

On Materiality and Social Form: A Political Critique of Rubin's Value-Form Theory

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Abstract

This paper critically examines I.I. Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* and argues that two different approaches to value theory can be found in that book: a more 'production-centred' value-form theory uneasily co-exists with a 'circulationist' perspective. This unresolved tension, the authors claim, reflects a more general theoretical shortcoming in Rubin's work, namely, a problematic conceptualisation of the inner connection between materiality and social form that eventually leads to a formalist perspective on the value-form. Furthermore, the paper argues that all those antinomies are an expression of the historical and political context underlying Rubin's work, in which Marxism was being codified as state ideology. The political implications of Rubin's formalism are explored through the critical examination of its consequences for the comprehension of the social determinations of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class.

Keywords

value-form, abstract labour, Isaak I. Rubin, Circulationism, materiality/social form

Introduction

The early 1970s saw a resurgence of interest among Marxist theorists in revisiting Marx's analysis of the commodity contained in Chapter One of *Capital*. The guiding thread of this reconsideration of Marx's main work was the reaction to what was seen as the (mis)reading of his work along Ricardian and/or left-Keynesian lines throughout much of the twentieth century. This debate gained momentum over the following two decades, engendering a variety of novel interpretations of Marx's theory of value. However, since the late 1990s, the vitality of the debate appears to have faded away and the issue came again to be increasingly consigned to oblivion, as evidenced by its loss of importance in academic journals and conferences.¹ In this paper we shall insist

1. The debate has been kept more or less alive by a small group of theorists associated with the International Working Group on Value Theory (www.iwgtv.org) and by those gathering

on the primordial importance of a debate which, we believe, is far from being resolved.

The eminently political nature of the debate on value theory was consciously recognised by those who took part in that early stage of its resurgence in the 1970s.² However, the failure of many of the contributions to establish a firm link with the concrete forms of the political action of the working class generated the appearance that the debate was an abstract scholastic dispute, irrelevant for those outside academic circles.³

The object of this paper is to bring politics back into value theory. This shall be done through a discussion of a particular version of value-form theory which, as we argue below, can be said to contain the germ of contemporary ‘circulationist’ interpretations: Isaak Illich Rubin’s *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*.

In a nutshell, one central theoretical idea characterises Rubin’s circulationist perspective, namely, the argument that abstract labour and value can only acquire reality through the exchange of products against money. It is this line of reasoning that inspired most of the contemporary circulationist readings of Rubin’s work.⁴ However, as Mavroudeas points out, Rubin’s interpretation of Marx’s value theory is more nuanced and has actually been misappropriated by many of his modern disciples.⁵ In effect, he notes that it is possible to find places where Rubin himself seems to disagree with the circulationist line of argument.

Now, although we concur with Mavroudeas on the existence of a more ‘production-centred’ Rubin, we do not think that one can read his work simply along those lines. Instead, it will be argued that *both* readings of the *Essays* are possible. And the reason for this is that, in the book, circulationist

around the International Symposium on Marxian Theory. The latter’s works have been published in a series of books about the three volumes of *Capital*. See Bellofiore and Taylor (eds.) 2004, Campbell and Reuten (eds.) 2002, Arthur and Reuten (eds.) 1998.

2. Clarke 1980.

3. Mohun 1994, p. 4.

4. The contemporary circulationist approach is sometimes associated with a group of theorists inspired by Backhaus’s pioneering work from the 1960s (Backhaus 1980), and which was developed in the English-speaking world firstly by Eldred and Haldon 1981 and, more recently, by Reuten and Williams (Reuten 1988, Reuten and Williams 1989, Reuten 1993). In addition to their circulationism, these contributions also share a methodological preoccupation with the reconstruction of Marx’s critique of political economy along ‘systematic-dialectical’ lines. However, the central substantive aspects of the approach can be found in a broader number of authors writing from rather diverse methodological traditions and which include, among others: Himmelweit and Mohun 1978, de Vroey 1982, Kay 1999, Lipietz 1982 and Roberts 2004.

5. Mavroudeas 2004, p. 189.

passages uneasily co-exist with numerous other places where the opposite perspective seems to prevail.

In this paper we provide an interpretative hypothesis to solve this apparent paradox. We argue that two different theoretico-political imperatives underlie the *Essays*. On the one hand, the book constituted an attempt to provide a response to the attacks on Marx's analysis of the value-form; in particular, those systematised by Böhm-Bawerk's *Karl Marx and the Close of His System*.⁶ Thus, Rubín observes that most widespread interpretations of Marx's work, both within and outside Marxism – for instance, among popular versions of Marx's work – took as their starting point the identification of value simply with embodied labour.⁷ It is this imperative that would lead Rubín to emphasise the importance of the notion of specific social form and, eventually, to a circulationist argument. On the other hand, and maybe under the pressure of a political context in which Marxism was undergoing a process of codification as state ideology, Rubín seems to have felt obliged not to give up his 'orthodox credentials'. This led him both (formally) to recognise the centrality of the productive forces and to provide a more 'production-centred' approach. As we shall see below, Rubín's attempt to sustain both viewpoints results in a conceptual tension that he was unable to resolve in any consistent fashion. In effect, a close scrutiny of Rubín's *Essays* reveals a broader theoretical question underlying his otherwise pertinent emphasis on the fundamental importance on the notion of social form, namely a problematic conception of the place of the material determinations of human life in the critique of political economy. In turn, an expression of what ultimately is a formalist approach to the value-form.

Furthermore, this engagement with Rubín's work will also allow us to uncover a 'darker' side of his intervention, which is hardly mentioned in the literature that recovered his thought, and which is of paramount importance for any attempt at a politically-inspired critique. We are referring to the practical implications of such a formalist approach. In particular, we shall argue that, when we take into consideration the historical and political context of Rubín's thought, his form-analytical approach is not as radical as it is usually assumed. This critique is then necessary in order to avoid an uncritical appropriation of his thought that reproduces the latter's shortcomings. Thus, the final part of this paper also examines the consequences of Rubín's formalism for the comprehension of the social determinations of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class.⁸

6. Böhm-Bawerk 1975.

7. Rubín 1973, p. 62.

8. For the general methodological approach to the critique of political economy as practical criticism this paper draws on the work of Íñigo Carrera (2003). In English, see Starosta 2005 for a detailed reconstruction of Marx's *Capital* along those lines.

The antinomies of Rubin's thought

The value-form and the social productive forces of the human individual

Compared with more recent formulations of the circulationist approach – such as the value-form school deriving from Backhaus mentioned above, with their characteristic extreme formalism in the understanding of the value-form⁹ – Rubin's point of departure in the *Essays* appears, at first sight, as thoroughly materialist. In effect, unlike many other contributions to value-form theory, Rubin's presentation starts out by explicitly posing the problem of value in relation to the more abstract determinations of human life giving content to its history, namely: the development of the productive powers of the social individual as a working subject. Thus, after referring approvingly to Hilferding's views of this question, Rubin states:

The capitalist economy represents a union of the material-technological process and its social forms, i.e. the totality of production relations among people. The concrete activities of people in the material-technical production process presuppose concrete production relations among them, and vice versa. The ultimate goal of science is to understand the capitalist economy as a whole, as a specific system of productive forces and production relations among people.¹⁰

Yet, we think that, on further inspection of Rubin's argument, these initial words on the ultimate goal of science turn out to be an unfulfilled promise. The conceptual tensions in his value-form approach eventually appear, and his attempt to grasp the unity of the capitalist economy as a whole – that is, the inner connection between its specific productive forces and social relations – ends up as an utter failure. In our view, these initial references to the productive forces reflect more Rubin's struggle to keep in line with the 'orthodox' imperative mentioned above than a genuine attempt to integrate the discussion of the capitalist productive forces into the heart of the critique of political economy.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the discussion of the connection between productive forces and social relations is developed in the introduction to the book. And, on this score, Rubin's text can hardly be distinguished from any other contribution to the vulgate dominating much Marxist theorising of those times, and which would eventually crystallise as the Marxist orthodoxy of the twentieth century. This involves a dogmatic starting point with the

9. Likitkijsonboon 1995, p. 92.

10. Rubin 1973, p. 1.

enunciation of the ‘principles of historical materialism’, as allegedly laid out by Marx in the 1859 ‘Preface’ to the *Contribution*, in order to only then move to the concrete question at stake (in this case, Marx’s theory of value). In fact, it is worth noting that in these passages Rubin almost paraphrases the 1859 ‘Preface’.¹¹ In other words, Rubin is prepared to deal with the productive forces only when discussing abstract generalities.¹² But, as we argue further on, Rubin cannot say anything significant about the specific qualitative determinations of the materiality of the capitalist productive forces and even less so about their inner connection with the determinations of the value-form of the product of labour.

In fact, one could argue that the whole point of Rubin’s vague reference to the productive forces – that is his purely general and formal acknowledgement of their determination as the content of human practice, whose organisation and development takes the necessary concrete form of historically-changing relations of production – is not to put them at the centre of his scientific enterprise, but actually to displace them from that fundamental place. In other words, Rubin starts by simply enunciating the necessary relation between productive forces and social relations only to end up positing a strict separation between them, where the former are downgraded to an objective context or background for the self-movement of social relations.

But, to approach this ultimate goal, science must first of all separate, by means of abstraction, two different aspects of the capitalist economy: the technical and the social-economic, the material-technical process of production and its social form, the material productive forces and the social production relations. Each of these two aspects of the economic process is the subject of a separate science. The

11. See Rubin 1973, pp. 1–2. Incidentally, let us point out, against one of the widespread assumptions of many ‘Western’-Marxist currents, that the 1859 ‘Preface’ does not constitute a sort of late ‘infantile disorder’ in Marx’s thought (see Gunn 1992). What Marx claims in those passages is, we think, essentially correct as a summary of his materialist approach to the study of history. However, it is the fact that those pages provide no more than a ‘stylised’ and concise rendition of the materialist approach to history that makes them incapable of going beyond the more general determinations of the relations at stake – that is, between the productive forces and social relations of production. In other words, it is precisely the general character of the connection posed that makes those passages incapable of casting any light on the specific mediation between materiality and social form characteristic of the capitalist mode of production (with all the necessary concrete forms of the case). This connection is explicitly spelled out and unfolded by Marx in the chapters on the production of relative surplus-value in *Capital*. The historical result of the whole movement is summarised only at the end of Volume I, in the chapter on the ‘Historical Tendency of Capital Accumulation’.

12. Or, alternatively, when dealing with the quantitative dimension of the value-form (more on this below).

science of social engineering – still in embryonic state – must make the subject of its analysis the productive forces of society as they interact with the production relations. On the other hand, theoretical political economy deals with production relations specific to the capitalist economy as they interact with the productive forces of society. Each of these two sciences, dealing only with one aspect of the whole process of production, presupposes the presence of the other aspect of the production process in the form of an assumption which underlies its research.¹³

For Rubin, then, productive forces are only a presupposition of what he considers the one and only genuine object of inquiry of ‘Marx’s economic theory’, namely, social forms. Despite the praise found later on in his book of Marx’s ‘Hegelian’ conception of the immanent connection between content and form,¹⁴ Rubin postulates here what undoubtedly is an external relation, namely, that of presupposition or assumption of an abstract material content by capitalist social forms.

Now, having granted social relations ‘relative autonomy’ from productive forces and having expunged the latter from his theoretical political economy, Rubin then hastens to reintroduce them back again through the reassertion of their determining role (‘in the last instance’?) in the change of the social relations of production.

Marx’s theory of historical materialism and his economic theory revolve around one and the same basic problem: the relationship between productive forces and production relations. The subject of both sciences is the same: the changes of production relations which depend on the development of productive forces.¹⁵

This re-introduction of the productive forces in the picture does not substantially alter the problematic nature of Rubin’s formulation. On the one hand, the above propositions still remain at the level of vague generalities. On the other, as the subsequent unfolding of Rubin’s argument in the rest of the book reveals, he manages to posit a more-or-less necessary connection between the productive forces and social relations mostly (if not only) when discussing the problem of the magnitude of value and, more concretely, its changes. That is, when dealing with the quantitative variations in the productivity of labour.¹⁶ There he can present the productive forces not simply as an objective context for the autonomous movement of capitalist social forms (as he does when addressing the qualitative connection between them), but even in their ‘interaction’ with the latter.

13. Rubin 1973, pp. 1–2.

14. Rubin 1973, p. 117.

15. Rubin 1973, p. 2.

16. See, for instance, Rubin 1973, pp. 66–7, 72–3, 119–20, 126.

Again, this should come as no surprise, since it actually expresses the more orthodox strand in Rubín's thought. In fact, his one-sided focus on the quantitative manifestations of the transformation of the productive forces brought about by the capital-form of social relations is perfectly in line with the underlying principles of Russian Marxism of his day,¹⁷ and which would eventually crystallise as the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy for most of the twentieth century: a preoccupation with the *growth* of the productive forces (i.e. their *quantitative* progression) without even the attempt to reflect on their *development*; which could only be problematised by looking at the *qualitatively specific* determinations immanent in their very materiality.¹⁸ But this is precisely the conceptual step that Rubín does not dare make. As we argue below, this inability to deal with the qualitative significance of the commodity-and capital-forms as (alienated, yet historically necessary) modes of development of human productive subjectivity (i.e. the productive forces of society), expresses two broader fundamental aspects of Rubín's thought: first, his troubled relationship with the material determinations of the direct production process of human life, in turn a reflection of, second, the ideological determination underlying his work.

At any rate, Rubín's attempt to integrate the productive forces in Marx's 'economic theory' is rather short-lived. Only a few lines later, his exposition oscillates again: after having reintroduced productive forces in the field of inquiry of theoretical political economy, he then proceeds to their renewed exclusion.

Political economy does not analyze the material-technical aspect of the capitalist process of production, but its social form, i.e., the totality of production relations which make up the 'economic structure' of capitalism. Production technology (or productive forces) is included in the field of research of Marx's economic theory only as an assumption, as a starting point, which is taken into consideration only in so far as it is indispensable for the explanation of the genuine subject of our analysis, namely production relations.¹⁹

Through this back-and-forth, hesitant movement, Rubín tries to find a compromise solution to the conceptual struggle between the formalist and

17. Sirianni 1982.

18. When qualitative changes are thematised (Lenin, Hilferding), they are mostly grasped in their outward manifestation through the institutional transformation of property-forms but not in their essential determination: the historically-changing forms of the real subsumption of labour to capital. See the excellent discussion of this in Veraza Urtuzuástegui 1987. Thus, the true critique of the crude materialism of orthodox Marxism does not consist in giving primacy to social relations over productive forces (the common 'Western'-Marxist critique), but in grasping the essentiality of the latter in their qualitative historical specificity.

19. Rubín 1973, p. 2.

orthodox impulses in his thought (in turn springing from the two theoretico-political imperatives mentioned above): theoretical political economy, he concludes, deals only with social forms, but must always ‘keep in mind’ that their self-movement always presupposes a certain level of development of the productive forces. Hence a change in the latter must presumably entail some influence on the former.

In our view, this compromise is far from satisfactory and amounts to a spurious, extrinsic mediation between material content (productive forces) and social form (relations of production). In fact, in the conceptual struggle, ‘Rubin the formalist’ ends up having the upper hand, thus relegating all the references to the productive forces to mere ‘lip-service’. All in all, Rubin’s approach shows a certain ‘discomfort’ with the materiality of the production process of human life. And this thwarts his otherwise valid attempt to comprehend the inner unity between material content and social form. This failure can not only be found in the general discussion of the connection between productive forces and social relations. The idiosyncratic separation between material content and its social form will actually impinge, with grave consequences, on the whole of Rubin’s work. Crucially, it will crop up again in his more concrete discussion of the determinations of the value-form and will have a two-fold manifestation: first, it will lead to the emergence of new antinomies in Rubin’s treatment of the material and social determinations of value-producing labour; secondly, it will lead him to an inverted conception of the relationship between production and exchange.²⁰

Abstract labour and the historical specificity of value-producing labour

The first step Rubin makes to distance himself from Ricardian conceptions – that took as their starting point the identification of value simply with embodied labour²¹ is to highlight the ‘social’ character of economic categories. In seeing value as embodied labour, Ricardian readings confine their analysis to the ‘material-technical’ aspect of the production process. But, as shown above, Rubin considers that there must be a clear-cut separation between the material and the social-formal aspect of the process of reproduction of human life. In keeping in line with this methodological postulate, he thereby subjects value, one of the fundamental economic categories of Marx’s *Capital*, to the scrutiny of ‘theoretical political economy’, the science of pure social forms. In

20. This oscillating argumentative pattern is repeated in Chapter 4 of the *Essays*. See Rubin 1973, pp. 39–41.

21. Rubin 1973, p. 62.

Rubin's own words, he sets out to examine value 'conceived from the standpoint of its [capitalist – GS and AK] social forms, i.e., value as form'.²²

What is, according to Rubin, that which makes value a social form and, hence, historically-determined? Rubin's line of argument is very simple. The Ricardian version of value theory maintains that labour creates value. If this were the case, then all forms of society would produce commodities. And yet, only in a particular kind of society does the product of labour assume the commodity-form. Rubin thereby concludes that it cannot be labour *sans phrase* that creates value. The explanation of the particular historical-social character of value must therefore involve the search for the specific form taken by labour in a commodity-producing society.²³ Since, according to Marx, the substance of value is abstract labour and not just 'labour', then it logically follows for Rubin that only in a commodity-capitalist society does labour become abstract. In brief, the very logic of Rubin's argument inevitably leads him to conclude that abstract labour is a category exclusively pertaining to commodity-producing societies and, hence, that it is the abstract character of labour in capitalism that gives the product of labour its value-form. Rubin's rethinking of Marx's analysis of the commodity thus confronts him with the logical necessity properly to 'construct' the 'concept' of abstract labour in order to have a consistent, pure science of social forms.²⁴

We shall provide a more detailed reconstruction of the specifics of Rubin's argument in the following section. For the moment, the general aspects that are relevant for the discussion of the historical specificity of abstract labour will be explored. According to Rubin's construction of the concept of abstract labour, it is the act of exchange that transforms particular concrete labours into abstract general labour. In equalising the products of different particular labours through the mediation of money, the market also equalises the different concrete labours, thereby becoming human labour in general, i.e. abstract labour. And, in the same act, through the equalisation of labours, private labour becomes social.²⁵ Rubin sees his own construction as a truly 'sociological' theory of abstract labour, since exchange is a social process that transforms labour itself, thereby bestowing upon it its particular social determination as abstract labour. In other words, abstract labour is concrete labour equalised through the act of exchange between ordinary commodities and money. Thus, we see how Rubin arrives at the result he was looking for, namely: only in a

22. Rubin 1973, p. 68.

23. Rubin 1973, p. 71.

24. Rubin 1973, p. 135.

25. Rubin 1973, pp. 141–2.

commodity-producing society labour becomes abstract. This is, for Rubin, the adequate interpretation of Marx's exposition of these questions in *Capital*. And yet, he claims, most Marxists did not fully understand it.

In this way, Rubin thinks he has secured his two-fold objective. On the one hand, he provides an account of the specific kind of labour which produces value, thus freeing his 'theoretical political economy' from any risk of contamination with the material determinations of the social-production process of human life and also from the naturalisation of value-producing labour. Therefore, he critically distances himself not only from classical political economy but also from those Marxists who, by taking abstract labour as physiological, were, in Rubin's view, unable to account for the historical character of value-producing labour. The physiological version of abstract labour makes it impossible to understand value as a social phenomenon.²⁶ On the other hand, in expunging every transhistorical element from his theoretical political economy and focusing on what indubitably is a social process, that is, the act of exchange, Rubin seems to be able to provide a tight and consistent form-analytical account of capitalist society. But this can be contested.

What is at stake, in short, is the search for a consistent answer to the following question: Where does the value-form of the product of labour, which distinguishes commodities from any other form of social wealth, come from? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to look closer at the precise form of Marx's argument in *Capital*.²⁷

The value-form of the product of labour is its power of general exchangeability. This potentiality immanent in the individual commodity consists of the aptitude to be transformed into any other commodity without the mediation of any material transformation in its bodily existence. It is this power that gives commodities such a mystical character, the genesis of which the critique of political economy needs to explain. Without the slightest change in their materiality, they can be transformed into another use-value through the exchange relation. On the other hand, it is clear that such social power is intrinsic to the object itself. In other words, it is neither a subjective attribute generated by the individuals carrying out the exchange process nor a relational property of the object.²⁸ In effect, as the specific social attribute of the commodity, the value-form is materially and individually borne by its generic

26. Rubin 1973, p. 135.

27. We are indebted to long discussions with Juan Iñigo Carrera for many of the insights in the following reconstruction of Marx's exposition of the determinations of the commodity-form in Chapter 1 of *Capital*.

28. See Kliman 2000 on value as an intrinsic property of the commodity.

character as use-value,²⁹ this being the reason why it is ‘inseparably connected with the commodity, inherent in it’.³⁰ Value cannot exist outside some use-value, the latter being its material bearer. What necessarily follows from this is that the human action that posits value in the commodity must also be the same action that posits its use-value. But, as stated above, the action of exchange does not alter an iota of the materiality of commodities. Thus, exchange is not the action that posits the use-value of the commodity and, consequently, it cannot possibly be the action that posits its value either.

In Chapter 1 of *Capital*, Marx also takes another analytical path that turns out to be impotent to account for the power of general exchangeability of commodities. Thus, he considers the action of natural forces as the possible source of that power immanent in commodities. Is it possible that purely natural actions posit the value-form in commodities? As Marx’s exposition shows, the answer must be negative. Qualitatively different natural actions certainly intervene in the constitution of the distinctive material properties of each commodity which make them different use-values.³¹ But the analytical process has already revealed to us that the exchange relation, although necessarily involving two different use-values, actually takes place on the basis of something that makes commodities identical (generally exchangeable entities), so that, when in appropriate quantities, one is as good as any other.³² In brief, it is not as results of purely natural actions that commodities possess the unity of exchangeable beings. As Marx states in the first edition of *Capital*, the unity or identity among commodities as exchangeable things ‘does not arise out of nature but out of society’.³³ The analytical process must therefore consider the only other option left: the realm of human actions. In actual fact, the only human action whose result is the positing of the use-value of the commodity is human productive action or productive labour. That is why labour is the only possible common social substance of value.

On the other hand, it is also evident that the action positing value and use-value cannot be exactly the same action, since they are two different attributes of the commodity. Were it exactly the same action, it would not be possible for it to posit two different attributes. How can this paradox be solved? Basically, by realising that human labour is an action which involves two different

29. Marx 1976a, p. 126.

30. Ibid.

31. As Marx reminds the reader in *Capital*, the use-value of commodities is the ‘joint product’ of labour and the action of purely natural forces, Marx 1976a, pp. 133–4.

32. Marx 1976d, pp. 8–9.

33. Marx 1976d, p. 9.

aspects or, as Marx puts it, contains a two-fold character. On the one hand, it is an action whose realisation entails a particular concrete form of application of human capacities. It is as an expression of that concrete character that it results in the particular use-value of the commodity produced. Marx calls this aspect of the productive action of human beings concrete labour. But, if we set aside that particular form in which human capacities are exercised, the fact remains that any productive activity entails an expenditure of the human body, of human vital energies. As such, human productive action can be termed abstract labour. While, in the former aspect, the different kind of labours are qualitatively different (hence, their objectification as different use-values), in the latter aspect they constitute a qualitatively homogeneous social substance (which, therefore, can only be distinguished quantitatively). The value of commodities is therefore the specific form in which objectified (or congealed, in the words of Marx) abstract labour is represented in capitalist society. In sum, the action that posits value is human labour in its abstract character.

Although this may have an air of simplicity surrounding it, it is systematically forgotten not only by those who follow Rubín in claiming that labour becomes abstract through exchange, but by all authors who claim that abstract labour, the substance of value, is the specific kind of human labour in capitalism. Because this analytical discovery of the substance of value does not only reveal to us its purely material determination, but it also makes evident that concrete and abstract labour are not two different kinds of labour but two different aspects of the same human productive action. Now, to claim that abstract labour is the specific form of human labour in capitalism means precisely to see it as a kind of human labour in general instead of as an aspect of it.³⁴ In fact, most authors – Rubín included – generally derive it as such; abstract labour is claimed to be the mode of existence of labour in capitalism.³⁵ But this renders inexplicable the two-fold objectification of labour in the commodity, which, as stated above, can only be posited by one and the same human action. Or, alternatively, this would require abstract labour itself to entail a double character, that of being concrete labour and that of being abstract labour, with the absurd result of the latter being just an aspect of itself as a whole. In the particular case of Rubín's argument, these problems are even worse. Because it is to be noted that what the analytical discovery of abstract labour as the substance of value shows is that it is not abstract labour in act, but its objectification that is specifically represented as the value of the commodity. This might seem yet another obvious point, but it is clearly

34. See Elson 1979, p. 148; Iñigo Carrera 2003, p. 36; Murray 2000, p. 49.

35. Rubín 1973, pp. 70–1, 97, 116, 140–4, 146, 152–3.

overlooked by Rubin's train of thought, which claims that value and abstract labour are not presupposed by the actual exchange of commodities but come into being through it. And this is something rather difficult, given that the exchange of commodities does not entail any process of material production. And the latter is the only moment at which (productive) labour can properly exist; at least according to any meaningful definition of it. At the moment of exchange, abstract labour is already materialised, therefore its existence is compromised.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the objectification of the abstract character of labour is socially represented in the form of value only inasmuch as it is socially necessary in a two-fold sense: first, it corresponds to the normal conditions of production, and, second, it satisfies a social need (this is actually implicit in the fact that value must be materially borne by a social use-value).³⁶

The whole confusion, we think, derives from the following fact. Marx's analytical discovery of abstract labour as the substance of value in the first pages of *Capital* is not synonymous with his discovery of the specific mode of existence of labour in capitalism. As any attentive reader can tell, the analytical process continues and it is only in the section on the dual character of labour that Marx finally finds the specific social form of labour that produces commodities and, hence, value. 'Only the products of mutually independent acts of labour, performed in isolation, can confront each other as commodities'.³⁷

That is, the 'labour of private individuals who work independently of each other',³⁸ or private labour, which constitutes the historically-specific mode of

36. The second sense of 'socially necessary' has nothing to do with assigning a role to the actual exchange process in the determination of value. The point is whether the labour expended in a determinate commodity is socially useful (that is, whether it is materially capable of satisfying an existing social need) at the very moment of direct production. Abstractly considered, this is independent of the concrete form that mediates the establishment of the unity between social production and consumption when social labour takes the form of private labour (exchange of commodities against money, i.e. social need backed by purchasing power, which is dependent on the value of commodities). To put it differently, a certain amount of labour is socially useful if its product satisfies a certain social need at whatever price over zero. This means that we need to distinguish between the case of commodities which have been produced in excess, relative to the magnitude of 'effective demand', and those use-values which have been produced in excess of all existing social needs (or, alternatively, whose very materiality make them socially useless, i.e. a three-legged chair). The former's value is determined by the socially-determined technical conditions of production but will not be realised in its plenitude in circulation (there will be a 'loss' of substance, which will be appropriated by the buyer). In the latter case, those products were socially useless and, hence, not bearers of value (the power of exchangeability) from the very start. See Marx 1976a, pp. 201–3.

37. Marx 1976a, p. 131.

38. Marx 1976a, p. 165.

existence of social labour in capitalism. Alternatively, the analytical reduction of value to its substance does not answer the question about the ‘specific social character of the labour which produces’ commodities.³⁹ It only tells us what the material determination is of that which is socially represented in the form of value. This materiality underlying the value-form is that of being the objectification of the abstract character of human labour.⁴⁰ What this stage of the analytical process does not show, and that is why we need to carry on with the search of the ‘formal determinants that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity’,⁴¹ is what historical form of the process of production of human life makes this generic materiality take the social form of value. Thus, commodities certainly ‘possess an objective character as values *only in so far* as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour’⁴² *but not simply because* of that. The confusion between these two aspects of the question is what lies at the basis of both the abstract naturalism of classical political economy and the abstract formalism of those who identify abstract labour as the historically-specific mode of existence of labour in capitalism.

Now, despite all his efforts to demonstrate that abstract labour must be (and is for Marx) specific to capitalist society, Rubín cannot but surrender to the self-evident fact that the identity between different concrete labours contains a physiological or material determination.⁴³ Rubín bypasses this problem by developing his own contributions to the ‘sociological theory of abstract labour’ in order to reconcile the idea that different labours can be identical in a physiological sense but still not be abstract labour. This leads Rubín to construct additional intermediate concepts which have the result of ‘purifying’ social forms by severing their immanent connection with the material determinations of human life. Thus, Rubín distinguishes between three kinds of equality among different concrete labours: physiologically-equal labour, socially-equalised labour and abstract, or abstract-universal labour, i.e., socially-equalised labour in the specific form which it acquires in a commodity economy.⁴⁴

39. Ibid.

40. Marx 1976a, p. 128.

41. Marx 1976c, p. 1059.

42. Marx 1976a, p. 138; our emphasis.

43. See especially Marx 1976a, p. 164. Rubín is, of course, aware of the philological difficulties his reading gives rise to; see Rubín 1973, pp. 117–18, 134. Thus, he tries out different explanations for the presence of passages in Marx’s text which contradict his interpretation; see Rubín 1973, pp. 147–50. Unfortunately, reasons of space do not allow us to discuss this important exegetical question. Here we can only point out that we think that Rubín’s textual evidence is contentious to say the least.

44. Rubín 1973, p. 139.

At first sight, the whole discussion seems to revolve around terminological subtleties since, in his idiosyncratic way, Rubin himself seems to be recognising that abstract labour entails both a generic material determination and a historically-specific role as the substance of value. Moreover, Rubin himself acknowledges that the problem might seem merely terminological since ‘every writer has the right to give any term he chooses to a phenomenon’.⁴⁵ But, he goes on, ‘such arbitrary terminology can be very dangerous and creates great confusion in science’.⁴⁶ We could not agree more with this. Yet, we think that the implications to be drawn from this are exactly the opposite of those drawn by Rubin. That is, we do not think that the scientific way to deal with the contradictory existence of abstract labour in capitalism and avoid confusions is to construct three different categories to refer to the same real form. Rubin’s strategy can clearly be understood as an emphatic reaction to Ricardian interpretations. The problem is that it actually constitutes an *overreaction* whose consequence is a formalist approach. Furthermore, the extrinsic interjection of categories has serious methodological consequences. For, in stopping short ‘at the fixed determinacy and its distinctness vis-à-vis other determinacies’,⁴⁷ that is, in Rubin’s extreme attempt to separate as much as possible the material and social determinations of abstract labour, science becomes impotent to comprehend the movement of contradiction – the inner negativity – that constitutes the immanent unity between the different determinations of real forms. In other words, the way to avoid the abstract identity between material and social determinations of value-producing labour characteristic of Ricardian interpretations is not to replace it with an abstract difference. As Marx puts it in ‘Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality’, those two procedures can hardly take science beyond the ‘whole grobianism of “sound common sense”’,

... that where it succeeds in seeing differences, it does not see unity, and that where it sees unity, it does not see differences. If it propounds differentiated determinants, they at once become fossilised in its hands, and it can see only the most reprehensible sophistry when these wooden concepts are knocked together so that they take fire.⁴⁸

In brief, Rubin’s ‘sociological theory’ of abstract labour substitutes a ‘general theory of equalised labour’ for the reproduction in thought of the contradictory movement of the real determinations of the commodity.⁴⁹

45. Rubin 1973, p. 140.

46. Ibid.

47. Hegel 1991, p. 125.

48. Marx 1976b, p. 320.

49. Rubin’s difficulties have been nicely and succinctly pointed out by Patrick Murray in what

In short, we could say that Rubin's antinomies spring from his dogmatic exclusion from the critique of political economy of any reference to the materiality of the production process of human life. The commodity, he correctly claims, is a useful product of labour which possesses value. Value, hence, must be the specific social form of the product when it takes the commodity-form. On the other hand, Marx states that abstract labour is the substance of value. Therefore, Rubin concludes, abstract labour must be a specific social form. In fact, this follows from Rubin's view of Marx's *Capital* which, *by definition*, is seen as dealing only with specific social forms. Hence, Rubin is forced to rule out from the outset the possibility that value is the specific social form of the product determined as a commodity while its substance bears no historical specificity at all. The socially specific value-form cannot be made of a generic material substance. This, for Rubin, does not stick to the correct methodological postulates of the science of pure social forms. The problem is that, when one does follow those rules, one gets caught, as we have attempted to show, in a web of logical antinomies. Moreover, the shortcomings of Rubin's method are actually broader than leading to irresolvable antinomies. More importantly, Rubin's 'scandal and abomination' before the materiality of abstract labour does not allow him to grasp what is the real 'genuine' object of the critique of political economy, namely: not the pure realm of social forms, but the contradictory unity between the materiality of human life and its historically-determined social forms. In order to see some of the implications of this, a more detailed look is needed for the precise way in which Rubin discusses the determinations of the value-form.

The value-form and the direct process of production of human life

It is rather difficult to come to grips with the specifics of Rubin's theory of value. In effect, the presentational structure he gave to his work (namely, essay-like chapters organised around different themes) means that there is no single

he calls 'Rubin's dilemma', also showing that Rubin's way out of the dilemma as a non-solution (Murray 2000). See also Reuten's reply to Murray (Reuten 2000) and the latter's rejoinder, Murray 2002. A proper discussion of Murray's own solution exceeds the scope of this paper. Here, we would only like to note that Murray's remarkable merit is to grasp the importance of highlighting the materiality of abstract labour whilst making clear that this does not necessarily lead to an asocial perspective on the value-form. In this way, his recent contribution to the debate provides a necessary correction to the formalist overreaction of much recent theorising on the value-form. Whilst still seeing abstract labour as capital-specific, Robles Báez offers probably one of the best treatments of the movement of the contradiction (that is, affirmation through self-negation) between the generic, physiological materiality of abstract labour and its historically-specific social determination as the substance of value deriving from the private character of labour in capitalism (Robles Báez 2004).

place where to find the positive unfolding of the determinations the value-form. It is perhaps only in Chapter 14, called ‘Abstract Labour’, where one can find the clearest and more systematic exposition of Rubin’s value-form approach, one that goes beyond the disorganised bits and pieces scattered throughout the book. Our discussion will therefore focus on a close reading of that text.

Rubin starts off by self-consciously acknowledging the difficulties he seems to be facing and by addressing the accusation of ‘circulationism’ that many of his contemporary critics had levelled at him. In a nutshell, at stake is the fundamental question of the precise relation between production and exchange.⁵⁰

From the exegetical point of view (that is, regarding ‘what Marx really said’), Rubin concedes that, in principle, both the production-centred and the circulationist readings are plausible. Thus, sometimes Marx states that value and abstract pre-exist the process of exchange and sometimes he states they presuppose the process of exchange. In our view, Rubin’s confusion (or rather, inversion) stems from the fact that he reads Marx’s passages where he states that exchange (as a necessary mediating form of the essentially private character of the direct process of production in capitalism) manifests outwardly the inner determinations borne by the direct process of production, as implying that it brings those determinations into existence.⁵¹ In other words, he confuses the qualitative determination of those more abstract forms (hence, of the social objectivity of value) with its concrete mode of realisation.⁵² For Rubin, then, abstract labour has no existence prior to the exchange process but comes into being through it, by subjecting concrete labour to a ‘social transformation’.

After highlighting the significance that the introduction of an additional sentence in the French edition has as evidence of a two-fold definition of abstract labour in Chapter 1 of *Capital* (one production-centred and one exchange-centred), Rubin moves to address the obvious question of the inconsistency in Marx’s text that such a reading seems to imply.⁵³

According to Rubin, ‘it is not hard to reconcile these views’.⁵⁴ The key resides in a definitional or terminological problem, namely: the true meaning

50. Rubin 1973, p. 147.

51. See, for instance, Rubin 1973, p. 148.

52. The qualitative determination of value addresses the question of where the attribute of general exchangeability comes from. In short, it inquires into the reason to be or genesis of a social form. Only once we have answered that question can we adequately address the self-negating forms through which those abstract determinations are realised (for instance, the mediation of ‘effective demand’ in the establishment of the actual price at which commodities exchange, which could deviate from their values). See note 37 above.

53. Rubin 1973, p. 148.

54. Rubin 1973, p. 149.

of the process of exchange. In its essential determination, Rubín argues, the latter actually is the very social form of the process of reproduction as a whole.⁵⁵ Thus, the argument states that the exchange process must be understood as denoting the specificity of the social relations of production, that is, of the way in which the organisation and development of social labour takes place. Thus, he claims, ‘exchange is above all a form of production process, or a form of social labour’.⁵⁶

How to grasp the meaning of what at first sight sounds rather counterintuitive? Two possibilities spring to mind when Rubín refers to exchange as the form of social labour. First, that exchange is not just occasional but is a general social feature of the organisation of human life. In this sense, exchange appears to be synonymous with generalised commodity exchange, and in it is this general character that the definition tries to highlight. What characterises value-producing labour is, for Rubín, the fact that the whole product of social labour is meant for the market. This would refer to the quantitative extension of the exchange phenomenon.

But, in addition, Rubín seems to be implying that there is a kind of dialectical transformation of quantity into quality at play, so that this extension of exchange actually defines the very specificity of the process of production of human life. Thus, in the second place, ‘exchange-as-social-form’ would capture the (logical) moment of qualitative determination of the historical specificity of what Rubín calls ‘the commodity economy’. Although, even according to this broader definition, the exchange process actually means the metamorphosis undergone by the commodity, it does grasp the specific determinations of the process of social reproduction as a whole inasmuch as, once constituted as the general social relation, it ‘leaves its imprint’ on the direct process of production.

What are the implications of this conception of the historical specificity of the commodity-form of social relations? To begin with, let us highlight that this simply means that the essence and ground of the specificity of the commodity-form of social relations is not immanently carried by the direct process of production. In itself, the latter carries no historically specific

55. Rubín says that exchange can also be understood in a more restricted sense as only one of the phases of the process of social reproduction, alternating with the phase of direct production, Rubín 1973, p. 149. This is the usual, uncontroversial meaning of the term. As such, it is not relevant for the problem of the qualitative determination of value with which we are concerned here. We shall therefore concentrate on the other, more fundamental meaning ascribed by Rubín to the term ‘exchange’, namely: exchange as social form.

56. Rubín 1973, p. 149. See also Rubín 1973, pp. 16, 21, for an elaboration of this notion of exchange as the social form of the reproduction process.

determination and is seen as a purely material process. The essentiality of the social determination is borne by the exchange process and is only (logically) later 'projected' onto the production process by means of the conscious action of the commodity producer. Rubin thus manages to expunge the foundation of the historically-specific character of capitalist labour from the immediate process of production through its displacement into the exchange process. This, we would like to argue, constitutes an inversion of the real relation, which can only result in an external relation between the value-form and the direct production process. The latter is represented as a purely material-technical and extrinsic mediation of the historically-specific form of the circulation of social wealth, which becomes inverted as the ground of the whole movement. Some further implications of this inversion can be highlighted by looking at the way in which Rubin elaborates on the concrete form in which 'exchange-as-social-form' impregnates the direct process of production with historical specificity.

Thus exchange is above all a form of production process, or a form of social labour. Since exchange is actually the dominant form of the process of production, it leaves its imprint on the phase of direct production. In other words, since a person produces after he has entered the act of exchange, and before he enters the next act of exchange, the process of direct production acquires determined social properties which correspond to the organization of the commodity economy based on exchange. Even though the commodity producer is still in his workshop and in a given moment does not enter into exchange with other members of society, he already feels the pressure of all those persons who enter the market as his buyers, competitors, people who buy from his competitors, etc., in the last analysis, the pressure of all members of society. This economic relation and these production relations that are directly realized in exchange, extend their influence even after the given concrete acts of exchange have ended. These acts leave a sharp social imprint on the individual and on the product of his labour. Already in the very process of direct production, the producer appears as a commodity producer, his labour has the character of abstract labour, and his product has the character of value.⁵⁷

The first striking point in the above quote concerns Rubin's peculiar conception of the way in which commodity producers integrate their individual action in the all-rounded system of material interdependence characteristic of the generalised production of commodities. According to Rubin, the reason why the process of exchange affects the direct process of production resides in the fact that the commodity possessor can only set the production process into motion (hence actually becoming a commodity producer) in between two

57. Rubin 1973, pp. 149–50.

different acts of exchange. And this means that she makes her conscious productive decisions already with the form-determinations ‘in mind’, i.e. that she produces with the thought that she needs to sell her commodity for some money already in her head. But this is a very peculiar manner of depicting the workings of a ‘commodity economy’, which begs the following question: where does the initial ‘endowment’ of commodities exchanged come from? As happens in the fantastic world of neoclassical economics, Rubín has to assume that commodities have ‘descended “from the heavens” during the preceding night’, ‘like the manna of the Children of Israel’.⁵⁸

Marx’s order of determination in *Capital* goes from the form and content of the commodity-form of the product of labour (Sections 1–3 of Chapter 1) to the alienated subjectivity of the commodity producer as its personification (Section 4 of Chapter 1); in order only then to move to the actual process of exchange, where the commodity producer appears as commodity possessor (in turn, concretely developed in the juridical form of private property owner). Rubín, however, posits the latter moment as the essential starting point of the investigation of the ‘commodity economy’ (hence as the most abstract form of capital). As the above quote makes clear, for Rubín, the private individual is not immanently determined as a commodity producer from the very start, but becomes one (literally, appears as one) through the externally-imposed ‘pressure of all members of society’. In Rubín, then, everything is turned upside down. As we have argued above, the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production lies in the private and independent form through which the social character of the direct process of production of use-values (hence, of human life) is organised. Given the private character of the direct process of production as the general social relation, the exchange process develops as the necessary mediating concrete form for the circulation of social wealth.

Now, this inversion of the real relation between production and circulation is not the only difficulty that crops up in Rubín’s discussion of the qualitative determinations of the value-form. A further complication arises when we examine more closely the concrete mediation he postulates in order to make the exchange process leave ‘a sharp social imprint’ on the phase of direct production. For Rubín seems to be arguing that it is the consciousness of the private individual which, under the subjectively ‘felt’ pressures objectively emanating from the market, ideally or latently posits the value-determinations already during the direct process of production.⁵⁹

58. Patinkin 1989, p. 4.

59. Rubín 1973, p. 150.

Rubin does not dwell further in this chapter on this notion of value (and abstract labour) as existing only ideally before the exchange process, by consciously being taken into consideration (or anticipated) by the commodity owner.⁶⁰ However, this conception can be found in other places in Rubin's text.⁶¹ In particular, it is in Chapter 8 where he spells out with utmost clarity the meaning of this notion of 'ideal' value. In summary, 'ideal' value means, for Rubin, the subjective representation of the value-determinations in the consciousness of the commodity producer.⁶² And it is only this purely subjective existence that the value-form enjoys within the direct process of production. According to Rubin, in this latter sphere, the value-form has, to borrow an expression from Marx, no socially-valid objectivity.⁶³ In the direct process of production, the consciousness of the private individual ceases to be the concrete expression of her alienated social being (materialised or reified in the commodity). Rather, Rubin sees the latter as ideally posited by the abstractly free consciousness of the commodity producer inasmuch as she 'feels the pressure to produce for the market'. Furthermore, Rubin's argument goes on, the same follows for abstract labour; the latter has only latent or ideal existence before the exchange of commodities. But abstract labour actually comes into being through the conversion of the ordinary commodity into the money-form.⁶⁴

Here we arrive at the crux of the matter and the source of the whole of Rubin's confusion. For this makes clear that, for Rubin, the exchange process does not manifest the material and social determinations already possessed by commodities as they emerge out of the direct process of production. Instead, Rubin conceives of the exchange process as engendering those very determinations which leads him to put forward some rather problematic formulations. Thus, for instance, Rubin claims that, in the 'commodity economy',

60. This argument about the 'mental anticipation' of the abstract character of labour in the direct process of production is replicated by contemporary circulationists such as Reuten and Williams 1989.

61. Rubin 1973, pp. 80–1, 128, 141–2, 144.

62. Rubin 1973, pp. 70–1.

63. Marx 1976a, p. 169. In a very broad sense, and as Marx puts it in the section on commodity fetishism, all categories of political economy are objective forms of thought and, hence, a 'phenomenon of consciousness'. But this in the sense that they are objectified forms of existence of the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer. They are, as Reichelt puts it, 'unconsciously posited forms of thought of universal validity' (Reichelt forthcoming). However, this is clearly not what Rubin had in mind in the passage cited. In other words, here he is not referring to the process of qualitative determination or constitution of the value-form, which, in his approach, occurs in the sphere of exchange, but to the conscious reflection of the private individual on an already constituted social form.

64. Rubin 1973, pp. 150–1.

labour has no actual social character before its ‘verification’ through the exchange process. He even states explicitly that the social relation between commodity producers is actually created by exchange.⁶⁵ This is, we think, absolutely incorrect. Whatever its specific social form (and this includes private labour), all act of labour has an immanent two-fold character, individual and social. What happens in a ‘commodity economy’ is that the general social character of labour is not consciously organised by the individual labourers in their direct process of production, which is precisely why it can only manifest through the exchange of the products of labour as commodities. Rubin, however, inverts this determination and completely deprives the direct process of production of its inner social determination in order to displace it to the sphere of exchange.⁶⁶

Now, in order to support his case, Rubin cites from the 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.⁶⁷ The second passage he cites, in particular, comes from Marx’s discussion of the functions of money and, more precisely, from the concrete development of the money-form as measure of value. As such, it does not actually correspond to the level abstraction of Chapter 1 of *Capital* (where the simplest determinations of the commodity-form are presented) but to what would correspond to Chapter 3 of *Capital* (where their more concrete development into the money-form and its functions are presented). Thus, as should be obvious from a cursory reading of the second passage, Marx is not referring to the more abstract, essential determinations of the value-form as such, but to its more concrete mode of existence as price. It is only the further realisation of the determinations of the price-form (and hence, only indirectly of the value-form as such) that is concretely mediated by the ideal representation of value in the consciousness of the commodity producer.

In brief, it is not the inner qualitative determination of value simply as such (hence the abstract labour materialised in the commodity in the direct process of production), but its outer mode of expression as exchange-value (more concretely, as price), that necessarily acquires an ideal form as a mediating first stage before its real conversion into money in the phase of exchange. Only the expression of value, to put it in Rubin’s terms, is ‘represented in consciousness’. Inasmuch as the commodity is an inert being lacking in consciousness and will, it needs the alienated consciousness of the private individual to personify the concrete realisation of its social essence as the reified bearer of the value-determinations. And this does not only include taking commodities to

65. Rubin 1973, p. 80.

66. Iñigo Carrera 2003, p. 34.

67. Rubin 1973, p. 151.

the market,⁶⁸ but also giving concrete expression to their value by ideally representing it as an imaginary sum of money or as having a determined price. To put it differently, commodity producers have not only to act as the vehicle of the real circulation of commodities but also of what Marx called in the 1859 *Contribution* their ‘theoretical circulation’ (i.e. the more abstract determinations of the commodity which are the presupposition of its actual circulation on the market and which culminate with the concrete fixing of prices – ‘sticking up the price tag’ – by individual commodity producers).⁶⁹

We would like to argue that it is the above distinction between the essential determinations of value (qualitative and quantitative) and their concrete realisation (including the distinction between ‘theoretical’ and ‘actual’ circulation of commodities) that Rubin’s notion of ‘ideal value’ conflates. More broadly, as Likitkijsonboon nicely puts it,⁷⁰ Rubin’s approach to value-form theory suffers from conceptual collapse or amalgamation of categories which, we add, expresses a more general problem of conflation of different levels of abstraction or of social forms of different degrees of concreteness.

After having completed his account of the qualitative determination of value and abstract labour, Rubin moves to their quantitative determination. Actually, he deals with the quantitative determination of abstract labour (which shows how, despite all he previously said about the fundamental distinction between value and abstract labour, he nonetheless feels free to use both categories interchangeably). In order to show the possibility (!?) of a quantitative characterisation of abstract labour, Rubin does not face the real form (value) itself but, again, resorts to the extrinsic comparison between abstract labour and the socially-equalised labour found in a socialist community.⁷¹ Through this comparison, Rubin tries further to make the point that it is not objectified physiological labour that constitutes the substance of value. Why? Simply because not even in a socialist community would physiological labour be the unit of ‘social accounting’. Even in this (allegedly) non-reified society there would be some need of social equalisation of labour

68. Marx 1976a, pp. 178–9.

69. Marx 1987, p. 303. The ‘theoretical phase of circulation’ of commodities is then ‘preparatory to real circulation’ (Marx 1987, p. 303.), since the latter can only take place once, ‘as a result of establishing prices, commodities have acquired the form in which they are able to enter circulation’ (Marx 1987, p. 323.). This ‘theoretical circulation’ comprises Chapters 1, 2 and the first section of 3 (the functions of measure of value and standard of prices) of *Capital*. Only then the actual movement of circulation of commodities is reproduced in thought, revealing the subsequent functions of money not as its preconditions (presupposed more abstract forms) but as its results (developed concrete forms).

70. Likitkijsonboon 1995, p. 91.

71. Rubin 1973, p. 152.

and, therefore, it would be ‘socially equalised labour’ (i.e. ‘the units of a homogeneous mass of social labour’) the basis for social accounting. And if this is so in a socialist community, Rubin argues, all the more must it be so in a commodity economy! Thus, he concludes, the magnitude of value must also have a purely social substance as its determinant and, hence, it cannot be a purely material form like labour in the physiological sense.

Leaving aside the peculiar, ‘roundabout’ form Rubin gives to his argument (where he wants to make a case about the determinations of value-producing labour by facing the determinations of labour in an alleged socialist community), there are still some problematic aspects to it. To begin with, from the fact that it is not individual labour-time that determines the magnitude of value, it does not necessarily follow that abstract labour in a physiological sense cannot be the substance which underlies its immanent measure. Certainly, it is socially necessary labour-time (as opposed to individual labour-time) that determines the magnitude of value. However, this might as well mean that it is only the amount of physiologically expended individual labour-time that accords with the normal technical conditions of production that counts for the determination of the magnitude of value (at the most general level of abstraction this norm can be regarded as a simple average). In other words, only insofar as it is socially necessary (both qualitatively and quantitatively) does the abstract character of individual private labour become socially represented in the form of value. Since the private character of labour entails the dissolution of all direct social relations, each individual only counts as a personification of average labour-power.⁷² Therefore, as far as the value-determinations are concerned, the singularity of each act of labour only matters as the expenditure of an identical aliquot part of the total labouring capacity of society.⁷³ But this does not do away with the physiological materiality of abstract labour. It only tell us that, from the social point of view, that part of the expenditure of human corporeality that is socially necessary is represented in the form of value.

At this juncture, Rubin’s own exposition faces a potentially serious blow to the orthodox, non-revisionist credentials he is struggling to preserve. As he self-consciously recognises, the idea that abstract labour (and hence ‘real’ value) only results from the equalisation of the products of labour in the exchange process which seems blatantly to clash with any conceivable notion of a ‘labour theory of value’, in which the labour-time expended in production determines the magnitude of value, and hence regulates the quantitative proportions in which two commodities exchange.⁷⁴

72. Colletti 1974, pp. 84–6, is good on this.

73. Marx 1976a, p. 129.

74. Rubin 1973, p. 154.

How does Rubín try to get round this antinomy? Again, he proceeds by resorting to strikingly idiosyncratic categorial distinctions and convoluted arguments of contentious logical status. Through the example of the ‘socialist’ community, Rubín constructs a distinction between the characteristics on the basis of which labour is equalised (which could be drawn from outside the sphere of exchange), and the act of equalisation itself (which, in the case of the commodity economy, has already been shown by Rubín to occur in the exchange process).⁷⁵ With this distinction in mind, he then makes the decisive final step in his whole argument.

Thus we assert that in a commodity economy, the social equality of two labour expenditures or their equality in the form of abstract labour is established through the process of exchange. But this does not prevent us from ascertaining a series of quantitative properties which distinguish labour in terms of its material-technical and its physiological aspects, and which causally influence the quantitative determination of abstract labour before the act of exchange and independent of it. The most important of these properties are: 1) the length of labour expenditure, or the quantity of working time; 2) the intensity of labour; 3) the qualification of labour; and 4) the quantity of products produced in a unit of time.⁷⁶

Rubín seems to be suggesting that the qualitative determination of value (and hence abstract labour) is the result of the process of exchange, whereas its quantitative determination ‘is influenced by’ the material determinations of the direct process of production. We can now appreciate how Rubín unsuccessfully tries to square the circle: not only does he rigidly separate materiality and social form but he also ends up raising a wall between the qualitative and the quantitative determination of value. Regarding the former, Rubín’s argument is undoubtedly circulationist and it is in this way that he tries to keep any naturalistic, Ricardian reading of Marx’s theory of value at bay. Concerning the latter, Rubín puts forward a rather traditional, production-centred ‘labour theory of value’. With this latter move, Rubín attempts to preserve his orthodox credentials intact. In this way, he tries to stick to the two theoretico-political imperatives that, as we mentioned in the introduction, underlie his intellectual enterprise: rejecting the ‘naturalistic’ retrogressions whilst avoiding being accused of revisionist.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, the consequence

75. Rubín 1973, p. 155.

76. *Ibid.*

77. In the final part of the book, with the problem of the qualitative determination of value behind, Rubín can afford the luxury of coming across as an orthodox defender of the ‘labour theory of value’. Thus, when dealing with the concrete form of market value and price of production taken by the value-form (more specifically, with the quantitative differences between them), he can offer a straight production-centred account. See Rubín 1973, pp. 179–84, 190–3, 206, 212, 224–5.

of this attempt was that of theoretical incoherence. The conceptual tensions in Rubin's thought actually turn out to be veritable antinomies. In the end, the two theoretico-political imperatives cannot be said to co-exist in peace but rather undermine each other.

The material and social determinations of value-producing labour in Marx's critique of political economy

In opposition to Rubin's theoretical political economy, it can be suggested that it is the contradictory unity between materiality and social form that forms the movement which Marx expounds in the whole of Chapter 1 of *Capital*. The commodity becomes known in its essential social being as a materialised social relation, a determination with which it emerges from the immediate process of production and, therefore, which is the premise of the act of exchange. In other words, in becoming a commodity, the material product of human labour negates itself simply as such to become a use-value which is, at the same time, the bearer of the fetishised general social relation between human beings (value, exchange value being its concrete form of appearance).⁷⁸ It is this contradiction that gives commodities what Marx termed in the final section of Chapter One of *Capital* its fetishistic character. Moreover, in the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx expounds how that contradiction objectified in the product of labour is, in turn, the realised necessity of the specific contradiction immanent in the capitalist form that social labour takes. It is here that we arrive at the crux of the matter. For no conceptual acrobatics or 'dialectical' subtlety can ignore the hard reality that Marx states without ambiguity that this specific form is not that of being abstract labour, but that of being performed as private and independent labour.⁷⁹ What is more, Marx states explicitly that it is not from labour's abstract aspect that the fetishism of commodity derives.⁸⁰ Let us examine the matter more closely.

However different the concrete forms of labour, they all consist in a material expenditure of human 'brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.,' i.e. of 'human labour-power pure and simple'.⁸¹ This, we think, is the only meaningful definition of abstract labour, which, as much as its concrete aspect, is a purely material form, bearing no social or historical specificity. And yet, when performed privately and independently, and once congealed in the natural

78. Iñigo Carrera 2003, p. 295.

79. Marx 1976a, p. 165.

80. Marx 1976a, p. 164.

81. Marx 1976a, pp. 134–5.

materiality of the product of labour, that purely material form acquires the form of the value of the commodity, i.e. a purely social form that embodies ‘not an atom of matter’.⁸² In this way, the materiality of the abstract character of human labour negates its generic role as the homogeneous element in the production of different useful objects to become a material form which acts as the substance of the fetishised social relation objectified in the product of labour. Now, it is to be noted that, in this process, abstract labour does not cease to be a material form. What happens is that, when performed privately, the materiality of the abstract character of (objectified) human labour plays a particular social role in the process of social metabolism by being represented as the social objectivity of value. It is only that social role that is peculiar to capitalist social relations. As Marx puts it in the first edition of *Capital*,

The commodities’ social form is their relationship to one another as equal labour; hence – since the equality of *toto coelo* [utterly] different labours can only consist in an abstraction from their inequality – their relationship to one another as human labour in general: expenditures of human labour power, which is what all human labours – whatever their content or mode of operation – actually are. In each social form of labour, the labours of different individuals are related to one another as human labours too, but in this case this relating itself counts as the specifically social form of the labours.⁸³

This is what Rubin’s one-sided focus on social forms fails to recognise. The reason for this is that, despite his references to the distinctiveness of Marx’s dialectical method vis-à-vis classical political economy, of which Ricardian Marxists are direct heirs, his own methodological approach could be said to be the mirror image of the latter. In other words, it is an application of formal logic, which is thereby impotent to reproduce in thought the contradictory movement of determination of real forms, that is, the process through which they realise their immanent potentiality through self-negation, by becoming another. For classical political economy, the question was very simple. If the source of value is a purely material form, there is no way in which its objectification could be a purely social form. Hence, the naturalisation of the value-form of the product. Now, paradoxical though as it may seem, the logic of Rubin’s argument is exactly the same, albeit emphasising the historicity of economic categories: value being a purely social form, so must be its substance. Thus, this train of thought cannot shed light on the specific determination of capitalist society whereby the process of expenditure of human ‘muscles, brain

82. Marx 1976a, p. 138.

83. Marx 1976d, p. 32.

and nerves', negates itself as such to affirm itself as a material process that simultaneously produces the general social relation (value). And notice that we are not referring to the generic fact that all processes of human material reproduction reproduce the social relations in which they take concrete form. That generic contradiction acquires a specific capitalist expression by virtue of the private form that social labour takes, so that the generic material determinations of the human life-process, including both the abstract and concrete character of labour, can only affirm themselves by becoming the immediate bearers of objectified forms of social mediation. In displacing the qualitative determination of the value-form from the direct process of production, Rubin actually misses this fundamental specific aspect of capitalist society, namely: that the immediate process of production of material wealth becomes, at the same time, the production of the general social relation.

Moreover, this is the only way in which the process of human metabolism can reproduce itself, given a particular historical stage in the development of the material productive forces of society. Namely, the historical stage in which human productive subjectivity develops to the point where it can no longer be ruled through relations of personal dependence, but where it cannot yet be ruled as a self-conscious collective potency either. Hence the conscious productive capacity of the individual to control the individual character of her labour (thus her individual freedom) as the necessary historical precondition of capitalism, but also the cost at which this freedom comes. That is, the incapacity to recognise and organise (i.e. the unconsciousness about) the social determinations of human individuality and the consequent inversion of those social powers into attributes of the product of labour. In other words, the freedom of the commodity producer is actually a concrete form of her alienation.⁸⁴

Now, in its more developed form of capital, this materialised general social relation among private individuals does not simply mediate their process of social metabolism; in addition, it becomes the very (alienated) subject of the movement of social reproduction itself. And yet, the material specificity of this fetishised social form – its reason to be in human (pre)history – consists, precisely, in the development of the human productive capacity to organise social labour in a fully conscious fashion. More concretely, capital is the social form that transforms the productive powers of free but isolated individual labour into powers of directly and consciously organised social labour.⁸⁵ As Chattopadhyay nicely puts it in his critique of the Leninist view of the

84. Iñigo Carrera 2003, pp. 3–4.

85. Marx 1976a, pp. 453, 928–9; Iñigo Carrera 2003, p. 37.

transition, ‘capitalism itself is the transition to communism’.⁸⁶ Hence the crucial importance of grasping the specificity of value-producing labour, deriving it from the private character of labour. Rubin’s representation of the historical character of value-producing labour as simply residing in abstract labour, coupled with his dogmatic exclusion of the ‘material-technical aspects’, actually obscures this material specificity of capital and leaves us with a purely formalistic understanding of the capitalist mode of production. As we shall see in the next section, this formalistic understanding deprives the critique of political economy of its critical-revolutionary force.

The materiality of value-producing labour and revolutionary subjectivity

At this stage of our argument, it is necessary to emphasise that the mode of existence of social labour as private labour is not a juridical form referring to the fragmentation of the property of means of production (though that is certainly its *simplest* juridical expression).⁸⁷ But neither should it be understood as an abstract atomisation of social production unilaterally seen from an exclusively formal point of view. That is, as just another social form of the production process that constitutes the present-day objective conditions in which human individuals exercise their abstractly free productive subjectivity.⁸⁸ As a social form, the private character of labour must be understood in its essential determination as a mode of development of the material productive forces of society borne by individual labour, i.e. of human productive individuality. In other words, it must be comprehended in relation to the development of the subjective material powers of human individuals consciously to organise their own transformative action upon their natural environment, the productive consciousness of human beings as working subjects. If human beings invert their social powers as the value-form of the product of social labour it is because they have developed the individual character of their productive powers to a degree that cannot be further expanded under relations of personal dependence. However, the other side of this coin is that they have not yet created the universality of the material powers needed to regulate their social reproduction in a fully conscious form either. This is why the product of their social labour still confronts them as

86. Chattopadhyay 1992, p. 94.

87. See Chattopadhyay 1996.

88. As is the case, for instance, with the representation of the private character of labour as dissociation – which would constitute the logical negation of the ‘concept’ of sociation and with association (exchange) as the mediating term in the logical contradiction – by contemporary authors within the ‘systematic-dialectics approach’ (Reuten 1988, pp. 48–50; Arthur 1993, p. 71).

an alien power in the form of capital and the material development of their productive subjectivity takes the form of the production of relative surplus-value.

But it is an insipid notion to conceive of this merely objective bond as a spontaneous, natural attribute inherent in individuals and inseparable from their nature (in antithesis to their conscious knowing and willing). This bond is their product. It is a historic product. It belongs to a specific phase of their development. The alien and independent character in which it presently exists vis-à-vis individuals proves only that the latter are still engaged in the creation of the conditions of their social life, and that have not yet begun, on the basis of these conditions, to live it. ... [U]niversally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal [*gemeinschaftlich*] relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where this individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities.⁸⁹

In brief, although capital is the historical producer of the powers of directly social labour, it achieves this by subordinating the conscious organisation to the autonomised movement of social life alienated as an attribute of the material product of labour. In other words, by determining social labour as a concrete form of development of the powers of private labour, i.e. a mode of existence of capital's self-valorisation through the production of relative surplus-value. This is capital's formal specificity, the necessary social form in which the aforementioned transformation of the materiality of the production process of human life is historically achieved. Thus, in this inverted social form, capital fulfils its *raison d'être* in the development of human species-being.⁹⁰

The creation of the material conditions engendering the social necessity for the 'suspension of this basis itself' does not have to be understood as the historical positing of abstractly objective conditions, to be complemented with equally self-moving subjective ones. Rather, it needs to be grasped as the development of the subject bearing the socially and historically developed material powers to strip the 'objective moments of production of this form of alienation'. It is about the inner unity of 'the objective and the subjective conditions, which are only the two distinct forms of the same conditions'.⁹¹

89. Marx 1993, pp. 161–2.

90. See especially Marx 1993, pp. 831–2; on the relative historical necessity of capital.

91. Marx 1993, p. 832; our emphasis.

In effect, this contradictory socialisation of labour as an alienated attribute of capital can only proceed by the constant revolution in the material conditions of social labour and, consequently, it also entails the permanent revolution in the productive subjectivity of wage-labourers according to a determinate tendency, namely: the development of the universality of their productive powers as self-conscious individual organs of a fully socialised productive body.⁹² This is the essential contradiction of the capitalist mode of production that needs to be analysed in its historical unfolding until reaching a concrete form in which it can only move forward in the transformation of the materiality of human life by revolutionising its social forms themselves.⁹³ That is, by abolishing the determination of material forms as bearers of objectified social relations.

As the material subject whose productive subjectivity this historic-economic process transforms ‘behind its back’ in the direction of a fully developed universality, the collective labourer thereby becomes determined to personify through its conscious revolutionary action the alienated necessity of social capital to be superseded in the free association of individuals. Inasmuch as the critique of political economy entails the reproduction in thought of the concrete unity of all these determinations of social existence, it becomes determined as the self-consciousness of the working class of its own determination as an alienated subject. An alienated subject, however, that eventually develops the material powers and historic task to put its own alienation (and hence its existence as working class) to an end. Blinded by his own formalism to the material content of social forms, and through the substitution of abstract labour for private labour as value-producing labour, Rubin and his ‘theoretical political economy’ are unable to shed light on any of these questions. That is, they leave out of scientific reflection the very material basis of the revolutionary action of the working class.

With this in mind, we can now briefly explore the politics behind this kind of formalism in the understanding of the capitalist mode of production by taking the socio-historical context of Rubin’s writings into account. In general, Rubin’s emphasis on social forms (abstract labour among them) has been

92. Iñigo Carrera 2003, pp. 10–12.

93. Needless to say, in the course of its unfolding throughout capitalist development that tendency towards a universal productive subjectivity can only push forward through its own negation. That is, not only through the formal inversion between subject and object of social production implicit in the general determination of capital as self-valorising value, but also by subjecting the different organs of the working class to all kinds of material mutilations of their productive subjectivity. The extreme manifestation of this is the production of a surplus population relative to capital’s needs of exploitation of living labour.

generally taken as a sound basis for a critical-revolutionary approach. However, in light of the argument above, one wonders if there is not an ideological determination in Rubín's ambiguous and hesitant treatment of the materiality of the process of production of human life. In effect, even a superficial observation of the transformation taking place in the materiality of the immediate production process in Russia in the late 1920s revealed a 'striking' similarity with the kind of development of the productive forces in Western capitalist countries.

Now, for Rubín's formalist approach, the difference between capitalism and socialism boils down to the way in which labour and things are 'socially equated': whether through the market or through the plan established by the 'social organs' of the socialist community. The materiality of the production process seems to be completely immaterial for that distinction. Moreover, for Rubín, those 'social organs' which determine the allocation of total labour-power of society into its different concrete forms are not the self-consciously (hence, freely) associated individuals themselves.⁹⁴ Rather, he claims that 'in a society with an organized economy, the labour of an individual in its concrete form is directly organized and directed by a social organ'.⁹⁵ But what is this 'social organ' which, as a power distinct from human individuals themselves, organises and directs the general social character of their labouring activity according to the 'goals of social policy'?⁹⁶ Although not stated explicitly by Rubín, one is tempted to conclude that this 'social organ' is the state and the plan which establishes the 'social equalization of labour and things' in the 'large socialist community' is the state-plan. Apparently, Rubín's form-analytical approach did not escape the ideological identification of socialism with state planning.⁹⁷

94. At least not in the early phase of the socialist society, 'when the labour of individuals is still evaluated by society' (Rubín 1973, p. 141). Clearly, Rubín cannot see that the whole point of the socialist/communist transformation consists, precisely, in the overcoming of the existence of 'society' as a potency standing over and against the conscious human individual.

95. Rubín 1973, p. 129.

96. Rubín 1973, p. 98. See also Rubín 1973, pp. 96, 154–5.

97. Needless to say, this is not to depict Rubín as a Stalinist. Yet, Rubín's assassination under Stalin does not speak necessarily of the critical and revolutionary nature of his work as such but of the degree of ideological and material violence that the centralised process of accumulation of capital as state property had to deploy for its original accumulation and expanded reproduction. Even the ambiguous formulations in Rubín's work were insufficient to escape the Stalinist purges and he certainly had to pay with his life for that (Iñigo Carrera 2003, p. 314.). Only complete and dogmatic compliance to every letter of the Stalinist codification of Marxism as state ideology was accepted. Such were the brutal forms taken by that absolutely centralised process of accumulation.

Concluding Remarks

Evidently, the debate among contemporary Marxists over the crucial question of the specificity of value-producing labour is far from being closed. As with many other contemporary currents, Rubin attempted to transcend the shortcomings of the Ricardian readings of Marx through the conception of abstract labour, the substance of value, as a specific social form of the capitalist mode of production. Moreover, albeit in a nuanced fashion, he offered the germinal elements of the circulationist approach. In this article, and through a close critical reconstruction of the *Essays*, we have attempted to lay bare the shortcomings of what still is a very influential contribution to the Marxist theorising on the value-form. The implications of our critique are, however, more general, and will, we hope, throw some light on more contemporary debates on value-form theory.

These questions are far from being simply academic. In effect, we have attempted to show that the very social determinations of the revolutionary action of the working class are among the ‘further developments’ of the commodity-form. In fact, one could even argue that the very term ‘value theory’ is misleading when referring to the investigation of the determinations presented by Marx in the first chapters of *Capital*. What Marx provided in the first chapter of *Capital*, and what we should develop in order to find the determinations of contemporary political action, is the ideal reproduction of the commodity-form of the product of labour. This is not part of a self-contained ‘theory of value’ but the discovery and exposition of the movement of the more abstract forms of the alienated social being of human individuals in capitalism. In this sense, so-called ‘value theory’ is actually but the first step in the broader process of dialectical cognition through which the working class comes to discover the alienated character of its social being and, consequently, of its consciousness and will. A process, however, that also produces the awareness of the historical powers developed in this alienated form and, hence, of the necessity (i.e. the social determinations) of conscious revolutionary action as the form in which capital is abolished. Starting with the simplest expression of alienated social life, the critique of political economy must therefore grasp the intrinsic connection among all the forms that this alienation takes, their form of movement, and their contradictory historical development into their own annihilation through the political action of the working class. The key to this movement consists, precisely, in the contradictory socialisation of labour – coupled with the corresponding development of the universality of human productive subjectivity – determined as a concrete form of development of the powers of private labour, i.e. as an alienated attribute of social capital.

Thus, the self-awareness of the working class about its historic task in the communist abolition of capital necessarily involves grasping capital as the unity of its social and material specificity. Or rather, as the specific social form in which that material specificity develops. It is this inner unity that Rubin's theory of value-producing labour fails to grasp.

In sum, the investigation of the determinations of the value-form should not be seen as a separate, self-contained field of research, with no connection to political action. Rather, it must be seen as an abstract yet necessary moment of the fully conscious organisation of the revolutionary activity of working class.

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