

The *Grundrisse* (The 1857-58 Manuscript)

The Chapter on Capital: Part 15

The Transformation of Surplus Labour into Profit (II): Different Combinations of Capital (pp. 373-386)

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We have seen that in production, the action of living labour: (1) preserves the value of the material and instrument whose form is changed (into that of the product); (2) reproduces its own cost of reproduction; and (3) produces a surplus value.

It follows from this that the surplus value produced in production depends for its magnitude on two factors. First, on the ratio of the capital advanced in the form of material and instrument to that advanced as labour (wages); second, on the ratio of necessary labour-time and surplus labour-time.

Marx now disabuses a view that he attributes to Carey,¹ that the rate of profit and what he calls the “share of labour” are inversely related. Rather, Marx argues that

[i]f [...] a capital of 100 yields 10% in one period, 5% in another, then nothing is more mistaken than to conclude [...] that the share of capital in production was $\frac{1}{10}$ and that of labour $\frac{9}{10}$ in the first case; in the second case, the share of capital only $\frac{1}{20}$ and that of labour $\frac{19}{20}$; i.e. that the share of labour rises as the rate of profit falls. (Marx, 1973, pp. 373-4)

Such a view (as Carey’s) is based on a failure to understand that profit does not result from the total capital advanced, but only from that part of it advanced as labour. It is consonant with the

¹ The *Apparat* section of the *Gesamtausgabe* cites Carey, from his *Principles of Political Economy* (1837), as follows (ellipses in original). “As labour is improved in its quality, it becomes more productive, capital is accumulated at less cost of labour, and its owner can demand a smaller proportion of the product in return for granting its aid ... With every improvement in the quality of labour, the quantity of commodities to be divided is increased ... This increased production is attended by the power, on the part of the labourer, to retain a constantly increasing proportion of the commodities produced. He is, therefore, constantly improving in his condition ... Although the proportion of the capitalist is constantly diminishing with the increased productiveness of labour, this diminished share gives him a constantly increasing quantity of commodities, enabling him to increase his consumption, while he rapidly increases his capital ... The interests of the capitalist and the labourer are thus in perfect harmony.” (MEGA 2006, p. 999)

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point of view of capital itself,² Marx says, a profit of 10% *appears* as a profit on the sum total of its value components, “as if this capital were simply a sum of 100 thalers of value which had, as such, increased by 10%.” (Marx 1973, p. 374)

In fact, the decisive questions are, first, what the ratio between the different parts of capital is (in other words, how much capital represents living labour), and, second, how much surplus labour is then bought with the wage (i.e. what the relation between necessary and surplus labour-time is).

Marx now begins a numerical example, which he will pursue in various iterations over the course of several pages. The example is very difficult to follow, and is riddled with minor arithmetical errors (as well as suffering from several translation and editorial defects), yet it leads us to such an important and striking conclusion that it is worth following closely. In my reconstruction here, I shall try to make the ride as smooth as I can.

Imagine a capital of 100 thalers, divided between 60 thalers of materials and 40 of living labour (i.e. wages). If the return (profit) on capital is 10%, then this labour (of 40) will have produced a surplus of 10 thalers, and the ratio of necessary to surplus labour-time will be 4 : 1.³ The “new value” created (i.e. the surplus value) is 10 thalers, but this must be reckoned on the base of 40 (wages), not 100 (total capital). “The 60 thalers of value [the materials] have created no value whatever; the working day has.” This fact is *obscured* by the rate of profit, for it “in no way expresses the rate at which living labour increases objective labour”. (Marx 1973, p. 374)

(If the producer were not a worker working for a capitalist, but a producer working for herself, then she would begin production with 40 thalers in subsistence and 60 in material, and (assuming a working day as in the immediately previous example of 12 hours) would then work a working day of $9\frac{3}{5}$ hours⁴, rather than 12, and produce a product of 100 thalers, rather than 110. (The new value produced would be equal to 40, not 50; there would be no profit.) If, however, she worked 12 hours, because the materials to do so were at hand, it would not occur to her to say she had produced a surplus of 10%, but of 25%, for she would be able buy 25% more means of subsistence.)

The identification of profit with surplus labour-time allows us to identify the *qualitative limits* to the accumulation of capital: the length of the working day, and population (“the number of simultaneous working days”). If, however, profit is conceived as *interest*, “i.e. as the relation in which capital increases itself by means of some imaginary sleight of hand”, then the only limit to accumulation is *quantitative*, “and there is then absolutely no reason why capital cannot every other day convert the interest into capital and thus yield interest on its interest in infinite geometrical progression.”⁵ (Marx 1973, p. 375)

² “[...] and capital has no awareness whatever of the nature of its process of valorisation, and has an interest in having an awareness of it only in times of *crisis* [...]” (Marx 1973, p. 374, translation modified according to Marx 2006, p. 283)

³ Marx’s statement that “if the worker works a day of 12 hours, he has worked 3 hours of surplus time, and the labour time necessary to maintain him alive for one day was 9 hours of labour” (Marx 1973, p. 364) is incorrect, for here the ratio of necessary to surplus labour would be 3 : 1. He should have said: “if the worker works a day of 12 hours, he has worked $2\frac{2}{3}$ hours of surplus time, and the labour time necessary to maintain him alive for one day was $9\frac{3}{5}$ hours of labour”.

⁴ Marx says 9 hours, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a working day of 12 hours. In reality, this part of the working day is $\frac{4}{5}$, hence the correct figure of $9\frac{3}{5}$ hours.

⁵ Marx notes *inter alia* that the “illusion” that the surplus produced by working a full working day, rather than just

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The commodity product of the process we are now considering is equal to 110 thalers. Of these, 60 are the preserved value of the material transformed in production. A further 40 represent the reproduction of living labour in the form of wages. The remaining 10 thalers “represent production above and beyond reproduction”: surplus labour. The 50 thalers are the sum of the wages and surplus product, necessary labour-time and surplus labour-time: “[o]nly these 50 thalers are a product of the production process.” (Marx 1973, p. 376)

(In the conception that Marx attributes to Carey (see note 1 above), $\frac{1}{10}$ of the product belongs to the capitalist, and therefore the remaining $\frac{9}{10}$ to the worker. But if the real product of production is the 50 thalers produced and reproduced by labour, then the worker would need to receive 45 thalers, instead of 40. And the capitalist would receive 65, in return for her 100 advanced. Of course, in reality, the worker receives none of the 40 thalers she has reproduced, for these are to serve as the means to purchase further living labour.)

Let, in the numerical example we are working with, the capital advanced be divided into materials 60 thalers, instrument 10 thalers, and wages 40 thalers (a total of 100), and let this capital produce a surplus of 10 thalers. Marx labels this last “25% surplus time” (Marx 1973, 376), meaning that the surplus labour is 25% of the value advanced as labour (what Marx will call in later writings the “rate of surplus value”).

Suppose the capital now be divided into material 60, instrument 20, and wages 20; and let again surplus labour be 10 thalers, such that the total product is 110 thalers. For the “ordinary economist” (“and the even more ordinary capitalist”), once again “10% has been produced in equal proportions by all parts of the capital” (Marx 1973, p. 376), just as before. In reality, however, what has actually happened is that the 20 thalers advanced as wages have become 30; the ratio of surplus labour to labour advanced is now 50%, while the 80 thalers of materials and instrument are simply maintained in value (just as in the previous case the 40 thalers advanced as wages became 50, with the 60 thalers advanced as materials and instrument maintaining themselves in value).

Now let the capital be divided into 70 materials, 20 instrument and 10 wages, with again 10 surplus. Now, the “invariable value” is 90; the new product 20; and the ratio of surplus to labour advanced 100%.

Marx, evidently unsatisfied with what he has been doing (it is not clear why⁶), now says: “The devil take this wrong arithmetic. But never mind. *Commençons de nouveau.*” (Marx 1973, p. 377) He adds nothing numerically new in the next two pages of calculations (Marx 1973, pp. 377-9) and I shall not reproduce here what he says.⁷

that part of it equivalent to necessary labour-time, derives from the whole capital advanced, and not from that part of it equivalent to the reproduction of the living labour, “is the basis of the notorious Dr Price’s *compound interest calculation*, which led the heaven-born Pitt to his *sinking fund* idiocy.” (Marx 1973, p. 375) (In 1772, the nonconformist minister Richard Price, in a pamphlet dealing with methods to reduce the British national debt, calculated that one penny invested at 5% annual compound interest at the time of the birth of Jesus would have by the time he was writing amount to an astronomical sum of money. Price’s ideas captured the imagination of Prime Minister William Pitt, who set up a “sinking fund” in 1786, a ring-fenced deposit of taxes intended to grow to an extent sufficient to wipe out Britain’s public debt, considered at the time to be unmanageably large. Predictably, the fund did not grow as expected, and was eventually abandoned.)

⁶ Although just before this remark there are several lines of crossed out calculations (see MEGA 2006, p. 845).

⁷ Except to note the following anticipatory remark. “It might be said that the *instrument of labour*, its value, has to be not only replaced but reproduced; since it is in fact used up, consumed in production. This to be looked at under fixed capital. In actuality the value of the instrument is transposed to that of the material; to the extent that

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Marx now summarises some of what he has identified in the foregoing numerical analysis (a summary that quickly takes the form of a critique of the assumptions on which the numerical model was based).

He points out that in the contrast between the division of capital between “constant value” and wages of 60 to 40 and that of the division of 80 to 20 the latter presents itself as “absurd”. While the constant value component of capital has risen from 60 to 80 what Marx calls the “productivity of labour” (“*die Productivität der Arbeit*”) has fallen (from $4\frac{1}{6}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$). (These numbers come from dividing the “real product of production”, that is, the sum of wages and surplus, by the total length of the working day (which is 12 hours in both cases); the unit is thalers per hour. In the first case, in 12 hours 50 thalers are produced; in the second, in 12 hours only 30.⁸)⁹

It is not relevant for the comparison that the *necessary* labour time (“the value of labour”) differs; this only represents a difference in the wage level. Nevertheless, “[t]he fact that the worker can live from less work, i.e. that he produces more in the same number of hours, would have to be shown not in a decrease in the thalers for necessary labour, but in the number of necessary hours” (Marx, 1973, p. 379), i.e. that a fall in the money wage would have to be explained not by way of a fall in the real wage but by a cheapening of the articles that make up the real wage.

The difficulty with the numerical model here is allowing the “invariable value” to vary and constraining the surplus to a constant magnitude. It is this that leads to the absurdities described.

Nevertheless, wonders Marx, might there not be some truth in the model after all? Is it not the case that, as relatively more material and instrument to labour is incorporated into capital, that absolute new value decreases alongside an increase in the relative? In other words, with an increase in the ratio of materials/instrument (“invariable value”) to wages, the ratio of surplus labour to necessary labour may rise at the same time as the ratio of surplus labour to *total capital* can fall.

An increase in the ratio of instrument/material to wages will necessarily be brought about by an increase in the productive forces, and for two reasons. First, the increase in the productive forces “has to express itself in an enlargement of the value of the instrument”; second, it “necessarily brings with it an increase in the material, since more material has to be worked in order to produce more product.”¹⁰ (Marx 1973, p. 380) “Now, although there is less (necessary) labour in relation to surplus labour, and absolutely less living labour in relation to capital, is it not possible for its surplus value to rise, although in relation to the capital as a whole it declines,

it is objectified labour, it only changes its form. If in the above example [i.e. that in which the capital advanced is divided as 60 “constant value” and 40 wages] the value of the material was 50 and that of the instrument 10, then now, with the instrument used up by 5, the value of the material is 55 and that of the instrument 5; if it disappears altogether, then that of the material has reached 60. This is an element of the simple production process. Unlike wages, the instrument has not been consumed outside the production process.” (Marx 1973, p. 378))

⁸ Really, this number is as index of the monetary value of labour-time.

⁹ “Suppose, however, that the increased expenditure for wages expresses more working days in the first case, fewer in the second, and then the presupposition is correct.” (Marx, 1973, p. 379) This can only be the case, however, if we are dealing with two different types of production processes (since the proportion between capital advanced as materials/instrument and wages).

¹⁰ Parenthetically, Marx notes that “[t]he increase in the productive force can [...] also relate to quality; but if that is given, only to quantity; or to quantity if quality is given; or to both.”

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i.e. the so-called rate of profit declines?” (Marx, 1973, pp. 380-81)

Marx sets up a numerical illustration of the point.

Let there be a capital of 100, of which material is 30, the instrument is 30, and wages 40 (this last being equal to 4 working days). Let profit be 10%. “Here profit is 25% on wages and 10% on capital as a whole.” (Marx 1973, p. 381)

Now let material be 40 and the instrument 40. Let the productivity of labour double, so that now only two working days are required (so that labour is 20). Is it now possible to let the “absolute profit” (the profit on total capital) be less than 10% and the profit on labour (profit divided by wages) be greater than 25%? It clearly is: if profit is $6\frac{2}{3}$, then “absolute profit” is $6\frac{2}{3}\%$ while “profit on labour” $33\frac{1}{3}\%$.

(Marx now states that “an increase in the value of the instrument in relation to capital as a whole, and an increase in the value of the material, all in all presuppose a division of labour, hence at least an absolute increase in the number of workers, if not an increase relative to capital as a whole.” (Marx 1973, p. 381) He gives no development of this argument.)

Marx restates the example in the form of one that centres on the use of a lithographic printing press as instrument. (His intention seems to be to paint a picture of the introduction of a labour-productivity raising instrument which does *not* affect the division of labour.)

Let there be two production processes; one involves a materials cost of 30 thalers and an instrument (lithograph press) cost of 30 thalers, plus 40 thalers wages (equivalent to four workers); the other a materials cost of 40 and an instrument cost of 40, and 20 wages (two workers). The machine involved in the second process is more expensive, but it can process the material transformed in production faster, and, in addition, it requires less labour to operate it.¹¹ The first process produces a surplus of 10 thalers (which is equal to 10% on capital and 25% on labour) while the second a surplus of $6\frac{2}{3}$, giving a profit of $6\frac{2}{3}\%$ on capital and $33\frac{1}{3}\%$ on labour.

Imagine now a rise in the price of means of workers’ subsistence (Marx suggests a rise in the price of grain) such that necessary labour (“the maintenance of the worker”) rises by 25%. In the case of the first process, wages will now be 50, and the total capital laid out 110. The profit will now be 12. (Marx gives no justification for this last figure; my supposition is that he wishes there to be a profit on labour of 25%, as there was before the rise in wages, but that he makes an elementary algebraic error: 25% on 50 is $12\frac{1}{5}$, not 12.) Profit on capital will be $\frac{12}{110}$ or $9\frac{1}{6}\%$ and $\frac{12}{50}$ or 24% on labour.

In that of the second process, wages will now be 25, and total capital 105. Calculating a surplus of $33\frac{1}{3}\%$ on labour (i.e. on 25) gives a surplus of a magnitude of $8\frac{1}{3}$, which amounts to a profit of $7\frac{59}{63}\%$ (Marx erroneously gives the profit rate as $8\frac{1}{3}\%$).

Marx now supposes that there be, over a 10-year period, a series of good harvests for five years and a series of bad harvests for five years, with the cost of means of subsistence varying as described above. In the five-year period of good harvests, the first capitalist will earn a total profit (Marx uses the word “*Zins*”, “interest”) of 50 thalers (a profit of 10 thalers each year over

¹¹ “There are machines, e.g. forced air heating ducts, where labour as such disappears altogether except at a single point; the duct is open at one point, and carries heat to the others; no workers are required at all.” (Marx 1973, pp. 381-2). Marx references Charles Babbage’s 1832 work *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures*.

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five years¹²); in the second period, that of bad harvests, a total profit of 60 thalers (12 thalers a year over five years). (Marx erroneously calculates the total profit for the second period as $45\frac{5}{6}$ a figure he can only have come to by multiplying the the profit *rate* ($9\frac{1}{6}\%$), not the *mass* of profit). This gives an annual average of 55 thalers profit.

In the case of the second capitalist, in the first five-year period the annual profit will be $6\frac{2}{3}$ thalers a year (a total of $33\frac{1}{3}$ thalers), and in the second $8\frac{1}{3}$ thalers a year (a total of $41\frac{2}{3}$ thalers). The annual average profit over the 10-year period for this second capitalist will be $7\frac{1}{2}$ thalers.¹³ (Marx notes that it may well be the case that the first process will be able sell at a lower per-unit cost because of the greater rate at which the instrument processes the material, but that this may then be offset by the fact that the instrument is more expensive. Nevertheless, he suggests that we assume “the relation between the value of the machine and that of the material [to] be constant in both cases.” (Marx 1973, p. 383))

What has been the point of all this? Marx summarises.

This example attains significance only if we assume a smaller capital which employs more labour and less material and machinery, but yields a higher percentage on the total capital; and a larger capital employing more machinery and more material, as many working days in absolute numbers but relatively fewer, and a smaller percentage on the whole, because less on labour, being more productive, division of labour used, etc. It also has to be postulated (which was not done above) that the use value of the machine significantly greater than its value; i.e. that its devaluation in the service of production is not proportional to its increasing effect on production.” (Marx 1973, p. 383)

Marx now restates the example (again!), this time varying the size of the two capitals, and changing the proportion between material and instrument for the more productive capital. (And this time he will come to an important conclusion.)

Capital I: total capital = 100 thalers; 30 material, 30 instrument (a “manual press”), 40 wages (= 4 working days). Profit (“*Gewinn*”, “gain”) = 10 thalers = 10% on capital advanced and 25% on labour.

Capital II:¹⁴ total capital = 200 thalers; 100 materials, 60 instrument, 40 wages (= 4 working days). Profit = $13\frac{1}{3}$ (equal to $1\frac{1}{3}$ working days, Marx notes, compared to the previous iteration of the example, where it was equal to one working day), and the “total sum” (i.e. the total value of the product, equal to the capital advanced plus profit) is equal to $413\frac{1}{3}$ thalers.¹⁵ This profit

¹²The translation “the first lithographer would gain 50 thalers of interest on the second during the first 5 years” (starting six lines up from the bottom of p. 382 of Marx 1973) is wrong: the original text does not say that the first capitalist gains 50 thalers *more* than the second over this period, but 50 thalers *in total* (cf. Marx 2006, p. 291).

¹³The accumulated errors in Marx’s account mean that my figures do not tally with his.

¹⁴Marx makes a significant arithmetic error in his description of the conditions of production for capital II. Unfortunately (and inexplicably) this error is corrected in Marx 1973, without the correction being acknowledged, which makes his account as it appears there even more incomprehensible than it otherwise would be. In what follows here I reproduce Marx’s account as it appears in Marx 2006, pp. 293ff, indicating as I go along the errors that appear in Marx’s original version of the example as well as the corrections that appear in Marx 1973, pp. 383ff. (Note that the version of the example that appears in Marx 1986, pp. 309f correctly reproduces Marx’s (erroneous) figures.)

¹⁵This last figure is clearly wrong, and should read $213\frac{1}{3}$; this figure is corrected without acknowledgement in Marx 1973.

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represents a rate of profit of $3\frac{1}{3}\%$,¹⁶ compared to 10% in the case of capital I. Despite this last, more surplus labour is produced by capital II than by capital I ($13\frac{1}{3}$ thalers compared with 10; one and a third days' labour compared with one), while the amount of labour functioning in both processes is the same. This despite the fact that the rate of profit in the case of capital II is one third of that in that of capital I.¹⁷

Now, Marx says, suppose that the "materials" components in both capitals (equal to 30 in the case of capital I and 100 in that of capital II) are sheets of book paper ("*Druckbogen*") and that both presses wear out completely after 10 years, such that capital I has to replace the press at a rate of 3 thalers per year and capital II at a rate of 6 thalers per year.

Marx now calculates the price of the respective commodity products; to do this he takes each "working day" to be a period of 3 months, i.e. a quarter of a year, and each sheet's material cost to be one thaler. We then have (for one year):

Capital I: 30 sheets (materials): 30 thalers; instrument (depreciation): 3 thalers; "objectified labour time" (Marx 1973, p. 383), i.e. wages (40 thalers) plus profit (10 thalers): 50 thalers. Total (for one year's commodity product): 83 thalers.

Capital II: 100 sheets (materials): 100 thalers; instrument: 6 thalers; objectified labour time: $53\frac{1}{3}$ thalers (40 thalers wages plus $13\frac{1}{3}$ thalers profit). Total: $159\frac{1}{3}$ thalers.

These two commodity product totals are for, respectively, 30 sheets and 100 sheets. This allows us to calculate the per-sheet value of the product as follows.

Capital I: $\frac{83}{30}$ thalers per sheet, or 2 thalers and 23 groschen;¹⁸

Capital II: $\frac{159\frac{1}{3}}{100} = \frac{478}{3} \cdot \frac{1}{100} = 1\frac{178}{300} \approx 1\frac{18}{30} = 1$ thaler 18 groschen.

At these prices, capital I will not be able to compete: "It is clear then that Capital I is done for, because its selling price is infinitely too high." (Marx 1973, p. 384) And this is due to the higher level of labour productivity in the production process of capital II, in turn due to the more productive—even if more expensive—machine. Marx has in fact come to a startlingly important conclusion.

The profit of the larger capital, working with more machinery, therefore appears smaller than that of the smaller capital working with relatively or absolutely more living labour, precisely because the *higher profit on living labour* appears as smaller, when calculated on the basis of a total capital in which living labour makes up a lesser proportion of the whole, than the *lower profit on living labour* which makes up a larger proportion of the smaller total capital. But the fact that No. II can employ more material, and that a larger proportion of the total value is in the instrument, is only the expression of the productivity of labour [*"die Productivität der Arbeit"* again, but here used in a different sense]. (Marx 1973, pp. 384-5)

¹⁶This figure is also wrong. What Marx has evidently done is calculate the rate of profit on a capital of 400 thalers, not, as he should have done, on 200 thalers (this fits with his calculation of the value of the commodity product as $413\frac{1}{3}$ rather than $213\frac{1}{3}$). This incorrect rate of profit is also corrected, without acknowledgement, in Marx 1973.

¹⁷The unacknowledged corrections in Marx 1973 make this statement there appear incomprehensible.

¹⁸From 1821 the coin known in Prussia as the *Silbergroschen* was worth $\frac{1}{30}$ of a thaler.

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(Marx points out that this conclusion runs counter to that drawn by Bastiat, who had argued that with a fall in the rate of profit the workers' share of the product would rise. He also points out that Ricardo, while aware of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, attributed this to a rise in the price of grain (and hence in rent).)

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