Annotations to Karl Marx's Value Page at end of Grundrisse

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English page numbers from [Mar73], German from [Mar74]. This short excerpt is also given in [Mar81, p. 740–43].

881:1 $\|VII-63|$ This section to be inserted earlier.

763:1 $\|VII-63|$ Dieser Abschnitt nachzunehmen.

881:2 The first category in which bourgeois wealth presents itself is that of the *commodity*.

763:2/o Die erste Kategorie, worin sich der bürgerliche Reichtum darstellt, ist die der *Ware*.

"Category," for Marx, is a concept necessary for an understanding of reality (here bourgeois wealth, i.e., wealth in a capitalist society). This mental concept helps us *understand* reality because it refers to certain social forces outside our brain which *shape* this reality. Marx says therefore two things in this sentence: that "commodity" is a social relation through which access to wealth is regulated in a capitalist society, and that it is the first social form which presents itself.

While the first sentence of *Capital* says that all wealth in capitalism is a commodity, this sentence says: if one wants to explore the social relations in capitalism involving wealth, the first social form which presents itself (because it visibly governs the daily interactions of individual with wealth) is the commodity relation.

The commodity, in turn, appears as the unity of two determinations.

Die Ware selbst erscheint als Einheit zweier Bestimmungen.

Why does Marx write here: "the commodity *appears*" and not "the commodity *is*"? Because use-value and exchange-value, the two determinations Marx refers to here, are the handles, interfaces, through which the economic agents interact with commodities. Literally, the word "appears" denotes that what one one sees first. But Marx not only speaks about observing the commodity, but more generally about any practical activity involving the commodity.

The word "appears" indicates that the thing which you see on the store shelf is so-to-say only the tip of the iceberg. These palpable things are offered for sale only because of very specific social relations. The category "commodity" comprises not only the things but the invisible social relations as well.

Next Marx spends several sentences to discuss one of the two determinations, the use-value:

It is use-value, i.e. object for the satisfaction of some system of human wants. This is its material aspect, which may be common to the most disparate epochs of production, and whose investigation is beyond the realm of political economy.

Sie ist Gebrauchswert, d.h. Gegenstand der Befriedigung irgendeines Systems menschlicher Bedürfnisse. Es ist dies ihre stoffliche Seite, die den disparatesten Produktionsepochen gemeinsam sein kann und deren Betrachtung daher jenseits der politischen Ökonomie liegt.

After saying that the study of use-values is not part of political economy, Marx is conscientious enough to indicate that there are exceptions to this. Sometimes use-value is indeed part of political economy:

Use-value falls into that realm whenever it is modified by the modern production relations or itself exerts a modifying influence on them.

Der Gebrauchswert fällt in ihren Bereich, sobald er durch die modernen Produktionsverhältnisse modifiziert wird oder seinerseits modifizierend in sie eingreift.

But this precision is only confusing here; the general message which the reader should come away with here at the beginning is that use-values are usually *not* part of political economy. This is why books about political economy, when they feel obligated to say a word or two about use-value, usually only come up with platitudes:

What is usually said about this in general terms (because this is the thing to do) is nothing more than a bunch of platitudes—

Was im Allgemeinen anstandshalber darüber gesagt zu werden pflegt, beschränkt sich auf Gemeinplätze,

Again Marx is conscientious enough to qualify his criticism: yes, in the beginnings of the science of economics such discussions of use-value may have been justified:

which had an historical value in the early beginnings of that science, in which the social forms of bourgeois production still had to be laboriously abstracted from the [empirical] material and with great effort fixed as independent objects of investigation.

die einen historischen Wert hatten in den ersten Anfängen der Wissenschaft, als die gesellschaftlichen Formen der bürgerlichen Produktion noch mühsam aus dem Stoff herausgeschält und mit großer Anstrengung als selbständige Gegenstände der Betrachtung fixiert wurden.

By addressing all these caveats on his first page, Marx overburdens the reader and blurs the lines that should be drawn clearly for didactical reasons. But the passage which we just read throws an interesting light on methodology. The "material" is the overwhelming variety of things relevant for human practice which need an explanation. This material has to be sorted according to the character of the forces that affect it: are these forces political, economic, ideological (religion), psychological, or physical forces of nature? The first task which the new science of economics has to accomplish is to sift through all these phenomena and "peel out" those which have an economic explanation, those which are economic "forms," i.e., the interface through which the invisible economic strucure is accessible to the individual agents (and, in turn, affects them).

After this theory-critical remark let's go back to the relationship between use-values and the economy:

In fact, however, the use-value of the com-

In der Tat aber ist der Gebrauchswert der

modity is a given presupposition—the material basis in which a specific economic relation presents itself. This specific relation is what stamps use-value as a commodity.

Ware gegebne Voraussetzung—, die stoffliche Basis, woran sich ein bestimmtes ökonomisches Verhältnis darstellt. Es ist erst dies bestimmte Verhältnis, das den Gebrauchswert zur Ware stempelt.

Just as the canvas is the necessary basis of the painting but does not belong to the painting, so use-values are the necessary material basis (in *Capital*, Marx uses the word "carrier") for economic relations without themselves representing an economic relation. As proof that use-values are not economic relations Marx reminds us that their character does not change with the economic relations:

Wheat, for instance, possesses the same use-value, whether it is grown by slaves, serfs or free labourers. It would not lose its use-value were it to come down from the sky like snow.

Weizen z.B. besitzt denselben Gebrauchswert, ob er von Sklaven, Leibeignen oder freien Arbeitern gebaut werde. Er würde seinen Gebrauchswert nicht verlieren, wenn er vom Himmel herunterschneite.

881:3/o Well, how does use-value turn into a commodity? By being a bearer of *exchange-value*.

Wie verwandelt sich nun der Gebrauchswert in Ware? Träger des *Tauschwerts*.

A commodity is therefore two things at the same time: use-value and exchange-value. But these two aspects of the commodity are in battle with each other:

Although they are immediately united in the commodity, use-value and exchange-value just as immediately fall asunder. Exchange-value appears not determined by use-value and, moreover, the commodity only becomes a commodity, only realises itself as exchange-value, to the extent that its owner does not relate to it as use-value. Only by alienating it, by exchanging it for other commodities, does he appropriate use-values.

Obgleich unmittelbar in der Ware vereinigt, fallen Gebrauchswert und Tauschwert ebenso unmittelbar auseinander. Nicht nur erscheint der Tauschwert nicht bestimmt durch den Gebrauchswert, sondern vielmehr die Ware wird erst Ware, realisiert sich erst als Tauschwert, sofern ihr Besitzer sich nicht zu ihr als Gebrauchswert verhält. Es ist nur durch ihre Entäußerung, ihren Austausch gegen andre Waren, daß er sich Gebrauchswerte aneignet.

⇓ Now comes a big jump: Marx declares the principle of "appropriation by alienation," which governs market interactions, also to be the driving principle of *production*. If circulation is governed by this principle, the production must be governed by it too:

Appropriation by means of alienation is the basic form of the social system of production of which exchange-value appears as the simplest, most abstract expression. The use-value of the commodity is presupposed, yet not for the owner of the commodity, but for society in general.

Aneignung durch Entäußerung ist die Grundform des gesellschaftlichen Systems der Produktion, als dessen einfachster, abstraktester Ausdruck der Tauschwert erscheint. Vorausgesetzt ist der Gebrauchswert der Ware, aber nicht für ihren Eigner, sondern für die Gesellschaft überhaupt.

Appropriation by alienation seems fair enough: you only get something if you also give something in return. But this tit-for-tat presupposes a social relation in which individuals are atomized, which is not the normal state of humankind. Marx makes this clear by the horrors of exchange relations entering the family:

882:1 Just as a Manchester family of factory workers in which the children stand in a relation of exchange to their parents and pay board and lodging to them does not represent the customary economic organisation of the family, so the system of modern private exchange does not, in general, represent the spontaneously evolved economy of societies.

Wie eine Manchester Familie von Fabrikarbeitern, worin die Kinder im Austauschverhältnis zu ihren Eltern stehn und ihnen Kost und Logis bezahlen, nicht die herkömmliche ökonomische Organisation der Familie darstellt, sowenig ist das System des modernen Privataustauschs überhaupt die naturwüchsige Ökonomie der Gesellschaften.

Question 1 *Why did working class families in Manchester force their children to pay for room and board?*

Such an arms-length relationship between highly interdependent agents, here the Manchester working-class parents and their children, does not occur spontaneously in a society. One first sees it between members of different clans:

Exchange does not begin between individuals within a community, but at the point where the communities cease—at their frontiers, at the point of contract between different communities.

Der Austausch beginnt nicht zwischen den Individuen innerhalb eines Gemeinwesens, sondern da, wo die Gemeinwesen aufhören—an ihrer Grenze, an dem Punkt des Kontakts verschiedner Gemeinwesen.

On a more positive note, communal property is not a curiosity that can only be found in certain societies, but it is something one finds almost universally if one goes back in history:

Communal property has recently been rediscovered as a peculiarly Slavic curiosity. But in fact India offers us a pattern card of the most diverse forms of such an economic community, more or less decomposed but still entirely recognisable; and more thor-

Das Gemeineigentum ist neuerdings als eine besondre slawische Kuriosität wiederentdeckt worden. In der Tat aber bietet uns Indien eine Musterkarte der mannigfaltigsten Formen solcher ökonomischen Gemeinwesen, mehr oder minder aufgelöst, aber noch

ough historical study finds it as the starting point of all cultured peoples. The system of production based upon private exchange is initially the historical dissolution of this spontaneously evolved communism. Yet a whole series of economic systems lies between the modern world, in which exchange-values dominates production in its entire depth and width, and the social formations whose basis is decomposed communal property, without however [...]

vollständig erkennbar; und eine gründlichere Geschichtsforschung findet es als Ausgangspunkt bei allen Kulturvölkern wieder. Das Privataustausch gegründete System der Produktion ist zuerst historische Auflösung dieses naturwüchsigen Kommunismus. Jedoch liegt wieder eine ganze Reihe ökonomischer Systeme zwischen der modernen Welt, worin der Tauschwert die Produktion in ihrer ganzen Tiefe und Breite beherrscht, und den Gesellschaftsformationen, deren Grundlage zwar schon das aufgelöste Gemeineigentum bildet, ohne daß [...]

Question 2 *What is wrong with "appropriation by alienation"?*

One sees: whereas in *Capital*, Marx identifies abstract labor as the underlying social relation on which capitalism is built, in the present, earlier discussion, Marx focuses on private property relations.

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