On the Thread of Time – In the Vortex of Mercantile Anarchy

The poetry of all eras has sung the act that renews and perpetuates the life of the species when the mouth of the child sucks nourishment from the mother's breast, and we see in it an example of natural use value, which, however, the mercantile era in certain cases has also been able to make an exchange value with the profession of a wet nurse. It is therefore difficult to find an object useful for life that society has not managed to transform into a commodity. Where the secret, the enigma, the fetish, the mystery of transformation lies, when it is so evident that a given need, to a given measure, is concretely satisfied by a given good, and the characteristics of the object consumed and the effects of its consumption are easy to understand, is up to revolutionary science to find out.

There are no exchange values for Robinson, it was clear. But the species, as it did not begin with an Adam, does not begin with a Robinson, but with the first groups still predominantly animal in character.

It is therefore an artifice that requires millennia and millennia of development to think of two Robinsons who work on different objects, and who, meeting each other, need to use the object that the other created. A fictitious society of independent producers, reduced to two components: now we know that there has never been a society of only artisans, and not even of only free individual farmers: it would lead us to the original family; and we also know that this leads us to the original clan or tribe. The true historical sequence was not: Adam - monogamous family - patriarchal society; but the opposite: original and communist matriarchal group - isolated family - dirty selfish individual of the mercantile time.

Let us take, however, for the sake of clarity, the artificial example: the market of two Robinson artisans, their meeting and the contract: so many flint axes for so many lambs. Why did they agree on the "price" in this simple form of equivalence? If they disagree, will everyone "withdraw from the market"? But what if, as a result of their renunciation, they both starved to death?

There is an alternative to failing to close the deal: battle. The vigorous shepherd can measure himself against the more agile one armed with an axe, one of the two will remain master, for his consumption, of the lambs and the axes, since he does not know what to do with his adversary's corpse. The equivalence so clear to the constructor of theories of a "natural economy" here becomes an addition for one and a subtraction for the other.

The secret of exchange value lies here. For the market to exist, there must be a superior force to prevent the parties from replacing the pact with a brawl. A society that lives on commodities must have an organised power. A society that has organised power is divided into classes; one of these holds power for its own benefit. It automatically charges the "cost" of such a service on each exchange. The matter has begun to get complicated: Robinson A the farmer, Robinson B the flint cutter, the police officer C who eats and does not work.

The affair is said by Marx to be fetishistic, since the privilege of agent C was explained at the outset to the two simpletons as a mandate from the gods, or something like that.

Since then, the mercantile vortex has swallowed everything: from two muscular, but daft Robinsons, to two billion men today, probably less muscular, but just as daft.

Marx walked, in the famous paragraph of the fetish character, the very long road with strides of a giant. At a certain point he explained how a type of human society without exchange value was the medieval one.
Of the essential step the Italian translations in circulation (Avanti! and UTET editions pre-war and post-war) give a completely malicious rendition, and it needs to be reconstituted. It consists of a double definition of the economy of feudal times, the basis of a double distinction between that and the capitalist economy, of a double imputation to the latter of greater deceit and nastiness. One distinction reflects the type of production: personal and non-social extortion of unpaid labour - the other of distribution: consumption of products within the limits of closed and autonomous territories instead of the general and international market.

Here is a literal version:

"Personal dependence characterises the social relations of material production [of the Middle Ages] just as well as [it characterises] the spheres of life or circles of influence based on it".

Syntactically, it is more accurate to relate “it” (auf ihr) not to the female “Produktion”, as might be expected, but to the previous female “Abhängigkeit”, i.e. "dependence".

The German construction, which in the mouth or under the pen of the shirkers becomes a rinsing of endless repetitions, has in Marx an enormous power of synthesis and expression (in the non-German but Jewish Marx! In the nationless Marx!). The text provides two compound words of clarity and formidable power to the theme that occupies us: they are “Lebenssphären”, and immediately in the author’s square bracket, “Wirkungskreise”, which we have translated as spheres of life and circles of influence.

In the foreshortening the description of medieval society is complete. We mentioned on another occasion that in that society founded on personal authority the lord was powerful not because of the territory but because of the number of vassals.

In a determinate circle or sphere, a certain number of serfs, to whom the legal norm obviously denies crossing the boundary of the "march" or "feud", are governed by the same small or large noble landowner, baron or prince, with every power. To the same they owe the tithe, the comandata, the corvée for given days, hours or quantities of product. They have a house and a field which they cultivate and on whose product they live, but they give the nobleman and the priest a share of the grain, the wine, the strength of their arm and, as they used to say, the grace of their daughter. A relation that is obvious, clear and "fair" for a positive economic science.

Thus, in this closed circle, the personal dependence of all the agricultural workers on the baron and, in the same circle, the production and consumption of everything that the former and the latter need to consume, in different quantities but, because of the simplicity of customs, with little qualitative difference yet. Producers and products never transgress the circle: the gentleman with his armed court defends their integrity from invaders. As relations gradually become more complicated, the feudal lord and his company will leave to follow the king or emperor into war, who is meddling with nothing else within the “Wirkungskreise”; the bourgeois artifices will settle on the margins of the castle; from time to time merchants coming from far away will tickle the lady of the castle, who still does not know what a bathroom is, with brocades and jewels from overseas.

There is nothing fetishistic in the open subtraction of labour. The mystical aspect of this society lies in the inexorable division between the orders: the quality of a noble is just as hereditary by family as that of a peasant, even coming from fertilisation through jus primae noctis. This was by the will of God who

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1 This deficiency was only amended in 1974, when UTET published a new translation done by Bruno Maffi, an ICP member.
handed down investiture of power to the dynasties of nobles and kings, blessed by parish priests and popes.

This seemed tenebrous to the bourgeoisie, all caught up in the need to enlighten itself, French-style, in the philosophical, legal and ethical fields. It is therefore amusing, as a cure against the rhetoric that from the first encyclopedists (always, Marx would say, giants of thought) is tiresomely watered down to the crooked midgets of today's electoral rallies, to refer to the quotations of the robust classical English economic writers who knew how to see the phenomenon at its roots.

The limits of feudal circles were broken and erased from the map of France and other countries, both with the Widow's blade2 and with the Austerlitz lightning strikes3, and at the same time the legal limits between the traditional orders were broken, with the new codes. All equal, regardless of birth, men released from enclosed feudal dependence had the freedom to go anywhere to employ their activity.

While men of letters and poets saw in this the passage from the world of tenebrousness to the world of the light of civilisation, the new economists who had arisen among the captains of factories and leaders of merchant expeditions wrote that the objects previously consumed by those who had worked hard on them, or brought by them, with bent backs, on a tray to the lordly table, had become commodities. The use values had become exchange values. Justice triumphs: no one will take away someone else's use value, everyone can sell and buy on a common market without enclosed circles. Personal freedom has taken the place of dependence.

If everything is a commodity, everything is the domain of the new fetish. Marx unravels its enigma, but the masses are now more interested in those of Turandot. Dependence means working for ten and having one taken away, but the other nine tenths are for you.

Freedom means that all ten tenths having become commodities, you have none left. The world, O free man, is open before you instead of the original glebe and the rural hut. You can have everything for money: you only have to make the small sacrifice of renting the short circle of your arms and your hours of sunshine to others.

Freedom; exchange value: you are born.

Yesterday

We will take as a guiding thread some basic concepts of economy, those that Marx has examined and characterised, while finding their often brilliant expressions and intuitions in his predecessors, and we will use them for a walk of... archaeological nature. Use value. Exchange value. Individual labour, by which we mean the labour of a worker who alone perfects the product ready for consumption. Associated labour, by which we generally mean the labour of many to form a mass of products or works that remain with a person or entity. Marx's term is “Kooperation”, but we have always feared confusion with modern associative bodies for buying or producing with funds taken from small dues. Division of labour in society, which refers to the different productive tasks of different groups of members of society, and which is presented in a particular form as a professional division of labour. Division of labour within the productive company, a process whereby a single product is obtained from successive operational interventions by different workers. Islands of consumption is what one may call the spheres or circles that have been discussed by Marx. Islands of production one could call the various forms of organisation in which a central management directs the efforts of the workers of a territory.

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2 “La Veuve”, the Widow, was a French nickname for the guillotine.
3 Referring to the Battle of Austerlitz, also known as the Battle of the Three Emperors.
Leaving in the background, but certainly not ignoring, the factor of force, power, and also of tradition, of propaganda, we briefly compare the presence of these phenomena in successive historical phases.

We did not take Robinson or Adam seriously. They could neither have exchange of products nor division of labour, as they were alone on that one island which was the Eden of the Bible or the unknown one of the shipwreck, the former of idleness and consumption, the latter of labour and consumption. It was certainly not an exchange, if the absent-minded Eve, in order to bite a simple apple, signed a bill of exchange that we are all paying, but a veritable devilry. As for Crusoe, the second man he came across was Friday, and having retrieved that sword with which Engels endlessly mocked Mr. Dühring, he hastened to establish a relation not of exchange (since he was naked like Adam, and moreover of the same sex) but of open slavery, after an explanation of the faith of the Bible according to which he was excluded from the Christian rights of the human person.

Less adventurously we could start from an evolved zoological species, and we find that they live individually, in families, and in colonies. We will not say that they work, that they produce, let alone that they exchange, nevertheless we must admit that the animal, while limiting its use value to food, at least finds it in nature ready-made and sets out to search to be able to collect it; sometimes it preys on it by force to the brute of another or the same species, and in some cases deposits it in stock; there is no need to follow Maeterlinck among his libertarian bees\(^4\), because it cannot be denied that there is a division of labour and a social hierarchy among them, together with the construction industry.

A fundamental fact for Marx and Engels, based on studies of primitive communities, is that the human species that has just emerged from the animal state lives, under all climates, grouped into communities. We will not recall once more the principal phases of the savage state, and of the lower and higher phases of barbarism.

Although at the beginning these groups live only on foods that they collect and consume in the natural state, and although the men are few in number and the territories immense, so that they generally easily move to more fertile areas for spontaneous vegetation when they have exhausted the resources of what they inhabited, as soon as we have the first forms of activity: hunting, fishing, rudimentary plant cultivation, rudimentary tool making, which hunting itself requires, we must recognise the existence of organised social forms. Food and objects take on a use value, and the members of the community perform functions that are true work activities.

We have use value, but not exchange value. We have associated labour, but not individual labour. We have no companies, but the clan community, that is, society as a whole, is the only company. Within its bosom there is a division of simple tasks, which Marx calls physiological, immediate, natural, because it is of practical evidence what the child, the woman, the adult man, the old man can do. There is not yet a "manufactured" technical division of labour, but there is in full the social division of labour, regulated not irrationally, not left to chance or arbitrariness. These ancestors of ours know only one circle of production and consumption, they make no distinction between the effort and the need of one or the other. Here the foundations of the building are laid without the banal pillars of the scholastic construction of the economists, who take the regime they want to arrive at for earthly paradise, and which would be based on insurmountable individual interests and their immanent contradictions. I cheat you so as not to be cheated by you. After all, the old derided myths of Eden that Satan took away from us, and of the Golden Age, are only the naive version of this initial life so far from us and our convulsions.

\(^4\) Referring to Maurice Maeterlinck’s 1901 work “The Life of the Bee”.
It is logical that the bourgeoisie praises Satan, because to unwind the film we also know that it had to have a smoky tail. But the bourgeois theory is beastly, so that its diabolical influence is inseparable from the men of the millennia that were and those that are to come.

Let's take a moment to measure the azimuth of some point on the coast, to see that we don't lose the right course.

Chapter XIV of Marx has the fundamental paragraph 4 on the "Division of Labour within Manufacture and Division of Labour within Society" which is another principal cornerstone.

"Within a tribe, there springs up naturally a division of labour [...] based on a purely physiological foundation. [...] the exchange of products springs up at the points where different families, tribes or communities come into contact; for at the dawn of civilisation it is not private individuals but families, tribes, etc. that meet on an independent footing."

So not from Robinson, but from two clans, exchange was born. Marx also recalls that the subjugation of the weakest tribe could have taken place in an armed struggle: Morgan, Engels and Bebel reminded us that in the society of the phratries, if there is war, one mostly exterminates and does not subjugate the conquered group, an economically logical solution because it leaves the monopoly of the circle to a few, and does not force them to divide, as it will be further on, between masters and slaves.

By one way or another: trade, or subjection, even within the tribe the division of labour will appear. Before, there was

"exchange between spheres of production [we did not invent them] which are originally distinct from and independent of one another."

And then the workers of the same tribe, who were dependent on each other and communists of all things, began to make themselves independent of each other, and exchanged the products of their labour. Since then communism and freedom have been fighting each other: and what did it take to get this into their heads!

At the end of this paragraph Marx returns to the primitive community, and gives a moving description of those in India (which in some parts are still there despite the bourgeois democrat Pandit Nehru) noting that there is no trace of the "anarchy of the social division of labour" typical of capitalist mercantilism, nor of political despotism, Marx shows how much balance, harmony, fraternity and wisdom there is in this "planned and authoritarian organisation of social labour". With just a dozen or so "officals", up to the poet!

It would be truly poetic to believe that the history of humanity could stop at the coexistence of these sparse oases of good little men. The human animal, if it had all the faults that philosophers and economists attribute to it, would really be the worst of the beasts, but it certainly has the capacity to proliferate, and its developed capacity to chat and therefore to think leads straight to that of resisting the environment, and surviving not only its dangers, but taking the triumphant march of demographic growth and the most worrying crowding.

The society of the tribes is succeeded by that of the great powers of warrior and theocratic leaders, typical of Asia, cradle of the most advanced race. In this much more complex society the various aspects overlap. We will find in the ancient empires in limited numbers autonomous artisan workers, autonomous farmers and merchants who navigate the first water and land routes. But above all, we have extensive use of collective labour, in large masses, by the great powers.

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5 Referring to Giosuè Carducci's 1863 hymn “A Satana”. 
The colossal effects of simple co-operation [i.e. without the technical division into different labour phases] are to be seen in the gigantic structures erected by the ancient Asiatics, Egyptians, Etruscans, etc.

When Alexander the Macedonian conquered Babylon, it is said that he stopped to read the inscription on the tomb of Queen Semiramis. "I forced the immense rivers into their bed and with the waters and silt of them I fertilised endless provinces. The Assyrians, who did not know what the sea was, led me to four shores [Mediterranean, Persian, Caspian, Black]. I founded the immense cities with the hanging gardens and the seven walls, not defeated by any enemy. Nor did I lack the time for joy and love."

Alexander, and even more so the Roman conquerors, represented social forms based on a solid military state network, connecting roads, fleets and equipped port systems. The basis of production was stable agriculture, either through the mass labour of slaves or through that of free farmers, ready to transform themselves into legionnaires for new conquests. In the context of the slave latifundium or small farm, consumption on the spot and for separate islands of production prevails, but, especially in the political capitals and on the coasts or in the stopover cities of the great land routes, there is undoubtedly a more advanced division of labour and a market of exchange. Thus classical antiquity at the height of its state units based on the fixedness of the agricultural populations knew trade and exchange value, and even to a limited extent the work of salaried free men; for this reason there was talk of capitalism in Greece and Rome: above all there were the great state works, bridges, aqueducts, canals, dykes, forums, theatres, and building contractors.

"Nevertheless, even with regard to material production, ἀρπαρϰε[ἰς [self-sufficiency; the self-sufficient company, which produces for its own consumption], as opposed to the division of labour, remained their ideal, ἵνα γὰρ τὸ εὔ παρὰ τὸ τῶν καὶ τὸ αὐταρκεῖς.’ [for with the latter there is well-being, but with the former there is independence.]"

Thus, in classical antiquity, closed islands of production-consumption dominate over the general mercantilism of exchange, and a connective tissue is more of a political and military nature. Ancient philosophers exalt use value.

This unity of the empire fell with the barbarian invasions, of hordes that were not yet settled and suited for agricultural labour, and had multiplied on barren and cold lands: from the clash medieval society was born, of which we have given the various references, which demands a new stability from the peoples, with a more federalist than centralised order.

In the feudal organisation, therefore, agricultural production rests on self-sufficient circles of production and subsistence, within which provisions do not yet take on the character of commodities. But already the needs for other items, from clothing to tools, are so developed that the profession of the artisan has to provide them. The thousand fetters of the guild order are all aimed at curbing mercantilism.

“A merchant could buy every kind of commodity, but he could not buy labour as a commodity. He existed only on sufferance, as a dealer in the products of the artisans.”

In any case, artisan products are distributed as exchange values on a market, even if it is fragmented by continuous barriers, even communal ones, and a social division of labour, as in previous eras, but much more particular, is already occurring. But the technical (manufacturing) division of labour is missing: master and apprentice end up knowing how to finish the same object; footwear or sword. We cannot yet talk about associated labour.
Today

We live in the full epoch of capitalist production and mercantile distribution, and it is certainly not even possible to summarise the description of its stormy course.

Excluding a few oases of family agrarian production, and excluding the heart of countries inhabited by the races of colour, every human endowment now appears as a "collection of commodities", and there are no use values that are not transformed into exchange values. Individual artisan labour survives almost everywhere for certain articles, but it is associated labour that dominates the field. The transformation that has taken place in the mode of producing manufactured goods made it possible for the national and then world market to emerge, and accompanied the social division of labour between classes, town and country, professional categories, the company division in which each worker no longer knows how to carry out a single phase of working and, also for this reason, does not dispose of any product. The islands of consumption have dissolved into the general sea, and so the islands of production have been grouped into ever larger blocks.

Here we have reached the step at which we must understand our dialectical vision of those conditions that were necessary to increase labour productivity, and whose acceleration we therefore see as a useful condition, and of those characteristics of mercantile society that we intend to overcome in the revolutionary process.

It is necessary that all use values pass into the furnace of exchange values, but in the meantime the communist organisation will build on this necessary condition, insofar as it will turn the large supplies and social equipment into purely collective and common use values again, as in the first phratry.

The fact that individual labour gives way to associated labour is such a factor of exalted performance that it constitutes another pillar of a new organisation. But general associated labour, through reduced time, in collectivist production, given the new characteristics of assigning labour, will leave very high margins to the most varied ranges of individual non-mercantile activities.

The division of labour in the company, after having yielded its results, must fall, and with it, in a broad sense, the same professional and social division, precisely to the extent that the scientific direction of each function in the sectors of productive labour will be unified and central. In fact, every mercantile and company system cannot separate itself from the despotism of the division of company functions, and from the anarchic disorder of production in society.

This anarchy leads to decompensation and economic crisis, and therefore to the collapse of the mercantile system. The class planning that modern capitalism implements to ward off the consequences of this congenital anarchy is one thing: it is planning for the repression of antagonisms, and a general calculation for the purposes of maximising company yield valued in a mercantile way, another is our planning of labour and general consumption: calculation of use values in physical units, and not of mercantile values.

The disappearance of the islands of consumption counts as an acquired result, but the concentration of production in large company units of associated labour remains capitalist until, as the market of consumption is already a single one in capitalist times, the "territory of production" of all peoples, or at least of all the most advanced, with international plans valid everywhere, for wheat, or for steel, or for oil, is a single one too.

It remains to relate some stages of this path (which is already happening before our eyes as regards the overwhelming of the ancient "spheres of life" in the single mercantile whirlpool of the world, and which will be completed when the slave driver characters already defined in the capitalist organisation fall) to the fundamental passages of Marx; so that the communist organisation for which the
proletariat fights and will fight will not be confused with the situation of the countries of great monopolist imperialism, or worse, with that of today's Russia and its Eurasian sphere.

Chapter XIII. Cooperation:

"Capitalist production only really begins, as we have already seen, when each individual capital [our usual traitor-translator wrote: the same master] simultaneously employs a comparatively large number of workers, and when, as a result, the labour-process is carried on on an extensive scale, and yields relatively large quantities of products. A large number of workers working together, at the same time, in one place (or, if you like, in the same field of labour), in order to produce the same sort of commodity under the command of the same capitalist, constitutes the starting-point of capitalist production. This is true both historically and conceptually."

The association of efforts is therefore accepted:

"When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species."

But capital uses this association for the purpose of producing commodities and extorting profit; and this we reject; in the sense that at the end of the cycle the working association remains, the mercantile character and the surplus value fall.

"The driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is [...] the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power [...] Moreover, the co-operation of wage-labourers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them. Their unification into one single productive body [communist claim], and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, lies outside their competence. These things are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings them together and maintains them in that situation."

And therefore, for Marxists, whenever there is production of commodities, and a system of remuneration by wages,

"As co-operators [the workers], as members of a working organism [which we like!], they merely form a particular mode of existence of capital. Hence the productive force developed by the worker socially is the productive force of capital."

Chap. XIV. Division of Labour and Manufacture. (We note that the social concepts discussed here are the same in simple manufacture, in organic manufacture, in machinism, in large-scale industry). We quote paragraph 4, from which we have taken the steps relating to pre-capitalist phases.

"Since the production and the circulation of commodities are the general prerequisites of the capitalist mode of production, division of labour in manufacture requires that a division of labour within society should have already attained a certain degree of development."

"The colonial system and the extension of the world market, both of which form part of the general conditions for the existence of the manufacturing period, furnish us with rich materials for displaying the division of labour in society. This is not the place, however, for us to show how division of labour seizes upon, not only the economic, but every other sphere of society, and everywhere lays the foundation for that specialisation, that development in a man of one single faculty at the expense of all others, which already caused Adam Ferguson, the master of Adam Smith, to exclaim: 'We make a nation of Helots, and have no free citizens.'"

The division of labour in the company, professional specialisation, the social division of labour itself, are fought in the vision of a communist organisation.
"Division of labour within the workshop implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist over men, who are merely the members of a total mechanism which belongs to him."

Further on, Marx speaks of corporate despotism, of idiotic automata.

"...the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation, thus actualising the absurd fable of Menenius Agrippa, which presents man as a mere fragment of his own body."

The workers as arms, the exploiters as stomachs.

"As the chosen people bore in their features the sign that they were the property of Jehovah, so the division of labour brands the manufacturing worker as the property of capital."

"The division of labour within society brings into contact independent producers of commodities, [in false conceptions of the future they would be independent companies] who acknowledge no authority other than that of competition, of the coercion exerted by the pressure of their reciprocal interests, just as in the animal kingdom the ‘war of all against all’ more or less preserves the conditions of existence of every species."

The anarchy of the social division of labour and despotism in the division of labour in the company characterise bourgeois society.

The critique of the division of human functions goes so far as to condemn the antithesis of town and country, as to condemn that between the labour of the arm and that of the mind.

And when in the chapter on big industry Marx looks directly into the future and towards "the inevitable conquest of political power by the working class"

he says that

"the capitalist form of production and the economic worker relations corresponding to it are in the most diametrical contradiction with such ferments of revolution and their aim, the sublation of the old division of labour. The development of the contradictions of a historical form of production is, however, the only historical way of its dissolution and reshaping."

If Russia is entirely an orgy of specialisation, of despotic division of labour in the company and in society, even of forced labour with the deportation of associated workers to labour camps, this is not because Stalin is a scoundrel, but because there is nothing else to be done to establish capitalist production, at a time when the centuries-old stages from the first semi-artisan manufacture to the great mechanised industry are now burnt out. There is nothing else to be done to combat the anarchy of enterprises, a struggle that is evident from the USSR's own balance sheets at every step.

State capitalism seeks to fight against the anarchy of production, but because it produces commodities and preoccupies itself with production costs, it can only do so by exasperating company despotism towards the wage earner.

It is not this socialist administration. Socialism will free the worker, and therefore man, from social anarchy and company oppression, division of labour and specialisations. This long struggle will start from the moment and the sectors in which monetary mercantilism disappears.

From bellum omnium contra omnes we will move on to communism only when every act of emulatory stimulation is excluded from the organisation of life.
It is thus that the wretch who tried to establish the maximum amount of coal that could be knocked off the walls of the tunnel in a day's work, and that every Marxist longs for to kick in the ass, has become a national hero.

But there is also a logic in this. National heroes are needed in capitalist society. Communism abolishes heroes.

Source: "Battaglia comunista", N. 9, 1952.