Abstract

Marxist political economy very often refers to the "accumulation of capital" as if it were a transparent concept, one easily understood from Marx's work. The problem is that, as a concept, it is not clear what accumulation of capital is to mean. In fact, capital is so often referred as means of production, following the classical economists, that Marxist political economists have not seemed to have broken from Marx's predecessors when mentioning the accumulation of capital.

Marx's multiple-volume work was not called "Capital" in order to refer to means of production. Class is the fundamental issue. Therefore, his accumulation of capital must be understood with class in mind, not means of production, not constant capital.

Marx had assumed in Capital that he was offering an understanding of a world that was fully capitalist. This continued to be the context for his discussions of accumulation of capital that took place in Volume 1 and in Volume 2. And these discussions suggest, in major part, that more wage-laborers would be involved, in addition to more constant capital. However, when we read carefully his discussions, contradictions emerge. These are discussed in the first two sections of this paper.

Rosa Luxemburg clearly argued that expansion of wage-labor employment was fundamentally involved in the accumulation of capital. In the next two sections, we elaborate her main points and then point to responses by her critics.

Resulting from the preceding discussion, value as a concept may be called into question, first because an argument has been offered that the very concept of value falls without full realization of commodities produced. Even if we do not accept this argument, we still need to consider how value works in a theoretical environment in which non-capitalist environments are being penetrated by capitalism.

The article then briefly concludes that Marxist political economy may need some re-examination, as a result of the totality of the problems opened up by careful consideration of this one concept: the accumulation of capital.

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Introduction

Marxist political economy very often refers to the "accumulation of capital" as if it were a transparent concept, one easily understood from Marx's work. Commonly, citing accumulation of capital in theoretical or empirical analysis suggests a depth of analysis by an author that does not need further explication. It can read with a self-confidence that "gravity" has in a work of physics. The problem is that, as a concept, it is not clear what accumulation of capital is to mean. In fact, capital is so often referred as means of production, following the classical economists, that Marxist political economists have not seemed to have broken from Marx's predecessors when mentioning the accumulation of capital. I include Lenin in this characterization (see Zarembka, 2003).

Marx's multiple-volume work was not called "Capital" in order to refer to means of production. Constant capital, rather, is used to refer to the means of production, measured in value units. The entire work of Capital is fundamentally offered to comprehend the social relations of production in capitalism. Class is the fundamental issue. Therefore, his accumulation of capital must be understood with class in mind, not means of production, not constant capital.

Marx himself was a theorist who was constantly evolving, not a person stuck with his earlier thinking. We can recall how late he arrived at "labor power" as an important concept, namely around 1865. In this spirit, we can interrogate the concept of accumulation of capital as he used it.

Marx had assumed in Capital that he was offering an understanding a world that was fully capitalist. This continued to be the context for his discussions of accumulation of capital that took place in Volume 1 and in Volume 2. And these discussions suggest, in major part, that more wage-laborers would be involved, in addition to more constant capital. However, when we read carefully his discussions, contradictions emerge. These are discussed in the first two sections of this paper.

Rosa Luxemburg published her book on the topic in 1913, thirty years after Marx's death. While she did not explicitly interrogate the wording "accumulation of capital", she clearly argued that expansion of wage-labor employment was fundamentally involved. In the next two sections, we elaborate her main points and then point to responses by her critics.

Resulting from the preceding discussion, value as a concept may be called into question, first because an argument has been offered that the very concept of value falls without full realization of commodities produced. Even if we do not accept this argument, we still need to consider how value works in a theoretical environment in which non-capitalist environments are being penetrated by capitalism. We explain in two sections how this problem could occur.

After a reflection on Louis Althusser's work, this article briefly concludes that Marxist political economy may need some re-examination, including the theory of money, as a result of the totality of the problems opened up by careful consideration of this one concept: the accumulation of capital.

Contradictions within Marx’s conception of accumulation of capital

Marx centered his theoretical work in Capital within a fully capitalist world. He said that

in order to examine the object of our investigation in its integrity, free from all disturbing subsidiary circumstances, we must treat the whole world as one nation, and assume that capitalist production is everywhere established and has possessed itself of every branch of industry.
He wrote this while discussing accumulation of capital, a subject perhaps least expected for such presumption. Several other statements by Marx were made in this regard, notably in Volume 2. As a simplifying assumption, who could fault Marx, particularly when we know full well that he knew that the world was much more complex? Still, the presumption is problematic within the internal logic of his work.

Marx’s concept of accumulation of capital conflicts with presumption of a fully capitalist world. His accumulation of capital must be understood to mean an increase in the number of wage laborers and the required means of production. Thus, in a draft of Capital, we read ‘The process of accumulation is itself an intrinsic feature of the capitalist process of production. It entails the new creation of wage-laborers . . . ’ (Marx, 1933: 1061, italics in original). Then, in Volume 1 as published, we read:

A part of the annual surplus-labor must have been applied to the production of additional means of production and subsistence . . . Now in order to allow of these elements actually functioning as capital, the capitalist class requires additional labor . . . Accumulation of capital is, therefore, increase of the proletariat.

(Marx, 1867: 544–5, 576)

This requirement, although inadequately appreciated, should be clear enough (for elaboration, see Zarembka, 2000).

Where does the increased supply of labor power come from? In Marx’s draft, the answer read:

it does this either by extending its rule to sections of the population not previously subject to itself, such as women or children; or else it subjugates a section of the laboring masses that has accrued through the natural growth of population.

(Marx, 1933: 1061)

In Volume 1, the solution for additional labor power was narrowed as follows: ‘the mechanism of capitalist production provides beforehand, by converting the working-class into a class dependent on wages, a class whose ordinary wages suffice, not only for its maintenance, but for its increase’ (Marx, 1867: 544, italics added). In other words, capital had previously created wage laborers, and now these wage laborers get a bit more than enough for their own subsistence. This may be suggestive of a Malthusian base for population increase. In any case, the incorporation of women and children into the labor force force, mentioned in the draft, is neglected in the published work.

Population increase continues to be mentioned by Marx as a major source of additional labor power. In the nineteenth century, the global population growth rate was only around 0.5 per cent per year. If

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1 This passage is from the draft ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production,’ which Marx deleted from Volume 1 before publication. ‘Results’ can be considered part of the third, next to last, draft of Volume 1. No other material from this third draft has survived, perhaps because the remainder was rolled into the final draft. Why third draft? Consider the Grundrisse as a first draft of Marx’s life work. Then the second draft can be considered to have been drafted between 1861 and 1863, and includes his work on the history of theories of surplus value. The third, not yet final, draft was begun in 1863 and completed in 1865, including the only draft ever made of what became Volume 3 under Engels’ editorship.
Marx was considering a country, rather than the whole world, the rate of increase in England was higher, 1 per cent in the nineteenth century, but still not enough to rely on for accumulation of capital. Marx’s own numerical illustrations of accumulation assume annual population increases of 10 per cent. Another possibility? Could the increased labor power supply for accumulation of capital not come from continuing penetration of non-capitalist modes, not merely a creation of wage laborers ‘beforehand’? While presumption of a fully capitalist world in Capital contradicts such an understanding, proletarianization of the world was then and is still, in fact, proceeding apace. Thus, Pagine Marxiste (November 2004, Year 1, Number 5, p. 5) makes an attempt to record recent progress, indicating that the global non-agricultural labor force more than quadrupled from 1950 to 2000, representing a 2.9 per cent annual rate of growth, due in part to population growth (about 1.7 per cent annually) and in part to the ‘process of proletarianization, linked to the disintegration of the peasant social framework and to the shift from the rural to the urban areas’.

Perhaps Marx became quite aware of continuing proletarianization (not only the proletarianization resulting from original transition from feudalism to capitalism, i.e. ‘primitive accumulation’). Thus, consider a bit more deeply the unpublished ‘Results’ section, which was to have been the conclusion of Volume 1. The most important theoretical concept in ‘Results’ was formal and real subsumption of labor to capital, following usage beginning in the Grundrisse. By the concept of subsumption, it can be argued that Marx ‘clearly wished to imply that as economic relations increasingly took on a capitalist character, their scale increased and this brought them ever closer to the world market and their point of culmination’ (White, 1996: 191). Yet, by leaving ‘Results’ out entirely as Volume 1 went to the publisher any focus on subsumption was lost. Even references elsewhere within Volume 1 to subsumption were almost completely stricken by Marx, including references to cooperation, division of labor, and use of machinery as stages of subsumption (White, 1996: 200; one remaining definitional passage for ‘subsumption’ was eliminated in the French edition). The published Volume 1 shows that “very little remained of the argument that in its cycle of reproduction capital created its own preconditions on an ever increasing scale” (p. 201).  

Marx spent many years after the publication of Volume 1 studying pre-capitalist societies, including reading much Russian literature.

Just as Marx was about to publish the first volume of Das Kapital he had run into serious problems with the section of his projected work which would deal with the circulation of capital. He had hitherto assumed that capital would spread throughout the world carrying all before it, but he had overlooked the fact that even in his own native Hunsruecken despite the development of capitalism, the older, collective, social and economic system still survived. Capitalism, apparently, did not necessarily erode traditional peasant society, but coexisted with it. Marx removed much of the philosophical underpinnings for his earlier view of capitalist development from the published version of Das Kapital, continuing the excisions in the second and French editions, and he embarked on a lengthy empirical investigation of how capital actually began to circulate. He had an excellent example to hand in Russia, which had just embarked on the capitalist road, having abolished serfdom a few years earlier. In 1870 Marx learnt Russian and got down to the serious job of collecting materials on Russian economic development.

\[2\] After pulling ‘Results’ from Volume 1, there is also no record that Marx later returned to the issue of ‘subsumption’. 

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It is mostly forgotten that Marx wrote Engels in 1870 that the most important work published since Engels’ own *Condition of the Working Class in England* was Flerovsky’s *Condition of the Working [Peasant] Class in Russia* (published in 1869). Flerovsky’s book, like, for example, van Onselen’s (1976) a hundred years later, focused upon the proletarianization process, including the role of taxation therein: ‘The main reason which compels the [peasant] to resort to the capitalist is to pay his taxes’ (translation by White, 1996: 249, who also explains that ‘worker’ for Flerovsky is ‘peasant’ in our usage; see also Forstater, 2005). It is fair to say that Marx was trying to understand the forms of, and limitations, to capital’s penetration. This became a continuing study of his to the end of his life, including extensive correspondence with Russians.

**Marx’s late theoretical work: schemes of reproduction**

We could suspect that the question of penetration of non-capitalist modes of production would become integrated into Marx’s late theoretical work. It is not to be so, however, and was left to posterity in Rosa Luxemburg’s (1913) work. From Engels’ ‘Preface’ to Volume 2 we know that Marx was working on the schemes of reproduction as the last of his theoretical work. And from Engels’ footnoting within Volume 2 concerning whether he is drawing upon earlier or later manuscripts of Volume 2 for his own editing, we can understand where individual passages are drawn from. For Section II of ‘Simple Reproduction’, for example, we can read Engels’ note: ‘Mainly from Manuscript II [1870], the schemes from Manuscript VIII [1878]’ (Marx, 1885: 399, fn. 44). For the entire chapter on ‘Accumulation’, we can read that it is from that last Manuscript VIII. We can thus infer that the schemes themselves date from 1878, i.e. long after Marx’s studies of Russia began.

Even in 1878, however, Marx was still considering, from a theoretical point of view, the capitalist world to be complete. Immediately before Part III of Volume 2, which includes the schemes, we read, ‘Apart from [the capitalist] class, according to our assumption – the general and exclusive domination of capitalist production – there is no other class at all except the working-class’ (Marx, 1885: 352, apparently also written in 1878, judging from Engels’ ‘Preface’, p. 5). Also, in the chapter ‘Simple Reproduction’, we read: ‘there are here only two classes: the working-class disposing only of its labor power, and the capitalist class’ (p. 425, from the 1878 Manuscript VIII). In other words, the process of proletarianization remains excluded from Marx’s last theoretical work on *Capital*, even after studying Russia.

In beginning his discussion concerning accumulation of additional constant capital for department I, Marx says that ‘in order that the transition from simple to extended reproduction may take place, production in department I must be in a position to fabricate fewer elements of constant capital for II and so many the more for I’ (pp. 500–1). That is, in transition to accumulation, production for workers’ consumption (department II) is scaled back as production of means of production (department I) is increased. Total employed labor power is seemingly constant. When he turns to additional variable capital needed for the expanding department I, Marx writes:

We have explained at great length in *Book* [Volume] I that labor-power is always available under the capitalist system of production, and that more labor can be rendered fluent, if necessary, *without increasing the number of laborers or the quantity of labor-power employed*. We therefore
need not go into this any further, but shall rather assume that the portion of the newly created money-capital capable of being converted into variable capitals will always find at hand the labor-power into which it is to transform itself.

(Marx, 1885: 505, italics added)

Marx seems to be referring here to production of relative surplus value, leading to workers being expelled from production as technology develops. Again, total labor power employed seems rather constant. Logically, Marx is almost forced to make such a statement as long as he presumes a fully capitalist world, as simple population increase would be his only other possibility.

Nevertheless, when Marx develops his full schemes of production as accumulation of capital proceeds, both departments I and II are increasing substantially, with the organic composition of capital in each department being held constant. It reads as if Marx, working out his calculations of schemes of reproduction under accumulation of capital, has come face to face with the fact that, unlike his earlier statement regarding Volume I (cited above with italics), more wage laborers are required, after all.

Marx, in the schemes of accumulation, offers two illustrations, with his second having higher organic compositions of capital in both departments. The latter “presupposes a considerable development of capitalist production and accordingly of the productivity of social labor, a considerable previous increase in the scale of production, and finally a development of all the circumstances which produce a relative surplus-population among the working-class” (Marx, 1885: 518). This could be a lead into incorporating the production of relative surplus value as the engine for sustaining a renewed supply of labor power. However, Marx never pursued this in drafts being prepared for Volume 2 and does not suggest that as his purpose.

The schemes of reproduction in Marx are a remarkable attempt at posing a new problem for investigation. They sustain the political economy of economists such as Kalecki, whom Kowalik (1990) argues is the main continuity from Marx and Luxemburg. They have even influenced ‘mainstream’ economics. But they do not help much, at least in Marx’s own formulation, in addressing a fundamental problem, the possibility of realizing surplus value within a fully capitalist system. Nor do they suggest that Marx was incorporating within his last theoretical work the issue of penetration of capitalism into non-capitalist modes of production.

White, whom we have already introduced, considers Marx’s problem in drafting Volume 2. He argues that the first draft, begun by Marx in 1865, failed ‘to establish any necessary connection between expanded reproduction of capital and the extension of capitalist relations’. Accumulation of capital for Marx was to be “a process which would reproduce its presuppositions, the capitalists and workers on an extended scale.” “To be unable to show that capital created its own presuppositions, that it created Civil Society, was a serious difficulty for Marx’s overall scheme of capitalist development” (White, 1996: 196).

Marx never came close to resolving this problem. And he could not resolve it as long as he separated theoretical questions regarding accumulation of capital from penetration of non-capitalist forms of production (‘primitive accumulation of capital’ is another matter altogether; see Zarembka, 2002a).
**Luxemburg on accumulation**

Marx’s study of the history of capital’s penetration, including its difficulties, had a successor in Luxemburg’s interest in the question of penetration of non-capitalist forms of production. Luxemburg’s interest is evidenced particularly in her *Introduction to Political Economy*, published posthumously (only half of it found after her murder). In fact, her work used many of the same sources Marx had studied. But she also integrated these questions into her own theoretical work.

Marx’s *Capital* and Luxemburg’s *Introduction to Political Economy* have distinct beginning points. Marx begins with ‘Commodities’. Luxemburg does not get to that until her sixth chapter after ‘What is Political Economy?’, ‘Social Labor’, and then three chapters on economic history, including primitive communism, the feudal system, and the medieval city and guilds. In other words, for Luxemburg, the capitalist mode of production arises in an historical context. Luxemburg’s conclusions concerning primitive communism’s longevity are indicative. While the last form of primitive communism – the Russian commune – had survived because of its adaptability, ‘there is only one contact that it cannot tolerate or overcome; this is the contact with European civilization, i.e. with capitalism . . . [The contact] accomplishes what centuries and the most savage Oriental conquerors could not . . . ’ (Luxemburg, 1925: 103). To determine the comparative power of capital to rip these people from all means of production and to thrust these societies into value-producing ones, we cannot just look at capital. We also have to look at the weaknesses of the primitive societies, including, as she does, developments in their specific practices of warfare.³

The capitalist mode arising in an historical context indicates that theoretical categories are not only socially conditioned, but socially conditioned within the developing historical setting. Suggestive of a rethinking of fundamental aspects of Marxist theory, we turn to this issue later. Here, we discuss a preliminary, Luxemburg’s fundamentally important *The Accumulation of Capital* and subsequent *Anti-Critique*, and their dismissal by very many critics, which has con-strained development of Marxist theory.

Confronting the problem of realization is the deepest contribution which Luxemburg’s *The Accumulation of Capital* makes to Marxist political economy: under extended reproduction of capital, what is surplus value used for? It cannot be merely luxury consumption of capitalists as that would be simple reproduction. It cannot be increasing workers’ consumption as this is no part of surplus value. The possibility that it could be used for increasing constant capital is more complicated. If the organic composition of capital stays constant, as in Marx’s own reproduction schemes in Volume 2, then any increase of constant capital is exactly associated with an increase in variable capital (more workers selling their labor power to capitalists). Could not the organic composition of capital be continually rising, and could not the increasing constant capital then completely absorb surplus value not used for capitalist consumption, with no extension of the capital–wage labor relation? Yet, a rising organic composition does not mean more machinery being used per work hour, but rather more value (labor hours) in the production of the machinery used by workers in each of their work hours. The latter increase is not so obvious as there is technological change in the production of machinery, even as we

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³ Marx, judging by a number of his interventions on this issue, seemed to think that primitive communism resisted capital more than Luxemburg argued. Examining this disparity is unnecessary for our purposes.
have a common sense that workers are working with more advanced technology today than earlier. Magaline (1975) offers the best starting point for analyzing the difficulties of this question; it should help undermine dogma about the organic composition rising, and thereby realizing surplus value.

Surplus value can, however, overcome the problem of insufficient markets when used for extending capitalist domination of the world, i.e. having more wage laborers attached to means of production controlled/owned by capitalists. Then surplus value can be realized, albeit outside the circuit of capital.

Critics
There are several factors underlying the dismissal of Luxemburg’s work, the upshot of which has been to limit the development of Marxist theory. First, Lenin had said, point blank, that Luxemburg was wrong on the accumulation of capital. While Lenin’s own economics had not been carefully criticized by anyone, the success of the Bolshevik revolution with Lenin as leader provided a imprimatur for his opinions not only on political matters, but also on economics. In fact, Lenin’s economics is not all that deep and reflects a Ricardianism that went unnoticed. For example, in 1897 Lenin roundly criticized Sismondi before Marx’s own comments on Sismondi appeared in *Theories of Surplus Value*. It turned out that Marx was clearly more appreciative of Sismondi than would be expected by Lenin’s judgment (see Zarembka, 2003).

Second, Luxemburg’s work received no sympathy from Kautsky, even though Kautsky himself used similar arguments as Luxemburg’s when Kautsky in 1902 criticized extensively a book by Tugan-Baranowsky. Lack of honest evaluation from Kautsky, or even any evaluation at all, was more damaging, at the time, than the fact of Lenin’s dismissal. As editor of *Theories of Surplus Value*, Kautsky could know quite well Marx’s thoughts on Sismondi. Furthermore, regarding the editorial board of her party’s publication *Vorwaerts*, Luxemburg herself commented that:

> a purely theoretical study on an abstract scientific problem was censured by the entire staff of a political daily paper (of whom probably two at the most may have read the book). They did this by denying to men like Franz Mehring and J. Karski [pseudonym for Julian Marchlewski] any expert knowledge of economics, but allowed only those who pulled my book to pieces to be ‘experts’. Such a fate has happened to no other party publication as far as I know and over the decades Social Democratic publishers have certainly not produced all gold and pearls.

*(Luxemburg, 1921: 47–8)*

Note that, according to Froelich (1939: 159), Mehring and Marchlewski greeted her book with ‘great enthusiasm’.

Third, the undermining of Luxemburg’s work was accelerated by Bukharin’s (1924) long discussion, offered five years after her murder. Bukharin’s critique played a major role in a process that has led a much later survey of the history of Marxist economics to feel comfortable in concluding of Rosa Luxemburg: ‘almost no one has been convinced by her attempt to demonstrate that accumulation is impossible in a closed capitalist system’; ‘her theory was wrong’ (Howard and King, 1989: 112 and 317). Bukharin’s commentary is reviewed in Zarembka (2002b, pp. 11-13).

For example, Bukharin ignores her when she says that money is something between two other
things: ‘Between the accumulation of surplus value in commodities and the use of this surplus value to expand production there always lies a decisive leap, the salto mortale of commodity production, as Marx calls it: selling for money’ (Bukharin, 1924: 192, italics in original). Instead, he refers to her defining ‘accumulation as accumulation of money capital’ (p. 194, italics in original). Would it not be more correct to interpret Luxemburg to say that ‘an amassing of money capital’ is a result of a necessity within the accumulation process?

After Bukharin, critiques of Luxemburg’s work continued, in one manner or another, in works by Grossmann, Pannekoek, Mattick, Sr., Sweezy, Rosdolsky, Tarbuck, Kuehne, Howard and King, and Dunayevskaya, among others, each of whom is discussed in Zarembka (2002b). Often the critiques are inconsistent, one with another, yet a cult of objection was created which includes those of many political stripes.

Lastly, the connection between Luxemburg’s work, particularly the third part of The Accumulation of Capital and Introduction to Political Economy, and Marx’s late research into Russian society has gone unnoticed. This neglect has been largely due to extremely tardy publication of Marx’s late notes.

Value and its realization, with accumulation of capital understood to focus on increased employment of wage labor

Weeks (1982) has made the startling claim that, without full realization of all production within the context of a fully capitalist economy, Marxist value theory must be discarded. Unlike neo-Ricardian value, he says, Marx’s understanding of value is snuffed out with incomplete realization: ‘if one postulates that a ‘pure’ capitalist system is endemically afflicted by the inability to sell all that is produced, then the Marxian concept of value must be rejected’ (Weeks, 1982: 61, italics in original). Raising the stakes for those who claim chronic realization problems within the capitalist mode of production, Weeks claims that proponents of under-consumptionism (mentioning particularly Baran and Sweezy) are compelled to abandon Marxist value theory. Given that Luxemburg and this author (Zarembka, 2000) argue chronic overproduction within ‘pure’ capitalism, should not Weeks’s conclusion, on its own, suggest unsustainability for Marx’s value theory? We do not think so, at least in the incomplete form presented.

Weeks’ argument on the incompatibility of Marx’s value theory and incomplete realization, in the beginning, is carefully laid out, starting with numerical tables of reproduction measured in both use-value magnitudes as well as in values. In the process he lays out his understanding of the precise role for Marx’s value conception. Marx’s conception (not, however, Ricardo’s) is at stake, says Weeks, when realization is not assured. Where Ricardians aggregate labor time in disparate production

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4 We are at a loss how Bukharin could so distort Luxemburg’s position by skipping over the sentence reproduced here. He even plays with the words salto mortale in his own text, getting into the reader’s subconscious that he, Bukharin, has read her: the reader is expected to take his word for the fact that, yes, she really does define accumulation as the amassing of money capital.

5 This latter quote is actually in a section entitled ‘Definition of Accumulation’.

6 It should be noted that Weeks, in his introductory paragraph and last footnote, favorably cites Lenin’s economic work of the 1890s on such questions, Lenin being one to criticize Luxemburg’s The Accumulation of Capital (Zarembka, 2000: 221–2, 225–35).
processes, Weeks argues that labor time referencing laboring activity for one product is, in fact, distinct from labor time referencing another product. ‘What is required is a measurement in units of generalized labor time which abstracts from the particular characteristics of each concrete laboring activity’ (p. 66, italics added), and that Marx’s concept of abstract labor and socially necessary labor does indeed offer the basis for the required intermediating concept, i.e. value. Those necessary abstractions are achieved in practice, socially, through capitalist competition whereby capitalists are forced to interact and adopt norms of efficiency under the discipline of monetary costs. Price is then the observed form of value. Realization involves the conversion of commodity capital into money capital through sale.

Realization is required, continues Weeks, because it determines the socially necessary labor time. That is, failure of realization implies that some part of labor time is socially unnecessary; some working time under wage labor conditions is not transformed into value. The conception of value would be therefore undermined.

If under-realization is endemic, . . . then it becomes, in effect, merely an ideal, a construction of the mind. Realized abstract labor time in such a case is set by the determinants of the [monetary] expenditure by workers and capitalists. Production still plays a role, but a very limited one.

(p. 73)

Further driving the point home, should an external market outside capitalism be introduced,

total realizable value is no longer constrained by the labor time expended in production. . . If external demand is buoyant, the use values produced can exchange for an amount of money representing labor time far in excess of that expended in production, and the production process determines nothing except the number of use values available for circulation.

(pp. 72–3)

A significant weakness in the structure of Weeks’s argument concerns the issue of money. Discussing the possibility of an external market, Weeks refers to money possibly ‘representing labor time far in excess of that expended in production’. This must mean that the social base of money (or a subset of moneys – whatever that might mean) is not necessarily related to capitalism. Indeed, what determines money representing labor time at all? Furthermore, even before considering any possible external market, Weeks refers to the possibility of a failure of realization as meaning that not all produced commodities can be converted into money capital: ‘the quantity of value objectified in the produced commodities is deter- mined by labor time expended if money exchanged against these commodities is equal to [the produced] value’ (p. 71, italics added). This seems reasonable enough . . . except that there is no statement of what ‘money’, including its relation to ‘value’, is to mean. No theory of money completes his argument; money is referred to as if obvious. Could not a theory be offered that the value represented by the money transacted in sales does, in fact, represent the value in production, even in the presence of overproduction? This might turn out to be a circular argument. Still, in the absence of an explicit concept relating money independently to value, an emptiness in the argumentation surfaces.

While Weeks provokes concern for the relationship of value to realization, and while it is correct that laboring in one production process (or in one part of one production process) is distinct from another, we need not consider these as incommensurable labor times, but rather as simply
incommensurable labors. We ought not to conflate labor times and labors, the former being measured by the clock as units of ‘value’ (witness Marx’s discussion of the production of absolute surplus value in which he recounts how minutes are stolen from workers simply by playing with the clock). Abstract labor – the foundation for Marx’s value – is in the relation of wage labor to capital in which the worker who has sold her or his labor time is told by the capitalist what actual laboring activity to do. One does not therefore need to introduce an additional concept of ‘generalized labor time,’ supposedly achieved under the discipline of monetary costs, as Weeks maintains. Value is defined in the production relation, and it would not be neo-Ricardian when Marxist political economy avoids introduction of ‘generalized labor time’. Thus, chronic failure of realization is not necessarily inconsistent with having value as a concept applicable to the capitalist mode of production.

Value, when the context is wider than capitalism

Turning away from Weeks, value is, of course, the foundation for Marx’s theoretical understanding of the capitalist mode of production. Since his 1847 Poverty of Philosophy (Marx, 1847), Marx’s economic categories are to be understood as socially conditioned. Having re-examined ‘accumulation of capital’ in light of Luxemburg, what then is to be the appropriate object of analysis leading to this concept of value: the capital–wage labor relation alone or that relation as well as the penetration of non-capitalist modes of production corresponding to accumulation of capital? The former has been universally presumed, based upon Marx’s simplifying assumption that ‘capitalist production is everywhere established’. Marx already made this presumption a decade before Volume 1, i.e. in 1858, Marx wrote Engels an outline of what he was preparing and included a significant comment concerning value, suggesting his focus to be on post-proletarianization:

Value. This is reduced entirely to the quantity of labor; time as a measure of value...Value as such has no other ‘material’ than labor itself...It already presupposes 1. the destruction of natural communism (in India etc.); 2. the destruction of all undeveloped, pre-bourgeois modes of production which are not governed in their totality by exchange. Although it is an abstraction, it is an abstraction which can only be assumed on the basis of a particular economic development of society...

(Marx and Engels, 1948: p. 58)

In the Grundrisse, we find: ‘The economic concept of value does not occur in antiquity...[It] is entirely peculiar to the most modern economy, since it is the most abstract expression of capital itself and of the production resting on it’ (Marx, 1939–41: 776).

This topic of the conception of value is addressed in Zarembka (2016), while beyond the scope of this article.

Reconsidering Marxist political economy

The deeper issue being raised in this chapter may be epistemological. Althusser’s (1965 [1970]) work, as no other, opens up this space for discussion, opens up the question of the theoretical object of Capital. Marx, says Althusser, did not under- take to ‘historicize’ the categories of classical political economy, categories such as value. Rather, Marx produced new concepts appropriate to his own theoretical object, in circumstances in which he had no philosophical concepts available ‘to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole’ (Althusser, 1965: 187). Althusser’s long discussion
concludes with his citing Marx’s comment in the 1857–58 *Grundrisse* that

> In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which pre- dominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colors and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.
> (Marx, 1939–41: 106–7; Althusser, 1965 [1970]: 187)

Marx was stating this point in order to explain that economic categories need not follow each other in the same manner as history, but rather should be determined, in capitalism, by the structure of bourgeois society. For Althusser, *Darstellung* (representation, *mise en scène*) should be recognized as ‘the key epistemological concept of the whole Marxist theory of value, the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of presence of the structure in its effects, and therefore to designate structural causality itself’ (Althusser, 1965: 188, italics in original).

Althusser, however, seems completely unaware of any difficulty with the concept of ‘accumulation of capital’, completely unaware of the problematic character of presuming full capitalism, completely unaware that penetration of non-capitalist modes of production may need to be part of the object of theoretical investigation. For Althusser, the capitalist mode of production has structural causality, the feudal mode also, albeit distinct, and the transition from one mode of production to another is a distinct theoretical question. Therefore, theory of the capitalist mode of production does not need to introduce what White would say is space and time, and what others could say is history. While a concept such as ‘value’ is not to be an historicization of classical political economy’s conception, neither is it, according to Althusser, to have the same theoretical object as classical political economy’s theoretical object. Yet, does not a clarified understanding of accumulation of capital undermine an ahistorical understanding of the capitalist mode of production and thus raise questions concerning Althusser’s structural causality? We cannot discuss penetration of non-capitalist society by capital without examining what it is that is being penetrated. We cannot examine what is being penetrated without the context, a context which must be historical.

A re-evaluation of value and accumulation of capital as concepts will have to address the theory of money. That is, ‘money’ is popping up all around these issues and cannot be left out of a re-evaluation. We all use money, but what is it? What is it not only within the capitalist mode of production, but before? Has it changed? Note that within Part III of Volume 2, when Marx wants to avoid a possibility of considering an increase in money as accumulation, he refers to ‘real’ accumulation of capital, e.g. ‘it may also happen that surplus-value must be converted into money and this money hoarded for a much longer time before this process, i.e. real accumulation, expansion of production, can take place’ (Marx, 1885: 493). Much discussion within this Part centers around monetary questions and questions of hoarding. Still, what is money and its role? On this note, we come to a halt.

**References**


Bukharin, N. I. (1924) *Der Imperialismus und die Akkumulation der Kapitals*, trans. by R. Wichman (1972)


