

The *Grundrisse* (The 1857-58 Manuscript)

The Chapter on Capital: Part 17

The Accumulation of Capital and the Law of Population (pp. 398-401)

September 9, 2026

If surplus labour-time is that part of the working day in excess of necessary labour-time, it assumes a form of existence as “a multiplication of *simultaneous working days*, i.e. of the *labouring population*.”¹ (Marx 1973, p. 399) To the extent, therefore, that the relation between necessary and surplus labour-time can be modified through transformations in the social productivity of labour, this latter can also change the composition of the population. “A labouring population of, say, 6 million can be regarded as one working day of 6×12 , i.e. 72 million hours: so that the same laws [are] applicable here.” (Marx 1973, p. 399)

If it is a law of capital that it sets surplus labour in motion, it can only do this on the basis of setting necessary labour in motion. This in turn is achieved through the exchange of capital with labour. The tendency of capital is to create as much labour as possible, at the same time as to reduce necessary labour to a minimum. It is therefore also a tendency of capital to create a *surplus* population.²

This is evidently a contradiction. On the one hand value *is* objectified labour; and *surplus* value, which is the valorisation³ of capital, is the excess of that objectified labour over that which is necessary for the reproduction of “labouring capacity” (“*Arbeitsvermögen*”). On the other, it is the tendency of capital “to make human labour (relatively) superfluous, so as to drive it [...] towards infinity.”

Capital must therefore constantly posit necessary labour in order to posit surplus labour; it has to multiply it (namely the *simultaneous* working days) in order to multiply the surplus; but at the same time it must suspend them as necessary, in order to posit them as surplus labour. (Marx 1973, p. 399)

¹ Marx notes parenthetically that surplus labour-time “can also be created [...] by means of forcible prolongation of the working day beyond its natural limits; by the addition of women and children to the labouring population.”

² Surplus population being that “population which is useless until such time as capital can utilize it.” (Marx 1973, p. 399)

³ Marx 1973 (p. 399) says “realisation”.

The *Grundrisse* (The 1857-58 Manuscript)

The Chapter on Capital Part 17: *The Accumulation of Capital and the Law of Population* (pp. 398-401)

With respect to the *individual* working day, capital thus on the one hand lengthens it to its maximum possible extent while on the other progressively reducing its necessary part (through the limitless increase in the productive forces).

With regard to the working day considered *spatially* (“*räumlich*”),⁴ however, we can conceive of it as “*many working days alongside one another*.”

The more working days capital can enter into exchange with at once, during which it exchanges *objectified for living labour*, the greater its realisation [“*Verwertung*”: valorisation] *at once*. It can leap over the natural limit formed by one individual’s living, working day, *at a given stage in the development of the forces of production* [...] only by positing *another* working day alongside the *first* at the same time—by the spatial addition of *more simultaneous working days*.⁵ (Marx 1973, pp. 399-400)

The very process that reduces the magnitude of necessary labour in turn makes the production of workers ever cheaper.⁶ But if it is the tendency of capital to increase the total population, it is also its tendency to reduce the social necessary working day, that is to reduce the many simultaneous working days, to the minimum.

From this arises “the tendency of capital simultaneously to increase the *labouring population* as well as to reduce constantly its *necessary* part (constantly to posit a part of it as reserve).” (Marx 1973, p. 400)

(Marx notes parenthetically (Marx 1973, p. 401n) the creation of what he calls “minus-labour” (contrasted with “surplus labour”): “relative idleness (or *not-productive* labour at best)”. What Marx is talking about is the what he calls “paupers, flunkeys, lickspittles,⁷ etc. living from the surplus product, in short, the whole train of retainers; [along with] the part of the servant class which lives not from capital but from revenue.” (Marx 1973, p. 401)

At the total social level, the creation of “disposable labour time” is also the creation of time available for the production of science and art. That there exist layers of “non-labour”, unproductive labour, etc. is due to the fact that there is a class of productive labourers who work more than required for the satisfaction of their own needs: because there is surplus labour. “In reality the development of wealth exists only in these opposites [...]”

⁴ “[T]ime itself regarded as space”. (Marx 1973, p. 399)

⁵ “I can drive the surplus labour of A no higher than 3 hours; but if I add the days of B, C, D, etc., then it becomes 12 hours. In place of a surplus time of 3, I have created one of 12.”

⁶ This in addition “to the fact that the increase in population increases the productive force of labour, since it makes possible a greater division and combination of labour, etc. The increase of population is a *natural force* of labour, for which nothing is paid. From this standpoint, we use the term *natural force* to refer to the *social force*. All *natural forces of social labour* are themselves historical products.”

⁷ What here is rendered “lickspittles” is in the original “Jenkinses”. (Marx 2006, p. 308) A “Jenkins” was nineteenth-century slang term (apparently coined by Thackeray and popular in *Punch*) used to refer to an obsequious flatterer (originally in the field of the print media).

The *Grundrisse* (The 1857-58 Manuscript)

The Chapter on Capital Part 17: *The Accumulation of Capital and the Law of Population* (pp. 398-401)

References

Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. London: Pelican Books.

Marx, Karl. 2006. "Karl Marx. Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857/58." Pp. 1-747 in *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, Abteilung II, Bd. 1. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.