The dual character of the labour embodied in commodities

Concrete useful labour: purposeful activity that creates use values (i.e. shoemaker’s or carpenter’s labour; the labour of a teacher or IT programmer; etc.)

Abstract human labour: human labour as such, meaning in abstraction from concrete activity

Concrete labour must be recognized as abstract labour – labour as such – in exchange. Otherwise it is not constitutive of value and hence useless (in the capitalist sense).

... crucial to an understanding of political economy ...

(p. 132)
Concrete useful labour

The social division of labour

We use the abbreviated expression «useful labour» for labour whose utility is represented by the use-value of its product. (p. 132)

Labour, then, as the creator of use-values, as useful labour, is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself. (p. 133)
Abstract human labour

★ Is the «reduction to homogeneous human labour», to *labour as such*;
★ labour considered as «human labour power expended without regard to the form [=manner] of its expenditure»;
★ a purely social determination;
★ something specific to capitalist commodity production;
★ is distinct from the specific expression of concrete activity (carpentry, tailoring, driving a taxi, philosophizing) or its character (sweat-inducing, boring, diverse, intellectual, simple, or complex).

Only as abstract labour is it the *substance of value*.

But how is the quantitative aspect of value creation determined?
The value constituting substance

The extent to which individual concrete labour is recognized as abstract human labour is first shown in exchange.

Because different acts of labour – to the extent that they constitute value – are qualitatively equal, they can be quantitatively compared. The magnitude of a commodity’s value depends on how much equalized labour is contained within it.

In exchange (i.e. this act of equalization), three reductions occur:

★ Distinct individual labour expenditure is reduced to average socially necessary labour (technology, skill, knowledge, productivity).

★ Complex labour is reduced to simple labour (the former is merely a multiple of the latter) – depending upon social conventions, power relations, gender hierarchies, etc.

★ Privately expended labour is reduced to socially necessary labour («use-value for others»: total social demand must be present).
How does this reduction function?

The various proportions in which different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers; these proportions therefore appear to the producers to have been handed down by tradition. (p. 135)
The reductions

$x \text{ Commodity } A = y \text{ Commodity } B$

concrete/individual labour = concrete/individual labour

qualitatively & quantitatively comparable

abstract labour

The carpenter

individually necessary concrete labour

social average

supply corresponds to demand

carpentry considered complex labour

5 hrs.

average socially necessary labour time

relation between supply and paying demand («use-value for others»)

reduction from complex to simple labour

counts as

4 Exchange

abstract value creating labour = abstract value creating labour

The tailor

individually necessary concrete labour

social average

supply corresponds to demand

tailoring considered simple labour

6 hrs.

amount of supply is double the demand

counts as

4

4
All labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being [...] abstract human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values.

(p. 137)