

We have decided to undertake the task of translation the whole of **CUADERNOS DE NEGACIÓN** 11th issue (May 2018), entitled "Contra la valorización de la vida" (tr. *Against the valorization of life*). Here we present the first part of our translation. What follows is their work. All footnotes are from CUADERNOS unless otherwise noted.

We have nothing to sell you and we are not trying to seduce our fellow proletarians. We are not a groupuscule seeking to compete over prestige or influence with the rest of the other groupuscules and parties which claim to represent the exploited and which seek to govern them. We are proletarians that struggle against Capital and the State with the means available to us, nothing more and nothing less.

If you feel that these materials should be disseminated then go ahead and reproduce them! Print them! Copy them! Discuss them! They were created to be circulated wherever they prove most propitious.

For obvious economic reasons we cannot make as large a print-run of this publication as we would like, nor are we able to send it to many places around the world, and because of this we encourage the distribution of these CUADERNOS, copying them and disseminating them as far as possible.

We deeply appreciate anyone who wishes to collaborate with us in the dissemination of the issues of CUADERNOS DE NEGACIÓN and we invite them to contact us.

Forward comrades!

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A NOTE ON THE CITATIONS

It is not our task to announce the news nor guard some ancient treasure, nonetheless, many who decide to read what follows may find small or grand revelations, as well as old statements. Those of us at CUADERNOS like to share some well-known paragraphs from different publications, books, texts and papers that we use to prepare each issue. When we reproduce these quotes we name the authors simply to make visible the steps we have taken and offer an invitation to go deeper. Those who read attentively will be able to distinguish the proximity of one or other author. The vast majority are related, but this does not imply an uncritical claim of them or of the organizations which they come from, or

which they formed a part of. And whomever reads with the intention of contemplation, as well as the desire to transform reality, will understand that all of this is about much more than just books, pamphlets, authors or words.

The texts here cited (as well as others) can be found at:
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PRESENTATION

“There is no other way to end a problem than to finish off the enemy. And this is what I wanted to get to, so as to make you understand on what basis this society is founded on.”
(Comte de Lautréamont, *The Songs of Maldoror*)

In the broad and self-identified *revolutionary, combative, subversive or however-it-calls-itself* milieu, there exists a propensity to divulge slogans that would look best on a poster, as part of their publicity. Part of following the capitalist logic of quantity over quality involves spreading public announcements instead of spreading reflection, inquiry and collective sharing. In this way, what is publicized is militancy as commodity, to be contemplated and admired without any participation by the spectators; or in the “least of worst” cases publicity is done “in an inclusive” way so as to gain supports with the promise of an immediate activism or militancy.

The understanding of matters such as *the critique of value* does not offer the consumer of political slogans any quick solution to their woes, such as are promised (and unsolved!) by parties, advertisers or shepherds of the nearest temple. To understand capitalist domination it is important to engage with these critiques as they form a important part of our struggle. Whomever comes to the critique of the economy with a consumer’s attitude and exclaims, “you have five minutes to convince me or I will choose another option!”, may you lose no more time and head directly to another option. A certain dedication and exertion are part of radical critique and they form a part of the practical opposition to the logic of Capital and its false critics.

Truly this consumer mentality, based in dominant immediatism, is a product of commodity logic. A commodity which sets out to win requires an immediate effect. Of course this immediate effect is totally counterfeit. In organic life solutions to questions (‘problems’) are part of a process, a movement, and not a mathematical solution. It is evident that this process, this movement, contains certain qualitative jumps which give rise to a “solution” to

a question, but whomever wants to invent shortcuts to quickly reach this qualitative jump forgets that is along the way that the quantitative transforms into the qualitative.

Further, although it may appear improbable or forced, there are actions that urgently require a critique of value. So that we do not use up our forces which in various ways sustain capitalism, such as falling into the trap of self-management or falling into a purer and harder reformism. And we need this critique so that we may **stop sharing the same horizon with the capitalists: the management of this society.** This is why we are interested in inquiring about the bases of the capitalist mode of production...so then, does this still seem unimportant?

Despite the fact that this topic is to be found within the work of Karl Marx, due to sloganeering and the managerial perspective of Marxism and of Social-Democracy, this topic has been censured, deliberately put aside, or considered as a generally secondary philosophical aspect of the revolutionary arsenal and particularly secondary aspect of Marx's work. As far as the anarchist movement, this topic has been mostly maligned for being "Marxist" or simply its existence remains unknown.

"Marx sketched out the fundamental elements of a critique of the basic categories of capitalist society: value, money, the commodity, abstract labor, commodity-fetishism. This critique of the nucleus of modernity is today more relevant than in the time of Marx because during his time this nucleus only existed in an embryonic state. To highlight this aspect of Marxian critique – the "critique of value" – it is not necessary to force these texts through convoluted interpretations: one need only read them closely, something which no one has done in a century." (Anselm Jappe, *The Adventures of the Commodity*).

Fortunately there have been some who (including within Marxism itself), starting from a personal and solitary effort, or also among numerous proletarian groups, that have rightly recognized the centrality of the critique of value within our emancipatory perspective. Throughout this issue, we will explain various phrases which we have given us sustenance. A few notable examples include the efforts of Isaak Illich Rubin during the hostile social context of the early years of the Soviet Union and the efforts of the currents of Italian and Dutch-German communists during the 1920s. There is also Jacques Camatte with his publication *Invariance* in France during the 1960s/1970s and Fredy Perlman in the United States, as part of a whole generation which started to have access to the once unpublished works of Karl Marx. Later would come other anti-capitalist writers and groups whom we have also sustained us and which we here bring together.

Thus, what we present here is no novelty. Even Aristotle (384 BCE – 322 BCE), in *Politics*, far from any critical intention, approaches the topic: “Since any good can serve two uses... One use which is proper to the thing as such, and an inverse which is not: thus, a sandal can serve as footwear, but it could also serve as an object of exchange. In both cases it is a question of the use-values of the sandal, since whomever exchanges the sandal for something they lack, food for example, still makes use of the sandal. But that is not its natural use. Since it is not made to be exchanged, the same can be said of other goods.”

It is essential to note that value is not a thing, it is not the price of an individual commodity, it is a social form. As we developed in *The myth of value as natural quality* in Ed. 9 of this publication, **objects do not naturally possess a quality known as value. Rather, this is a consequence of the mode in which a society organizes its production. Value and the commodity, just like money and work, are not neutral and transhistorical facts, nor are they natural or eternal. Rather, these are basic categories under capitalism.**

Lamentably, at these heights it is not only within bourgeois reasoning which sees value as a natural fact, this is also so within arguments which claim to be revolutionary, and others even claim the proletariat as “those who create all value in society which some no-good bourgeois later appropriates.”

Thus the critique of “indecent” profits endorses the notion that there are profits supposedly decent; a critique which seeks to understand the ever-greater brutality of capitalism as a consequence of the malice of the exploiter, without realizing that the same exploiter is required to act as such by Capital, with its constant need for growth. **The foundation of capitalist society is the dictatorship of value in process and the utility of the objects produced is just a means; what we call use-value serves only as a support for exchange-value, of value valorizing itself.**

When in the previous issues of CUADERNOS DE NEGACIÓN we referred to our need to re-appropriate revolutionary positions, we did not simply refer to the recuperation of something finished which had been censured and forgotten. We refer to the need to recuperate theoretical-practical experiences of revolutionaries from around the world and to continue to deepen them, critique them and grasp them in our current moment.

In addition, it is important to highlight that both ours and others’ international initiatives, which begin to re-focus on the critique of value, do not arrive at the same goal by way of just reading and theoretical discussion. We approach the efforts of the past by way of the need to struggle against the very substratum of capitalist society. Our task is not then an

archeology of lost writings, it is the living and class-based effort of our past, present and future for social revolution.

After our last two offerings of CUADERNOS, and continuing with this block of issues, **we continue to enter in the critique of economy, that as we always note is a critique of society as a whole.** We call it a critique of economy because part of using economic categories is to show their real social content. It is not economist, rather it is its opposite; it is a critique to roundly opposes the economy and which breaks with every disciplinary barrier.

“There is no struggle for communism without a minimum of passion, nor is there a struggle for communism without an identification of the enemy. To kill, obviously, is not a synonym for comunizer: a communist revolution subverts more than it kills off. (...) Nonetheless, to reject violence and any use of arms is to renounce the revolution (...)

It is true that our “target” is a social system, and not bosses, upper-management, experts or the police officers they employ. A strength of Social-Democracy, and of Stalinism, has been to liken capitalism with the bourgeoisie, the rich, the *big guys*. **In the same way that within commodity-fetishism the social relation is presented as a thing, when it comes to a person, it is incarnated by a big-bellied bourgeois with a cigar in the mouths, like in the old caricatures from a century ago. (...) Maintaining anger against these characters helps to deflect criticism towards a deadend: attacking the bourgeoisie as individuals, rather than attacking them in their function.**

But if our target is Capital, its structural power, its force of inertia and not the capitalist; social relations take no less a human form. To only see within a factory boss a factory boss is an optical illusion. To not confront them under the pretext that they are just a cog in the machine which surpasses them, really brings us back to a view of society as cohesive whole (*un tout*) which then becomes impossible to figure out which end to grasp at this totality. **To depersonalize history is to renounce to act upon it. The absence of hate for those who direct us leads us to a fate worse than resignation, at best reform.** Those who do not know or feel a rejection for those who exploit us, and despise them, will never change anything.” (Troploin, *Sortie d’usine*).

THE COMMODITY & VALUE

As we have developed in previous issues of CUADERNOS, at the nucleus of capitalist society we find the commodity. This is the particular form which the products of human activity take in our current moment. Its development is neither spontaneous or sudden. Its existence is the result of a process of progressive submission of human needs to fetishist and objectifying practices, which gradually undermine the close link between need and activity. It is here that life becomes fragmented and arrives at a situation where the overwhelming majority of what is produced is expressly made with the market and processes of exchange in mind. As commodities are produced to be exchanged, their use-value is not of much interest, rather they exist in relation to the good which will be obtained by its counterpart (exchange value). What is a use-value to one person, is nothing but an exchange-value for someone else, and vice versa. At a glance, a loaf of bread is just a loaf of bread; it can be found in the hands of a baker, in an ad or on the table of a diner. Likewise, when a loaf of bread passes from the hands of the baker to the consumer who purchased it, the loaf of bread's existence does not change. Nonetheless (and simplifying things here a bit), for the consumer of the loaf of bread the loaf is a use-value and for the vendor it is the basis for an economic relation. A loaf may satisfy hunger, or the desire to eat someone, but this is something which does not interest the producer as their completing their task. In this way, social relations under capitalism are inverted: what we have are social relations between commodified things made for human beings. **It is the inversion between subject and object which gives life to the thing as a subject of society and leaves the role of object to the human.** Value is the material expression of capitalist social relations.

The adventures of the commodity

Here is an excerpt from Anselm Jappe's *Adventures of the Commodity*. Translated by Diego Luis Sanromán, *Pepitas de calabaza*, 2016¹. The placement of titles and bold text is our own.



A commodity is not identical to a "good" or to an "object of exchange." It is the particular form which some "goods" more or less take in certain human societies. **The commodity is merely an object that not only possesses a use-value, but also an exchange-value.** Every object which satisfies any human need contains a use-value which, nonetheless, is

¹Translator's note: here we will translate the text from Spanish, which was originally in German since no English translation of the text exists.

also an economic category.² But as long as an object can be exchanged for pre-determined quantities for other objects, then the object still possesses an exchange value. **If you exchange a shirt for 30 kilos of potatoes, we are treating these commodities as having different quantities of something identical, which they have in common.** When it comes to use-values, commodities are totally incommensurable. A shirt and potato have nothing in common. The relations in which commodities are exchanged (and consequently also their exchange-value) are subject to continuous variations. But at any given moment the some product can be exchanged for different exchange values which are equal to each other: a shirt can be exchanged whether for a gram of gold; 10 kilos wheat; a pair of shoes; etc. **It is necessary then that these different exchange-values have something in common at their core: their "value."**

This shared substance of commodities can be nothing more than the labor which created them: this is the only identical thing which otherwise incommensurable

²Note from CUADERNOS: Use-value has frequently been displaced from the economy, likewise in some cases its importance to the critique of the economy has been misunderstood, a topic which we have been trying to engage with throughout past issues of CUADERNOS. To read further on this topic see *El fetichismo de la mercancía* in CUADERNOS N°9.

Likewise, although the author here is referring to commodities as goods or objects, it's important for us to present a salvo that we will deepen in the section *Capitalist Exploitation: Wage, Labor and Labor-Power*. As we will see, use-value will acquire decisive importance under capitalism when it concerns to the commodity of labor-power. Economists, from antiquity to the present, have associated the use-value of commodities with mere private consumption, something which occurs at the margins of the economy and which holds no importance in the economy. As soon as a commodity is used up, is consumed, its role ends in the economic process. Effectively, if I buy a book, it matters little to the process of capitalist production whether I read it, use it to decorate a room, use it as a throwing weapon, if its a useless heavy tome, or if its just the fetish of some collector. That book has already fulfilled its social function; has rendered money to its seller, which then quickly makes off to the coffers of accumulation for Capital. It is logical that economists venture no further, that a view of the whole deprives them of the singularity of labor-power, which they do not see among the motley series of commodities that swarm in the market, a singularity whose decisive importance arises from its use-value. This is a logical outcome for economists as they are representatives of Capital and express the limited point of view of the bourgeoisie. Along with them come a whole series of critiques incapable of breaking away with that logic.

On the other hand the proletariat understands that the use-value of labor-power, and its consumption, plays a fundamental role under capitalism. Above all, the proletariat understands this because it is the axis which capitalist exploitation depends on and then falls onto the backs of our class. The commodity of labor-power contains a peculiarity, its use is not like that of a book or of any other commodity. Its peculiarity is that its use creates value and surplus-value. Although bourgeois logic does not understand this, nor does it care about this reality of labor-power, it does not overlook, when paying for labor-power, its need to get as much use as possible out of this commodity for the specific purpose of creating value. The consumption of this commodity, whose very use is the motor of the production process under capitalism, is the axis on which Capital energizes its life and valorizes itself. **This is where the importance of understanding use-value as a fundamental economic category in the exchange between Capital and labor comes from.**

commodities share. Labor can be measured by its duration, and consequently, its quantity: the value of every commodity depends on the quantity of labor which was necessary to produce it. In this regard, it matters little what use-value some labor results in. An hour spent sewing a dress and an hour spent manufacturing a bomb are both an hour of labor. If two hours were necessary to build a bomb, its value doubles in relation to the dress, without taking into account its use-value. The quantitative difference is the only difference that can exist between values: if different use-values of commodities are not taken into account to determine their value, neither is the concrete labor which created them. The work which makes up a value does not matter except as an expenditure of labor, without consideration for the specific form in which it has been spent. **Marx called this form of labor, which becomes abstracted from all its concrete forms, "abstract labor."** Commodity values are nothing more than "crystallizations" of this "mere jelly of undifferentiated human labor" (*Capital*, vol. 1). Value – not to be confused with exchange-value – is a determined quantity of abstract labor "contained" within a commodity. The commodity then is the union of use-value and of value, just as it is the union of concrete labor and abstract labor which created it.

Here we are not talking about the labor-time which a concrete individual effectively employed in their production of a commodity. Value is rather determined by the labor-time, which in a particular society, with a certain level of development of productive forces, is on average necessary to produce the commodity in question. If an hour is enough to sew a dress under average conditions, its value is that of an hour and if a tailor takes an hour and a half they will only be paid for an hour of labor. Marx calls this time "socially necessary time."³ So then, **any change in the labor production that affects the value of commodities. If a new invention allows the production of 10 shirts in one hour, then after the diffusion of this invention, each shirt will contain no more than six minutes of social labor, even though persons incapable of resorting to this invention continue to employ an hour to sew a shirt.**

³Note from CUADERNOS: We should really force ourselves to think about the use of "necessary" in Capital's terms. So that the socially necessary labor time is the labor time which a commodity embodies through the totality of labor processes which are necessary for its creation, determined by the average production conditions at any given moment. This is why commodities produced a decade ago do not only undergo devaluation because they "go out of style" or because better versions are now made, but because in general, 10 years later, less time is needed to produce them. Further, as we will later see, if a capitalist labor process discovers a way to minimize labor time at the point of production, then it will have a comparative advantage above other capitalists, and only if this labor process is generalized will then its value be established taking this process as reference.

Naturally, **we do not work twice to produce a commodity, once doing a particular task to produce its use-value and another abstract task to produce its exchange-value.**

Rather, the same task presents itself with a double character: on the one hand its abstract labor and on the other, its concrete labor. As far as concrete labor, it is the infinite multitude of tasks which produce diverse objects in every society in which the division of labor reigns. This labor knows qualitative differences: sometimes its a matter of sewing; other times its about driving a car; another times it's is about working the land, etc. As far as abstract labor, it all amounts to the "productive expenditure of human brain, muscle, nerve, hand, etc., and are both in this sense human labour" (*Capital*, vol. 1). Abstract labor, as such, only knows quantitative differences: sometimes it's a matter of working one hour, and in others working 10 hours. The most complex tasks count as a multiplication of simple labor: an hour of highly-specialized labor by a worker could be "worth" 10 hours of a peasant. This reduction automatically produces itself in economic life.

In the inversion which characterizes a given commodity, the concrete becomes a carrier for the abstract. It has no other social existence in so far as it serves the abstract as a way to give itself a tangible expression.

The abstraction of any tangible quality, of any use-value, is not a mental summation, as when we abstract the different genera of animals to then speak of the "animal," which nonetheless does not exist as such. The best way to convey this real abstraction is found in a passage in the first edition of *Capital*, which Marx unfortunately did not reproduce in later editions: " It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition the animal, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom. Such a particular which contains within itself all really present species of the same entity is a universal (like animal, god, etc.)" (*Das Kapital*, 1st ed., 1867).

In commodity society **tasks are not interchangeable, and consequently are not social, than by way of their abstract quality.** Commodities cannot be exchanged until they are transformed into money, because money is the only commodity that can be directly exchanged for any commodity. No commodity, then, possesses within itself the capacity to be exchanged; this capacity exists for a commodity as an exterior object (an equivalency, money) which it must aspire the transformation into. In a commodity society, the capacity for individual products to be exchangeable does not reside, then, in their concrete character or utility, but rather it exists at the margin of these products and at the margin of their utility, separated from them.

Value against the human community

In commodity production, the natural form of an individual product of labor only serves as the “carrier” of exchange-value. To participate in exchange – and consequently, also participate in the world of commodities –, a product of labor must fold unto itself. This is not a universal phenomena, since, as we have said, in societies not based in commodity production, the individual product of labor already possesses a social character and has no need to acquire it by way of equivalency with an object which exists outside of it.⁴

This is why we can say that **value, even in its most innocent form – namely, “20 meters of cloth contain the value of a suit” – is already the cause and consequence of a social formation in which human beings do not consciously regulate their mode of production.** When Marx writes, “the objectification of the general & social character of labor (as well as the objectification of the labor-time contained within exchange-value) directly makes of its product an exchange-value” (*Grundrisse*, I), he clearly states that when the product is transformed into an exchange-value, along with the seemingly more innocuous transformation of labor into value, in the form of labor-time, they do not constitute an original datum, but rather are themselves a consequence of a certain form of socialization: one which is based on the labor of separate and private producers. The objectification of labor-time is a consequence of the objectification of the social character of labor, of its quality of being a social link.

Value is nothing more than a form of social organization. Its production does not make a society wealthier; is the creation of a social link which is not created during production, but rather exists along side it as an exterior form. Every time we hear someone speak of “overproduction,” it is worth asking: an overproduction of value or of wealth? “Wealth is never overproduced. But periodically too much wealth is produced in its capitalist, antagonistic forms.” (*Capital*, III), although we cannot really call it “wealth” since the “the self-valorization of capital – the creation of surplus value–” is an “absolutely mean and abstract content” (*Unpublished 6th Chapter of Capital*).

What is this content? Money is the sole purpose for production. Nonetheless, money is not the concrete universality of use-values produced, but rather it is the abstract universality of produced value, and consequently, of abstract labor expended.

⁴Note from CUADERNOS: To speak of an individual product of labor previous to the creation of the commodity implies attributing to work and the individual a transhistoricalness which the author critiques in later chapters of their work, which are not included here.

Value is only interested in its own quantity. It is indifferent to the use-values which support it, that “body of commodities”: wheat or contaminated blood, books or video games. Sociability is deprived of all concrete content and social relations are reduced to the exchange of quantities.

It is for these very reasons, and not for a simple moralistic or existentialist recrimination, that we can say that social life itself has become abstract. This type of abstraction is not a bad mental habit that could be cured by replacing false ideas with right ideas. Rather it is the very real subordination of concrete content to an abstract form which is put into play by the concept of real abstraction. It is only due to an old habit that normal consciousness starts to *not* notice that it is mad that, for example, air pollution “matters less” than the losses that a limitation of road traffic would inflict on the automobile industry. Preceding any more judgment, here madness already resides in the comparison of two completely different things – the health of individuals and the interests of industry – with the same quantitative and abstract parameters; which is to say they are measured with money. We can see here how apparently very “abstract” considerations about abstract labor can reach the very heart of the problems we face today.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the inversion of C-M-C to M-C-M' encloses within the whole essence of capitalism.⁵ The transformation of abstract labor into money is the only goal of commodity production; the production of all use-values are but a means, a necessary evil, eyeing only a single purpose: to have available at the end of the operation a sum of money greater than at the beginning. The satisfaction of needs is not the goal of

⁵Note from CUADERNOS: Initially the direct form in which commodities & money circulate in was C-M-C, or rather, the transformation of a commodity (C) into money (M), starting with the sale, for example, of a book, and then the purchase of another commodity with the money received in the exchange, for example a pair of pants: sell to buy. In this type of circulation money always ends up as a commodity which is employed as a use-value, which is to say, money leaves circulation by being used up. But from historic processes there also rises another distinct form: M-C-M, the transformation of money into a commodity and then once again into money, which is to say, *buy to sell*. The result will then be the exchange of money for money, M-M. This apparently absurd cycle nonetheless reveals a fundamental difference: whereas in the first form of circulation the initial and final commodity *qualitatively* differ from each other (the book & pants, for example), in this form the difference between the initial and final money is truly *quantitative*; the process always ends up extracting more money from circulation than was started with initially. The complete formula then is: M-C-M', where M' is the sum of the money disbursed at the start plus an increase; an increase that is known as surplus-value. Hence the value initially introduced in circulation, not only conserves its magnitude of value but it also undergoes a change, it increases with surplus value, it *valorizes*. And it is with this process that money is transformed into capital and its formula is the *generic formula of capital*. **The circulation of money as capital is itself its own end** because the *valorization of value* only occurs within this ever-renewing process, this incessant movement. (CUADERNOS DE NEGACIÓN, Issue 10, *Capital only wants more Capital*)

production, but rather an inevitable and secondary aspect. The inversion of the concrete and the abstract which we considered previously, in an abstract way, within the relations of two commodities, now reveals itself as the fundamental law of a whole society, our society, where the concrete only serves to feed a materialized abstraction: money.

ON THE HISTORICAL AND LOGICAL BASES OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY

This society is guided by the incessant growth of Capital, not by the satisfaction of needs. This could lead us to a critique of those who best represent this guide and whom profit from abstract labor pursuing this guide. But the crux of the matter is to try to overcome a society which needs this class of persons, a society we are all a part of. We must question the very basic categories of capitalist society and the totality of social relations which we are dominated by. **As everyday more and more aspects of life become commoditized, our critique should not remain there, we should go to the root: the very existence of the commodity.**

The commodity-form, just like different capitalist forms⁶, have developed for thousand of years arriving at their current manifestations. To understand their *raison d'être*, their relations and their dynamic we resort to analyzing them in their different determinations and their different levels of abstraction. For example, in our previous issue we talked about the different determinations of money: as a medium for exchange, as a medium unto itself, as an accumulation of wealth, as the supreme objective of capitalist society and finally money as Capital. Marx, in his analysis of the value-form, also talks about its different determinations: a simple form, a developed form, a general form and a monetary form. It is not our intention here to to further delve into each of these forms, but rather to understand two dimensions when investigating them: the logical and historical. As we said, **in the critique of capitalism we resort to using different levels of abstraction from the simplest to the complex, which are not necessarily conditioned by a chronological temporality.** If we emphasize this distinction it is because in our pursuit of the root of capitalist society, it is important to distinguish between the causes of its origin and the conditions of its current existence. **Although capital arises from the commodity, it is only with Capital that the totality of production assumes a commodity-form.**

“The value-form assumed by the product of labor is its most abstract form, but it is also the most general of the bourgeois mode of production, and in this way it remains characterized

⁶Here we are referring to social forms and not just categories or concepts, because this is a matter of the result concrete social relations that continue to modify over time.

as a particular type of social production and in this way, also, something very historical.”
(Karl Marx, *Capital*)

Thus what we are trying to analyze and critique is the very structure and operation of current society. In this way, though it may be important to go over historical developments and empirical data, the prevention of certain misunderstandings and tendentious interpretations of history is also necessary.

An introductory example of this is found in the recurrent discussions of value, within dominant ideology, where the intent is the denial of the very substance of labor. In other words, denying that the exchange of commodities is established by the labor-time embodied in them. To this end, there have been developed different theorizations concerning pricing, where most of the time there is no distinction between value and price, where these theorizations rely on certain characteristics of the different branches of production (monopolies, oligarchies, etc), on different State monetary policies, on supply & demand, as well as on the subjective appreciations of those who participate in the market.

Later we will stop to deepen the distinction between value and price and explain how commodities are indeed not bought and sold in exact accordance with their value (as well as that the precise calculation of its labor-time is impossible to realize) and that the magnitude of prices is foremost determined by the quantity of labor which it embodies. This is known as the *law of value*, which explains the movement of prices, but not its exact fixation.

In his final notes on the third volume of *Capital*, Engels looks to demonstrate the “full functioning of this law” in stages previous to capitalism: “The same is true for the exchange of products between peasants and urban artisans. In the beginning, this exchange took place directly, without the mediation of the merchant, on market days in the city, when peasants would sell and make their purchases. Likewise in this case, both the peasant and the artisan are aware of the labor conditions of each other. The artisan is a bit of a peasant themselves, not only does he have a garden, but very often a small plot of land, a few cows, pigs, poultry, etc. In this way, men of the Middle Ages were in a position to make the calculus of the costs of production of each other when it came to raw materials, auxiliary materials, labor time, with a certain precision, at least when it came to the things generally consumed everyday.”

We use this example, since it highlights what we previously mentioned on the logical and historical dimension of these [Marxian] concepts, where the most elemental functioning of capitalist society does not necessarily coincide with the business relations which prefigured

it. It is tempting to seek out in the past a concrete manifestation of abstractions which constitute the present so as to better understand and explain them, but this is not how reality works. The developments in the works of Marx, and other authors, which appear to be so obviously logical, have been labeled as metaphysical by their critics, and at the same time certain defenders have tried to fill in these “gaps” with empirical data, resulting in misunderstandings in both camps of the importance of the abstraction not as a thought exercise but as a phenomena of reality. We will return to this subject in the next section.

In the previous issue of CUADERNOS, we reflected on the origins of capitalist society. There we saw how commercial and usurious⁷ capital in their manifestations previous to capitalism constituted the indispensable motor of capitalism’s emergence, hoarding up one side and draining on the other. But the place of commercial capital under capitalism is completely different:

“Historically, capital developed in the sphere of circulation to then later seize production; but under capitalism, it is only through production that capital is born. The capital that seems to be born through circulation (commercial gains, monetary interest) is only a deduction of the gains realized through production. This fact should be enough to show that the relationship between the logical genesis and historical succession has, in Marx, a very peculiar nature.” (Anselm Jappe, *Adventures of the Commodity*)

The following quotations from Marx⁸ will help clarify things in this regard: “To buy cheap in order to sell dear is the rule of trade. Hence, not the exchange of equivalents. (...) The quantitative ratio in which products are exchanged is at first quite arbitrary. They assume the form of commodities inasmuch as they are exchangeables, i.e., expressions of one and the same third. Continued exchange and more regular reproduction for exchange reduces this arbitrariness more and more. But at first not for the producer and consumer, but for their go-between, the merchant, who compares money-prices and pockets the difference. It is through his own movements that he establishes equivalence. By virtue of its very movement an equivalency is established.⁹ (...) The trade of the first independent

⁷Translator’s Note: Here CUADERNOS used “usurario” which is the adjective form of “usura” or *usury* in English. Here we followed the original text since we felt translating this word to *financial* or *credit* would detract from their original intended meaning although the word we used, *usurious*, is a bit unwieldy in English.

⁸Extracts from Chp. 20 of the third volume of *Capital*.

⁹At first, the monopolizers of commercial activity had a greater influence on the determination of prices. The competition between them, as well as protectionist measures from different governments started to level them off, until, finally, with the proper subsumption of labor processes [to Capital], we finally arrive at the

flourishing merchant towns and trading nations rested as a pure carrying trade upon the barbarism of the producing nations, between whom they acted the middleman. In the pre-capitalist stages of society commerce ruled industry. In modern society the reverse is true. (...) It will subordinate production more and more to exchange-value by making luxuries and subsistence more dependent on sale than on the immediate use of the products. Thereby it dissolves the old relationships. It multiplies money circulation. It encompasses no longer merely the surplus of production, but bites deeper and deeper into the latter, and makes entire branches of production dependent upon it. Nevertheless this disintegrating effect depends very much on the nature of the producing community."

Human productive activity does not always assume the form of work, neither does its production take the form of a commodity. These social forms and their correspondent conceptual categories are not transhistorical, nor do they exist apart from specific forms of relations. Therefore, it is not enough to affirm that we are the workers whom produce the value that is then appropriated by capitalists, rather we want to know *how* we arrive at becoming workers and how our production took on the commodity-form. It is through the historical development of different social relations of exchange that made possible the rise of *value*. Its kernel lies in the comparison of diverse objects to facilitate their exchange. With the deepening and generalization of these comparisons value established itself over the centuries and ended up constituted itself as the intermediary boss of all transactions, destroying infinite forms of distribution and exchange which by far did not correspond with this type of fundamentally quantitative parameters. Finally, all production under capitalism is the production of value, and the objective of society is the production of the maximum amount of value possible. It was not always the case that activities orientated towards production and subsistence were so split from the rest of reproductive, ludic, creative, pleasurable and contemplative activities. The separation between communities and their very members is the correlate of the separation of the very activity of its members into various spheres, up to the level we see today. The ever-growing precarization, division and ultra-specialization of work, which the defenders of "skilled, quality and well-paid for all" work complain of, is nothing but the latest result of the logic of immanent separation from one's work and the production of commodities. Work, as a separate sphere of activity, arises from the generalization of exchanged-based relations and of value in the process of subsuming human activity.

value-form which we suffer under today, with its specific determination over the movement of prices, which we will stop to further explain later on.

[END PART 1]