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TO SOCIALISM

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RESEARCH IN POLITICAL ECONOMY VOLUME 36

IMPERIALISM AND TRANSITIONS TO SOCIALISM

EDITED BY

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CONTENTS

<i>About the Editor</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>About the Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>

PART I THEORETICAL ELEMENTS

Chapter 1 Abstract Labor and Imperialism <i>Fabien Trémeau</i>	3
Chapter 2 Imperialism and Working-class Agency <i>John Smith</i>	21
Chapter 3 The Imperialist Multinational: Concentration, Fiction or Rent? <i>Andy Higginbottom</i>	39
Chapter 4 Unequal Exchange and Global Value Chains <i>Andrea Ricci</i>	59
Chapter 5 The Transition Toward a Post-capitalist Economic Rationality <i>Wim Dierckxsens, Andrés Piqueras and Walter Formento</i>	77
Chapter 6 Study on the Evolution of China's Economic Structure (from 1952 to 2014) – Analysis of the Role of Profit Rate by Impulse Response Functions <i>Zhiming Long and Rémy Herrera</i>	95

**PART II
PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES**

Chapter 7 Land Revolution and Local Governance: Socialist Transformation in China	<i>123</i>
<i>Tsui Sit, Erebus Wong, Kin Chi Lau and Tiejun Wen</i>	
Chapter 8 Imperialism and Transition to Socialism in Vietnam	<i>141</i>
<i>Tran Dac Loi</i>	
Chapter 9 A Testimony on the “Juche” Thought in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea	<i>157</i>
<i>Kinhide Mushakoji</i>	
Chapter 10 Imperialism and the Transition to Socialism in Cuba	<i>163</i>
<i>Al Campbell</i>	
Chapter 11 The Venezuelan Oil and the US Imperialism (1920–2020)	<i>179</i>
<i>Hemmi Croes</i>	
Chapter 12 The Citizens’ Revolution in Ecuador and the US Imperialism	<i>197</i>
<i>Constantin Lopez</i>	
Chapter 13 Brazil: Impeachment and the Conflicting Relationship between the Dilma Rousseff Government and the National Congress	<i>223</i>
<i>Leonardo Loureiro Nunes</i>	
<i>Index</i>	<i>237</i>

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PREFACE

In this volume, we provide the reader with a set of texts designed to shed light on the issues of imperialism and the transitions to socialism. Written by 18 contributors – in addition to the author of these lines – from 12 countries and 3 continents, these texts are organized in two main parts. One part is devoted to certain theoretical aspects whose analysis seems to us to be decisive for understanding the subject under consideration. The other part is focused on the examination of practical experiences of socialist transitions, more or less advanced and with varying degrees of success.

In the theoretical part, the reader will not find a homogeneous definition of imperialism nor a unified characterization of the transitions to socialism. Rather, we propose multidimensional, polyvalent and multidisciplinary approaches to highlight both the complexity and the topicality of these phenomena. Thus imperialism, which combines and articulates relations of domination between nations with relations of exploitation of labor by capital, is linked here to several of the most fundamental concepts of Marxism, such as value, abstract labor, the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, and class struggle, but also to the contradictory dynamics of the transformations of present-day capitalism, in connection with the new contemporary forms of fictitious capital, the behavior of transnational firms in the concentration and centralization of globalized capital or the delocalization of production, as well as with the configurations of unequal exchange in the international division of labor and global value chains or the evolution of economic structures. These analyses do not claim to be exhaustive and would certainly be enriched with in-depth studies of wars and military expenditures, new technologies or the destruction caused by capitalism on the environment – points that are present in this book but not extensively developed in the form of specific chapters. In addition, even if the calculations and estimates in Chapter 6 are performed on a particular country (China), we ultimately thought that it was recommendable and preferable to place this text in the theoretical part of the volume, given the methodology used. The latter, as a matter of facts, is centered around a conceptual and theoretical reflection on the rate of profit and mobilizes technical tools (such as econometric modeling, impulse response functions, matrix calculation, Bayesian analysis, among others).

The countries studied as case studies in the applied part can, beyond the singularity of their respective historical trajectories, be classified into several quite distinct categories. Here, two criteria will be used, depending on whether or not these countries are anti-capitalist – that is to say, for questioning the structures of capitalism – and/or anti-imperialist or not – in other words, for or against the implementation of policies aimed at opening up margins of maneuver for national sovereignty. China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba all fall into a first category, that of countries that are both anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, where

the revolutionary processes are the most radical, where the struggles for socialist emancipation and national liberation have merged into a conceptual and political unity, and through which the generalized social gains and the concrete improvement of living and working conditions of the vast majority of the people are the most solid. Venezuela (since 1999 and the setting in motion of the Bolivarian revolution) but also Ecuador (for the period of the citizens' revolution between 2005 and 2017 only) belong to a second group, bringing together countries where significant revolutionary advances have been performed, or are still in the process of being consolidated, whose anti-imperialist and pro-socialist orientation is explicit, but which have so far only managed to tackle the neoliberal form of the capitalist system, rather than its deep structures. Other governments, with a popular base and progressive leaders, have made progress in the fight against poverty, but limited and without affecting its causes, because the neoliberal line of capitalism has not really been inflected there: this is the third category in which we find Brazil of the mandates of Presidents Lula and Dilma Rousseff. Finally, other countries, the fourth and last group, are seeing popular resistance, whose heroism is no less important than that of previous struggles, against regimes that, for the time being, remain right-wing or even extreme right-wing. Brazil after the parliamentary coup of 2016 and Ecuador since 2017 have slipped into this category. However, movement in the opposite direction is also possible, as Bolivia has recently shown, whose people succeeded in overturning the military coup orchestrated by proimperialist and racist forces in 2019 and, thanks to the victory of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS, or *Movimiento al Socialismo*) in the Bolivian presidential elections of October 2020, in reviving the momentum of the indigenous revolution begun in 2005. Bolivia, like other countries in Asia (especially Nepal) and Africa (Burkina Faso, for example), could have been studied here to show how important the revolutionary advances of modern times are for the strengthening of national independence and social justice, but also how vulnerable they remain as long as they do not succeed in radicalizing themselves by breaking with capitalism and socializing the productive forces.

Capitalism is in crisis. This crisis, old, structural, serious, is systemic, in the sense that the system will not find a solution by itself. The capitalist system is declining, degenerating, becoming more destructive and dangerous, and if it is not collapsing faster, it is because its state is supporting it, at arm's length, as was the case in 2008 when the monetary authorities of the US hegemony injected astronomical amounts of liquidity into the economy and granted the Central Banks of the countries of the North and some key countries of the South unlimited access to the dollar; or as is the case at the present time in the so-called "health crisis" following the COVID-19 pandemic, with the main capitalist economies that only remain in a functioning state because they are placed under an infusion of public money. There will be no way out of the "health problem" with neoliberal managers who weaken public hospital services; nor will there be a way out of the financial problem with rapacious private bank managers who continue to speculate frantically, shamelessly. There will be no way out of the environmental problems with procapitalist environmentalists; nor will there be a way out of the social problems with the social-liberal reformists; any more than there will

be no way out of religious terrorism with capitalist leaders who stir up hatred and communitarianism and behave like temple merchants by weakening national education (and secularism where it exists, as in France) by selling it to the private sector (confessional, moreover) and promoting market mechanisms in education.

Capital will not find a solution through its internal logic of profit maximization that locks the world system into a spiral of destruction and wars that ends up threatening us all with death. This is where we are. And this is why wanting to embark on a socialist transition is not only a response to a spirit of justice but also an answer to the call of reason: it is a question of survival for humanity and for life. Socialism is not just a word, it is a struggle. It is not an end, but a transition process, long and difficult that can take many paths toward the liberation of labor from the domination of capital. It is socialism, a society of solidarity, which walks with history.

Rémy Herrera

December 29, 2020

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PART I

THEORETICAL ELEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

ABSTRACT LABOR AND IMPERIALISM

Fabien Trémeau

ABSTRACT

To understand the logic that pushes capitalism to imperialism requires us to question one of the fundamental categories of capital: abstract labor. Often ignored by the Marxist tradition, abstract labor is, however, by Marx's own admission, one of its greatest discoveries. However, the different interpretations that have marked out the twentieth century have, most of the time, failed to grasp the profound originality of this concept. However, a correct understanding of abstract labor makes it possible to understand the dynamics and contradictions of capital and what distinguishes it from other forms of social organization. By showing that abstract labor is much more than a neutral economic category and that it is the general social mediator, we question the category of labor within capitalist society. It then becomes possible to identify the dynamics and contradictions of capital and why imperialism is necessary to it.

Keywords: Abstract labor; value; crisis; imperialism; production process; productive and unproductive labor

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to distinguish two types of categories in order to understand the development of capitalism: logical categories and historical categories, and to study their dialectical relationship in order to grasp the dynamics of capitalism and the possibilities for action within it. Therefore, when writing a history of capitalism and imperialism, it is essential not to do so independently of the logical categories that underlie it.¹

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Marxist thinkers have often left aside the study of these categories in Marx's work, relegating them either to metaphysical fantasies still marked by Hegelianism or to aporias, given the difficulties they raise in the economic field (think of value-price transformation). Yet, if we agree with Marx that science would be useless if essence and appearance coincided, understanding the logical categories of capital is the prerequisite for a correct grasp of the historical dynamics of capitalism and consequently of imperialism. This is Marx's approach in *Capital*, since he starts from the concepts of commodity, value and abstract labor in order to "reconstruct" capitalist society in its most concrete aspects. These three categories, intimately linked, become concrete abstractions in their phenomenal development and subject humans to their laws. One of the "real abstractions" that Marx held most dear and that caused him the most difficulty was undoubtedly abstract labor.

Abstract labor is a concept that has largely been ignored by the Marxist tradition. From the death of Marx to the 1920s, it was absent from both theoretical and political debates. It was Isaak Rubin who first took a serious interest in this concept in his book *Essays on Marx's Value Theory*. Relatively unnoticed at the time, he wrote in his book² that "the theory of abstract labour is one of the central points of Marx's theory of value" (Rubin, 1990, p. 131) but his voice remains isolated and this "central point" will remain anecdotal for the full understanding of capital, for economists as well as for philosophers. Part of the Marxist tradition continued to reduce the concept of abstract labor to its quantitative aspect alone that is, from the point of view of the magnitude of value in a Ricardian approach to the question, while another part did not even bother to consider it. After a few debates in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the question of abstract labor returned to oblivion and did not reappear until the early 1970s with Lucio Colletti (1974) in Italy, Hans Georg Backhaus (1974)³ in Germany and Jean-Marie Vincent (2019, 2020) in France.

This revival of the question since Rubin showed that the concept of abstract labor went far beyond a simple economic category. According to Marx, this concept is fundamental to understanding, on the one hand, the creation of value, and on the other hand, the organization and specificity of capitalist society. Moreover, he strongly and repeatedly stresses the importance of his discovery of the dual nature of labor (abstract labor/concrete labor):

That the economists, without exception, have missed the simple fact that, if the commodity has the double character of use value and exchange value, then the labour represented in the commodity must also have a double character; thus the bare analysis of labour *sans phrase*, as in Smith, Ricardo, etc., is bound to come up against the inexplicable everywhere. This is, in fact, the whole secret of the critical conception.⁴ The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to all understanding of the facts) the two-fold character of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange value, which is brought out in the very First Chapter.⁵

I was the first to point out and to examine critically this twofold nature of the labour contained in commodities. As this point is the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns, we must go more into detail.⁶

It may seem surprising that the Marxists did not seize with more force this question, which seems so fundamental by Marx's own admission.⁷ If the subject has been so rarely treated, it is because it is, on the one hand, a relatively complex concept and perhaps too abstract for immediate application in the struggles;

and on the other hand, it has often been misinterpreted by Marxists themselves, making its use either harmless or counterproductive in the understanding of the dynamics of capital.

ABSTRACT LABOR AND PHYSIOLOGICAL EXPENDITURE

The first misinterpretation is to make abstract labor a mere expense of energy. In fact, abstract labor seems to have long been, in Marx's mind, work without concrete determination, that is, a simple "productive expenditure of human brains, nerves, and muscles." If the concept of abstract labor has not, as we have seen, been simply ignored, it has most of the time been understood, even by Marxists attentive to these questions, as a simple undifferentiated expenditure of energy.⁸ Yet, this statement amounts to saying that all particular labor is ultimately labor; besides the tautological character of such a definition, the distinction and specificity of labor under capitalism is also totally ignored. However, as Postone (1993) points out in his book *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, there is a historical specificity of work under capitalism, which classical economists, and Ricardo in particular, have not seen:

An adequate analysis of capitalism is possible, according to Marx, only if it proceeds from an analysis of the historically specific character of labor in capitalism. The initial and basic determination of that specificity is what Marx calls the 'double character' of commodity-determined labour. (p. 55)

Reducing abstract labor to a mere quantitative expenditure of energy amounts to removing all historical and social determinations from it, and for Marx abstract labor is not an ahistorical form of organization of society. This way of thinking about labor, that is, confusing labor understood as "metabolism with nature" (a true and necessary phenomenon in every society) with labor as the source of value specific to the capitalist mode of production, is, moreover, a reproach that Marx makes against Ricardo: "The bourgeois form of labour is regarded by Ricardo as the eternal natural form of social labour,"⁹ "*Ricardo does not examine* the form – the peculiar characteristic of labour that creates exchange value or manifests itself in exchange values – the *nature* of this labour."¹⁰

The originality of Marx is that he questions the category of labor under capitalism; making it a simple expenditure of energy in order to explain the commensurability of goods, naturalizes labor and therefore does not go beyond the classical economists. Finally, this does not make it possible to understand how labor under capitalism creates a structure, an objective form that imposes itself on society as a whole and dominates it.

ABSTRACT LABOR AND RATIONALIZATION OF THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

If abstract labor is not labor *sans phrase*, another common misinterpretation is to confuse it with a greater rationalization of concrete labor or more precisely of the

work process. In this case, abstract labor is confused with what we could call the fragmentation of concrete labor. It is the increasing rationalization of the labor process under capitalism that makes the different kinds of labor almost indistinguishable in their concrete forms. In other words, and to take up a concept that Marx develops in the unpublished Chapter VI of *Capital*, abstract labor would be linked to the real subsumption of labor under capital, that is, to the moment when capital itself organizes and forms the process of labor.

This way of understanding abstract work is that of G. Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. As labor becomes abstract with rationalization and ever greater calculation in the labor process, Taylorism, which was then beginning to develop, is clearly targeted here. In his approach to abstract labor, Lukács seems to be more influenced by his professor Max Weber's ideas of the development of the rationalization process in capitalism than by Marx. Indeed, for Lukács abstract labor becomes more and more "equal, comparable... measurable with increasing precision," referring here directly to the process of labor Lukács misses the conception of Marx for whom abstract labor under capitalism is the dominant social form and not only a rationalized organization of the labor process:

On the one hand, the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialised operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialised set of actions. On the other hand, the period of time necessary for work to be accomplished (which forms the basis of rational calculation) is converted, as mechanisation and rationalisation are intensified, from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint that confronts the worker as a fixed and established reality. (Lukács, 1971, p. 88)

Although Lukács' approach is different from Marx's, the two approaches converge as to the social, even totalizing character of abstract labor, though the two interpretations are radically different. Lukács wants to grasp the social form by looking at the history of the labor process (factories, plants, etc.); the conditions of the labor process under capitalism (quantification, standardization) become the conditions of existence of the whole of capitalist society and the state. Reification, a concept developed in *History and Class Consciousness*, thus finds its roots in the modern factory and becomes the lot of the whole society, which in turn reinforces the process of reification within the factory: "The fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole; indeed, this fate must become universal as otherwise industrialisation could not develop in this direction" (Lukács, 1971, p. 91).

This critique of capitalist rationality would go on to have a fertile posterity with the Frankfurt School, especially with Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and with Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. However, the limits of this critique will soon become apparent, since starting from a critique of the labor process and its technique, it would not be able to adequately understand the upheavals in the production process from the 1970s in the most advanced capitalist countries. When the factory tends to disappear, it becomes impossible to find in its organizational structure the foundations or the engine of capitalism. The changes in labor conditions, the transition from an industrial economy to a service economy would thus lead many thinkers influenced by the critique of capitalist rationality either to abandon the concept of value-labor, as Habermas did,

for whom the disappearance of the working class in advanced capitalist societies is a sign that surplus value is no longer created by labor power but by technology; or to abandon completely the study of capitalism, since it has supposedly been already transformed into something else, into a “technician society” according to the expression of Ellul. There is indeed a blind dynamic, but it is no longer due to capital but to technology, which has become autonomous. Obviously, such a conception of the evolution of the dynamics in modern societies also leads to the abandonment of the concept of value-labor:

The growth of techniques produces completely new phenomena. The link, the relationship between the sectors of society and the economy, is now information The enormous consequence is that in reality from this moment on it is no longer human labour that creates value. Marx's whole theory is overturned by the simple technical process. Of course, this value-creating work still exists, but in such a small quantity, applied to such different objects, that we can no longer hold the reasoning of the past. What is truly value-creating is the technique itself, or, as Richta would say, the “scientific and technical revolution.” (Ellul, 1982, p. 42)

ABSTRACT LABOR AND DEMATERIALIZATION OF CONCRETE LABOR

There is a third misinterpretation that sees abstract labor as similar to virtual or dematerialized labor. This definition takes its arguments from the latest developments of capitalism and the different forms of labor that are linked to it. Thus, with the computer revolution at the turn of the 1970s, new forms of labor emerged that differed greatly from the labor that Marx or even Lukács could think about. This definition largely links abstract labor to computer-related occupations or, more generally, to occupations in the new technologies. This conception does not take into account the fact that work under capitalism has, as Marx called it, a “twofold” nature; it is therefore always both concrete and abstract, regardless of the concrete nature of the labor. The labor of the computer scientist has a concrete nature (all the particular activities related to this job) and as labor taken in the process of capitalist production, it also has an abstract nature. Abstract labor therefore has nothing to do with any tendency for work to dematerialize, as [Negri and Hardt \(2000\)](#) seem to think in their book *Empire*: “Through the computerization of production, then, labor tends toward the position of abstract labor” (p. 292); nor can it be confused with finance:

I am convinced that today's crisis is a terrible crisis. It is not the crisis of overproduction. But it is a crisis of speculation. On the one hand a huge bubble. On the other hand, it is a crisis in which the role of abstract labour, *i.e. finance*, is absolutely decisive.¹¹

It is true that labor in the last phase of the history of capital increasingly favors, by its internal logic, dematerialized labor; or, in other words, it favors the tertiary sector. In this sense we can say that labor tends to become immaterial or that concrete labor becomes abstract. However, assimilating abstract labor to a form of dematerialized concrete labor does not get out of the aporia of abstract labor understood as physiological energy expenditure. In this case, it becomes impossible to question labor in its historical form and thus to understand labor as

a social category. As [Rubin \(1990\)](#) rightly says, it is necessary to choose between a conception of abstract labor as physiological and therefore transhistorical and abstract labor as a social category and therefore specific to capitalism:

One of two things is possible: if abstract labor is an expenditure of human energy in physiological form, then value also has a reified-material character. Or value is a social phenomenon, and then abstract labor must also be understood as a social phenomenon connected with a determined social form of production. It is not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labor with the historical character of the value which it creates. The physiological expenditure of energy as such is the same for all epochs and, one might say, this energy created value in all epochs. We arrive at the crudest interpretation of the theory of value, one which sharply contradicts Marx's theory. (p. 135)

ABSTRACT LABOR AND SOCIALLY EQUALIZED LABOR

If abstract labor cannot be confused with an expenditure of physiological energy, whatever form this interpretation may take, because this leads to aporias or makes abstract labor a transhistorical category, it is also necessary to distinguish abstract labor from socially equalized labor. Here, the task is more difficult because these two concepts are very close, as [Rubin \(1990\)](#) points out:

The social characteristics of labour which we traced through an organized community are also found in a commodity economy. Here too we can see *social labor*, *allocated labor*, and *socially equalized labor*. But all of these processes of socialization, equalization and allocation of labor are carried out in an altogether different form. (p. 96)

Just as in a capitalist economy, socially equalized labor presupposes a certain division of labor; we can say that in all societies labor has experienced some form of distribution or division. However, while a division of labor exists in all societies, this division of labor, unlike in the capitalist organization, is not carried out blindly, because labor is here directly social, and the division of labor is established on the decisions of the society itself. In pre-capitalist societies, the various particular labors have, so to speak, their function already attributed by society. Thus, within these societies, the social labor necessary for the whole social body is organized and distributed according to the functioning of each society: respect for traditions or customs, relationship of direct domination organized through religion, coercion, etc. This social distribution of labor is obviously the cause of many injustices, as was the case in feudal societies in the Middle Ages, but it is nevertheless true that no one then feared that their labor would not find a social utility or that it could not be exchanged. The various types of work are social labor from the outset, and they do not have to be compared with each other once they have been carried out to find out whether they are “validated.” Socially equalized labor therefore does not deny concrete work; on the contrary, it includes it, thanks to the socialization carried out beforehand, in their heterogeneity.

The concrete labor of each person is therefore already socialized beforehand and society, according to its particular expression, decides on its distribution. A certain equalization of the different types of work is also necessary, but contrary to a capitalist society where “there is no independent social decision as to the equalization of labor” ([Rubin, 1990](#), p. 99), a pre-capitalist society (or in Rubin's