

## Contribution to the discussion on "labor"

"Which labor [travail] do we want to put an end to ?" The question posed by Maxime, touches on a fundamental aspect of the revolutionary project: the organization of the production of the means of subsistence in a post-capitalist, a communist society.

Maxime wrote: *"In our recent exchange of ideas, we have often come back to the distinction between "liberating labor" and the " liberation of human beings from labor"; put somewhat differently, is the correct revolutionary slogan: "the abolition of wage-labor" (capitalist in its ultimate form) or this other one: "the abolition of labor as a whole"?"*

As I have already pointed out, this question can get lost in sterile misunderstandings if we do not agree on the meaning of "labor", if we do not specify at every opportunity in what sense this term is being used. For example, one finds in Marx, on the one hand, the idea of the necessity for "the abolition of labor" in a fully communist society and, on the other hand, the idea that "labor" will become "the first need of life". If one does not understand the word "labor" in its different senses in each formulation, one is in the presence of a gross contradiction. At another level, the slogan (which Maxime recalled), "No more labor!" written on the walls of Paris in May 1968 by the Situationists, for the "uninitiated", could mean "don't produce enough to meet your needs or those of society" or even "do not do anything that requires a sustained effort".

The word "labor" is particularly ambiguous, it has a huge number of meanings and this makes it essential not to get lost. This is not to reduce a complex problem to a simple question of semantics, but to get rid of semantic ambiguities to better address this issue. For purposes of the issue that concerns us here, I believe it essential to distinguish three principal meanings of the word "labor" [*le travail*].

### Labor as diligent [*assidu*] effort

The first is very general, not necessarily economic: *"Activity involving mental or physical exertion in order to accomplish/achieve a result."* (Oxford Dictionary).

The emphasis is on the fact that it is a sustained effort for a purpose, irrespective of the type of effort and whatever the objective pursued. When the poet takes up his pen, when the child begins his homework, or when the farmer gets on his tractor to plow, one says they are starting to "work" [*travail*].

Maxime repeatedly alludes to "effort", "diligent effort" suggesting – it seems to me -- that it is in this sense that Marx uses the word "labor" when he wrote in the 1844 Manuscripts that *"universal history is nothing but the generation of man by human labor"* (PL, II, p. 89) (\*). For Marx, -- Maxime writes -- *"the exercise of freedom and creation requires diligent effort and can, therefore, contain less pleasant moments where you have to fight the urge to relax. This effort, compelled only by our humanity (as distinct from Nature), is its origin."* (Maxime 7feb15)

### **Labor as "vital activity", "productive life"**

The second meaning is more restrictive, more "economic", but still very general. It refers to productive activity of the means necessary for the subsistence of the human being. Marx, in the 1844 Manuscripts, spoke of "*vital activity, productive life.*" (PL II, p. 63) It focuses on the differences with other activities such as artistic activities, "leisure" in general, which are not, at least directly, necessary to the production of means of subsistence. With this meaning the concept of "labor" refers to a type of activity that exists, even if in very different forms in every human society, since no one can live without means of subsistence. It is in this sense that it is used, for example, for the hunter-gatherers in the debate around the theses of Marshall Sahlins (emphasizing the very minor part played by "labor", the time dedicated to hunting and gathering in the life of primitive communities). I think it is in this sense too that Marx employs it when he writes, describing "*a higher phase of communist society*": "*when labor has become not only a way to live, but the first need of life.*" "Labor" which for Marx has become "*the first need of life*", is, indeed, the productive activity of subsistence in general ("*a means of living*"), but freed from the alienating scourges of the past and integrated, unified, with other forms of human activity. Agricultural production will become an artistic activity at the same time as the arts become as indispensable as food. It is the same for William Morris when he describes "labor" in a post-capitalist society as "a joy". We will return to this.

### **Labor as alienated activity**

The third meaning of the word "labor" is even more restrictive and means productive activity of the means of subsistence, such as it has been practiced in an alienated way in class divided societies. Labor is then associated with the reality of the systems based on exploitation where it is almost exclusively carried out by the "lower" classes. Therefore, the concept of labor is likened to that of suffering. In the Bible, when they are driven out of Eden, Eve was condemned to give birth in pain (also in French and English, the word "work" or "labor" describes the process of childbirth) and Adam had to "labor" to "earn his bread by the sweat of his brow." The word "labor" (trabajo in Spanish, trabalho in Portuguese) comes from the word *tripalium* which means an instrument of torture for slaves (1). The word "Arbeit" in German comes from the Indo-European root *orbho*, and in the Slavic languages, *robu*, which means *serf or slave*. For the Roman patricians or feudal aristocrats work is ignominious. It was not until capitalism that the concept of work is "valorized" and elevated to an ideal and moral foundation of society. In its time, Protestantism did much in this direction. In the twentieth century, the Soviet Stakhanovism, just like the motto "*Labor, Family, Fatherland*" of the Vichy government, or the cynical "*Arbeit macht frei*" inscribed at the entrance of Auschwitz and Dachau, expressed the same ideology. In capitalism the dehumanization of labor is raised to its highest degree, as evidenced by today's "anti-suicide" nets hanging on the outside walls of some factories in China.

If one understands "labor" as subsistence production under these forms of exploitation, of alienation, it is obvious that it will disappear in a post-capitalist, communist society. It is in this sense that Marx in using

the word "labor" wrote in 1845: "*Labor is by nature the subjugated, inhuman, antisocial, activity, determined and created by private property. Therefore, the abolition of property becomes a reality only if one conceives it as the abolition of labor.*" ("The National System of Political Economy" of Friedrich List, quoted by Maxime).

The word "labor" is too saturated with what it has been for millennia of exploitation, for it to be utilized to mean the productive activity of the means of subsistence in a society freed from private property and from exploitation.

It is surprising that Marx did not feel the need to be more attentive to the ambiguity of the concept in some of his formulations. However, he addresses the issue in a note at the beginning of the first book of *Capital*, related to the meaning of work in Adam Smith:

*"On the other hand, he [Adam Smith] insists, it is true, that all labor is only an expenditure of human labor power, as it is represented in the value of goods, but he understands this expense solely as sacrifice, a sacrifice of rest, freedom and happiness, and not at the same time as a normal affirmation of life. It is true he has in view the modern wage-worker."* (PL I, p. 575.)

That recalls the reproach made by Marx to Proudhon's "*seeing in poverty only poverty.*" Here, Marx criticizes Smith for not seeing in labor its aspect of a "*normal affirmation of life.*" Certainly he agrees with him that "*he has in view the modern wage-worker*" and that he is therefore at least partially right. But in doing so he affirms this idea that labor can be a vital affirmation.

In the 4th German edition of the first volume of *Capital*, Engels adds at that point a semantic note:

*"The English language has the advantage of having two different terms for these two different aspects of labor. The labor that creates use values and defines itself qualitatively is called work, in opposition to labor; the labor which creates values and is only measured quantitatively is called labor, as opposed to work."* (Engels, PL I, p. 1637).

I do not know enough about the nuances of the English language to fully determine what is at stake. The Oxford dictionary is content to define "*labour*" thusly: "*Work, especially physical work.*"

But Engels is right-- if I interpret his thought correctly -- to associate the aspect of labor as creator of use value to what Marx considers "*normal life affirming*" and to link its aspect as a creator of exchange value to that which Marx calls "*abnegation ... sacrifice of rest, freedom and happiness*".

But these remarks of Marx and Engels are not enough to correct the ambiguity that sometimes surrounds the use of the word labor.

Maxime agrees and proposes the following solution:

*"I think, for discussion and intervention, it is advantageous to simplify things by using two non-synonymous terms: we would keep "labor" to refer to tasks related directly or indirectly to production, circulation and provision of the means of subsistence, activities undoubtedly biologically essential but not enhancing the worthiness of the human being; inhuman, then, in Marx's sense, uninteresting, thus, to be reduced to the minimum in communism; we could adopt something like "oeuvre" -- following, why not,*

*the example of Hannah Arendt -- to describe in general the activity -- distinct from the previous activity -- that is interesting, human, because creative, communicative, not constrained and routine, etc. No matter the choice of words, in the end, it is sufficient that they cover indisputably distinct content. "* (8feb15)

Maxime also says:

*"Real human activity is creating for the pleasure of creating and to communicate with others, to flourish individually in a collectivity, to enjoy life so jubilantly with one's companions, just in itself, without any other necessity than that. It is to affirm one's humanity, including against nature. It is also, therefore, freedom. Freedom is the opposite of necessity which does not derive from the will of man, while necessity dictated to man by natural needs is external to him. It is extra-human in his expression of Gloses, Marx would have done better to write: "When work [oeuvre] which is no longer labor, since it's humanly free activity, will become the first vital need".*

These lines merit more comment. The first concerns the alternative freedom/ necessity.

### **The alternative freedom/necessity**

What Maxime considers an activity *"not enhancing the worthiness of the human being, inhuman in Marx's sense, uninteresting"* is not only exploited, alienated, labor, but the production of the means of subsistence in itself, (generic labor) even in a communist society. He bases this idea – which I do not share - on the antagonistic opposition between necessity and freedom, as Marx describes it in the famous conclusion of volume III of *Capital*.

*"In truth, the realm of freedom only starts where labor ceases to be dictated by necessity and external purposes. (...) Freedom in this domain can only consist in this: the associated producers – social human beings -- rationally regulate their interchanges with Nature, bringing them under their common control, instead of being ruled by the blind forces of these exchanges; and they achieve this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that expansion of human powers which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis." (PL II, pp. 1487-1488).*

The word "labor" is used here in the sense of producing sustenance in general, and not of alienated labor, as Marx describes what may be this activity when it is no longer dominated *"by the blind forces of these exchanges "*. However it is considered that it can not belong to the *"true realm of freedom"* because it is subject to *"the realm of necessity."* The whole of his reasoning is based on the antinomy between freedom and necessity. But the importance, the reality of this antinomy, is largely dependent on the conditions in which it arises. Necessity is opposed to freedom insofar as it appears as a constraint from which there is no escape. This constraint is even more real than its satisfaction that involves a painful unpleasant action that we would not want to undertake if we had freedom. But if the required output is achieved under conditions where it can be fulfilling, rewarding, pleasant, *"in keeping with human nature"* it can become a desirable activity, chosen and freely desired.

Maxime has cited interesting extracts from the *Critique of Economic Reason (Métamorphoses du travail)*, where André Gorz relativizes the pertinence of putting at the very heart of the problematic of labor precisely what he terms "the freedom/necessity couplet."

*"In Greek philosophy – Gorz writes -- freedom and necessity were opposites. The individual became free when he was relieved of the burden of daily necessities. In so far as the extent of these necessities grew as his needs grew, self-limitation and frugality were indispensable virtues for a free man. These virtues were not, however, enough. To free the individual from the grip of necessities, these had to be assumed for free men by a group of people who, by definition, were not free: slaves and women. (...)*

*The only important difference from Aristotle, is that the unfolding of freedom in Marx -- or in other words, in communist society, where the forces of production are fully developed – no longer presupposes that the burden of necessity should be shouldered by unfree social strata. The machine has taken the place of the slaves and the 'associated producers' organize themselves so as to reduce the necessary labor time 'to a minimum,' so that everyone can work, though only a little, and that everyone, alongside their work, can engage in activities which are themselves their own end. (...)*

*If, in Marx's day, the chief opposite of freedom was necessity, this was because labor [travail] for economic ends and labor for oneself in the domestic sphere both served essentially to produce what was necessary and allowed practically no time for anything else. (...)*

*Now the sphere of necessity today is neither so extensive as it was in Marx's day, nor does it have the same characteristics. Almost all of the production and jobs necessary for life are industrialized; the principal part of our needs is supplied by heteronomous labor, that is, by labor that is subject to a social division of labor, specialized and professionalized and performed with a view to commodity exchange; and neither the exchange-value of which, nor its length, nature, goal or meaning can be determined by us as sovereign individuals. ... We are therefore less in thrall to the 'necessities' of existence than to the external determination of our lives and our activity by the imperatives of a social apparatus of production and organization which provides willy-nilly both the essential and the superfluous, the productive and the destructive.*

*Therefore, in our daily experience, it is not so much the freedom/necessity distinction that is decisive, but the autonomy/heteronomy opposition. Freedom consists less (or rather consists less and less) in freeing ourselves from the labor necessary to live, and more in freeing ourselves from heteronomy, that is, in reconquering spaces of autonomy in which we can will what we are doing.*

*I refer to those activities which are their own end as autonomous activities (...) because the action which realizes the goal is as much a source of satisfaction as the achievement of the goal itself. The end is reflected in the means and vice versa. There is no difference between them: I can will the goal by virtue of the intrinsic worth of the activity that realizes it, and that activity by virtue of the goal sought."*

My second comment is in relation to the idea expressed by Maxime according to which "production, circulation ... and means of subsistence" is always "in Marx's sense inhuman", concerns the "generic" [species being] dimension of this activity.

## The "generic" dimension of the production of the means of subsistence

When Marx develops in the 1844 Manuscripts the different consequences of "alienated", "dispossessed", labor, he highlights four effects:

"1 *The relation of the worker to the product of labor as an alien object that holds him in thrall.*" His product becomes for him "contrary and hostile."

"2. *The relationship between labor and the act of production within labor; this is the relation of the worker to his own activity as alien, which is not his "own" (...) It is the **self-alienation** coming after the **alienation of the object.***" (...)

"3. *It transforms the **human species being**, its nature as well as its intellectual faculties, into a being alien to him, into an instrument of his individual existence. It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect.*"

"4. *Having been rendered foreign to the product of his labor, his life activity, his species-being, **man becomes foreign to himself.***" (Marx's emphasizing).

Here, it is first the third effect of alienated labor that interests us. (We will return later to the fourth). In general, the first two aspects of alienation, relative to the product and in relation to the act of production are known and cited. This is less the case for the third, with respect to the "human species being", "the human essence. Yet it is fundamental, and stems from the first two effects. It consists, as I understand it, in this. The true specificity of the human being, his "species" being, in relation to other animals is his ability to transform the world and consequently to transform himself, consciously, freely. It is through productive life that the human being can achieve this capability. But in alienated labor, this activity is experienced only as a way to earn his immediate living, a simple livelihood, with virtually no control over the purpose and manner of his activity. That – one's "livelihood" -- has nothing to do with the free and conscious will to achieve one's most powerful and specific capacity: to transform the world and him/herself. His most genuine need, the most in line with one's potential is denied, annihilated, in favor of the expedient of physical survival.

Marx wrote "*productive life is the life of the species; it is life creative of life . The mode of vital activity shapes the whole character of a species, its species being ...*"

"*It is precisely by shaping the world of objects that man begins to assert himself as a species-being. This production is his creative species life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is **the realization of man's species being**. Man not only recreates himself in an intellectual way, in his consciousness, but actively, actually, and he contemplates himself in a world of his creation. By taking from man the object of his production, alienated labor steals his species-being, his true general objectivity and in stealing his inorganic body, his nature, it turns into a disadvantage the human beings advantage over the animal.*"

Similarly, by degrading free, creative, activity, to the rank of a means, alienated labor makes his species being into an instrument of his physical existence.

In short, because of alienation, the awareness that man has of his species being is changing to the extent that it becomes just an instrument." (PL II, p.64)

"His labor [for the worker] is not voluntary, but forced. Forced labor is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means to satisfy needs outside of work." (PL II, p.61)

The "need" that is not satisfied, it is the need for humans to act voluntarily by creating a "world" and themselves, through their productive activity. It is this need which Marx said, over 30 years later, that in a communist society, it will become "*the first need of life*", and not just a means to live.

But to return to the original question of whether, as Maxime says, any activity that produces goods needed for subsistence is "*inhuman within Marx's meaning*", we do not see how "*creative species life*" could exclude all the concerns of the production of the means of subsistence merely because it corresponds to an immediate need. Production in a free society cannot deny this necessity; it integrates the effort for its satisfaction into a unified activity, across the universality of the human being.

In fact, Maxime, apparently in contradiction with what he has expressed elsewhere, also recognizes and clearly states the need for this unification:

"Labor --writes Maxime-- was an artificially separate activity (during certain developments of societies) from the rest of the activities of men, this separation having been extended by capitalism on the largest scale ever known. In this context, that separation of labor is a violent evil and the revolutionary resolution of the problem, in communism, can only return to the suppression of that separation; to its reintegration: the 'fabrication' at the same time at the same level, 'objects' of subsistence and of biological reproduction and the products of art in the broadest sense (including crafts), culture, leisure, political discussion, love, friendliness, etc. " ("What labor do we want to put an end to ?")

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William Morris, who wrote about productive activity in the future society, often insisted that the upheaval of what he still calls "*labor*" is the change that makes "*all the others possible*." (2) It is an idea that accords with what Marx wrote about the fourth effect of alienated labor, and that we have cited above:

"4. Being rendered alien to the product of his labor, his life activity, his species being, **man becomes alien to man.**"

Marx continues. "When face to face with himself, it is the **other** who is present before him. What is true of the relation of man to his labor and to himself, is true to his relation with others, and the labor and purpose of the others labor. In a general way, the proposition that man is estranged from his species-being means that men are rendered strangers to each other, and that each is rendered a stranger to the human essence."

There can be no conscious revolution as long as men remain "*strangers to each other*". On the overcoming of this atomization induced by alienated labor, of this fundamental change, depends, as Morris says, all the other changes.

This is a central, paramount question that must set the agenda from the first moments that the means of production are seized by the population. Unlike Stalinist ideologies that make the sacrifice by labor the cement of the construction of socialism, it is at the outset that the question of de-alienated productive activity must be an absolute priority.

At one point, Lenin was led to proclaim that he who does not labor should be shot on the spot. It is just the exact opposite: voluntary, free, productive activity is a prerequisite for the construction of an emancipated society.

With respect to what concerns us, thinking about what will be the future society, on what can be the revolutionary project today, it would be dangerous to confine ourselves to yet another exegesis of Marx's texts. This focus on a future society can only be fertile in actualizing, feeding on, the abundant material productive practices developed in the present movement of industrial revolution.

The *commons-based peer production* as we have seen it developing for over two decades, is a real germ of what can be productive activity in a communist society. We are speaking of the voluntary, non-commodity, "non-hierarchical", self-fulfilling production, that is at the center of the "hackers" logic; its "collaborative" practices. The concrete development of these new practices clashes with a thousand obstacles that the market and the oppressive context of the dominant system wields in order to confine them, while profiting from them. It confronts the difficulties of moving forward on issues of new organization (volunteer hierarchies, reconciling individual aspirations and collective efficiency, managing more menial tasks, etc.) with as a compass only some general principles and as a method collective experimentation, sharing without secrets, with the willingness to learn from mistakes. To pretend to address issues of "labor" in the future society, without reference to the experiences of these new practices in progress, is to deprive oneself of an indispensable source of lessons. (3)

Raoul Victor, June 2, 2015

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Notes

\* PL II : Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, Éditions Gallimard, *Karl Marx, Œuvres*, Tome II.

1. <http://www.qualiblog.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/tripalium.png>
2. See *News from Nowhere*, chap. XV.
3. Sebastien Brocca's book, *Utopie du logiciel libre – Du bricolage informatique à la réinvention sociale*, (Éditions Le passager clandestin, 2013) is particularly profound and interesting on these issues.

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