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Author(s): Santosh Mehrotra

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On the Social Specifications of Use Value in Marx's Capital

Having stated that the commodity is the basic unit of the wealth of capitalist society (*Capital*, Volume I, chapter 1), Marx establishes that every commodity has both a use-value and an exchange-value. He begins the discussion of *Capital* by defining use-value as a substance which satisfies human needs. But rather than being merely a natural substance, use-value acquires a series of social specifications as the analysis of Volume I proceeds. What are these specifications; and what role do they play in the analysis of (a) the commodity, money and their circulation; (b) capital; (c) capitalist production? It is with these issues that this note is concerned.

The use-value of a commodity is its utility or usefulness in satisfying human needs. A commodity, such as corn, brandy or a coat, is therefore, so far as it is a material thing, a use-value, something useful. Introducing the notion of Value, Marx says that a use-value, or useful article, has value because human labour in the abstract has been embodied in it. "Moreover, a thing can be useful, and the product of human labour, without being a commodity. Whoever directly satisfies his wants with the produce of his own labour, creates use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values.¹ However, Marx makes clear that producing use-values for some one else is not enough. For that matter, even the medieval peasant used to produce for others. But that did not make the corn he produced a commodity. "To become a commodity, a product must be transferred to another, for whom it will have use-value, by means of exchange" (i,48). In capitalist society, use-values serve as the material depositories of exchange value. Thus use-values enter into the act of exchange; a use-value has exchange when it can be exchanged for definite quantities of use-value. Use values constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth.

* School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi.

Marx does define the use-value initially as almost a natural substance, but is such a formulation valid? There seems to be a prior determination of a la Hegel, in which the use-value is determined socially through (1) a social determination of need, and (2) as a C—whether in the C-M-C or the M-C-M' circuits—the use-value is *only* useful for others, yet it is the *property* of one for whom it is not useful. Quite early in the analysis of *Capital*, the social specifications of use-value emerge, whether it be the use-value of (1) commodities (2) money-commodity or (3) the commodity labour-power.

The social specifications of the use-value of commodities emerges, for instance, in Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism. As a principle, he says, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other. The sum total of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact with one another until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labour does not appear explicitly until the act of exchange takes place. This act of exchange establishes relations directly between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one producer with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what as they really are, 'the material relations between persons and social relations between things' (i, 76). It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as Values, one common social character, separate from their varied forms of existence as use-values. This division of a product into a use-value and a value becomes practically important only when exchange has become so widespread, that use-values are produced for the object of being exchanged. In this way, the character that the producer's own labour possesses of being socially useful takes the form of the condition, that the product must not only be useful, but useful for others. But there is an element of ambiguity here: is this a social determination of the use-value or of exchange-value? (as undoubtedly exchangeable only as use-values they are such for others).

The social specification of the use-value of the money-commodity, however, becomes explicit soon after its introduction in the analysis of Volume 1 (i. 75). As we have seen above, with the increasing number and variety of the commodity exchanged, necessity for a commodity to acquire a value form independent of its use-value grows. Commodity owners never exchange their commodities on a large scale without these different kinds of commodities being equated to one and the same special article. This article acquires the character of general social equivalent. At first, the use-value as an elementary equivalent expresses the value of the C in the relative form. Its useful form then stands as exchange-value. Its character as a general social equivalent comes and goes with the momentary social acts that called it into

being. It attaches itself first to this and then to that commodity. But with the growth of exchange, it becomes fixed to a particular kind of commodity thus assuming the money form. The money commodity in this way acquires a formal use-value, originating in its special social function; the point being that one C now has its use-value determined to be *only* its exchangeability.

The use-value of the commodity, labour-power, also acquires a social specification as the analysis of Volume 1 proceeds. In chapter VI labour-power is introduced as that commodity which has the use-value of creating value (VI, 164). It is, then, the use-value *for capital*. Only in examining its consumption does labour appear natural. The labour process, resolved into its simple elementary factors, Marx says, is human action aimed at producing use-values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements. Speaking of the source of material wealth, of use-values, he quotes Petty as saying that labour is its father and the earth the mother. This labour process is the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is common to every social phase of that existence. But this simple process does not tell you what are the social conditions under which it is taking place, whether the slave owners whiplash, or the eagle eye of the capitalist. Under the capitalist mode of production, the capitalist owns the means of production; the labourer, on the other hand, owns nothing except his capacity to labour, or labour-power. The owner of money pays the labourer the value of a day's labour power; as a result the use-value of labour-power for that day belongs to the capitalist. The seller of labour-power, by giving his labour, does no more, in reality, than part with the use-value he has sold. The labour process, the process by which the capitalist consumes labour power, shows two characteristic phenomena. First, the labourer works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs. Secondly, the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the labourer, its immediate producer. All this is a far cry from the earlier characterisation of the consumption of the use value of labour power as a simple labour process, having no social content.

(a) We can now proceed to explain the role played by the social specifications of use-values (as derived above) in the analysis of money, commodities and their circulation. In so far as exchange is a process, by which commodities are transferred from persons to whom they are non-use-values, to persons to whom they become use-values, it is a social circulation of matter. The simple circulation of commodities, as exemplified in the circuit C-M-C, shows how the owner of one use-value (corn) sells it in order to buy a use-value (coat) which serves to satisfy his needs. (Here for C, its price can be realised only if it actually has a use-value.) Instead of his original commodity, he now possesses another of the same value but of different utility. And the

exchange process which makes this possible constitutes the social circulation of use-values.

But we saw that this exchange process was mediated by the commodity money. Money, as we saw above, by becoming the equivalent of various other commodities, acquires the character of a general social equivalent. In other words, in circuit C-M-C, what is the commodity (corn) exchanged for? For the shape assumed by its own value, for the universal equivalent. And for what is the money exchanged? For a particular form of its use-value. The role of the use-value (of money) is quite obvious in this transaction. However, M is more concrete in its use-value—it functions to measure exchange-value, set a standard of price, circulate C's. It then, insists function as *money*, an end in itself, takes ends which are solely social—exchange-value as an end in itself.

(b) It is not too difficult to explain the role played by the social specifications of the use-values of the commodity labour power, in the analysis of *Capital*. As we saw above, the use-value of the commodity labour power belongs to its purchaser, the capitalist. What really influences the capitalist when he purchases this commodity is the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being not only a source of value, but of more value than it has itself. It would not make sense for the capitalist to purchase this commodity if it was not capable of producing a commodity whose value would be greater than the sum of the values of the commodities used in its production, i.e. of the means of production and the labour power that he purchased with his money in the open market. More generally, its use-value is *labour*, such that all *use-values* emerge and are distributed according to the logic of value expanding itself.

Thus, the consumption of the use-value of labour power makes possible the realisation of the circuit M-C-M, or the conversion of money into capital. This metamorphosis, this conversion of money into capital, takes place within the sphere of circulation and also outside it. It is within the sphere of circulation because the act of purchase (M-C) of the commodity (labour power) takes place in the open market, where equivalents are exchanged, i.e. the value of labour power is paid to the labourer in terms of money. It is outside circulation because what is done within circulation is only a first step to the production of surplus value which takes place within the sphere of production.

The increase in value that takes place in the money intended to be converted into capital, cannot take place in the money itself. This is because in its function of means of purchase and of payment, money does no more than realise the price of the commodity it buys. Nor can it originate in the second act of circulation, the resale of the commodity, which is actually only the transformation of the article back again into its money form. The great change must take place, therefore, in the use-value as such of the commodity, in its consumption. We can thus see

how the use-value of labour is helpful in the conversion of money into capital.

What is interesting in this entire schema is that the two use-values, Money and Labour power, have been determined in this analysis not with respect to particular needs, but to exchange-value: money as the universal equivalent, and labour power in its capacity to expand exchange-value. Moreover, both are means to acquire more commodities.

(c) In capitalist production or the stage of modern industry, the revolution in the mode of production begins with the instruments of labour. The instrument of labour takes the form of the machine, which becomes a competitor of the labourer himself. The social specification of use-value here becomes quite clear. Firstly, under modern industry, the particular character of the use-value produced is determined by machinery. Quite unlike the system of manufacturing, the machine now conceives the commodity which has to be produced. Manufacture is characterised by the specialisation and differentiation of the instruments of production; now they can be incorporated as parts of the machinery. A machine is an instrument of production which effects a desired transformation in a certain material to produce use-value. It has a necessity internal to its mechanism, which creates motion, transmits the motion to the tool and manipulates the tool to produce a desired effect; in this way it determines the particular character of the use-value which is produced. Moreover, use-values, as products of modern industry, are themselves mass produced.

This leads to the second social specification, which is that machinery now determines the productivity and use-value of labour power. How much use-values labour can produce in a given time is determined by the machine—for a machine is the most powerful means for increasing the productiveness of labour, i.e. for shortening the working time required in the production of a commodity. Not only the use-value, but the value of each unit of output is now determined by the system of machines. In other words, use-value determines the magnitude of *value* of each produced C.

The role of the labourer in capitalist production is merely to maintain and supervise the machine, for labour puts the machine in operation. The factory is the place where individual labourers come together to maintain the system of machinery which produces the output. The particular character of the labour is determined by the character of the machinery. Labour is abstracted, separated from the product, in that it no longer determines the particular useful form of the product and no longer determines the productivity. The labour market in pre-bourgeois societies, however, is determined by the particular product which is produced. In modern industry, the labour market is independent of what the product is. Capital, through its machinery, determines both the value and use-value of labour power.

Finally, since pre-capitalist societies are largely marked by independent production for internal use, and are non-money exchange economies, use-values never acquire a social specification. It is in capitalist societies alone that use-values acquire a social specification.

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NOTES

1. *Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), Vol. I, chap. 1, p. 48. Hereafter cited in text.