

# Robert Kurz and Wertkritik on the Critique of Labor

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Wertkritik (usually translated as “Value criticism” or “Critique of value”) was a marginalized school of Marxian critical theory which emerged in the 1980s partly out of the “anti-German” movement and partly out of disillusionment with “K-Gruppen” (German communist parties). Operating under the journals *Marxistische Kritik* (later renamed *Krisis*) and later under *Exit!*:

“Wertkritik [...] designates in practice the accumulated work of probably no more than thirty or forty individuals making up two presently non-cooperating theory-oriented collectives, the central core of whose members have for years lived and worked in and around the northern Bavarian city of Nuremberg and whose main activity has been to produce two roughly annual journals — *Krisis* and *Exit!* — with *Streifzüge*, a Vienna-based loosely *Krisis*-allied, more pamphletary publication, making up a third venue.” **Source** → <https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/editors-note-vol-27-no-1>

Wertkritik remains largely peripheral in the field of Marxian theory, having hardly broken out of its territorial bounds in Nuremberg and its marginal success in São Paulo. Robert Kurz remained Wertkritik’s most prominent theorist until his untimely death in 2012. *Exit!* still publishes periodically on [their website](https://exit-online.org/) → <https://exit-online.org/>, and only one major and high-quality series of translations have been published in English, in the form of

M-C-M' Publishing's *Marxism and the Critique of Value* → <https://www.mcmprime.com/books/marxism-and-the-critique-of-value>, also reproduced by the literary group *Meditations* → [https://mediationsjournal.org/toc/27\\_1](https://mediationsjournal.org/toc/27_1).

A general outline of Wertkritik's unique contributions to Marxian critical theory can be comprised of two aspects: (1) the assertion that labor is a specifically capitalist, modern category of social life; (2) the assertion of an immanent and inevitable crisis of capitalism caused by the reaching of an absolute "intrinsic limit to valorization." This article will focus only on the first assertion, however a separate article on Wertkritik's crisis theory may be anticipated later.

## 1 — Marx's Aporia of Labor

In order to approach Wertkritik's critique of labor from the standpoint of Marxian analysis, this article will begin by analyzing the contradictory status of "labor" in Marx's theory, before attempting to resolve this contradiction. This resolution will consist in discussing practical and genealogical justifications for the assertion that the category of labor is in itself an "abstraction," and a negative one formed uniquely in modernity.

To begin, it is not difficult to find contradictory passages in Marx regarding the status of "labor" in his theory. Marx wrote in a *Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's book* → <http://hiaw.org/defcon6/works/1845/03/list.html>:

“**Labour**’ is the living basis of private property, it is private property as the creative source of itself. Private property is nothing but **objectified** labour. If it is desired to strike a mortal blow at private property, one must attack it not only as a **material state of affairs**, but also as *activity*, as **labour**. It is one of the greatest misapprehensions to speak of free, human, social labour, of labour without private property. ‘**Labour**’ by its very nature is unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity,

determined by private property and creating private property. Hence the abolition of private property will become a reality only when it is conceived as the abolition of ‘**labour**’...”

This is in large contrast to Marx’s later statements in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* → <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>:

“In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after **labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want...**”  
(*emphasis mine*)

Further quotes of this contradictory nature may be found (such as drawing from different passages in the *Estranged Labor* → <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm> manuscript). But so far the issue of contradictory statements regarding labor may appear as only a semantic issue. It could be argued that Marx was simply operating on different uses of the word “labor” in different writings whilst referring to the same concept. It is therefore only in a passage from his *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* → <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm> from 1857 (abbreviated *Introduction* hereafter), where we find a clearer conception of Marx’s truly aporetic understanding of labor:

“The abstract category ‘labour,’ ‘labour as such,’ labour **sans phrase**, the point of departure of modern economics, thus becomes a practical fact only [in the United States]. The simplest abstraction, which plays a decisive role in modern political economy, an abstraction which expresses an ancient relation existing in all social formations, nevertheless appears to be actually true in this abstract form only as a category of the most modern society. [...]

The example of labour strikingly demonstrates how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity in all epochs — precisely because they are abstractions — are equally a product of historical conditions even in the specific form of abstractions, and they retain their full validity only for and within the framework of these conditions.”

— (Sec. 3: “The Method of Political Economy”)

This formulation of labor is nothing short of incoherent. It cannot possibly be true that labor is simultaneously valid across history and only “*actually true*” in modern society, and likewise it cannot be true that labor has “*validity in all epochs*” and is, at the same time, a “*product of historical conditions.*” As Alastair Hemmens humorously put it → [https://www.academia.edu/34180967/Labour A Rational Abstraction Robert Kurz s The Substance of Capital and Resolving the Labour Aporia in Marx Marx and Philosophy Society Conference 2017](https://www.academia.edu/34180967/Labour_A_Rational_Abstraction_Robert_Kurz_s_The_Substance_of_Capital_and_Resolved_the_Labour_Aporia_in_Marx_Marx_and_Philosophy_Society_Conference_2017),

“[W]e effectively see Marx trying to have his cake and eat it.” (pg. 6)

Marx identified labor as harmful and abstracted in capitalism, and yet was unable to associate this problem with the category of labor *as such*. Marx’s theory effectively trips over its own foot attempting to assert the transhistoricity of a category rightly identified as historically contingent and practically applicable only to the current bourgeois epoch. Even if disbelief is suspended by trying to assert that “labor” has only become *dominant* in bourgeois society, there is no doubt as to the unstable theoretical ground Marx’s statements rest on.

To be clear, Marx’s point is not about the representation of labor in value (which Diane Elson refers to as the “*objectification of abstract labor*”), but about the *character of labor itself* as an actually existing abstraction of the different possible qualities of labor. This is demonstrated by the fact that Marx states in the same paragraph:

“...[I]n the first place, there is an enormous difference between barbarians having a predisposition which makes it possible to employ them in various tasks, and civilised people who apply themselves to various tasks. As regards the Russians, moreover, their indifference to the particular kind of labour performed is in practice matched by their traditional habit of clinging fast to a very definite kind of labour from which they are extricated only by external influences.”

Marx is thus referring specifically to the quality of labor in capitalist modernity as being truly homogeneous and really abstract, yet somehow also a transhistorically applicable category, a category of all historical epochs despite not being *real* in any past epochs.

## 2 — Resolving the Aporia

Kurz (and Wertkritik as a whole), in order to resolve the “aporia of labor” in Marx, conclude that “labor” is a *historically specific* category applicable only to the modern bourgeois epoch. They discard the idea that human activity in past historical epochs can even be called labor; therefore, that which Marx calls “labor as such” is the *only form* of labor.

A way to approach this argument can be through a discussion about the nature of abstraction itself as a social condition. Hemmens puts it thusly:

“There is nothing about the activities [of labor] themselves, no movement of the hands, no training, no concrete purpose inherent to the task, no materials, no tools, no physical qualities or even, strictly speaking, sociological class grouping that allows me to bring together, say, the work of a banker, a cleaner, a schoolteacher, a miner, a prime minister and a plantation slave under the rubric of a single abstraction. The fact that we do so with such ease, without even thinking, is rather a product of a society in which the abstraction ‘labour’ as such has already been established, long before we were born, as an organising

material principle of life, that is, as an assumption, a quasi-Kantian **a priori**, that proceeds all individual and collective thought and action. The abstraction in question, in other words, is not primarily linguistic or mental but an historically specific form of social mediation that reduces all human activity down to an ‘undifferentiated expenditure of human energy’ measured in socially necessary labour time.” (pg. 4)

In other words, it is only by bringing certain human activities together and making them homogeneous that the abstraction “labor” becomes conceivable; until this happens, human activities find no common substance to relate to themselves through, and thus flourish in heterogeneity.

While this idea alone can be interesting, its arguments might still remain weak until historical and anthropological considerations are made as to the real status of “labor” in pre-capitalist societies. Kurz pursues this position. Kurz argues that the category of labor is an abstraction which can only be *anachronistically* used to describe the activities of pre-modern societies, and that there existed no “ontology of labor” then and no separate sphere of life for labor. As such, these societies could only be seen by modern subjects as “laboring” through a wrongful application of modern categories of life to the past for which these categories were inconceivable. In *The Substance of Capital*, Kurz states that,

“...there have been many societies in history, among which are included the so-called high cultures, such as ancient Egypt, in which there is absolutely no abstract universal category of activity. Even in societies in which such a nominal general concept (precisely not a real abstraction) seems to be found it is a matter of very limited areas of activity and never of a social universality of ‘activity in general’. If the modern reading of ‘labour’ is inserted here, then it leads astray and is an anachronism; actually, it is a translation error (by the way, this is also true for other specifically modern categories belonging to the fetish relation of the self-expansion of value, such as for example, politics and the state, etc.) Insofar as the abstraction ‘labour’ as a concept

of modern society was adopted from the Indogermanic language, it had to be completely redefined, because in these languages the term ‘labour’ consistently refers to the specific activity of slaves, dependants, minors, etc. That is to say it is not a mentally constructed general term for various areas of activity, but is a social abstraction (and insofar also a real abstraction in this specific pre-modern sense), but is exactly for this reason not a social universality, not a category of social synthesis as it is in Modernity.” (pg. 27)

Hemmens justifies Kurz’s position thusly:

“...[Kurz’s] argument is born out by a variety of historical and anthropological research. The French medievalist Jacques Le Goff, for example, has shown that the word ‘travail’, or ‘labour’, referred almost exclusively to activities that were, physically taxing, painful and/or reserved for the lowest members of society, in particular fieldwork. We retain some of this original meaning in Modern English when we speak of the ‘travails of Christ on the cross’, the ‘labour’ of women during childbirth or the ‘Seven Labours of Hercules’. As Le Goff puts it, ‘if a word doesn’t exist, I think that the thing it is supposed to describe, to represent, doesn’t exist either.’”

The etymology of the word “labor” and its French and German forms (“travail” and “arbeit,” respectively) is an argument which reoccurs in Wertkritik writings, at least in the *Manifesto Against Labor* → <https://libcom.org/library/manifesto-against-labour-krisis-group> and *“Robotics and Labor,”* → <https://libcom.org/article/robotics-and-labor-nightmares-reified-consciousness-robert-kurz> among others. The words derive overwhelmingly from negatively associated roots, deriving either from descriptions of slave work or torture. The internalization of labor as a positive and common abstraction, then, must be a more recent development, and one that has now become like second nature.

### 3 — Elucidation On the Negativity of Labor

In rejecting the transhistoricity of labor, Kurz does not reject “materialism” as such, stating,

“The only self-evident point is that every society implies both a relation to nature and human relationships, that humans effect their reproduction through interaction in order to eat, drink, clothe and house themselves, keep each other company, play, construct a worldview, etc.” (pg. 54)

However, Kurz’s major departure from Marx arrives in the form of his rejection of labor as a necessarily regulating factor in any society outside of capitalist modernity. Even more so, Kurz argues that a stern regulation of labor is a necessary factor for any society outside of capitalist modernity. Continued from the previous quotation, Kurz writes,

“It in no way follows from [materialism], however, that there is an abstracting process of the ‘expenditure of human energy’ in the sense of a process of overall regulation. That people know, for instance, that they must sow so that they can reap does not imply any social universal ‘accounting system’ of energy expenditure or a corresponding abstract universality. So far as such bookkeeperish regulation occurs in agrarian societies, it only ever relates just to the social abstraction of a particular activity, namely that of the socially dependent persons and precisely not to any ‘social universality’; and in certain societies either not at all or not in the first instance to reproductive activities, but to transcendent aims (for instance pyramid building in ancient Egypt).” (*emphasis mine*, pg. 55)

This clearly parts staunchly with Marx himself, who states in *Capital*:



“In all states of society, the labour time that it costs to produce the means of subsistence, must necessarily be an object of interest to mankind, though not of equal interest in different stages of development.” (Ch. 1, Sec. 4)

And reiterates in a footnote:

“Among the ancient Germans the unit for measuring land was what could be harvested in a day, and was called **Tagwerk**, **Tagwanne** (**jur-nale**, or **terra jurnal**is, or **diornalis**)...”

These ideas are reinforced in other passages from the same section, as well as infamous passages from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Despite their vague nature, and even more vague relation to the possibilities offered by Marx’s theory, theories of socialism which revolved around the regulation of labor-time quickly became, and still remain, the overwhelmingly dominant way Marxists have understood socialism. Indeed, from Engels’ similarly infamous words in *Anti-Dühring* onward, the creation of elaborate mechanisms of labor mediation through an abstracting process has always served as the very basis for Marxian understandings of socialism. At its worst, these positions make Marx out to be, in effect, merely an advocate for economic planning.

## 4 — Labor and Socialist Organization

One of such advocates who Kurz particularly criticizes (likely because of his association with value-form theory, which Kurz repudiates later) is Isaak I. Rubin. For Rubin, as with many Marxists, only *abstract labor* is historically specific to capitalism, and not labor “as such.” Rubin’s socialistic schemes, however, involve a high degree of abstraction of labor:

“Let us imagine some socialist community where labor is divided among the members of the community. A determined social organ equalizes the labors of various individuals with each other, since without this equalization a more or less extensive social plan cannot be realized.”

— *Essays On Marx's Theory of Value*, pg. 96

Yet according to Rubin also,

“But in such a community, the process of equalization of labor is secondary and supplements the process of socialization and allocation of labor. Labor is first of all socialized and allocated labor. We can also include here the quality of socially equalized labor as a derived and additional characteristic. The basic characteristic of labor is its characteristic of being social and allocated labor, and a supplementary characteristic is its property of being socially equalized labor.” (*ibid.*)

Diane Elson → <http://digamo.free.fr/elson79.pdf> (pg. 144–150) shares a similar position, arguing that capitalist society is not unique for exhibiting the category of abstract labor at all (according to her, such a category is merely a feature of labor and a *potential* as a regulator, but never non-existent). Rather, capitalist society is unique for having conflated concrete and abstract labor with private and social labor, respectively. That labor can become social only by becoming abstract, and therefore that this abstract aspect has become dominant and a huge regulator of human action, is what is unique to capitalist society. In other words, the *objectification of abstract labor* is what is unique, but in any society this abstract aspect exists, and in any society labor (or concrete labor) is objectified in its product.

Kurz does not tolerate such an opinion. Rubin, of course, does not present the most coherent possible form of this theory, but Kurz takes a different position entirely. For Kurz, there is no necessity to abstract and equalize human labor at large in any society except a capitalist one:

“A society that has organised itself consciously as a total being of freely associated individuals means precisely that it is no longer subjugated to a fetishistic principle of ‘equalisation’ and also need never suffer because of a ‘lack of time’, which represents a specific feature of self-expanding value as an end in itself. Just because there is not an infinite amount of time available by no means implies that it would be ‘lacking’ in itself and necessitate an equalisation process of ‘homogenous’ units of expended human energy with the aim of facilitating ‘optimal efficiency’. In general, this completely crazy notion could only arise under the dictate of abstract labour in the process of socialisation by value.” (pg. 36)

As far as Kurz is concerned, a system of production still based on the equalization of labor is a system still not yet free from value. As Marx put it, it would still have “*prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society.*” But, that communist society is or should be a society beyond mediation by labor-time entirely, does not seem to occur to most Marxists and barely even to Marx himself.

## 5 — Breaking With Marx

Kurz’s conscious break with Marx here almost calls back to the idea of “ambivalences” in Marx, a point elucidated by Michael Heinrich in *Wissenschaft vom Wert* (“*The Science of Value*”). The notion of “ambivalences” in retaining a positive and transhistorical conception of labor are explained by Wertkritik by Marx’s historical position, particularly within in the realm of an emerging worker’s movement. Affirmation of the working class, and thus the work they did, was taken as a given.

This likens to the notion of an “exoteric” and an “esoteric” Marx which appears in different places in his writing. These terms, first applied by the Young Hegelians to describe Hegel, and then by Marx to describe Adam Smith, are a favorite among marginalized Marxists such as the Wertkritik school. In this theory, there exists — in addition to the well-

known Marx who revealed exploitation in capitalist society, saw labor as the source of value, and saw the working class as needing to overthrow and take control of society — a different Marx who is not compatible with the first. This “esoteric” Marx saw capitalism as an essentially subjectless system, with capital as the only “automatic subject” and with value constituted in the totality of capitalist relations, its influence fragmented across society. Wertkritik sought to take this latter Marx to his logical conclusion, implying that all “exoteric” aspects to Marx were a fetter to his theory and prevented him from completing a totalizing critique of the commodity society. In this way, Wertkritik would go on to reject not only labor, but class struggle and revolutionary voluntarism.

Of course, Marx’s critique was far from complete at the point of his death, and certainly Marx’s historical position can be called into question today. What matters in the end is the critique of commodity society — Marx is simply the best place to start, but there exists not totalizing “Marxism” as such.