

Fuck your “labor-tokens”, down with Value! - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

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(Part 1 of a polemic on value)

Among the lesser quoted aspects of Marx’s work is his admittance to the fact that his theory of “lower-stage communism” was yet bourgeois. Guided by the principle, “*The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another,*” such a society would trade labor for “labor-tokens” which would draw from stock of the fruits of labor. But Marx notes immediately after:

“Here, obviously, the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is exchange of equal values.” (*Critique of the Gotha Programme, sec. 1*)

“Abstract labor is thus the reduction of all the different forms of commodity-producing labor to a common denominator. It makes them comparable and as a result capable of being exchanged for one another, by reducing them to the pure abstract, reified quantity of elapsed time. As such, it forms the substance of value.” —Norbert Trenkle, *Value and Crisis: Basic Questions*

It is to great misfortune that the utterly dominating understanding of Marxism in the American left today, if it is not some over-emphasis on property relations or class, is that the establishment of socialism is nothing more

than rational economic planning. As youtuber Xexizy has noted → <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaP11B0v9zg>, this whole framework ultimately derives from Leninism, and every “alternative,” be it Luxemburgism, some branches of Councilism, etc. are all still indebted to this framework popularized by Lenin. In short, Marxists in the US look out of ideas, rehashing the same dead points about a “dictatorship of the proletariat” and a “lower and higher-stage communism.”

The question this blogpost poses is this: why is this “lower-stage” even necessary? It is nothing more than the perpetuation of the very value-form which Marx sought to destroy. The two potential answers are that (1) the lower-stage is merely communism “*still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges,*” and thus needs time to develop into the real thing, and (2) the lower-stage is necessary as long as scarcity remains an issue.

For #1, Marx gives no explanation as to how a society moves from labor-tokens to none. A society based on exchange of labor-time for products of equal labor-times has absolutely nothing to with a society in which all labor and all of its fruits are free to all, not needing to be exchanged. A possible objection could be that moving from the lower to the higher-stage, labor-tokens are gradually phased out. But what would be phased out, where, and why? In truth, the only way such a transition could be effected would be by means of a new revolution altogether, this time against the whole value-form and not merely the commodity-form!

#2 relies on the supposition that scarcity could at all disappear (it can't), and/or that we don't already have forces of production mature enough to guarantee basic necessities with minimal labor-time expended, which we do. The latter point need not even reliance on “mature forces of production” to be petty — Kropotkin calculated (in his *Conquest of Bread*) that even in his day, a society could sustain itself on mere 4-hour work days. Given where we are now, some transitional phase existing merely to wait for new innovations in labor-saving technology would be stalling. To pick up on my point regarding #1, a transitional phasing out of labor-tokens

would either be their disappearance at each moment that a given product can be produced with minimal labor-time (which would mean that the labor-token would never fully disappear at all), or that society would have to make completely arbitrary decisions to wean themselves of labor-tokens (which would call into question their legitimacy entirely.)

What is so disappointing in the masterfully intricate designs of socialism, such as those sketched in W. Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell's *Towards a New Socialism* (the epitome of obsession over "lower-stage communism"), is that it fails at solving capitalism's fundamental problems which Marx enumerated in his economic manuscripts. Cockshott and Cottrell miss that Marx's critique of capitalism is not that labor isn't efficient enough, or that prices of commodities don't exactly portray the amount of labor-time given to them, or that market fluctuations make it so that one doesn't get to buy back *exactly* the amount of commodities equivalent to the amount of labor one put in. Marx's critique of capitalism is that labor as a value-producing activity is made to exist at all.

Under C&C's design, one goes to work in order to be granted access to the fruits of society's labor, earning a wage (with surplus value extracted for "societal good") and exchanging the wage for products available to her. (You need that car? Sorry, not enough labor tokens!) What C&C's design does is merely streamline the process of labor alienation and labor abstraction that made capitalism so barbaric. It is simply a more efficient, more equitable, more humane capitalism. It is almost like taking *Capital* as a guidebook for how to run an economy.

An objection to my obloquy may be that "lower-stage communism" would exhibit almost none of the negative features which riddled the capitalist value-form. Coercion to work would be replaced by guaranteeing basic necessities for all, and the holding of economic property in common would allow the collapse of a strict division of labor, which is also the basis for labor abstraction. I simply reply: why not go all the way? Every society will find scarce goods, priceless works of art, or products which are needed by many but only available to a few. In such situations, should these prod-

ucts really go merely to the ones who contributed the most labor-time? Seeing the obvious issues with this, what other methods could be employed for rational distribution other than labor-time quantification? Beginning the discussion there already opens itself up to a world beyond “labor-tokens.”

“[S]uffice it to say here, leaving ourselves free to return to the subject later, that the Collectivist ideal appears to us untenable in a society which considers the instruments of labour as a common inheritance. Starting from this principle, such a society would find itself forced from the very outset to abandon all forms of wages. [...]

A new form of property requires a new form of remuneration. A new method of production cannot exist side by side with the old forms of consumption, any more than it can adapt itself to the old forms of political organization.

The wage system arises out of the individual ownership of the land and the instruments of labour. It was the necessary condition for the development of capitalist production, and will perish with it, in spite of the attempt to disguise it as ‘profit-sharing.’ The common possession of the instruments of labour must necessarily bring with it the enjoyment in common of the fruits of common labour.” — Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*

At this point in capitalism’s development, I don’t believe it would be smart to build new systems that simply perpetuate its logic, nor do I believe it is necessary to wait for some new innovation in the system before we proceed. The value-form is ultimately nothing more than a social relation, and like any social relation it must be reproduced by people. The end of the value-form, then, should not be viewed as some far-off destination, for this will only make the present less radical. The end of the value-form can only be the production and reproduction of communistic relations in the here and now, generalized across global society.