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A note on *Capital* and *Praxis*

I have long read *Capital* as a theory of *praxis*. It was in this spirit that I interpreted what Marx says in the Preface to the First German Edition (1867):

“in bourgeois society, the commodity form of the product of labour – or value-form of the commodity – is the economic cell-form.”

together with the clarification in his *Notes on Adolf Wagner* (1881):

“I do not proceed from the ‘concept of value’ ... What I proceed from is the simplest social form in the which the labour product presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the ‘commodity’.”

I have taken this as a statement that Marx unfolds this social formation out of the *Urpraxis*, the archetypal bourgeois practice of exchanging commodities.

After all, he said in *These on Feuerbach* (1845):

“All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”

and he says variations on this same claim in several different ways in the *Theses*.

In this passage from Chapter 7 of *Capital*, he shows how activity (*praxis*) changes the material artefacts used in labour:

“An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour, and which serves as the conductor of his activity. He makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to make other substances subservient to his aims.”

And for example, in §3 of Chapter 1 of *Capital*, which deals with the origins and evolution of the commodity form of labour, Marx describes this process in terms of changing practices. And isn't exchanging commodities after all an action, an artefact-mediated action in fact, i.e., a form of *praxis*?

But in *Capital*, Marx stubbornly refuses to say that he begins from the *practice* of exchanging commodities and producing for exchange. Instead he talks about *the commodity*, the reified, fetishised artefact which mediates the exchange, not the action of exchanging itself! As if it were the thing being exchanged which is the determining element in the action.

The clue is in the opening lines of *Capital*:

“The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity.”

Why is Marx placing at the start and centre of his analysis, not human activity, but the material products of his labour, or even on occasion, Nature?

Well, Marx is right, of course, for *Capital* is a study of the *social reproduction* of a certain social formation, viz., capitalism. And from this point of view, humanity is dominated by the social and physical shapes of our past labour. Even the labour process itself is dominated by the existing conditions of labour.

For example, if village A, being by the seaside, regularly produces a surplus of fish, but being situated on barren soil, has no grain, while village B across the hill, have no fish but a surplus of grain, then the labouring people of these two villages must transform their labour into commodity-form and exchange fish and bread.

Now it must be admitted that this situation can only have arisen as the product of past activity. Nonetheless, the product of that past activity (the geographical division of products) is inherited in the form of material artefacts, not habits of activity. And haven't we witnessed in our lifetimes the transformative effect of the existence and availability of certain kinds of artefacts, i.e., technology, which seems to have a determining effect on our activity and our consciousness?

So Marx is right.

But if you are writing a study of *social change*, then this is a different matter altogether. Social change implies that material conditions are changed by human practice. As the *Theses* say:

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.”

So the move from a theory of the social reproduction of capitalist social relations to a theory of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, requires turning the practice-product relation around.

Capital is concerned with the situation the worker is in – a certain distribution and certain types of products which leave us no choice but to sell what we have, our labour power. But in working, we change those conditions. Thus:

$$C \rightarrow A \rightarrow C'$$

in which C is a commodity, A is the activity afforded by this commodity and C' is a changed conditions of activity. But when we turn our attention to the activity of changing material conditions, we see that

$$A \rightarrow C' \rightarrow A'$$

That is, by changing material conditions, we change practices. Those familiar with *Capital* will recognise that this is the same kind of transformation of the unit of analysis which Marx makes the transition from simple commodity exchange,

$$C \rightarrow M \rightarrow C'$$

to the unit of capital, the capitalist firm:

$$M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M'$$