The Ontology of Production in Marx: The Paradox of Labor and the Enigma of Praxis

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Introduction

Praxis is the identifying signature of the most prevalent contemporary versions of the reception and interpretation of Marx and of the movements of thought inspired or provoked by him. This view seems to accord well with the early “Theses on Feuerbach” (especially numbers 1-3, 5, 8-9, & 11) and is frequently mobilized in support of the further claim that the “mature” or “scientific” Marx, the Marx of Das Kapital, above all had left behind his former preoccupations with philosophy in anything like a traditional sense, in order to pursue single-mindedly and whole-heartedly his critical diagnosis of bourgeois political economy, the opening wedge in his “practical” campaign to establish first socialism and then communism. In this essay, I want to call into question some of the central commitments of this consensus. In particular, I shall suggest (1) that Marx’s understanding of praxis, of human activity and interaction, is pervasively shaped by his conception of poiesis, the production of hitherto non-existing objects and, therewith, the ongoing transformation of external Nature. Accordingly, appreciations of Marx’s supposedly revolutionary transfiguration of the relation between theoria and praxis need to be recast and reconstrued in light of his reduction of praxis to technical production. (2) Poiesis is the cardinal, indeed the unique, category in the ontological vocabulary Marx adopted in his earliest works and never abandoned afterwards, even when he went on to treat ontological issues much more economically. (3) This monochromatic vocabulary so colored Marx’s analysis of the nature and civic places of labor and human interrelations, that both tended to lose the variegated contours by which pre-modern, if not all pre-Marxist, thinkers recognized them. (4) Marx’s elliptical, not to say sibylline, allu-
sions to the condition and the telos of “socialized humanity” in the 
*Grundrisse* and in the final volume of *Das Kapital* prove so perplexing 
extactly because ‘labor’ itself has become paradoxical—does it figure 
with equal prominence in both the ‘realm of necessity’ and the ‘realm of 
freedom’?—while *praxis*, once it seems finally set free from the spell 
cast on it by the presumptive ultimacy of *poiesis*, appears to lose its 
bearings, its pre-modern orientation to a goal such as achieved and 
mutually-acknowledged human excellence. The claims and promises of 
*praxis* turn out to be deeply enigmatic.

I. The Ontology of Production

“Production,” in Marx, is neither the simple physical expenditure of 
human labor-power, since this omits its “useful character,” nor is it 
simply the bringing forth of objects of consumption and use (use-val-
ues), since the consumption of a product is only a ‘moment’ in the con-
tinuous cycle of production. Finally, production is not merely “the 
reproduction of the physical existence of individuals,” since this 
obscures its role as a “particular fashion” in which individuals “express 
their lives.”

Refusal to confine the meaning of ‘production’ to any or all of these 
narrowed physiological, or economic, senses does not stem simply from 
Marx’s more widely-ranging, even polymorphous, application of the 
term—thoughts, ideas, and needs are “produced,” labor produces not 
only commodities, but also itself. Rather, and much more basically, 
these still other instances of the use of ‘production’ are so many surface 
appearances of the essence of production, so many phenomenal or ontic 
hieroglyphs which must be deciphered if we are to reach their compre-
hensive, ontological significance. Namely, self, world and their inter-
play can only be understood under the aspect of production: “As indi-
viduals express, externalize (äußern) their life, so are they. What they 
are therefore coincides with their production, both with what they pro-
duce as well as with how they produce.”1 And: “. . . this activity, this 
continuous sensuous labor and creation (Schaffen), this production, is 
the basis of the entire sensuous world as it now exists.” To be a being 
at all is to be either a producing or a produced being.

To sustain these claims, to accomplish this decipherment, inevitably 
requires supplementing, even replacing, the elliptical formulations of 
the chapter from *Capital* on “The Labor-Process”—bound up as they 
are with the more exiguous demands of a diagnosis of the capitalist 
mode of production and its expression in classical (i.e., bourgeois) politi-
cal economy—with the ampler and ontologically more relevant accounts 
in the *Grundrisse*, *The German Ideology* and, above all, the *Economic*
and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844). Far from being separated from Capital by an intellectual chasm, these texts are its philosophical matrices.

What, then, is production and why does it provide, for Marx, the answer to the intertwined questions: what is it to be human? what is it to be “real,” i.e., to have a place within the totality of ‘what is’?

Ontically regarded, production by an agent brings forward (pro-ducere) into the sensuous, perceptible world something that was not there previously in the form or shape in which it has now been ‘introduced’. Ontologically considered, production bestows the opposite categorial status upon both the item brought forward, made to emerge into the world, and the agent responsible for its emergence, and does so in such a way that the status of each entails the status of the other.

In Marx’s own words in the Grundrisse, “Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.” Accordingly, the first foundational role of production is to promote, put into motion the encounter of ‘subjects’ (‘active’ human agents) and ‘objects’ (Gegenstände—items newly present in the world, standing over against the agents responsible for their being present). However, this is by no means the whole story. The encounter production brings about between subjects and objects at the same time converts or transforms each into its categorial counterpart; this is, in fact, the heart of the matter, as Marx conceives it.

In Capital I, chapter 5, he puts the case somewhat obliquely: “Work binds, coalesces itself, with its object (Gegenstand). Work is objectified (vergegenständlicht) and the object is worked up (verarbeitet).” In the Grundrisse, he brings home the same point more perspicuously: “The person objectifies himself in production; the thing subjectifies itself in the person . . . [or: ‘in consumption’].” In other words, in bringing forth a product, an item new to the world, the agent takes on the character of an object, while the product, inasmuch as it has been brought forth in this way, comes to bear the signature of the subjective agent from whom it arose. The “objectification of the subject,” to which Marx calls attention here and elsewhere, is matched by, takes place in tandem with, the “subjectification” of the object. However, this reciprocal exchange of ontological character is more complex still:

All three moments of the process, the material, the instrument, and labor, coincide in the neutral result—the product. The moments of the process of production which have been consumed to form the product are simultaneously reproduced in it. The whole process therefore appears as productive consumption, i.e. as consumption which terminates neither in a void, nor in the mere subjectification of the objective, but which is, rather, again posited as an object.
This consumption is not simply a consumption of the material, but rather consumption of consumption itself; in the suspension of the material it is of the suspension of this suspension and hence the *posing* of the same. This *form-giving* activity consumes the object and consumes itself, but it consumes the given form of the object only in order to posit it in a new objective form, and it consumes itself only in its subjective form as activity. It consumes the objective character of the object—the indifference towards the form—and the subjective character of activity; forms (*formt*) the one, materializes (*materialisiert*) the other.6

The thread leading through this labyrinthine passage is the thesis that the initially productive activity of the subject and the object it initially produces are equally *labile*. What at one turning of the spiral of production makes its appearance as “form-giving activity,” i.e., as a subjective deed or act of making, recedes from the scene when its activity has been consummated in the resultant object. Similarly, but not identically, the sheer objectivity, i.e., the indifference to “form-giving activity” originally displayed by the material item onto which that activity was directed, is replaced by a second “objective form” that places the newly-shaped object once again at the disposal of subjective activity, i.e., human productive work. It now holds itself ready for a new round of productive work.

The foregoing account is abstract, although no more abstract than the passages cited from Marx. *Reculons pour mieux sauter*, by turning to the more familiar, economic fabrics from which this guiding thread was woven.

The passage just quoted from the *Grundrisse* reiterates and extends Marx’s earlier discussion of the relation between *production* and *consumption*. Their dialectical intermingling might at first appear to give one or the other, indifferently, the upper hand; by supplying an object satisfying a need, “production produces consumption,” while “consumption brings to completion the act of production,” by satisfying a need via that very object. Nonetheless,

[c]onsumption as urgency, as need, is itself an intrinsic moment of productive activity. But the latter is the point of departure for realization and hence also its predominant moment; it is the act through which the whole process again runs its course. The individual produces an object and, by consuming it, returns to himself as a productive and self-reproducing individual. Consumption thus appears as a moment of production.7

Marx is arguing here that the point, the *telos*, of production is *two-fold*: (1) the continuous elaboration of new needs which, in turn, internally incite and are then allayed by, new acts of production and (2) the realization of the agent’s own identity as “productive and self-reproducing.” As regards the first aspect, we should notice that the cycle of produc-
tion-consumption—new production is, in principle, never-ending: “Production not only supplies a material for a need, but it also supplies a need for the material.”8 Production as an activity generates novel ‘needs’, in much the fashion of Hobbes’ definition of “felicity”: “Felicity is a continual progresse of the desire from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later” (Leviathan, XI, 1). Or, as Marx (in concert with Engels) puts it in The German Ideology: “The second fundamental point is that as soon as a need is satisfied (which implies the action of satisfying and the acquisition of an instrument), new needs are made; and this production of new needs is the first historical act.”9 The second aspect lets us begin to catch sight of the web of crucial or captivating notions in which Marx tries to capture what it is to be genuinely human. For a productive agent to cause a new object to emerge is for him (as well as for his product) to pass from movement into the condition of (temporarily) unmov ing Being, or “objectivity.” His activity is seemingly consummated and congealed in the product in which it issues, the product for which Marx’s term is frequently “objectified labor.” “Objectified labor,” however, can in turn, be uncongealed, be put at the disposal of “living labor,” that is, be worked upon as “raw material and instrument of labor” and thus reworked into a new product with a new use-value. “Objectified labor ceases to exist in a dead state as an external, indifferent form on the substance, because it is itself again posited as a moment of living labor; as a relation of living labor to itself in an objective material, as the objectivity of living labor.”10 Marx also contrasts these two facets of productive labor in terms of the difference between labor “present in space,” and hence registering the past, and labor “present in time.” In this continuous passage from past to present, from spatial fixity to temporal fluidity, the active subject continually affirms and augments its productive capacities.

This passage and progression bring to light the nature of human labor as “Selbstbetätigung,” an activation or, as we might say, an actuation of the self that yields a proof and confirmation of man’s powers to transform the materials of nature into products suiting his own needs and intentions. By “objectifying” himself in this fashion man constantly bears witness to his “subjectivity”; by appropriating nature, making it his own (Aneignung), the self comes into his own. Or, in words often favored by Marx, “Betätigung,” activation, is at the same time “Bestätigung,” substantiation. What man produces is not simply an external, material object but, more importantly, the overt evidence of his transformative prowess, i.e., of his being human.
To treat production as an individual affair, as I have been doing, is, of course, only a heuristic abstraction, one Marx himself frequently employs. Needless to say, this heuristic abstraction must, in the end, give way to Marx’s unabating insistence on the social setting and determination of the process of production. “All production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society.”

“The human being is in the most literal sense a ὑπάρχων ζών, not merely a gregarious animal but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.”

If the social relations of production are always founded upon, and in some sense “reflect,” the material forces of production, the latter, in their turn, have always been elaborated in and by a social community of productive agents. Or, to put the same point in a slightly different way, the materials and instruments of production available to any one individual as well as to his contemporaries are themselves the legacy, the repository, of the productive activities of past generations. Production as the “objectification” of subjects and the “subjectification” of objects is all along historical and this means that the array of man’s transformative powers is not fixed from the start but is developed, actualized, and, hence, discovered over the course of time. Moreover, this “course of time” apparently places no intrinsic limits on the range and character of these productive powers, since man produces, or at least should be able to produce, in accord with Marx’s regulative idea of production, universally, as a generic-being (Gattungswesen). Let me explore these interlinked points a bit more fully.

In his footnote-reference to Vico, Marx alludes to the history of human technology; in a well-known passage from the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts he asserts that “. . . the history of industry and the presence (Dasein) of industry when it has become objective is the open book of human essential powers, human psychology on display in a sensuous form . . . .” Industry is “the exoteric unveiling (Enthüllung) of man’s essential powers . . . .” The verbal alliance of Wesenskräfte and Gattungswesen points to their explanatory complicity.

The members of every other natural species produce only what they immediately need and immediately consume (physically assimilate), while man alone produces objects “even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need,” while “man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.” In other words, man produces “universally,” he can and does for his own activity take over all of the elements and productive-patterns present in nature (i.e., plants, animals, stones, air, light and, e.g. a beaver’s dam). Man is the productive measure of all things.
Finally, what other species do instinctively, man, in principle, does consciously. Indeed, individual men consciously put themselves in relation to their shared generic life; the point of individual life is not physical self-preservation but participation in, and active manifestation of, the powers and products of mankind as a whole. “The practical engendering (Erzeugung) of an objective world, the fashioning of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious generic-being (Gattungswesen), i.e., a being which treats the genus as its own essential being or itself as a generic-being.” The objective world, the world conceived as the totality of objects freely and consciously produced through the active powers progressively set to work over the course of human social history (the history of industry and technology, in a wide sense) thus becomes the unique medium in which man can see his own essence. “The object of labor is therefore the objectification of the generic-life of man; by reduplicating himself (sich . . . verdoppelt) not only intellectually, as in consciousness, but actively (werktätig), actually (wirklich), man sees himself (sich anschaut) in a world he has created.” Unlike Plato’s Sophist who merely pretends to have made all things by holding up a mirror in front of them, Marxian man brings (or, should bring) into the world objects that mirror his own being. “Our products would [i.e., in fully human relations of production] be as many mirrors from which our essence (Wesen) would shine back to us.” Man is the ultimate, and the only, creative artist and all of his works are self-portraits.

The preceding paragraphs by no means exhaust what Marx has to say about man’s generic-being, the universality of his production and the essentially social character of human life; they do, however, bring us face to face with two radical, deeply connected, profoundly difficult questions. (1) Why does human self-making inevitably take the form of production of external objects? Why, in other words, can man come to see his own nature only in the mirror of the products he has caused to emerge into the “world”? (2) What is the constitution of Nature itself such that it is amenable to the human project of total productivity, the complete and universal display of man’s “essential powers”?

(1) In one way the answer to the first of these questions is straightforward, in another way any possible answer is indirect and baffling, its elements bound to one another in an exquisite tension.

(a) The first version of an answer to this question simply recalls Marx’s Feuerbachian commitment to the physical, sensuous, embodied status of living human beings. It is only “natural” that beings so understood perform activities that are likewise visible and palpable, that all their self-expressions are at once, immediately, incarnate, just as a spider spins its web from its own corporeal substance. Following Feuerbach, who ushers in the ‘philosophy of the future’ with the decla-
ration that “only a sensuous being is a true and real being,” Marx himself affirms that man “creates and establishes (setzt) [natural, sensuously present] only objects because . . . he is by his origin (von Haus aus) Nature.”19 Or “[t]hat the physical and spiritual (geistige) life of man coheres with (zusammenhängt) Nature means nothing else than that Nature coheres with itself, for Man is part of Nature.”20

Marx believed that in this naturalness, this corporeal, organic immediacy, Feuerbach had finally found the hitherto missing positive and self-grounded basis which would no longer be the outcome of reflection—i.e., the Hegelian negation of negation—but would necessarily “antedate” reflection and self-consciousness. The natural or “objective” character of man plays the role of “Being” at the start of Hegel’s Science of Logic: “Dieses reflexionslose Sein . . . .” Accordingly, Marx can criticize what he takes to be Hegel’s account of knowing in the Phenomenology in these terms:

Knowing [sc., not sensuous activity] is its only objective relationship. It knows the nullity of the object, i.e., that the object is not distinct from it, the non-existence of the object for it, in that it knows the object as its own self-alienation . . . . Knowing knows that when it relates itself to an object it is only outside itself, alienates itself; that it only appears to itself as an object, or rather, that what appears to it as an object is only itself.21

The positive face of this same coin: “To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being with natural powers means that he has real, sensuous objects as the objects of his being or of his life, or that he can only express his life in real sensuous objects.”22 Human nature and Nature “at large” thus appear to be equally immediate, the former simply a regional instance of the latter.

An objective being acts objectively, and it would not act objectively if objectivity were not an inherent part of its essential nature. It creates and establishes (setzt) only objects because it is established by objects, because it is fundamentally (von Haus aus) nature. In the act of establishing, it therefore does not descend from its ‘pure activity’ to the creation of objects; on the contrary, its objective product simply confirms its objective activity, its activity as the activity of an objective, natural being.23

(b) And yet, the second, more complex and appropriate route of Marx’s thought on the matter leads us away from so simple a solution, towards a more ambiguous destination. As he tells us, man, unlike other animals, is not “immediately one with its vital activity”24; man consciously and willfully takes up a stance towards his natural vitality, makes it his object, forms a relationship to it. Because nature, including especially his own corporeal, sensuous nature, is the term of a relation-
ship and hence no longer “indeterminate immediacy” (Hegel), a gap inexorably opens up between the humanness of human nature and its naturalness; objectification is the externalizing of a subject, a self, that must be in a position to see the transparent traces of its own selfhood in the objects which it produces or creates. “But man is not only a natural being; he is a human natural being; i.e., he is a being for himself and hence a generic-being, as which he must confirm and realize (bestätigen und betätigen) himself both in his being and in his knowing . . . . Neither objective nor subjective nature is immediately present in a form adequate to the human being.” What at first blush stood out as the “unity of the essence of man and nature” now stands out as a goal that must first be reached, a unity fully accomplished that comes about, if at all, only as a result of human production. Objectification is not straightaway self-confirmation, the proof that the agent producing objects is a self; their “conflict” must be brought to an end.

The same point can be sighted from still another angle of vision. The “history of industry” and, thus, of the human fashioning of a world of objects suited to man’s needs and inventiveness, is, we remember, the “exoteric revelation of man’s essential powers.” The difference between the exoteric and the esoteric is not a simple antithesis; Marx, we can fairly conjecture, agrees with Hegel’s argument that “Das Wesen muss erscheinen” (the essence must make an appearance). Man’s “essential powers” are not a stock of interior, dormant capacities, but precisely the powers he puts patently on display. Nonetheless, the mere externality or overtness of this display is not, eo ipso, adequate to the goal of self-confirmation. As Hegel goes on to argue, “what exists (das Existierende) is . . . not onesidedly (abstrakt) for itself; but is only in an Other; but, in this other it is relation (Beziehung) to itself and relation to the Other.” In Marxian terms, production, the subjective activity or living-labor, holds priority over consumption or the utilization of use-values precisely because the productive agent returns to himself from the otherness or outwardness of what he has produced, in order to affirm or re-affirm his powers in light of this now ‘objective’ evidence. His self-substantiation is the unity of his relation to the object and to himself as the subjective source of the object. This unity, however, must be further supplemented and consolidated by an act of recognition on the part of a second human agent. This seems to be the weight of Marx’s rather obscure reference to “the third object” or “third being” in the tortuously dense discussion of “objectification” towards the end of the 1844 Manuscripts. “A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being and plays no part in the system of nature. A being which has no object outside itself is not an objective being. A being which is not itself an object for a third being has no being for its
object, i.e. it has no objective relationships and its existence is not objective." Marx is building here on Feuerbach’s thesis concerning the sensuously grounded interplay between the ‘I’ and ‘Thou’. “But only through the senses is an ‘I’ a ‘not-I’.” It falls to another self to perceive my objective activity, my causing an item to emerge into the world bearing the stamp of my subjective intentions or needs. When this perception is reciprocal, the object I produce, like the object that “third being” produces, becomes a “social object.” “In practice I can only relate myself to a thing in a human way if the thing is related in a human way to man.” Accordingly, what initially may have come across, in some of Marx’s own formulations, as a simple elimination of the ‘Cartesian’ separation of res cogitans from res extensa, an erasure of the difference between self-conscious subjects and bodily objects, now shows itself to be a continuously mediated process by which conscious activity first expresses itself, embodies itself, in sensuous, “worldly” objects, then reverts to itself with an enhanced sense of its power over the “world,” so long as its power is also acknowledged by another self-objectifying subject.

This self-affirming reversion to the subject—comparable to Fichte’s description of selfhood (Ichheit) as “activity (Handeln) which reverts to itself”—notwithstanding, the outwardness of what human activity produces is not a secondary, subservient, or ‘alien’ ‘moment’ in this process. Once again Marx’s critique of Hegel, in this case of his philosophy of nature, is pertinent. For Hegel, according to Marx, the concept or Absolute Idea, when it “freely releases itself as Nature from itself” takes on an alien character; external nature is disclosed as “a flaw, an infirmity, something which ought not to be.” For Marx, on the contrary, “externality” should be understood as sensuousness, “sensuousness which externalizes itself, disclosed to light and to sensuous Man (dem Licht, dem sinnlichen Menschen erschlossene Sinnlichkeit).” The opacity of man’s inwardness or subjectivity is dispelled and illumined only when he brings his powers to light; the world of objects he produces thereby, and only thereby, becomes for him a “dwelling in the light (Lichtwohnung) which Prometheus, in Aeschylus, describes as one of the great gifts through which he transformed beasts into men.”

(2) How must Nature, pre-human or extra-human Nature (if these are apt designations), be constituted or, at least, conceived, such that it might lend itself to this project of human self-substantiation (selbstbestätigung) by means of technical production?

It must be acknowledged that Marx often writes in a way to suggest that the “essential unity of man and Nature” is not only immediate, but permanent as well, that is, that both terms are equal partners in the process of production. Nature, in this account, would be
autonomous and autochtonous. The frequently-used expression “Stoffwechsel,” exchange of matter, “metabolism,” suggests a kind of enduring **symbiosis** between man and non-human nature. This picture is brought even more clearly into relief when Marx asserts that “Man can work only as Nature does, that is by changing the form of the matter.”38 Human productive labor would, in this picture, be a continual imitation of natural production, or, in other terms, the procreative model of human work would obliterate the artisanal, “creative” model.

These suggestions, however, are deeply at odds with the logic that his central view of human production demands and that a greater quantity of his texts supplies.

To be sure, material nature is anterior to human labor; production is not, in any simple sense, **creatio ex nihilo**. The earth (as land) is **not** the product of human activity; it is “the universal instrument”39 for labor, two of the three factors ingredient in the “process of labor” as it is described in the first volume of *Capital*. This dual role already begins to reveal Nature’s ambiguous standing **vis-à-vis** human production—the earth (embracing here the totality of ‘natural’ elements) is the Archimedean point, the **locus standi**, as Marx says, from which the earth cannot only be moved, but cultivated and, in the end, radically transformed. What seem to be Nature’s own products—e.g., plants and animals—“are, in their present form, not only products of, say, last year’s labor, but the result of a gradual transformation, continued through many generations, under man’s superintendence, and by means of his labor.”40

Even that Nature acknowledged to be temporally antecedent to Man and thus apt for union or symbiosis with him has always from the start unified itself with man “in industry and has existed in varying forms in every epoch according to the lesser or greater development of industry, just like the ‘struggle’ of man with nature, right up to the development of his productive powers on a corresponding basis.”41

These sometimes disingenuous equivocations bring ingeniously to the fore the indefinite malleability of Nature and anticipate its conversion into “humanized Nature” which will give no quarter to any residual conflict or struggle.

Let me briefly rehearse some of the themes that figure in this conclusion. Nature, says Marx in the *Paris Manuscripts* and in the *Grundrisse*, is Man’s “inorganic body”—it is universally, unlimitedly, without constraint, at his disposal. **Symbiosis** has been transmuted into **technology**. This is not an idle inference; on the one occasion on which Marx cites Descartes in the first volume of *Capital* he quotes the self-revealing lines from the last section of the *Discourse on Method*—men, through the infinity of artifices the new sciences allow them to produce,
make themselves into “the masters and possessors of Nature.” This citation occurs quite noticeably, unaccidentally, in the chapter on “Machinery and Modern Industry,” so as to remove any scintilla of doubt about his understanding of the seventeenth century Scientific Revolution. Marx avers that “Descartes, like Bacon, anticipated an alteration in the form of production, and the practical subjugation of Nature by Man, as a result of the altered methods of thought, is plain from his Discours de la méthode.”

What consequences can we justifiably begin to draw from these and cognate texts?

First, the nature pre-given to the history of human production, in its most inchoate form, is from the first, something presupposed to labor—already there as amenable to human elaboration.

Appropriation not through labor, but presupposed to labor; appropriation of the natural conditions of labor, of the earth as the original instrument of labor as well as its workshop and repository of raw materials. The individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labor as being his; [relates] to them as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity, in which the latter realizes itself; the chief objective condition of labor does not itself appear as a product of labor, but is already there as nature; on one side the living individual, on the other the earth, as the objective condition of his reproduction.

Hence, the anteriority of pre-human nature is all along mediated, recognized as a prior and necessary condition of human self-preservation and artefactual work.

For, just as the working subject appears naturally as an individual, as natural being—so does the first objective condition of his labor appear as nature, earth, as his inorganic body; he himself is not only the organic body, but also the subject (Gegenstand) of this inorganic nature. This condition is not his product but something he finds to hand—presupposed to him as a natural being apart from him.

Once again, nature shows up not exclusively in its own right, apart from what men do to nature, but as what is set-out-in-advance (vorausgesetzt) as the medium and material of human activity.

The individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labor as being his [viz., the unmediatedly positive, in the spirit of Feuerbach, is from the first appropriable—apt to become one's own] [relates] to them as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity, in which the latter realizes itself.

Marx, in these and other equally diffuse texts, appropriates the Hegelian account of Setzung and Voraussetzung so as to leave no doubt that ‘inorganic nature’ does not, as earlier impressions might have led
us to believe, enjoy a radical, pre-conceptual autonomy. Much more concretely, Marx drives home the same point by referring to this putatively pre-given, antecedent Nature as “the workshop of his (man’s) forces,” and the “domain of his will.” Supposituously pre-given, and thus apparently independent, nature is, from start to finish, the “laboratory of man’s forces.” Since nature is man’s inorganic body, it can be organized and reorganized ad libitum, that is, in accord with human purposes. Nature, then, is already yoked to human agents as their “inorganic body,” submissible to human productive will, the will to produce what has not yet emerged into the world, what, once it does emerge, will generate new needs to incite and keep in motion the cycle of production. Nature, in its submissions to human production seems to be indefinitely malleable. The one salient difference between nature and human production lies in the fact that the latter has “immanent laws of reproduction [which] maintain this form in the way in which the tree, for example, maintains its form as a tree,” while, on the other hand, the substances (Stoffe) to which labor gives a new form (e.g., making a table out of wood) are indifferent to that form. This indifference and, correspondingly, the difference between Nature and production already marked out by Aristotle, can nonetheless be overcome when the first product—the objectified labor—is made in turn into a condition for new “living labor.” Then both the underlying ‘stuff’ and its externally imposed form cease their movement towards mechanical dissolutions and chemical decay and become “reanimated.” (Marx already wrote in the 1844 Manuscripts of “the true resurrection of nature” brought about by the “fully-achieved unity in essence of man with nature.”)

The transformation of the material by living labor, by the realization of living labor in the material—a transformation which, as purpose, determines labor and is its purposeful activation (a transformation which does not only posit the form as external to the inanimate object, as a mere vanishing image of its material consistency)—thus preserves the material in a definite form, and subjugates the transformation of the material to the purpose of labor. Labor is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality (das lebendige, gestaltende Feuer, die Vergänglichkeit der Dinge, ihre Zeitlichkeit).

This living, form-giving fire—the true gift of Prometheus—is what illumines that “dwelling in the light” to which man is entitled by his authentic nature.

Ultimately, then, the Stoffwechsel, the metabolic exchange between man and nature, is one-sided; in principle man can appropriate the totality of nature for purposes of productive transformation. In doing so
he keeps Nature alive or restores it to life. “Nature appears,” (sc. thanks to production) “as his work and his actuality.” It takes time and, thus, history, i.e., the history of industry, to reach this final result: “The human essence of nature” (i.e., Nature brought entirely under human will) and “the natural essence of man” (i.e., the stage at which all of his natural, essential powers are manifestly at work in the external world). Nature is thoroughly humanized, while man, in accomplishing this process, becomes fully naturalized.

Marxian Man, we might want to say, loves to bring nature out of hiding, to make it show its true face, which turns out to be a human face.

II. The Paradox of Labor and the Enigma of Praxis

In Section I, I have been consistently trying to sketch the lineaments of human productive labor in accordance with its regulative idea. I scarcely need say that the picture so far obtained is deeply at odds with the constitutive idea, that is, the socio-historical reality of human labor as described by Marx. The inconcinnity of the two pictures is, of course, most jarring in the case of capitalism, in which the ‘alienation’ of labor, according to his diagnosis, reaches its most intense and exacerbated level.

There is no need here to belabor this prominent theme, except to remark that the lack of adequation between nature and its immediacy and human labor both at its origin and until its full conquest of nature might well be considered the ultimate source of alienation even in its narrower, bourgeois economic versions—so long as the external products wrought by man fail to mirror the human essence and to be recognized by others as doing so, their externality will continue to come across as foreignness, as mere things standing at a dismaying distance from human intent.

At all events, alienation is the expression of an even more puzzling paradox evident in Marx’s works, from the early manuscripts to Capital, the paradox of human labor itself. On the one hand, self-confirmation, affirmative objectification of what it is to be human, labor, on the other hand, by its very productiveness, puts into play the forces that negate or, at least, hem in the essentially human. Labor is, at one and the same time, the promise of Promethean striving and the curse of Edenic exile. Consequently, Marx is compelled to treat human labor both as “life-activity, productive life itself,” whereby man fashions his own world, and as a “negative form of self-activation.” Externalization (Äußerung), which is otherwise supposed to be the vehicle of self-manip-
festation becomes, instead, and not only in bourgeois society, a process of self-estrangement. Or, as Marx puts it in one of his strongest statements “labor is only an expression of human activity within alienation (Entäußerung), the externalizing of life as the alienated externalizing of life (Lebensäußerung als Lebensentäußerung).”

This tension between the regulative and the (historically) constitutive ideas of labor arises out of the very conditions that make labor increasingly productive: the division of labor, private ownership and, finally, capital itself.

This is not the occasion for an extensive scrutiny of these three reciprocally influencing conditions. It will have to suffice to take note of the following basic points. According to Marx, the division of labor, which originates spontaneously (naturwüchsig) from factors such as increase in population, differences in natural talents, etc., is both the source of property (based on the unequal distribution of labor and its products)—and hence, of the eventual reduction of all human relations to the relation of “having”—and, on the other hand, the motive-power behind the expansion of productiveness toward its all-embracing goal. The complexity of forces (and relations) of production needed to bring about the conquest of Nature, or its transformation into the “essence of man,” is incompatible with the simple or direct ‘appropriation’ of natural ‘goods’. Hence, Marx can say that “[i]t is precisely in the fact that the division of labor and exchange are configurations (Gestaltungen) of private property that we find the proof, both that human life needed private property for its realization and that it now needs the abolition of private property.” Or, in another passage,

Natural science (sc., yoked to technological innovation and expansion) has intervened in and transformed human life all the more practically through industry and has prepared the conditions for human emancipation, however much its immediate effect was to complete the process of dehumanization. It is as though man must totally lose his essence in order to regain it. Furthermore, capital, even while instigating the shift from authentic objectification to a perverse ‘reification’ (Verdinglichung, fetishism of commodities, etc.), by monopolizing the forces of production in modern society, nonetheless renders “living labor” totally productive. Capital ownership, to begin with in the simple form of landed property, first makes possible the application of science “and the development of the full force of production.” “Labor itself is productive only if absorbed into capital, where capital forms the basis of production, and where the capitalist is therefore in command of production.” More technically, with the increasing efficiency of the means of production, the quantity of
labor-time required for the sustenance of the worker decreases; surplus-value, the root of the capitalist system, emerges when the capitalist is in a position to gain purchase on the labor power in force when the amount of requisite labor-time has been already expended. As one recent commentator aptly puts the point: labor is “at one and the same time the basis of the economy and the basis of the denunciation of the exploitation of the economic system.”

Obscured as it is by these tensions and ambiguities, the ultimate status of labor is by no means certain. In the first volume of Capital Marx speaks of labor as an “eternal condition of human existence, imposed by Nature.” In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels more than once refer to the abolition of labor itself, not only wage-labor or the natural and, hence, involuntary division of labor. Further, while the engendering of material life has until ‘now’ been “considered a subordinate mode of self-confirming activity” (Selbstbetätigung), it is only in the stage of communist production that “self-confirming activity coincides with material life, corresponding to the development of individuals into total individuals and the stripping-away of everything natural and spontaneous (Abstreifung aller Naturwüchsigkeit).”

The same ambiguity in the value of labor is evident in Marx’s divergent assessments of the joyful character of labor. He joins with Engels in satirizing the “true socialist’s” view that “labor must, then, become a free expression (äußerung) of life and thereby a source of enjoyment,” while, in the Grundrisse, he criticizes Adam Smith for one-sidedly emphasizing the sacrificed nature of work.

But Smith has no inkling whatever that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity—and that, further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits—hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labor.

This tension within Marx’s appraisal of productive labor reaches its climax in a famous passage in the third volume of Capital in which he contrasts the “realm of necessity” with the “realm of freedom.” Even when the engendering of material life requires the minimum expenditure of active human power (Kraftaufwand) and takes place “under conditions most worthy of, and adequate to, human nature . . . this still remains in a realm of necessity. Beyond this begins the development of human power (die menschliche Kraftentwicklung) which counts as an end in itself (Selbstzweck), the true realm of freedom . . . ” The antithesis of necessity and freedom makes it appear that the “living-fire” of labor will (and should) eventually turn to ashes.
Just as the role of labor—in pre-history and history—is paradoxical, so, too, the character of human intercourse in Marx’s thought is enigmatic.

Many readers of Marx have taken note of what can readily strike one as his assimilation of the concepts of *praxis* and *poiesis*, concepts kept distinct by Aristotle and by most of the pre-modern tradition. To these interpreters it appears that Marx in fact *obliterates* the Aristotelian notion of *praxis*, human action and interaction, both of which are choice-worthy ends immanently displayed in the activities themselves, in favor of *poiesis*, the production of an object given a standing in the world that is independent of its agent. While there is much to be said in support of this view, it seems to me far more plausible to interpret Marx as *subordinating praxis to poiesis*, rather than as *completely* submerging the former into the latter. In other terms, relations of production remain genuinely distinct from sources of production, however much those relations only come alive as a result of these forces. It is only insofar as one takes part in production that one can engage in truly “practical” intercourse with other agents. In *Wage-Labor and Capital*, Marx makes clear this dependency of *praxis* upon *poiesis*:

> In the process of production, human beings work not only upon nature, but also upon one another. They produce only by working together in a specified manner and reciprocally exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations to one another, and only within these social connections and relations does their influence upon nature operate, i.e., does production take place.62

Similarly, in the often ignored *finale* of Marx’s manuscript excerpts from, and commentary on, James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy* (dating from 1844), he recaptures the Hegelian motif of *Anerkennung*—recognition—in order to bring to light what human interaction would look like in fully human, unalienated, society. Here, too, the sentiments of mutual respect and even friendship, are anchored to success in *producing* humanly satisfactory objects.

> Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have: (1) objectified in my production my individuality and its peculiarity and thus both in my activity enjoyed an individual expression of my life and also in looking at the object have had the individual pleasure of realizing that my personality was objective, visible to the sense and thus a power raised beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realizing that I had both satisfied a human need by my work and also objectified the human essence and therefore

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fashioned for another human being the object that met his need. (3) I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species and thus been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own essence and a necessary part of yourself and have thus realized that I am confirmed both in your thought and your love. (4) In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realized my own essence, my human, my communal essence. In that case our products would be like so many mirrors, out of which our essence shone. Thus, in this relationship what occurred on my side would also occur on yours.33

If praxis, intercourse or human interaction, is tied to, subtended by, poiesis in these multiple ways, then the disappearance of poiesis, the eclipse of the “realm of necessity,” can only darken the riddle of social and political life. Marx seems both responsive to, and baffled by, this opacity when, in the Grundrisse, he takes up the question of the telos of total productiveness. While the modern world produces for the sake of abundance and wealth, for the ancients “the human being appears as the aim of production” (my emphasis).

In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form [of production] is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity’s own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human power as such the end in itself, not as measured on a pre-determined yardstick? Where does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?34

When the conquest of nature and, therewith, the total manifestation of human “essential powers” is complete, what basis remains for enactments of human praxis? If the “living fire” of material production has been quenched in the “realm of freedom,” then Marx has to be content with a premonition of Nietzsche: “To set the seal of being upon becoming—that is the supreme will to power.”35 Praxis, if ever freed from the constraints of necessitous poiesis, would, or so it appears, lose its orientation. This disorientation seems all the more likely inasmuch as praxis was never steered hitherto by a logos of its own, that is, by public or private language. The silence of production may have turned human praxis into more of a dumb-show, a pantomime, than an exchange of ‘telling speeches’. (Milton ‘produced’ Paradise Lost in the same way a
silk-worm produces silk.) It is difficult to know whether the “absolute movement of becoming,” celebrated by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, can be distinguished from what he elsewhere calls “*mors immortalis,*” the “undying death.” “There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction in social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement—*mors immortalis.*”

NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 37, translation modified. [All references have been supplied by the editors. It should be noted that the author frequently modified the existing translations—Eds.]

2. Ibid., p. 46.


5. *Grundrisse*, p. 89.

6. Ibid., pp. 300-1.

7. Ibid., p. 94.

8. Ibid., p. 92.


10. *Grundrisse*, p. 360. [The original has “tot an dem Stoff”—Eds.]

11. Ibid., p. 87.

12. Ibid., p. 84.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 329.

20. Ibid., p. 389.
22. Ibid., p. 390.
23. Ibid., p. 389.
24. Ibid., p. 328.
25. Ibid., p. 391.
34. Ibid., p. 399.
35. Ibid., p. 192.
36. Ibid., p. 359.
37. Ibid., p. 349.
38. [Reference unavailable—Eds.]
40. Ibid., pp. 287-8.
41. *German Ideology*, pp. 45-6.
42. *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 390, n. 1.
44. Ibid., p. 488.
45. Ibid., p. 485.
46. Ibid., p. 497.
47. [Reference unavailable—Eds.]


52. Ibid., p. 369.

53. Ibid., p. 374.

54. Ibid., p. 355.

55. *Grundrisse*, p. 308.

56. [Reference unavailable—Eds.]


59. Ibid., p. 509.

60. *Grundrisse*, p. 611.


64. *Grundrisse*, p. 488.
