiated in relation to its process, its product, and the destination of its product. Historical epoch of the artisanal mode of production. Succeeded, in the capitalist mode of production, by the double aspect under which labor is analyzed:

“While labor which creates exchange values is *abstract, universal, and homogenous*, labor which produces use value is concrete and special and is made up of an endless variety of kinds of labor according to the way in which and the material to which it is applied.”<sup>7</sup> Here we rediscover the moment of use value: concrete, differentiated, incomparable. In opposition to the quantitative measure of labor power, labor use value remains a qualitative potentiality. Neither more nor less. It is specified by its own end, the material that it works, or simply because it is the energetic expenditure of a particular individual at a particular moment. The use value of labor power is the moment of its actualization, of the relation of man to the useful expenditure that he possesses—it is basically an act of (productive) *consumption*—and this moment retains, in the general process, all of its singularity. At this level, labor power is incommensurable.

There is a profound enigma in the articulation of Marx’s theory: how is surplus labor born? How does the actualization of labor power, by definition qualitative, come to be “more” or “less”? If not by supposing that the “dialectical” opposition of the quantitative and the qualitative only expresses an apparent movement.

In fact, this is again a question, with the *effect* of quality and of incomparability, of the *apparent* movement of political economy. What the universalization of labor in the 18th century, and its reproduction thereafter, produced, was not the reduction of concrete qualitative labor into abstract quantitative labor, but, from the outset, the structural articulation of both terms. On the basis of this “fork” labor is truly universalized, not only as market value but as human value. Ideology always proceeds in this way through a binary structural division (or moreover by redoubling in a qualitative structural effect, which is an effect of the *code*) investing the entire field of possibility. Henceforth there can only be labor—qualitative or quantitative. The quantitative still only signifies the comparability of all forms of labor in abstract value. The qualitative, under the banner of incomparability, goes much further: it signifies *the comparability of every human practice in terms of production and labor*. Or again: the abstract and formal universality of the labor power commodity underlines the “concrete” universality

tion to the wealth of symbolic exchange. This “concrete” labor, with all of its values of repression, of sublimation, of objective finality, of “conformity to a goal,” of the rational domestication of sexuality and of nature, this *productive eros* already represents, in relation to symbolic exchange, the real cut that Marx himself displaces and situates between abstract quantitative labor and concrete qualitative labor. The process of “valorization” begins with the process of the useful transformation of nature, with the instauration of labor as generic finality, with the stage of use value. And this real cut is not between “abstract” labor and concrete labor, but between symbolic exchange and labor (production, economics). The abstract social form of labor and of exchange is only the completed form, overvalorization and production inaugurated long ago, breaking with every symbolic organization of exchange.<sup>32</sup>

Kristeva would like to escape value, but not labor or Marx. You have to choose. Labor is defined (historically and anthropologically) as what disinvests all the ambivalent and symbolic potentialities of the body and of social exchange, reducing them to a rational, positive, and unilateral investment. Productive eros pushes all alternative potentialities of meaning and exchange, in symbolic exchange, toward the process of production, accumulation, and appropriation. If we want to question this process which places us in the hands of political economy, of the terrorism of value, if we want to rethink expenditure and symbolic exchange, the concept of production and of labor developed by Marx (not to speak of classical economics) must be resolved, analyzed as ideological concepts in solidarity with the general system of value. And if we want to find a realm beyond value (which is in effect the only revolutionary perspective), then we must shatter the *mirror of production*, in which all of Western metaphysics is reflected. Should we abandon Marx?<sup>33</sup>

## *In the Shadow of Marxist Concepts*



HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, dialectics, modes of production, labor

festive and free volatilization of the power of the body, a game with death, the action of a desire. Moreover, this “expenditure of the body” does not have, as in play (sexual or otherwise), in response to other bodies, its echo in a nature that would play or expand itself in exchange. It is not based on symbolic exchange. What man offers of his body in labor is never *given* or *lost*, not *rendered* by nature in a reciprocal mode. Labor intends only to “render the yield” of nature. Expenditure in this sense is therefore only an investment of value, a *making valuable*, opposed to every symbolic play, whether in a gift or an expenditure.

Kristeva poses the problem of redefining labor beyond value. In fact, for Marx, as Jean-Joseph Goux has shown, the line demarcating value passes between use value and exchange value. “If we proceed further, and compare the process of producing value with the labor-process, pure and simple, we find that the latter consists of the useful labor, the work, that produces use values. Here we contemplate the labor as producing a particular article; we view it under its qualitative aspect alone. Here it is a question merely of the time occupied by the laborer in doing the work—of the period during which the labor power is usefully expended.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the abstraction of value begins only that of the second stage, that of exchange value. This amounts to removing use value from the sphere of the production of value, or again: the sphere of use value is confused with that which is beyond value (this is Goux’s point, in extending this proposition to the use value of the sign). Here, as we have seen, there is a very serious idealization of the process of concrete, qualitative labor and, in the end, a compromise with political economy—to the extent that the entire theoretical investment and strategy crystallizes on this line of demarcation within the sphere of value, the line “external” to the closure of this sphere of political economy is left in the shadows. By positing use value beyond exchange value, we enclose all transcendence within this single internal alternative to the field of value. Qualitative production is already the reign of a rational, positive finality—the transformation of nature is already the place of its objectification as productive power, under the sign of utility (this is simultaneously true of human labor). Labor and production—before even the stage of exchange value and of the temporal equivalence of abstract social labor—already constitute an abstraction, a reduction and an unsurpassed rationalization in rela-

of qualitative labor.

But the word “concrete” here is an abuse of sense. It seems to oppose abstraction to the interior of the fork; in fact it is the fork itself which grounds abstraction. In the play of one and the other—of abstract and concrete, of qualitative and quantitative, of exchange value and use value—the autonomization of labor is sealed. The fetishism of labor and of productivity comes to be crystallized in this structured play of signifiers.<sup>8</sup>

What is concrete about labor? Marx: “The indifference as to the particular kind of labor implies the existence of a highly developed aggregate of different species of concrete labor, none of which is any longer the predominant one. So do the most general abstractions commonly arise only where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all.”<sup>9</sup> But if no type of labor dominates all the others, it is because labor itself dominates all the other regimes, that it substitutes itself for all other forms of wealth and exchange. Indifference in regard to determinate labor corresponds to a much more complete determination of social wealth by labor. And what is this social wealth, placed entirely under the sign of labor, if not use value? The “richest concrete development” is the qualitative and quantitative multiplication of use values. “The greater the extent to which historic needs—needs created by production itself, social needs—needs which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse, are posited as *necessary*, the higher the level to which real wealth has become developed. Regarded *materially*, wealth consists only in the manifold variety of needs.”<sup>10</sup> Is this not the program of an advanced capitalist society? Because it does not conceive of a mode of social wealth other than that founded on labor and production, Marxism no longer furnishes, long term, a real alternative to capitalism. Adopting the generic schema of production and needs, there is an astounding simplification of social exchange by the law of value. A fantastic proposition, if conceived correctly; arbitrary and fantastic in regard to the status of man in society; belied by the analysis of all primitive or archaic organization, and by the feudal symbolic order, and even by that of our societies. It is clear that all of the perspectives opened up

by the contradictions of the mode of production drive us into political economy.

The dialectic of production only redoubles the abstraction, the separation of political economy. And this leads to the radical interrogation of the Marxist theoretical discourse. Since the dialectic abstract-concrete relationship is in the final instance defined by Marx as the relationship between “scientific representation and real movement” (what Althusser will analyze precisely as the *production* of a theoretical object), it appears that this theoretical production, itself caught in the abstraction of representation can only redouble its object, in this case the logic and movement of political economy. Between the theory and the object (this goes not only for Marxism) there is effectively a dialectical relation, in the fatal sense wherein it encloses them both in an unsurpassable specularity.<sup>11</sup> Thought beyond the production form, beyond the representation form becomes unthinkable.

### *The “Generic” Double Face of Man*



IN FACT, the use value of labor power is no more real than the use value of products, no more real than the autonomy of the signified and the referent. The same fiction reigns in the orders of production, consumption, and signification. Exchange value makes the use value of products appear as its anthropological horizon. The exchange value of labor power makes use value visible as the originality and concrete finality of the act of labor, as its “generic” alibi. The logic of signifiers produces “evidence” of the “reality” of the signified and of the referent. Throughout, exchange value makes concrete production, concrete consumption, and concrete signification appear as a kind of abstraction, as an abstract distortion. Exchange value foments this concreteness as its ideological ectoplasm, as its originary phantasm and its surpassing. In this sense, needs, use value, the referent “don’t exist”: they are only concepts produced and projected in a generic dimension by the same development of the system of exchange value.<sup>12</sup>

In the same way, the double potentiality of man, that of needs and labor

that Marx did not think, it is expenditure, loss, sacrifice, prodigality, play, the symbolic. Marx thought about *production* (already not bad) and he thought about it in terms of value.

There is no escape from this. Marxist labor is defined in the absolute framework of a natural necessity and of its dialectical overcoming as rational activity producing value. The social wealth it produces is *material*. It has nothing to do with *symbolic* wealth which comes conversely from destruction, from the deconstruction of value, from transgression and expenditure, which mocks natural necessity. These two notions of wealth are irreconcilable, perhaps even exclusive of one another, and it is useless to attempt acrobatic transfers. According to Bataille, “sacrificial economy” or symbolic exchange is excluded from political economy (and from its critique, which is only its completed form). It is just to return to political economy what belongs to it: the concept of labor is consubstantial with it. For this reason, it cannot be turned to any other field of analysis, and it certainly cannot become once again the object of a science that claims to overturn political economy. The “labor of the sign,” “intertextual productive space,” etc. are ambiguous metaphors. There is a choice to be made between value and non-value. Labor definitively elevates the sphere of value. This is why the concept of labor in Marx (like his concepts of production and of productive force) must be submitted to a radical critique as an *ideological* concept. With all of its ambiguities, this is not the moment to generalize labor as a *revolutionary* concept.

The citations from Marx to which Kristeva refers do not in any way carry the sense she gives them. The genesis of wealth through genital combination of labor-father and earth-mother repeats well enough a “normal” productive-reproductive schema: we make love to have children, not for pleasure. The metaphor is that of reproductive genital sexuality, not at all that of an expenditure of the ecstatic body. But this is only a detail. The “expenditure” of human power that Marx speaks of is not an expenditure of pure loss, in Bataille’s sense, a symbolic (pulsional, libidinal) expenditure, it is still a productive, finalized, economic expenditure because it engenders only through coupling with this other productive force called earth (or matter). It is a useful expenditure, an investment, and not at all a

*determined* contents. It is there henceforth as *pure form*, but no less determining. Exactly as the pure institutional form of painting, of art and theater shines, emptied of its contents, in anti-painting, anti-art, anti-theater—non-work shines with the pure form of labor. The concept can therefore be fantasized as the abolition of political economy, it is bound to fall back into the sphere of political economy, as a sign—and only a sign—of its abolition. It already escapes the revolutionaries to enter into the programmatic field of the “new society.”

## *Marx and the Hieroglyph of Value*



IN *Semeiotike*, Julia Kristeva writes: “From the viewpoint of social distribution and consumption (of communication), labor is always a value of use or value which it is, and not in any other way. Value is measured by the quantity of time socially necessary for production. But Marx clearly outlined another possibility: *work could be apprehended outside value*, on the side of the commodity produced and circulating in the chain of communication. Here labor no longer represents any value, meaning, or signification. It is a question only of a *body* and a *discharge*...”<sup>29</sup>

Marx: “The use values, coat, linen, etc., i.e., the bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements—matter and labor... We see, then, that labor is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labor, as William Petty put it, labor is its father and the earth its mother... Productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz. the useful character of the labor, is nothing but the expenditure of human labor-power.”<sup>30</sup>

Is there a conception of labor in Marx different from the production of useful ends (canonical definition of labor as value in the framework of political economy and the anthropological definition of labor as human finality)? According to Kristeva, Marx’s vision is radically different, centered on the body, expenditure, play, anti-value, non-utility, non-finality, etc. She would have him have read Bataille before writing, freely—forgetting it just as quickly: if there is something

power, that “generic” double face of universal man is only that of man as he is produced by the system of political economy. And productivity is not there at first as a generic dimension, as the human and social seed of all wealth, that one must extract from the dross of capitalist relations of production (the eternal empiricist illusion), one must reverse all of this, and see that it is the development of abstract and generalized productivity (the developed form of political economy) that makes the *concept of production* itself visible as movement and generic end of man (or again the concept of man as producer).

In other words, the system of political economy produces not only the individual as labor power as the fundamental human potentiality. More profoundly than in the fiction of the individual freely selling his labor power in the market, the system takes root to the extent that the individual identifies with his labor power and his act of “transforming nature towards human ends.” In a word, there is not only the quantitative exploitation of man as productive force by the *system* of capitalist political economy, but the metaphysical overdetermination of man as producer by the *code* of political economy.<sup>13</sup> In the final instance, that is how the system rationalizes its power. *And in this Marxism aides the capitalist deceit by persuading men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power, censuring the much more radical hypothesis that they could be alienated as labor power, as the “inalienable” power of creating value through labor.*

If Marx affiliates himself with the ulterior fate of labor power objectivized in the process of production, as abstract social labor, under the aspect of its exchange value—the existence of this human (energetic, physical, intellectual) capacity of production, this productive potentiality which is that of all men, in every society, “to transform their surroundings toward ends useful for the individual and society,” this *Arbeitsvermögen* is never questioned by Marxist theory. Its critique and history halt strangely before this anthropological postulate. Curious fate for a Marxist concept.

The concept of need in its present operation (the consumption of use value) appears in the same light. It offers the same marks of singularity, of differ-

tiation, of incomparability, in short of the “qualitative” as the concrete capacity of labor. If one can be defined as a “particular type of action producing its own work,” the other can also be defined as a “particular type of tendency (or other psychological motivation, of course, because all of this is only bad psychology) searching for its own satisfaction.” Need also “decomposes matter and form... in infinitely diverse types of consumption.” One is that by which man offers a useful objective end to nature, another is that by which he offers a useful subjective end to products. Needs, labor: double potentiality, double generic quality of man, same anthropological sphere which defines the concept of production as the “fundamental movement of human existence,” as defining a rationality and a society proper to man. Moreover, one finds them logically reunited in a kind of final perspective: “In a superior phase of communist society...when labor will not only be a means of living, but will itself become the primary vital need.”<sup>14</sup>

Marxist theory, radical in its *logical* analysis of capital, sustains itself with an *anthropological* consensus with Western rationalist options, in the definitive form that it assumed in the bourgeois thought of the 18th century. Science, technology, progress, history: an entire civilization understands itself as the producer of its own humanity, designated in terms of totality and happiness. Genesis, development, finality: Marx invented none of this, nor did he change anything essential, nothing of the *idea* of man *producing* himself in his infinite determination and continually surpassing himself toward his own end.

Marx translated this concept into the logic of material production and into the historical dialectic of modes of production. But to differentiate the modes of production is to render unsurpassable of production as determinant instance. It is to generalize the rational mode of economics over the entire stretch of human history, as a generic mode of human becoming. It is to circumscribe the entire history of man in what is undoubtedly only a gigantic model of simulation. It is in a way to turn against the order of capital by using as an instrument of analysis the most subtle ideological phantasm that capitalism itself has elaborated. “Dialectical” reversal? Is it not the system that is leading its own dialectic here, that of its universal reduction? If one advances the hypothesis *that there never has been*

ened with all these finalities, whether the concrete finality of use value or the endless idealist and transcendental finalities. This is the defect of every notion of play, of liberty, of transparency, of disalienation, the defect of the *revolutionary imagination*—insofar as in the ideal type of play, of the free play of human faculties, we are still in the process of repressive desublimation. This sphere of play effectively defines itself as the fulfillment of human rationality, as the dialectical culmination of man’s activity, of his incessant objectification of nature and control of his exchanges with it. It presupposes the full development of productive forces, it remains “mixed up with” the reality principle and the transformation of nature. It can only flourish, Marx says clearly, when based on the reign of necessity. This is to say that, wishing itself beyond labor, but in its *prolongation*, the sphere of play is never only the aesthetic sublimation of its constraints. We are still well within the typically bourgeois problematic of necessity and freedom, the double ideological expression of which has always been, since coming into existence, the intuition of a reality principle (repression and sublimation: principle of labor) and its formal surpassing in an ideal transcendence.

Work and non-work. “Revolutionary” theme. Therein lies the most subtle form of the previously mentioned binary structural opposition. The end of the end of the exploitation by labor is truly this inverse fascination with non-labor, this inverse mirage of free time (obligated time—free time, full time—empty time: another paradigm that seals the hegemony of the order of time, which is always merely that of production). Non-work is still only the repressive desublimation of labor power—the antithesis that acts as an alternative. The sphere of non-work, even if one does not confuse it immediately with that of leisure and its present bureaucratic organization, wherein the desire for death and for mortification and its management by social institutions is as powerful as in the sphere of work. Even if one envisions it in a radical way that *represents it* as other than the model of a “total availability,” of a “liberty” for the individual to “produce” himself as a value, to “express” himself, to “liberate” himself as authentic *content* (conscious or unconscious), in short the ideality of time and of the individual as an empty form, to be filled in the end by his freedom. The finality of value is always there. It no longer inscribes itself, as in the sphere of productive activity, in

covery about the double aspect of labor (his aesthetics of play, of non-work, which is based on the dialectic of the quantitative and the qualitative. This is the perspective, beyond the capitalist mode of production and the qualitative measure of labor, of a definitive qualitative mutation in communist society: the end of alienated labor, the free objectification of man's own powers. "In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production... Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins the development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom which, however, can blossom forth, only with this realm of necessity as its basis."<sup>27</sup> Or again Marcuse, returning to less puritanical (less Hegelian) conceptions, though undoubtedly entirely philosophical (Schiller's aesthetic philosophy): "Play and display, as principles of civilization, imply not the transformation of labor but its complete subordination to the freely evolving potentialities of man and nature. The ideas of play and display now reveal their full distance from the values of productiveness and performance. Play is *unproductive* and *useless* precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure."<sup>28</sup>

This *beyond* of political economy called play, non-work, or non-alienated labor is defined as the reign of finality without end. It is in this sense that it is and remains, in the very Kantian sense of the term, an *aesthetic*. With all the bourgeois ideological connotations that this implies. And it is true that the thought of Marx, if it settled its accounts with bourgeois morality, remains defenseless against bourgeois aesthetics, the ambiguity of which is more subtle, but whose complicity with the general system of political economy is also profound. Once again, it is at the heart of its strategy, in the analytic distinction that it makes between the quantitative and the qualitative, that Marxist thought inherits from the aesthetic and humanist virus of bourgeois thought—the concept of the qualitative is burd-

of its universal reduction? If one advances the hypothesis *that there never has been and that there never will be more than a single mode of production, regulated by the capitalist political economy*, this concept only makes sense in relation to the economic formation which produces it (observe the theory that analyzes this economic formation). Thus the generalization, even "dialectical," of this concept, is but the *ideological* universalization of the system's postulates.

## *Ethic of Labor; Aesthetics of Play*



THIS LOGIC OF MATERIAL production, this dialectic of modes of production always returns, beyond history, to a generic definition of man as a dialectical being, understandable based on the sole process of the objectification of nature. This is heavy with consequences to the extent that, even through the fortunes of his history, man (whose history is also a "product") will be ruled by this clear and definitive reason, by this dialectical schema which acts like implicit philosophy. Marx developed it in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marcuse revives it in his critique of the economic concept of labor: "Labor is an ontological concept of human existence as such." He cites Lorenz von Stein: "Labor is...in every way the actualization of one's infinite determinations through the self-positing of the individual personality [in which the personality itself] makes the content of the external world its own and in this way forces the world to become a part of its own internal world."<sup>15</sup> Marx: "Labor is *man's coming-to-be for himself* within the *externalization* or as *externalized* man...[that is] the *self-creation* and self-objectification [of man]."<sup>16</sup> And even in *Capital*: "So far therefore as labor is a creator of use value, is useful labor, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an external nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and nature, and therefore no life."<sup>17</sup> "Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord stars, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces setting arms and legs, heads

and hands, the natural forces of his body in motion in order to appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants."<sup>18</sup> The dialectical culmination of all this is the concept of nature as "the inorganic body of man": the naturalization of man and the humanization of nature.<sup>19</sup>

On this dialectical basis, Marxist philosophy unfolds in two directions: an ethics of labor, an aesthetics of non-labor. The first across the entirety of bourgeois and socialist ideology—the exaltation of labor as value, as an end in itself, as a categorical imperative. Labor loses its negativity here and stands as an absolute value. But is the "materialist" thesis of the generic productivity of man far from this "idealist" sanctification of labor? It is in any case dangerously vulnerable here. Marcuse: "Insofar as they take the concept of 'needs' and its satisfaction in the world of goods as the starting point, all economic theories fail to recognize the full factual content of labor... The essential factual content of labor is not grounded in the scarcity of goods, nor in a discontinuity between the world of disposable and utilizable goods and human needs, but, on the contrary, in an essential excess of human existence beyond every possible situation in which it finds itself and the world."<sup>20</sup> In the name of which he separates play as a secondary activity: "In the structural sense, within the totality of human existence, labor is necessarily and eternally 'earlier' than play."<sup>21</sup> Labor alone founds the world as objective and man as historical, only labor finds a real dialectic of transcendence and completion. It even justifies metaphysically the burdensome nature of labor. "In the final analysis, the burdensome character of labor expresses nothing other than a negativity rooted in the very essence of human existence: man can achieve his own self only by passing through otherness: by passing through 'externalization' and 'alienation'."<sup>22</sup> I have only cited this long passage to show how the Marxist dialectic can lead to the purest Christian ethic (and inversely of course: today we see a large contamination of these two points of view on the basis of this transcendence of alienation and this intrawordly asceticism of effort and of the overcoming that Weber located as the radical germ of the capitalist spirit). And also because since the beginning this aberrant sanctification of labor found itself to be the secret vice of Marxist political and economic strategy. Walter Benjamin stigmatized it violently: "Nothing has corrupted the German

working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old Protestant ethics of work were resurrected among German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program already bears traces of this confusion, defining labor as the 'source of all wealth and all culture.' Smelling a rat, Marx countered that '... man who possesses no other property than his labor power' must of necessity become 'the slave of other men who have made themselves owners...' However, the confusion spread, soon thereafter Josef Dietzgen proclaimed, 'the savior of modern times is called work. The...improvement...of labor constitutes the wealth which is now able to accomplish what no redeemer has ever been able to do.'<sup>23</sup> Is this a question of a "vulgar" Marxism as Benjamin suggests? No less "vulgar" in the case of the "strange delusion" Paul Lafargue denounced in *The Right to be Lazy*: "A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway."<sup>24</sup> Apparently orthodox Marxism preaches the liberation of productive forces under the auspices of the *negativity* of labor. But is this not a question, faced with the gospel of labor, of an "aristocratic" idealism? The other is positivist, and Marxism wants to be "dialectical," but they have the hypothesis of man's productive vocation in common. If one admits that it raises the purest metaphysics,<sup>25</sup> then the difference between "vulgar" Marxism and the "other" would be that of a mass religion and a philosophical theory—which, as we know, is not much.

Confronted with the *absolute* idealism of labor, dialectical materialism is perhaps only a *dialectical* idealism of productive forces. We will return to this to see if the dialectic of means and ends which is at the heart of the principle of the transformation of nature does not already virtually imply the autonomization of means (the autonomization of science, of technology, and of labor, the autonomization of the dialectic itself as general scheme of development).<sup>26</sup>

In the fine print of Marxist thought and against this labor ethic, the regressive character of which evidently maintains what it represses—Marx's capital dis-