Marxian value theory: An anthropological perspective
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An anthropological perspective

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Abstract
Marx's critique of political economy and analysis of the capitalist mode of production are grounded in more general ideas about human activity and social organization that, taken together, constitute an anthropology which is applicable in principle to all social systems and forms of social production, including those that do not involve the production and exchange of commodities. Marx's anthropology is built upon general notions of production, need, value, semiotic mediation, exploitation, alienation, the role of subjective activity and consciousness, and the structural properties of systems of social production as totalities. This article attempts to abstract the general forms and principles of these notions in terms applicable to non-commodity producing social systems. It identifies Marx's formulation of value theory as the most encompassing organizational framework of his anthropological ideas.

Key Words
activity, Marx, semiotic mediation, value theory

The revival of interest in Marxian value theory has been one of the salutary recent developments in social theory. The recent interest in value theory in anthropology owes much to Marx's ideas (Turner, 1984, 2000). Anthropologists have been attracted to Marx's conception of value as an alternative approach to the integration of ideas of agency, action and social consciousness with social organization to that offered by 'practice theory' and earlier forms of anthropological Marxism. They have also been interested in the potential application of Marx's approach to value to the analysis of social production and values in non-capitalist societies. This article attempts to contribute to this set of issues by offering a contemporary anthropological perspective on some of the main ideas of Marx's value theory. The object of the exercise is to restate these aspects of the theory in more general terms that may render them more directly useful to anthropologists concerned with the comparative analysis of value in different types of productive regimes.
MARX'S CONCEPT OF VALUE AND MARX'S ANTHROPOLOGY

Marx's conception of value is a synthetic construct, bringing together the main ideas of his theoretical analysis of capitalist society and his more general anthropological concepts developed in his earlier writings. The critiques of Hegel, Feuerbach and the French philosophical materialists that Marx formulated in his works up to and including the *German Ideology* constitute a philosophical anthropology of universal scope, applicable in principle to all human societies. This anthropological dimension of Marx's notions of praxis, production, social consciousness and exploitation, among others, appears to support the thesis that the essential principles of Marx's formulations should prove applicable to all human societies, including relatively simple, non-commodity producing, kinship-based societies such as those traditionally studied by modern (if not post-modern) anthropologists.

Marx's early philosophical (or, as I have called them, anthropological) writings contain a number of ideas of central relevance to contemporary anthropological theory, which entered in different ways into the formation of his theory of value. They include the nature of human agency and activity as both subjective and objective, individual and social, material and ideal (in the sense of being consciously guided by representations of its relations to the object world and of the needs that arise from those relations). He developed a powerful and sophisticated analysis of the central role of semiotic representation in mediating and shaping material activity, and the ways ideological representation tends to objectify itself as the producer rather than the product of that activity and its social forms. Finally, Marx used the categories of his value analysis to formulate his solution to the great question to which Classical Political Economy had addressed itself without success: how to account for the unequal distribution of the wealth produced by labor among the classes of society, and the closely related question of how to explain the source of surplus value and thus of profit.

Marx's conception of value is the most direct link between his critical analyses of political economy, above all his analysis of capitalist production in *Capital*, *Grundrisse* and other relatively late works, and his more anthropological conceptions of the dialectical unity of subjective action, consciousness, material activity and social relations found in his earlier works. Marx's fullest development of what we may call his 'theory of value' in *Capital* is inseparable from his totalizing conception of the nature of social systems of production in the broadest sense, including their forms of semiotic representation and social consciousness, their relations of exploitation and their sources of historical instability and change.

The roots of the theory of value presented in the three volumes of *Capital* lie in the notions of praxis and production developed in his early works of philosophical anthropology up to, and culminating in, *The German Ideology*, the draft (written together with his friend Engels) of a general materialist theory of history (Tucker, 1978). In this work, Marx and Engels defined production as the fundamental process at the base of human society and its historical transformations. They described production as self-transforming social praxis that consists of four main aspects ('moments'): the production of means of material subsistence, including tools and techniques; the production of new needs, which give rise to new social relations; the production of human beings themselves (to this they added parenthetically 'the relation between husband and wife, parents and children, the family', in other words, kinship); and the production of the
different relations of social cooperation involved as a ‘productive force’ in their own right as part of each historical mode of production.

This passage is well known, but the second of the four historical ‘moments’ usually receives little attention, as it receives little elaboration in the text beyond the authors’ remark that new needs arise as a result of increases in population and form part of the development of successive modes of production. In his later studies of capitalism, however, and above all in Capital, Marx provides a more powerful example of the development of a new need: the need for the accumulation of capital. This becomes the supreme need that every capitalist must satisfy in order to survive in competition with other capitalists. It arises directly from the structure of capitalist relations of production and the organization of the capitalist system of production as a whole as a competitive struggle among independent capitals. This is the need that drives the exploitation of workers and the extraction of the maximum possible amount of surplus value from their labor. As such, it is on a different level from the more mundane needs for material subsistence and services satisfied by the commodities produced by capitalist firms. Rather, it is the structural necessity whose satisfaction constitutes the aim of all the productive activities comprising the capitalist system as a whole. It thus (an important point here for anthropological purposes) reflexively becomes the criterion for defining which activities count as ‘productive’ and therefore as creating value in a capitalist economy.

We thus arrive at a fundamental issue for the comparative anthropological study of production (and thus a fortiori of value). The definition of what counts as ‘production’ in any society is ethnographically inseparable from how it defines the need (or needs) that serve as the focus (or foci) of its productive activities. Extrapolating from Marx’s example of the need for the accumulation of capital in capitalism, I suggest that this overarching meta-need tends in most, if not all, modes of production to be identified with a relationship of exploitation in which a category, group or class that controls some critical means of production uses that control to extract a surplus from the labor of those whom the exploiter is able to control. In many if not all societies this surplus tends to be appropriated, not merely as a brute product, but in a form of value.

This, at any rate, is the working hypothesis I shall attempt to test in the following analysis of the Kayapo system of production and value. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate that the basic categories of Marxian value theory, such as ‘production’, ‘value’, ‘objectification’, and ‘circulation/exchange’, among others, must be treated as ethnographic variables that change their form and content in different types of societies and productive regimes, but that the general principles of Marx’s approach to value and its relation to the structures of social production may nevertheless apply, mutatis mutandis. I should explain that I do not offer the Kayapo as the type case of ‘pre-capitalist’ or ‘kinship-based’ social formations in contrast to the ideal type of capitalism as conceived by Marx. Rather, I wish to suggest the importance of taking each ethnographic case in its own terms as a basis for analyzing the manifold variations of form and content of sociocultural systems of productive activity, understood in broadly Marxian theoretical terms.
VALUE AS STRUCTURAL CONCEPT: QUANTITY, QUALITY, TOTALITY

The essence of Marx’s approach to value is that it is a relational aspect of a structure of interdependent productive activities, rather than a positive, inherent property of the labor invested in products. This was the basis of Marx’s critique of the ‘labor theory of value’ of Classical Political Economy, which defined value as a natural, intrinsic content of labor. Against this uncritical positivist approach, Marx reformulated the problem of value in structural terms as the question of why, in capitalism, value becomes the form of representation of labor. As Elson puts it, he thus created not a ‘labor theory of value’ but a ‘value theory of labor’ (Elson, 1979).

Consistent with this way of framing the issue, Marx insists that it is impossible to define the value of any product or commodity by itself on the basis of the quantity of labor used in its production, but only in terms of its relation with other products, where the amounts of productive labor embodied in each product appear as distinct quantitative proportions of a common qualitative substance shared by both products. The common substance identifies the whole or totality of which the products that serve as the contrastive terms of the value relation are parts. They thus become defined as contrastive quantitative proportions of a common qualitative content. ‘Value’ is this internal relation of quantitatively contrasting forms of appearance among entities sharing a qualitatively identical essence, where the essence (content) is socially necessary labor time and the form consists of contrasts among different proportions of that content embodied by different products of the same system or social totality.

For the purposes of Marx’s ‘value theory of labor’ as applied to the capitalist mode of production, the relevant whole is the capitalist system of commodity production. The social character of this system as a ‘whole’ or ‘totality’ follows, for Marx, from the pragmatic historical achievement of capitalism in creating a universal market for the exchange of commodities, including labor itself in its commodity form. In Marx’s view, in sum, the universal commodity market, with its associated forms of value and money, is the material social basis of the character of the capitalist system of commodity production as a ‘totality’ which encompasses the production of all commodities, and thus all value realized in the form of exchange value.

Note, however, that this totality does not include other forms of social production essential to the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist society. Domestic work of the kind traditionally done by women in the context of families and households, for example, is not performed for a wage and thus does not assume the character of a commodity with an exchange value. It can therefore make no contribution to the accumulation of capital, the criterion that any activity must satisfy to count as production in a capitalist system of production, even though it obviously makes a massive contribution to the production of the key commodity of such systems, labor power.

TOTALITY, VALUE AND THE LETTER TO KUGELMANN

It is at least plausible that analyses that start from these ethnographically grounded definitions of production and the values it generates in particular societies and modes of production may be able to account in Marxian terms for empirically attested phenomena such as the existence in non-commoditized productive systems of more concrete, substantively differentiated forms of value, each related to a structurally...
distinct sphere or mode of social production. In such cases, despite their differences from capitalism, the fundamental principles of Marx’s value analysis in *Capital*, as distinct from its specific forms, might nonetheless be found to apply. Marx himself suggested as much in a letter to his friend Kugelmann dated July 1868, in which he dismissed the failure of a reviewer of *Capital* to understand his analysis of value in the following terms:

The unfortunate fellow does not see that even if there were no chapter on value in my book, the analysis of the real relationships which I give would contain the proof and demonstration of the real value relation . . . Every child knows, too, that the mass of products corresponding to the different needs require different and quantitatively determined masses of the total labor of society. That *this necessity of distributing social labor in definite proportions cannot be done away with by the particular form of social production, but can only change the form it assumes*, is self-evident. No natural laws can be done away with. What can change, in changing historical circumstances, is the form in which these laws operate. And the form in which this proportional division of labor operates, in a state of society where the interconnection of social labor is manifested in the private quality of the individual products of labor, is precisely the exchange value of the products. (Marx, 1934, my emphasis)

The letter to Kugelmann is important as the only text, as far as I know, in which Marx affirms that the ‘value relation’, as he calls it, is a universal feature of human social organization, albeit in different ‘forms’ related to different ‘forms of social production’. The Kugelmann letter may thus be interpreted as a charter for a comparative investigation of the varying forms assumed by the ‘value relation’ in different societies. As such, it may be taken as an important foundational text for a Marxian anthropology. It is, however, a foundation on which Marx himself failed to build in his comparative anthropological study, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (Marx, 1965). In this text he abstracted from issues of value, and spoke of exploitation in other modes of production in terms of the direct appropriation of quantities of product without the mediation of forms of value. In this respect, Marx’s example has been followed by Marxist anthropologists from his time down to the present.

The present article is an attempt to reverse this history of avoidance, but in so doing it also seeks to avoid certain problems raised by the letter to Kugelmann. It will be noted, for instance, that the letter speaks of the ‘value relation’ but not ‘value’ *per se* as universal. This leaves open the question of how, or whether, the varying forms assumed by the value relation in different societies may be represented in varying forms of value, or indeed whether they may be represented at all – in which case it might be necessary to speak of instances of the ‘value relation’ in the absence of ‘value’. Simply to consider this possibility implies recognition that ‘value’ as a constituent of systems of social production consists essentially of forms of representation, and therefore requires to be defined and analyzed in each ethnographic case by taking account of the system of collective representations or semiotic media by means of which it is defined and circulated.

There is also an unresolved question about the nature and role of needs. Marx in his letter to Kugelmann speaks of ‘the mass of products corresponding to the different needs’, but mentions no independent basis for defining the needs in question. The result
is an implicitly tautologous formulation. The various social needs are defined and ‘quantitatively determined’, so far as the external observer is concerned, by the ‘mass of products’ produced for their satisfaction. By this standard, any need served by any activity, again by an external observer, may be deemed to form part of the set of needs that determines the distribution of labor and is thus socially recognized as a part of the ‘value relation’ of the system in question. By this standard, domestic labor in capitalist society, or the unproductive labor of soldiers and bureaucrats, would count as productive labor constituting part of the ‘value relation’ of the capitalist system of production. What is missing is a recognition of the indispensable role of representation and semiotic media in defining what activities count as productive (and thus as producing value). By omitting any reference to the role of the semiotic medium of value, the letter may be taken to imply that values or, by implication, the value relation are directly determined without the mediation of a social medium of representation, by the distribution of labor, in a manner analogous to the Ricardian ‘labor theory of value’. 

Related to this question is the crucial issue of how the ‘distribution of social labor in definite proportions’ is conceived to be accomplished. Since Marx omits to mention the possible roles of semiotic media of representation, circulation and exchange or specific institutional frameworks, such as markets or redistributive states, through which this can be effected, the letter may leave the impression that ‘the different needs’ act directly, in an unmediated fashion, to determine the ‘masses’ of productive activity allotted to them. The result would be a functionalist formulation in which ‘needs’ are conceived as given independently of the system of productive activities, and as directly determining the structure of the total system of production. This, as I noted earlier, is inconsistent with Marx’s way of conceiving the relation of needs and productive activity.

Against these misinterpretations, the Marxist economist Diane Elson has argued that Marx’s conception of value, which she calls his ‘value theory of labor’ is rooted in the idea that the production of value is simultaneously a process of producing the social system of production itself as well as the production of commodities within that structure of relations (Elson, 1979: 124). In the capitalist system, this means that the distribution of productive labor in differing proportions among sectors of the economy happens as part of the same process that (re-)produces the relations of exchange among different sectors of production themselves, as each sector takes from the others such inputs as it needs and sells its products as outputs to the others.

Marx worked out his ideas of this process of exchange between economic sectors in the reproduction models published in Volume II of Capital, which he had already drafted when Volume I was published. At any rate, the general outlines of his conception are implicit in his discussion of the circuit of capital in Volume I.

It might seem disproportionate to devote so much critical exegesis to what was after all only a brief private letter, but the problems it can be interpreted to raise about Marx’s notions of value as a relation among proportions of social labor that form parts of the same totality have given rise to considerable confusion that has, for some, obscured the nature and value of Marx’s ideas on the subject. It should be remembered that in his letter to Kugelmann Marx is seeking to make his point that ‘the real value relation’, as he calls it, would be evident from his analysis of the ‘real relations’ of production in the system as a whole even if his chapter on value were excised from the book. It is in this chapter that Marx introduces the idea that value, as distinct from the ‘value relation’,
comes into existence when one commodity (e.g. 20 yards of linen) is used as representation or sign for the value of another (e.g. one coat), thus setting up his general discussion of the role of money as a ‘general commodity’ employed as a medium of representation and exchange (Marx, 1976). The ‘value relation’ (the relation between quantitative proportions of a common qualitative substance, which constitutes a totality) is identical at the levels of the relation between individual commodities mediated by money and at that of the distribution of masses of social labor among whole sectors of production, but only the former case involves ‘value’ as such, which consists in the representation of that relation by one commodity serving as a sign of the quantity of the common substance (socially necessary labor time) embodied by another.

Value, in sum, is a special form of representation, which requires a medium of representation. In capitalism and other forms of commodity production, this is money, which begins its historical development as a commodity on the same footing as others but becomes specialized as the ‘general commodity’ for the purpose of facilitating the exchange of other commodities as commodity production and markets develop into capitalism. This point may serve to introduce a discussion of Marx’s analysis of the central role of representation and semiotic mediation in his conceptualization of value, and more generally in the social organization of production.

THE SEMIOTIC REPRESENTATION AND MEDIATION OF VALUE
Marx understood the structure of systems of production, including their different variants of the ‘real value relation’, as an emergent property of the spontaneous self-organization of productive activities into an interdependent social system. Marx conceived this process of self-organization, however, as consisting of the activities of human subjects (individual and collective), oriented and motivated by their ideological representations of social reality. Among these, the representations of value transmitted by specialized media of circulation (such as money in commodity-producing societies) play a uniquely important role.

As a medium or representation (the aspect of money the Classical political economists called ‘the measure of value’), the money medium serves both to represent the quantitative amount of the common value content embodied in individual products, and the qualitative nature of the value of that content. This quantitative aspect may be divided into two complementary levels: on the one hand, the direct equivalence of the total quantity of the medium in circulation with the totality of commodity production; and on the other, the formal subdivision of the medium into categories (that is, monetary denominations) embodying differential quantitative levels or proportions of itself. As a medium of circulation, money makes possible the form of universal commodity exchange that is the basis of the institution of the capitalist market, with its generalized degrees of freedom with respect to the time of exchange (the transaction need not be completed when it is initiated, and both payment and delivery may be variously prorated, or credit given), the items exchanged (a virtually infinite variety of commodities may be exchanged for money, and there are no prescriptive limitations on the size of transactions); and the terms of exchange (virtually anyone may enter the market as buyer or seller without regard to social status or condition).

The development of a semiotic medium with these qualitative and quantitative properties was, for Marx, the necessary condition for the development of the capitalist
system of interdependent, concretely differentiated productive labors capable of exchanging their products according to a common calculus of value and – the essential step to full capitalism – subsuming productive labor itself under the same calculus (Marx, 1976: 162, 188–246). Circulation and exchange on the scale of a generalized system of commodity production such as capitalism is only possible through the intermediacy of such a semiotic medium. For the medium to play this role, however, Marx emphasized that it had to take on the structural properties of the system of social relations it mediated, both in its aspect as collective representation and as medium of exchange, in both cases with the requisite properties of generality and abstraction. The semiotic medium, in other words, could become effective only by itself becoming an iconic as well as an indexical symbol of the material activity it mediates.

Money in capitalist economies, in other words, is obliged to represent the value of commodities in terms of a category of productive labor sufficiently abstract and general to serve as a common denominator for the values of commodities produced by the whole range of concretely differing productive labors. Marx called this category ‘abstract labor’, which he defined as ‘socially necessary labor time’. This is not the pan-historical category of ‘labor’ employed in the Classical labor theory of value, but a historically specific form of ‘labor’, identified with equally specific capitalist forms of ‘value’ and money.

As a medium of exchange, money functions as ‘representation’ in a double sense: not only as a ‘measure’ of the value of the commodity offered for sale, but also of the equivalent value possessed by the prospective buyer that he offers to give in exchange. As we have seen, Marx insisted on the structural or relative character of value as a comparative relation between products or their monetary equivalents. The semiotic medium of representation of value (money), as Marx conceived it, plays an indispensable part in formulating such relations and thus in making value possible.

For this relation between products to be concretely realized, and thus for value to come into material existence, however, it is necessary for the product and the proportions of productive social activity they embody to be concretely integrated into the totality of social production (in its consummated aspect as the total product of that labor), since it is only at this point that it actually becomes a part or proportion of that whole. In a system of generalized commodity production like capitalism, this means the point of exchange. Value, as an aspect of the capitalist structure of production, can thus only come into concrete existence in the form of exchange value. Exchange value, in turn, can only appear in the form in which it is symbolically represented in the act of exchange, or for some types of production, public circulation.

‘Realization’ in this context refers to the pragmatic integration of the commodity and its embodied value into the total system of productive (need-satisfying) labor; in other words, the production of the structure of social production as a whole, as called for by Elson in her critique of the letter to Kugelmann. The point can be stated in general terms as the proposition that products realize their embodied values through circulation and consumption (which may involve public recognition in the case of performances or artistic production and may or may not involve exchange), where they become directly compared with other products and their embodied values, and at the same time pragmatically integrated into the social system of production as a whole.
In this regard, the medium of representation acts in the exchange or circulation of products in a performative way, enabling the exchange of values it represents to take place. It serves, in other words, not only to represent the amount of value to be transacted in a given exchange, but also acts as the precondition for the exchange, and thus the realization of that value, to take place (Marx, 1971, 1976: 221–6; De Vroey, 1981). Marx, in other words, considered the representation of value by the money medium not as a reflection of an independently existing property of commodities, but rather as the means by which that property is brought into being or ‘realized’ in practice. In this sense, Banaji is correct when he says that ‘logically it is impossible to understand Marx’s theory of value except as his theory of money’ (Banaji, 1979).

The money medium, as the ‘universal commodity’, participates in the ‘fetishism of commodities’. Considered as a repository of value, it becomes regarded as an object of accumulation in and of itself. This is not merely a question of miserly psychopathology. Marx argued that the hoarding of money constituted a regular part of economic activity, and even played a decisive role in the business cycle, when the withdrawal of too much money from circulation by hoarders seeking to protect themselves from financial instability can precipitate a turn from an overextended boom to a depressive bust.

The phenomenon of monetary hoarding may take on affinities with the ‘conspicuous consumption’ of luxury commodities. In both cases, symbolic objects (monetary tokens of value, consumer commodities) are objectified as sources of value in themselves. As such, their possession becomes a mark of status, raising the social value of the person who covertly or overtly owns or controls an impressive quantity of economic value.

MARX’S APPROACH TO VALUE AS ‘PRAXIS THEORY’ VS ‘PRACTICE THEORY’

As a semiotic representation of a relation among commodities, value is a form of social consciousness. As such, it is both a representation of an existing class of objects and a goal (and thus a constituent) of social activity. It is thus not merely a semiotic construction of the objective structural properties of the relations of production and exchange, but an object of subjective struggles to acquire and accumulate that drive the entire system of social production.

Value and its semiotic representations thus figure both as the emergent products of activity and the goals or purposes towards which that activity is directed. The production of value is an integral aspect of the activities that produce and reproduce the social relations of production, and as such become the schemas of social consciousness of those relations and their products. Marx’s conception of value thus constitutes the frame of his conception of the relation between the semiotic forms of social consciousness (‘collective representations’), the social organization of productive activity, and the subjective formation of social agents and their intentions.

Marx did not conceive of social systems as self-existing or self-reproducing structures without allowing for a consequential role for conscious human subjects as agents. In contrast to structuralist Marxist approaches and neo-Durkheimian ‘practice theory’, with their conceptions of ‘structuration’, ‘habitus’, ‘interpellation’ and closed cycles of ‘internalization’ and ‘externalization’, in which social structures appear as self-acting, with pseudo-agentive powers to create the human actors needed to reproduce them, Marx’s value theory may be understood as a form of ‘praxis theory’ that includes a
sophisticated account of the consciousness and will to act of social persons as agents. Unlike any of the other theories mentioned, it provides explanations for the distortions of actors’ consciousness of the social and historical process in which they must act as they attempt to manipulate the system to diminish or amplify its inequities.

**VALUE AS COSMOLOGY**

Marx’s definition of value in capitalism as ‘socially necessary labor time’, that is, a duration of productive activity of a specified (‘socially necessary’) intensity, is actually a synthetic category of space-time. ‘Social necessity’ refers to the established standard of intensity of the transference of energy (work) from producer to product. It is thus logically speaking a spatial relationship, defined with reference to duration, as the relevant aspect of time. Marx’s conception of value thus entails and includes a conception of the social representation of space and time as linked aspects of the process of socially productive activity. The essence of this conception is that a society’s categories of space and time are formed as schemas of the corresponding aspects of its standardized productive activities. In capitalism, where all labor is treated as a homogeneous commodity (abstract labor) irrespective of the multifarious concrete forms it assumes in practice, and where it is therefore defined at a high level of abstraction, one finds spatio-temporal categories of an abstract, universal and quantitatively precisely articulated (infinitely divisible and expandable) character. These representational properties are paralleled by the properties of the representational medium that embodies these categories as a medium of circulation: universal exchangeability, making possible infinite ‘degrees of freedom’ with respect to the time, terms and items of exchange.

**SURPLUS VALUE, EXPLOITATION AND THE ALIENATION OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The production of value is an organized social activity that simultaneously produces and reproduces the social relations and institutional structures of production and the forms of social consciousness of this activity. Marx accordingly framed his value analysis, culminating in his explanation of the source of surplus value, with a double focus: both as an analysis of the objective economic relations of capitalist production and as a critical analysis of the forms of consciousness of these social relations that are produced within the system and form an essential part of it. The most important of these are those that represent exploitation as fair exchange and thus, by disguising the central inequity of the system, become the most potent forces for its preservation.

Marx regarded capitalism as a system based on alienation in two interdependent respects: exploitation, or the alienation of surplus product at the level of the social relations of production, and the alienation of consciousness manifested in phenomena such as the fetishism of commodities and the ideological mystification of the categories of bourgeois political economy. Exploitation occurs when owners of the means of production (capitalists, in capitalism), as ‘indirect producers’, appropriate for themselves a portion of the product of workers (the ‘direct producers’). The direct producers are obliged to allow this expropriation because the indirect producers, as a class, control essential means of production they require to be able to work. They are thus obliged to do so on the exploitative terms imposed by the indirect producers.
Marx, however, discerned a second, more insidious reason for the willingness of the direct producers to subordinate themselves to the productive regime dominated by the indirect producers. This is the misperception on the part of both classes of direct and direct producers of the real source of the value of the work performed by the former for the latter. In systems of commodity production, where workers produce products ('commodities') for exchange rather than for their own use, the category of value becomes bifurcated into aspects he called 'use value' and 'exchange value'. In such systems, Marx argued, the exchange value of commodities tends to be perceived as deriving from their use value to the consumers who pay for and use them. This is because it is only through purchase by a consumer that the value latent in a product is 'realized' in specific terms by being exchanged for money and thus made part of the totality of social production in concrete rather than merely potential (abstract) terms. In capitalism, where labor is a commodity, capitalists are consumers of labor, and pay for it with the wage. Its use value to them is the production of goods and services – other commodities, which they can then sell on the market. Both workers and capitalists, as socialized members of a commodity-producing society, therefore tend to accept that the value of labor is represented by its commodity price, the wage, and thus also that the magnitude of its value is represented by the quantity of the wage.

Marx argued, however, that this view is based on a fundamental error. The value of commodities, he showed, is determined not by their use value, or the price they may fetch as commodities, but by the relative quantity of socially necessary labor time it took to produce them. The value of labor as a commodity is thus determined by the relative quantity of socially necessary labor time required to produce it, that is, the ability to do work, or what Marx called 'labor power'. This quantity is less by a significant margin than the relative quantity of labor time the worker is obliged to expend for the capitalist who buys his labor power for the wage. That quantity – the difference between the magnitude of the wage and the magnitude of value produced by the concrete labor the worker performs for the capitalist – is a surplus, and the increment of value involved is the surplus value.

For Marx, the creation of value is the essential content of capitalist production, and the creation and appropriation of surplus value is its central focus. Marx's explanation of the source of surplus value rests on his distinction between labor power and concrete labor as commodities. Labor power is defined as the ability of a worker to perform work. It requires a certain level of produced goods to maintain (shelter, clothing, food and so on) and thus has a certain labor value. Marx's great insight was that what laborers sell to the capitalist in exchange for the wage is their labor power, that is their abstract capacity to work, rather than their concrete labor (the work they actually perform). The wage, Marx argued, tends to be an equitable recompense for the exchange value of the worker's labor power. It corresponds, in other words, to the exchange value of the socially necessary labor time required to produce the food, shelter, clothing and other necessities that make possible the reproduction of the worker's capacity to work.

Labor power in capitalism is thus no exception to the 'law of value', which holds that all commodities, of which labor power is one, tend to exchange at their labor values (I abstract here for convenience of exposition from the complications introduced by inequalities in the organic composition of capital). The capitalist who buys the worker's labor power is then the owner of this commodity, and has the use of it. The 'use-value'
of labor power to the capitalist is to realize itself in the form of concrete labor, that is, to assume the form of products the total exchange value of which is in excess of the exchange value of labor power. The increment of exchange value between labor power as the commodity exchanged for the wage and its realization as concrete labor in the form of the commodities it is employed to produce constitutes a surplus of value, and this is the surplus that is appropriated by the capitalist: the ‘surplus value’ that is the source of profit.

Capitalism is thus analyzed by Marx as a system of commodity production that creates a surplus through the differentiation of the exchange-value and use-value of labor as a commodity. This surplus is appropriated in a form of value (that mediated by the money medium of exchange), but in such a way that the true source of value becomes invisible to those who produce it. Instead, it gives rise to a distorted form of social consciousness that locates the source of value in the utility of commodities to consumers (such as the use-value of concrete labor to the capitalists who employ it). This distortion of social consciousness, which Marx called ‘the fetishism of commodities’, is a form of alienation in which producers attribute their own productive contribution to the value of their products to their commodity forms as objects of exchange. Thus the value of their own powers of production, their ‘labor power’, is thought to be determined by the wage, which is the exchange value it fetches on the market by virtue of the labor power required to produce it, rather than the exchange value of the products it is used to produce for the capitalist who pays the wage. The ‘fetishism of commodities’, in other words, is essentially a confusion about the nature and sources of value. This confusion, Marx argued, has the effect of ‘naturalizing’ the relation of exploitation and thus promoting its acceptance by those who might otherwise resist it.

CONCLUSION
In this article I have sought to abstract the general principles of Marx’s approach to value in terms of a structural analysis of total systems of productive activity, where ‘production’ is defined in terms of the satisfaction of the needs of individual persons and the meta-needs of those who control key aspects of the relations of production and use that control to extract a surplus in the form of value from direct producers. This approach via the dialectical notion of social systems as totalities is in turn predicated on a conception of the role of semiotic media of representation of value as indispensable means of circulation and exchange. ‘Value’ is the form in which such media represent what Marx called ‘the value relation’, or the distribution of the total social labor in different proportions to the production of different commodities and sectors of production, in ways that ultimately lead to the distribution of the values produced in different proportions to different groups or classes of society. Marx’s approach emphasized that the media of representation of value tend to become objects of accumulation in their own right and thereby promote the development of forms of social consciousness based on the alienation of subjective awareness of the real source of value in human (social) productivity. These principles may be applied to the analysis of any social-cultural system, including those that do not produce commodities for exchange. I have attempted to demonstrate the utility of such an application in analyses of indigenous Amazonian societies (Turner, 1979a, 1979b, 1984, 1995, 2000, 2003).
References


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