CHAPTER 13

The Form of Labor: Individuation and Socialization

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the concept of labor in Marx’s thought in order to use this concept as a key to interpret the working processes in the contemporary society. The philosophical frame founding this point will be considered, clarifying the relationships connecting Marx to Hegel’s thought, as expressed especially in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. From the critical analysis of the labor form as it stands out within the capitalist social-economic structure, Marx elaborates an original form of socialization in which the self-realization of the individuals and the establishment of the social tie can occur simultaneously. This Marxian thesis is further compared with Hegel’s theory of recognition.

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the complex interactions of the notion of labor in Marx’s thought highlighting, especially in the plot of the *Capital*, the richness of Hegelian references. In this way, a fertile field of connections between the two thinkers shall be established, in order to suggest a system of concepts capable to confront the social processes which still shape our present world.

In the first chapter of the *Capital*, Marx proudly claims to be the first to “point out and to examine critically this twofold nature of the labor contained in commodities” and underlines that “this point is the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns”.\(^1\) This twofold nature of the labor points to the intrinsic antagonism of commodity, to its ‘being two things in one’ (“a complex of two things”);\(^2\) use value and exchange value. As regards the first, there is “a special sort of productive activity, the nature of which is

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2 Marx, *Capital*, 29.
determined by its aim, the useful labor, which is expressed in a multiplicity of qualitatively diverse labors. This kind of labor embodies the form of organic change between man and nature, the mediation which constitutes human life and, considered as such, it is independent from whatever specific reference to a determined society. The kind of labor defined by Marx as ‘abstract’, the labor assumed as a pure expenditure of human energy and measured according to its temporal duration, corresponds to value, the element which permits that different commodities, despite their qualitative difference, are confronted and made the same in the exchange.

With this distinction between concrete and abstract labor, Marx has not the purpose of suggesting the existence of two different kinds of labor, in such a way that there could be two activities to be performed separately. Labor is always a concrete thing, and it is always performed by some individual, but at the same time it shall be considered in its social character, inscribed in the general activity of a historically determined world. The question is to understand the relationship between these two aspects; the distinction between concrete and abstract labor is drawn in order to shed some light on the specific modality of the socialization of labor in a society where the commodity is the Grundform of wealth.

The abstract labor creates value, thus generating the crucial character of the commodity as a product of labor meant to be exchanged. In this way, individual labors are socialized in the form of their opposites: while remaining concrete and useful, they assume, in a society based upon the exchange, the form of equal labor, ‘without quality’. Labor is abstract insofar as it is a modality of the socialization of labor within the generalized production of commodities. To understand its specificity means to reveal a form of society formed by independent private producers, autonomously deciding what and how much to produce, and getting in touch only in the market, through the exchange of their products. Value is, thus, a coagulation, a crystallization of human labors and, as such, it constitutes the connection between themselves, the form of their social relationship. Marx is interested in underlining that, from the independence of the producers, the social connection tends to separate itself and to become autonomous. As a value, the social relation is inherent in things and it loses its immanent bond with the producers: labor as a decisive modality of human relations acquires an unprecedented ‘social existence’, it hides itself within the commodities, which appear ensconced in themselves with value and, thus, of a social quality.

3 Marx, Capital, 29.