PRODUCTIVE AND UNPRODUCTIVE WORK: A CONSTANT CHALLENGE

Google images

*"The difference between **productive and unproductive** labor is essential to accumulation, because only exchange for productive labor allows surplus value to be transformed back into capital."*
K. Marx, An Unpublished Chapter of Capital, p.240, 10/18, Paris, 1971.

The differentiation between productive and unproductive labor is an essential political question, because it allows us to better perceive the real repercussions of the workers' struggle and to elaborate the strategy it should promote. These concepts, derived from classical economics (A. Smith), were widely used and discussed by Marx throughout his theoretical development, and are found mainly in the essential works "Capital", "Theories of surplus value", "Grundrisse" and "An unpublished chapter of Capital". Even today, they correspond to important political questions, and their proper and operational use cannot be reduced to a "Marxological" point of discussion. It is a matter of understanding and assessing the impact of independent workers' action against capital or, more basically, "where it hurts most." The lack of interest in this strategic question is mainly the work of trade unionism and its henchmen, whose specific function is to blunt the workers' struggle and turn it into one more element of the necessary upheaval in the way capital organizes its "different factors of production".

For the communist critique, on the contrary, it is a matter of objectifying as precisely as possible the workers' practices that effectively impede the process of valorization (value that values itself) inherent to the existence of the C.M.P. The attack on productive labor, motor of this valorization, is thus a priority in the perspective of the rejection of labor and the abolition of wage labor. It is also a question of criticizing the vulgar interpretations which reduce productive labor to the contractual status of "worker" and unproductive labor to that of "employee", or which persist in the same hackneyed line, in considering that the only productive sector is that linked to the production of commodities (the secondary sector, i.e. manufacturing industry).

Worse still, some are content to use obsolete categories such as "goods" (capital goods, final consumption, etc.) and "services". Such conceptual deteriorations reinforce the indifference of those who consider that this is a "superfluous distinction", since everything that exists under capital can only be redundant to its advantage. In this way, no concrete situation can be materially analyzed, and no strategy can be enunciated. It is therefore essential to take up again some elements of Marx's definition.

Attempting to define

As is often the case, Marx's first approach was to criticize the main concepts that preceded him. First, those of the physiocrats (Quesnay), who believed that only work on the land could be considered productive (agriculture as the only source of wealth). But it was with his critique of Adam Smith's classical view that Marx began to develop his own decisive view of productive labor. The first essential point for him is that productive labor is first and foremost labor that generates surplus value: "*Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus-value. The labourer produces, not for himself, but for capital. It no longer suffices, therefore, that he should simply produce. He must produce surplus-value. That labourer alone is productive, who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital."* K. Marx, Capital Volume One[1]. This definition is found almost identical in the unpublished sixth chapter of Capital.

*"Since the immediate aim and specific product of capitalist production is surplus-value, only labor or the supplier of labor-power which **directly produces surplus-value** is productive. The only productive labor is, therefore, that which is directly consumed in the process of production with a view to the valorization of capital (...) The worker who performs productive labor is productive, productive labor being that which directly generates surplus value, i.e., that which valorizes capital."* K. Marx, An Unpublished Chapter of Capital[2]

The adverb "**directly**" acquires its full meaning here, because it makes it clear that unproductive labor, such as that which takes place in circulation or in unproductive consumption, is obviously indispensable to the overall process of capitalist production, but it is neither the place nor the specific moment of the production of surplus value. In the same way, the realization of surplus value, made possible by solvent consumption, is not its production made possible only by the productive consumption of labor power. It is not a question of knowing in an absolute sense which labor or worker is productive and which unproductive, but of considering this question in relation to the Capitalist Mode of Production and in relation not to the production of use value (the process of labor) but to the creation of new value, that is, in relation to the process of valorization. Every productive worker is subject to wage slavery, but not every wage worker necessarily performs productive labor. This is exactly what Marx says in the unpublished chapter, "every productive worker is a wage worker, but it does not follow that every wage worker is a productive worker."

*"One should not be taken in by the wage-labour form. One is not a productive worker (for capital) simply by earning a wage. In fact, a worker is productive if: "This labour **objectifies** itself immediately during the production process as a **fluid quantum of value."** (VI°, p.227). **It permits the valorization process, and thus the cycle M - C - M', to take place."*** J. Camatte: Capital and community, p.114-115, Spartacus, Paris, 1978.

Therefore, the product of the worker's **living** labor must be sold, regardless of its concrete form. This is what differentiates productive labor, for example, from that rendered by a servant and intended for the personal consumption of his master and **not for sale**. It is also important to note that with the phase of real subsumption of labor under capital, and the

[1]On the website: https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1867/Capital-I/kmcapI-16.htm
[2]On the web site: https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/186 7/Capital-inedit/kmcapI-6-2H.htm

substantial transformations that this period entails, it becomes increasingly important to bear in mind that labor loses its individual character to become more and more a **collective worker**. It is possible, therefore, in this associated labor, that certain tasks are productive at certain times, and that other tasks are unproductive. What matters then is the overall productive consumption of socialized labor power which, generating new value, is exchanged for capital.

"With the development of the real subjection of labor to capital, or of the specifically capitalist mode of production, the real agent of the total labor process is no longer the individual worker, but an increasingly socially combined labor power. Under these conditions, the multiple labor forces that cooperate and form the total productive machine participate in the most diverse ways in the immediate process of the creation of commodities or, better still, of products: some work intellectually, others manually, some as managers, engineers, technicians or supervisors, others as manual laborers or even simple auxiliaries. An increasing number of functions of the labor force acquire the immediate character of productive labor, those who perform them being productive workers directly exploited by capital and subjected to its process of production and valorization. If we consider the collective worker who forms the workshop, his combined activity is expressed materially and directly in a global product, that is to say, in a total mass of commodities. From this point on, it is perfectly irrelevant that the function of the individual worker - a simple link in the collective worker - consists more or less of simple manual labor. The activity of this aggregate labor-power is directly consumed productively by capital in the process of capital's self-valorization: it therefore immediately produces surplus value, or better still, as we shall see, it is directly transformed into capital." K. Marx: An unpublished chapter of Capital[3]

The concept of the collective worker is a clear expression of the real subsumption of labor under capital, characterized by the extortion of relative surplus value and made possible by the rise of mechanization, which increases the productivity of labor.

"By exacerbating the manufacturing and social division of labor, capital, subjugating the intellectual forces of production, develops the productive and social force of labor, the different functions of this force being at the same time separated and subsumed in the collective capitalist productive worker. Finally, it is evident that any increase in the productivity of labor is accompanied by the development of this collective worker and a restructuring of capitalist productive labor." H. Nadel : Marx et le salariat, p.181-182, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1983.

In addition to his definition of productive labor, Marx explained that unproductive labor is unproductive because it is outside the sphere of production but is nevertheless necessary for capital.

"Whenever labor is purchased, not in order to substitute it as a living factor for the value of variable capital and incorporate it into the process of capitalist production, but in order to consume it as use-value, as a service, labor is not productive labor and the wage-worker is not a productive worker. His labor is then consumed unproductively for its use value, and not productively, as a source of surplus value." K. Marx: Œuvres, La Pléiade t.2 p.389, Gallimard, Paris, 1972. Or again*: " Thereby also what is unproductive labour is absolutely defined. It is labour which is not exchanged against capital, but directly against revenue, that is, against wages or profit (...)." K.* Marx: Theories of surplus value, TI, p.167, éditions sociales, Paris, 1974.

In this fundamental differentiation lies the key to the real capacity of the working class to hinder the process of value production and thus **capitalist exploitation**. Hence also that

[3]On the website: https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1867/Capital-inedit/kmcapI-6-2H.htm

leadership structures such as the unions systematically favor the simulacra of struggle, mainly in the unproductive sphere, in order to organize the ritualized spectacle of the false protest while hindering as little as possible the production of value.

As I. Roubine, in 1928, "*Marx throws out as useless the question of what kind of labor is productive in general, in all historical epochs, independently of tire given social relations. Every system of production relations, every economic order, has its concept of productive labor. Marx confined his analysis to the question of which labor is productive from the standpoint of capital, or in the capitalist system of economy. He answers this question as follows: "Productive labor is therefore—in the system of capitalist production—labor which produces surplus-value for its employer, or which transforms the objective conditions of labor into capital and their owner into a capitalist; that is to say, labor which produces its own product as capital" (Ibid., p. 384). "Only labor which is directly transformed into capital is productive; that is, only labor which makes variable capital a variable magnitude " (Ibid., p. 381). In other words, productive labor is "labor which is directly exchanged with capital" (Ibid., p. 153), i.e., labor which the capitalist buys as his variable capital for the purpose of using that labor to create exchange values and to create surplus value. Unproductive labor is that labor "which is not exchanged with capital, but directly with revenue, that is, with wages or profit (including of course the various categories of those who share as co-partners in the capitalist's profit, such as interest and rent)" (ibid., p. 167).*" Isaak Mich Rubin: Essays on Marx's Theory of Value.[4]

Logistics and freight transport

An operational application of these Marxist definitions makes it possible to envisage, contrary to vulgar logic, that logistics and freight transport are, for example, highly productive capitalist sectors whose workers are therefore mostly productive workers.

"In other industrial works, the aim of the work is not to modify the form of the object, ***but only to modify its spatial determination****."* K. Marx : Théories sur la plus-value, TI, p.185, éditions sociales, Paris, 1974.

It is also evident, in this period of accelerated progress towards generalized war, that the hindering and paralyzing of the transport of goods and trade routes are increasingly used as military strategies to penalize competing powers and tend towards "low intensity" conflicts. Here, too, the productive and strategic nature of these sectors is openly revealed. In short, "*logistics can be presented as the process by which a company sets in motion various levers to ensure the transit, storage, packaging and delivery of goods to the final recipient."*[5] In a distorted view, these would be unproductive sectors because the goods have already been produced; but this is not the case, because each action of packaging, flow management, storage, movement, etc. requires the productive consumption of labor power and therefore generates surplus value. These are therefore eminently productive sectors. Moreover, it involves transporting goods for the purpose of selling them. This distinguishes it from passenger transport, which is considered an unproductive "service", since passengers are not sold at a higher price on arrival. What the transport industry sells is transport itself, which we pay for and consume. *"(...) The transport of goods from the place of production to the place of consumption is a productive act, insofar as it requires human labor time."* A. Bordiga, Éléments de l'économie marxiste, p.31, éditions Programme, Lyon, 1996.

[4]On the web site : https://www.marxists.org/francais/roubine/ Chapter2-19.html
[5]Transport in logistics: issues and specificities of the sector, on the website: https://www.supplychaininfo.eu/dossier-logistique /qu-est-ce-logistique-transport/

Marx's thesis is unequivocal: "services" can be productive of surplus value, just as labor that does not produce surplus value can be transformed into material objects.

"What the transport industry sells is the transfer itself, not the train, nor the wagon, nor the mechanic's labor power. The theory of capitalist production thus goes beyond the mere production of material objects." J. Bidet: Que faire du Capital, Klincksieck, p.100, Paris, 1985.

A company as well known internationally as Amazon could thus be considered the archetype of the new model of productive enterprise in the transport and management of goods that it itself produces (Kindle) or that it buys to repackage, transport and distribute. Its strength lies in the fact that it simultaneously develops the concentration and centralization of capital, relative rather than absolute phenomena characteristic of large multinational companies. Working conditions at Amazon also reflect the precarious, mobile and intense nature of modern exploitation, thanks to the use of automation and artificial intelligence to increase labor productivity.

For example, one worker explains, "*Between 2:10 p.m. and 9:20 p.m. that day, I will travel 15 km. A single break of 35 minutes, 25 of them paid. It's a pace that some find exhausting, like the temp worker I met on my route: "We're not all young anymore, we're not 20 years old." According to Amazon, eight out of ten employees are satisfied with their working conditions. However, a January 2021 report commissioned by Amazon's employee representatives criticized the pace of work and "an absenteeism rate due to accidents and occupational illnesses that has been rising for two years." "A particularly high rate at Amazon Lauwin-Planque which, according to the report, exceeds the warning threshold of 8%".*[6]

In addition, several findings point to "*a sharp increase in workplace accidents, "alarming" **absenteeism** and high staff turnover: a report examines social practices in Amazon France warehouses, while employees cite illegal practices and a culture of "pressure". The document - prepared by independent consultancy Progexa for Amazon's central works council and presented in October - contains a startling figure: **the number of lost-time accidents more than doubled in 2022,** to 1,132 incidents compared to 482 the previous year. The study covers the 8 warehouses and the head office."* [7]

These various testimonies, which can be declined ad infinitum, attest to the precariousness of wage labor in relation to the fall in the value of labor power and the increase in its productivity (relative surplus value). There is a clear link between intensive forms of accumulation and the real subsumption of labor under capital. This link produces both precarization and supernumeraries, because the capitalist mode of production must be constantly revolutionized in order to make productive labor **social and abstract**, i.e., general and independent of the specific quality of any given labor force. It is this abstraction (abstract social labor) that permits the self-valorization of capital.

"Here, the mobility of capital implies and produces the mobility of labor power through increased productivity, the mastery of dead labor, and the simplification and fragmentation of tasks. The possibility of this simplification in turn conditions and reinforces the centralization of capital in its phase of intensive accumulation." H. Nadel, Marx et le salariat, p.205, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1983.

[8]Capital: Sick leave, turnover, deteriorating working conditions: this damning report on Amazon, On the K. Marx website: Theories on surplus value**:** https://www.capital.fr/entreprises-marches/arrets-maladie-turn-over-degradation-des-conditi ons-de-travail-ce-rapport-qui-accable-amazon-1482245

From the point of view of the class struggle, these transformations antithetically underline the weakness of modern and **technocratic** capitalism, because the more sophisticated its machinery (automation, robotics, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, etc.), the more the weapon of sabotage regains all its historical power.

"Sabotage" is not as new as it seems: workers have always practiced it individually, albeit without method. By instinct, they have always slowed down production when the boss has increased his demands; without realizing it, they have applied the formula: BAD PAY, BAD WORK." E. Pouget, Le sabotage.[8]

Towards the abolition of wage labor through the rejection of work

It is the social relation of wage labor that implies the category of productive labor as the **motor of** the valorization process. Unproductive labor, mainly in circulation, constitutes a relative obstacle to this valorization; it is the "false cost" of production of the system as a whole. The strategic importance of productive labor is vital to elaborate the most effective and radical workers' strategy in their confrontation with the CPM. For this reason, the road to the abolition of wage labor is that of permanent reinforcement within the struggles of the rejection of labor.[9] especially productive.

"The obligation to produce alienates the passion to create. Productive work becomes part of the process of maintaining order. Work time decreases as the empire of conditioning grows." A. Chassagne & G. Montracher, La fin du travail, p.13, Stock, Paris, 1978.

Any class movement must be clear and as forceful as possible, because duration is often the weapon of the bosses and their unionist allies, to wear down the struggle and demoralize the workers. That is why it is so important to choose the right terrain based on a precise and practical analysis. For example, if the company has excess production and huge stocks of goods, these factors must be considered when calling a strike so that it does not prove ineffective or, worse, be used by the boss to sell off his stocks at the expense of the striking workers. This was the situation in Belgium in 1997, during the Renault-Vilvorde conflict, where the workers, subject to the unions, almost never succeeded in using (or destroying) stocks as a weapon in the struggle. Here again, sabotage could have been a constituent element of a truly independent workers' strategy. Sabotage and refusal to work, however diffuse, are the first -even unconscious- expressions of the struggle against exploitation.

Strictly speaking, capitalist exploitation singularly concerns productive labor, because it is defined by the extortion of surplus value, while unproductive labor corresponds to the process of circulation and optimization of profits. However, it is the capitalist process as a whole -the process of labor and valorization, of production and circulation- that needs to be hindered and destroyed because, as Marx points out, "*production, distribution, exchange and consumption constitute diverse moments of a totality, "differences within a unity" between which reciprocal action is exerted."* B. Chavance, Marx et le capitalisme, la dialectique d'un système, Nathan, p.13, Paris, 1996.

[8]On the website : https://www.cnt-f.org/cooperatives/emile-pouget-le-sabotage.html
[9]On this important question we refer the reader to our text: " Lutter pour les salaires ou contre le salariat. " on our magazine Matériaux Critiques N°9 as well as on our web site: https://materiauxcritiques.wix site.com/monsite/textes

The process of exploitation is specific to capitalism and cannot be confused or diluted in other types of oppression. Any generalization of the historical concept of exploitation to other forms of slavery is abusive and leads to serious political deviations. Such is the case of the erroneous use that some feminists (Delphy) make of this concept to try to define domestic and free labor within the family as identical to wage labor.

"In any case, domestic work can in no way be considered productive in the sense of K. Marx: this work is not remunerated by capital - for the good reason that it is not remunerated at all." C. Darmangeat [10]: Le profit déchiffré, travail productif et improductif, p.145, la ville brûle, Paris, 2016.

The same can be said of national or religious oppression, which in no case can be equated with exploitation. These can also be combined with other "oppressions" of a sexual or "racial" type; but exploitation in the strict sense is only situated in the sphere of production and thus specifically concerns productive (collective) wage labor. Thus, for Marx, the rate of exploitation corresponds to the rate of surplus-value, the latter being the relation between surplus-value and variable capital: PL/V. The remuneration of unproductive labor, on the contrary, is essentially a deduction ("false costs") from profits. This is also the reason why, in Capital, Marx analyzes almost exclusively the wage system of the productive worker. The dictatorship of the proletariat for the abolition of wage labor implies, above all, the drastic reduction of the rate of exploitation through immediate measures aimed at imperatively reducing the labor time of the worker by replacing it with the social measure of liberated time. A society emancipated from wage slavery will ipso facto abolish the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, thanks to a planned production that responds to social needs and progressively abolishes labor itself. The rejection of labor is thus an obligatory element of living Marxism. The dictatorship of the proletariat must propose it **immediately** in the geographical place where it imposes itself, with a view to the internationalization of the revolution, and not wait for this extension to begin to do so. The latter position leads irremediably to immediate counter-revolution from within the revolution itself.

"The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification." Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p. 60, éditions sociales, Paris, 1972.

"There is no point in being alive if you have to work." André Breton, Nadja (1928).

Fj, Ms & Mm.

Translated by IsaCR.

[10]C. Darmangeat specifies in his work: *"Domestic work has, however, a difference with the work **of** domesticity: it is not remunerated by a salary, but only in nature, in the form of usage values bought with the salary of the husband."* p.145. Unfortunately, Darmangeat does not draw the logical conclusion concerning the strict use of the concept of capitalist exploitation and returns to an abusive generalization of the term exploitation to characterize the oppression of women in the classic framework of the bourgeois family.

Bibliography

Works

-J. Bidet, Que faire du Capital, Klincksieck, Paris, 1985.
-A. Bordiga, Éléments de l'économie marxiste, éditions Programme, Lyon, 1996.
-J. Camatte, Capital et Gemeinwesen, Spartacus, Paris, 1978.
-A. Chassagne & G. Montrache, La fin du travail, Stock, Paris, 1978.
-B. Chavance, Marx et le capitalisme, Nathan, Paris, 1996.
-C. Darmangeat, Le profit déchiffré, la ville brûle, Paris, 2016.
-K. Marx, Œuvres, La Pléiade t.2, Gallimard, Paris, 1972.
-K. Marx, Théorie sur la plus-value, TI, éditions sociales, Paris, 1974.
-K. Marx, Un chapitre inédit du Capital, 10/18, Paris, 1971.
-K. Marx, Manuscrits de 1844, éditions sociales, Paris, 1972.
-H. Nadel, Marx et le salariat, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1983.

Articles, brochures and reviews:

-«Travail productif et improductif : de quoi parle-t-on ? » Robin Goodfellow, 2008 https://www.robingoodfellow.info/
-Capital : Arrêts maladie, turn-over, dégradation des conditions de travail : ce rapport qui accable Amazon, on the website: https://www.capital.fr/entreprises-marches/arrets-maladie-turn-over-degrada tion-des-conditions-de-travail-ce-rapport-qui-accable-amazon-1482245
-E. Pouget, Le sabotage, on the website: https://www.cnt-f.org/cooperatives/emile-pouget-le-sabotage.html
-France Info : Rythme effréné, surveillance des salariés, pression... On s'est fait embaucher dans un entrepôt d'Amazon à la veille de Noël, 17.12.2021, on the website : https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/emploi/carriere/vie-professionnelle/ sante-au-travail/rythme-effrene-surveillance-des-salaries-on-s-est-fait-embaucher-chez-amaz on 4883859.html
-I. Roubine, Essais sur la théorie de la valeur de Marx, sur : https://www.marxists.org/francais/roubine/Chapitre2-19.h tml-« Lutter pour les salaires ou contre le salariat. » : Matériaux Critiques N°9 on the website: https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/mon site/textes
-K. Marx, Le capital, on the website: https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1867/Capital-I/kmcapI-16.htm
-« La périodisation non décadentiste du M.P.C. » : Matériaux Critiques N°7 on the website: https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes