It was Geert Reuten’s essay ‘The Difficult Labour of a Theory of Social Value’ that got me to rethink whether, for Marx, value-producing labour was simply ‘abstract labour’. Reuten pointed out that, as any social sort of labour can be regarded in the abstract (‘physiologically’), an ‘abstract labour-embodied’ theory of value would fail to be a ‘truly social’ theory of value. I concluded that ‘abstract labour’ is a general, not a determinate, category. It must be distinguished from the determinate category of ‘practically abstract’ labour, that is, labour that is actually socially validated as abstract. Value-producing labour, as Marx conceives of it, is ‘practically abstract’ labour, so Marx’s theory of value is ‘truly social’. In fact, it is exclusively about the specific social form and purpose of labour in societies where the capitalist mode of production dominates. In my article ‘Marx’s “Truly Social” Labour Theory of Value: Part I’, I argued for these ideas and criticised Reuten for insisting that Marx could be interpreted as offering an asocial,

---

1 Reuten 1993.
2 Reuten himself rejects an asocial, ‘abstract labour-embodied’ theory of value.
3 On general and determinate abstractions, see Chapter Ten of Murray 1988.
4 Murray 2000a.
‘abstract labour-embodied’ theory of value. Now I have Geert Reuten to thank for a thoughtful and thought-provoking reply to that article.

In responding, I will address three main issues: (i) historical materialism and systematic dialectics, (ii) Marx’s theory of value, and (iii) why Marx’s theory of value has long been interpreted as an asocial, Ricardian theory of value, when it is not. Before turning to these topics, I want to say something about Reuten’s repeated admonition that we should be prepared to reconstruct Marx. I agree, even if I tend to find less call for this than Reuten does, but a general admonition, such as this, is no help in determining where, specifically, Marx needs to be reconstructed. If I find that, in *Capital*, Marx presents us with a ‘truly social’ labour theory of value, this does not prove that I am treating him with kid gloves. Likewise, Reuten’s general observation that it is extremely difficult to make a clean break with previous conceptions when one introduces a revolutionary new scientific conception does not give a warrant to any specific conclusions regarding where Marx’s efforts to break with the old ideas may have failed. Generalities will not make Reuten’s case. So let us examine the particular points he makes.

(i) Historical materialism and systematic dialectics

Reuten notes that I rarely refer to historical materialism. In one sense, that is true. Historical materialism in general does not have much to say. And what it has to say may sound banal, despite its exceptional importance. In my article, I expressed the general, phenomenological truth of historical materialism as follows: ‘human beings are needy, self-conscious, symbolising, social, sexually reproducing animals who are in (and of) non-human nature, which they purposively transform according to their perceived wants’. The task of a historical-materialist investigator is to explore the specific social ways that human beings reproduce themselves and purposively transform nature to meet their wants. I do not believe that there is a great deal to be said in general about how such an investigation is to be carried out. Reuten seems to agree; apart

---

5 Murray 2000a, p. 39. Reuten comments that ‘this “general phenomenology” is perplexingly thin’ (Reuten 2000, p. 148). In my article, I called it ‘spare’ (Murray 2000a, p. 30) but went on to observe that, rather than being ‘perplexing’, this thinness holds space open for historically diverse ways of living.

6 For a contrasting view see Ollman 1993.