

Chapter 10: The Working Day

I. THE LIMITS OF THE WORKING DAY

We began with the assumption that labour-power is bought and sold at its value. Its value, like that of all other commodities, is determined by the labour-time necessary to produce it. If it takes 6 hours to produce the average daily means of subsistence of the worker, he must work an average of 6 hours a day to produce his daily labour-power, or to reproduce the value received as a result of its sale. The necessary part of his working day amounts to 6 hours, and is therefore, other things being equal, a given quantity. But with this the extent of the working day itself is not yet given.

Let us assume that a line A-----B represents the length of the necessary labour-time, say 6 hours. If the labour is prolonged beyond AB by 1, 3 or 6 hours, we get three other lines:

Working day I: A-----B-C

Working day II: A-----B---C

Working day III: A-----B-----C

which represent three different working days of 7, 9 and 12 hours. The extension BC of the line AB represents the length of the surplus labour. As the working day is $AB + BC$, or AC, it varies with the variable magnitude BC. Since AB is constant, the ratio of BC to AB can always be calculated. In working day I, it is one-sixth, in working day II, three-sixths, in working day III, six-sixths of AB. Since, further, the ratio of surplus labour-time to necessary labour-time determines the rate of surplus-value, the latter is given by the ratio of BC to AB. It amounts in the three different working days respectively to 16½, 50 and 100 per cent. On the other hand, the rate of surplus-value alone would not give us the extent of the working day. If this rate were 100 per cent, the working day might be of 8, 10, 12 or more hours. It would indicate that

the two constituent parts of the working day, necessary labour-time and surplus labour-time, were equal in extent, but not how long each of these two constituent parts was.

The working day is thus not a constant, but a variable quantity. One of its parts, certainly, is determined by the labour-time required for the reproduction of the labour-power of the worker himself. But its total amount varies with the duration of the surplus labour. The working day is therefore capable of being determined, but in and for itself indeterminate.¹

Although the working day is not a fixed but a fluid quantity, it can, on the other hand, vary only within certain limits. The minimum limit, however, cannot be determined. Of course, if we make the extension line BC, or the surplus labour, equal to zero, we have a minimum limit, i.e. the part of the day in which the worker must necessarily work for his own maintenance. Under the capitalist mode of production, however, this necessary labour can form only a part of the working day; the working day can never be reduced to this minimum. On the other hand, the working day does have a maximum limit. It cannot be prolonged beyond a certain point. This maximum limit is conditioned by two things. First by the physical limits to labour-power. Within the 24 hours of the natural day a man can only expend a certain quantity of his vital force. Similarly, a horse can work regularly for only 8 hours a day. During part of the day the vital force must rest, sleep; during another part the man has to satisfy other physical needs, to feed, wash and clothe himself. Besides these purely physical limitations, the extension of the working day encounters moral obstacles. The worker needs time in which to satisfy his intellectual and social requirements, and the extent and the number of these requirements is conditioned by the general level of civilization. The length of the working day therefore fluctuates within boundaries both physical and social. But these limiting conditions are of a very elastic nature, and allow a tremendous amount of latitude. So we find working days of many different lengths, of 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 hours.

The capitalist has bought the labour-power at its daily value. The use-value of the labour-power belongs to him throughout one working day. He has thus acquired the right to make the

1. 'A day's labour is vague, it may be long or short' (*An Essay on Trade and Commerce, Containing Observations on Taxes, etc.*, London, 1770, p. 73).

worker work for him during one day. But what is a working day?² At all events, it is less than a natural day. How much less? The capitalist has his own views of this point of no return, the necessary limit of the working day. As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour.³ Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him.⁴ If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.⁵

The capitalist therefore takes his stand on the law of commodity-exchange. Like all other buyers, he seeks to extract the maximum possible benefit from the use-value of his commodity. Suddenly, however, there arises the voice of the worker, which had previously been stifled in the sound and fury of the production process:

'The commodity I have sold you differs from the ordinary crowd of commodities in that its use creates value, a greater value than it costs. That is why you bought it. What appears on your side as the valorization of capital is on my side an excess expenditure of labour-power. You and I know on the market only one

2. This question is far more important than the celebrated question of Sir Robert Peel to the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce: What is a pound? Peel was able to pose this question only because he was as much in the dark about the nature of money as the 'little shilling men' * of Birmingham.

3. 'It is the aim of the capitalist to obtain with his expended capital the greatest possible quantity of labour (*d'obtenir du capital dépensé la plus forte somme de travail possible*)' (J. G. Courcelle-Seneuil, *Traité théorique et pratique des entreprises industrielles*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1857, p. 63).

4. 'An hour's labour lost in a day is a prodigious injury to a commercial State . . . There is a very great consumption of luxuries among the labouring poor of this kingdom: particularly among the manufacturing populace, by which they also consume their time, the most fatal of consumptions' (*An Essay on Trade and Commerce*, etc., pp. 47, 153).

5. 'If the free worker rests for an instant, the base and petty management which watches over him with wary eyes claims he is stealing from it' (N. Linguet, *Théorie des lois civiles*, etc., London, 1767, Vol. 2, p. 466).

* The followers of the banker and Radical M.P. Thomas Attwood (1783-1836) of Birmingham, so called because they advocated the repayment of creditors in shillings of a reduced gold content, as a way of solving the currency problems incurred at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. See *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, English edition, pp. 81-3.

law, that of the exchange of commodities. And the consumption of the commodity belongs not to the seller who parts with it, but to the buyer who acquires it. The use of my daily labour-power therefore belongs to you. But by means of the price you pay for it every day, I must be able to reproduce it every day, thus allowing myself to sell it again. Apart from natural deterioration through age etc., I must be able to work tomorrow with the same normal amount of strength, health and freshness as today. You are constantly preaching to me the gospel of "saving" and "abstinence". Very well! Like a sensible, thrifty owner of property I will husband my sole wealth, my labour-power, and abstain from wasting it foolishly. Every day I will spend, set in motion, transfer into labour only as much of it as is compatible with its normal duration and healthy development. By an unlimited extension of the working day, you may in one day use up a quantity of labour-power greater than I can restore in three. What you gain in labour, I lose in the substance of labour. Using my labour and despoiling it are quite different things. If the average length of time an average worker can live (while doing a reasonable amount of work) is 30 years, the value of my labour-power, which you pay me from day to day, is $\frac{1}{365 \times 30}$ or $\frac{1}{10,950}$ of its total value. But if you consume it in 10

years, you pay me daily $\frac{1}{10,950}$ instead of $\frac{1}{3,650}$ of its total value, i.e. only one-third of its daily value, and you therefore rob me every day of two-thirds of the value of my commodity. You pay me for one day's labour-power, while you use three days of it. That is against our contract and the law of commodity exchange. I therefore demand a working day of normal length, and I demand it without any appeal to your heart, for in money matters sentiment is out of place. You may be a model citizen, perhaps a member of the R.S.P.C.A., and you may be in the odour of sanctity as well; but the thing you represent when you come face to face with me has no heart in its breast. What seems to throb there is my own heartbeat. I demand a normal working day because, like every other seller, I demand the value of my commodity.⁶

6. During the great strike of the London building workers [1859-60] for the reduction of the working day to 9 hours, their committee published a manifesto that contained, to some extent, the plea of our worker. The manifesto alludes, not without irony, to the fact that the greatest profit-

We see then that, leaving aside certain extremely elastic restrictions, the nature of commodity exchange itself imposes no limit to the working day, no limit to surplus labour. The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and, where possible, to make two working days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the worker maintains his right as a seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to a particular normal length. There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides. Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class.

2. THE VORACIOUS APPETITE FOR SURPLUS LABOUR. MANUFACTURER AND BOYAR

Capital did not invent surplus labour. Wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the worker, free or unfree, must add to the labour-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra quantity of labour-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production,⁷ whether this proprietor be an Athenian *καλὸς κ' ἀγαθός*,* an Etruscan theocrat, a *civis romanus*, a Norman baron, an American slave-owner, a Wallachian boyar, a modern landlord or a capital-

monger among the building masters, a certain Sir M. Peto, was in the 'odour of sanctity'.* (The same Peto, after 1867, came to an end *à la* Strousberg.)†

7. 'Those who labour ... in reality feed both the pensioners, called the rich, and themselves' (Edmund Burke, op. cit., pp. 2-3).

*Peto was a Baptist, a benefactor to various chapels, and the author in 1847 of a pamphlet entitled *Divine Support in Death*.

†The bankruptcy of Peto's firm was in fact in 1866; the allusion here is to the bankruptcy of the German financier and speculator B. H. Strousberg in St Petersburg in 1875 and his subsequent expulsion from Russia after being charged with fraud.

* 'Handsome and good': ancient Greek expression for an aristocrat.

ist.⁸ It is however clear that in any economic formation of society where the use-value rather than the exchange-value of the product predominates, surplus labour will be restricted by a more or less confined set of needs, and that no boundless thirst for surplus labour will arise from the character of production itself. Hence in antiquity over-work becomes frightful only when the aim is to obtain exchange-value in its independent monetary shape, i.e. in the production of gold and silver. The recognized form of over-work here is forced labour until death. One only needs to read Diodorus Siculus.⁹ Nevertheless, these are exceptions in antiquity. But as soon as peoples whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, the *corvée*, etc. are drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production, whereby the sale of their products for export develops into their principal interest, the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom etc. Hence the Negro labour in the southern states of the American Union preserved a moderately patriarchal character as long as production was chiefly directed to the satisfaction of immediate local requirements. But in proportion as the export of cotton became of vital interest to those states, the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labour, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products, but rather of the production of surplus-value itself. The same is true of the *corvée*, in the Danubian Principalities for instance.

The comparison of the appetite for surplus labour in the Danubian Principalities with the same appetite as found in English factories has a special interest, because the *corvée* presents surplus labour in an independent and immediately perceptible form.

Suppose the working day consists of 6 hours of necessary

8. Niebuhr remarks very naively in his *Roman History*: 'It is evident that monuments like those of the Etruscans, which astound us even in their ruins, presuppose lords and vassals in small (!) states.' Sismondi, with deeper insight, says that 'Brussels lace' presupposes wage-lords and wage-slaves.

9. 'One cannot see these unfortunates' (in the gold mines between Egypt, Ethiopia and Arabia) 'who are unable even to keep their bodies clean or to clothe their nakedness, without pitying their miserable lot. There is no indulgence, no forbearance for the sick, the feeble, the aged, or for feminine weaknesses. All, forced by blows, must work on until death puts an end to their sufferings and their distress' (Diodorus Siculus, *Historische Bibliothek*, Bk III, Ch. 13).

5. THE STRUGGLE FOR A NORMAL WORKING DAY. LAWS
FOR THE COMPULSORY EXTENSION OF THE WORKING
DAY, FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE FOURTEENTH TO THE
END OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

'What is a working day? What is the length of time during which capital may consume the labour-power whose daily value it has paid for? How far may the working day be extended beyond the amount of labour-time necessary for the reproduction of labour-power itself? We have seen that capital's reply to these questions is this: the working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour-power is absolutely incapable of renewing its services. Hence it is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilment of social functions, for social intercourse, for the play of the vital forces of his body and his mind, even the rest time of Sunday (and that in a country of Sabbatarians!)⁷² – what foolishness! But in its blind and measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals

if it is night, or by the noise, if it is day,' Mr White gives cases where a boy worked for 36 consecutive hours, and others where boys of 12 drudged on until 2 in the morning, and then slept in the works till 5 a.m. (3 hours!) only to resume their work. 'The amount of work,' say Tremetheere and Tufnell, who drafted the general report, 'done by boys, youths, girls, and women, in the course of their daily or nightly spell of labour, is certainly extraordinary' (ibid., pp. xliii and xliv). Meanwhile, late at night perhaps, Mr Glass-Capital, stuffed full with abstinence, and primed with port wine, reels home from his club, droning out idiotically 'Britons never, never shall be slaves!'

72. In England even now in rural districts a labourer is occasionally condemned to imprisonment for desecrating the Sabbath by working in his front garden. The same man would be punished for breach of contract if he remained away from his metal, paper or glass works on Sunday, even on account of some religious foible. The orthodox Parliament will entertain no complaint of Sabbath-breaking if it occurs in the 'process of valorization' of capital. A petition of August 1863 in which the London day-labourers in fish and poultry shops asked for the abolition of Sunday labour states that their work lasts on an average of 16 hours a day for the first 6 days of the week, 8 to 10 hours on Sunday. We also learn from this petition that the delicate gourmards among

the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It haggles over the meal-times, where possible incorporating them into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, and grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, renewal and refreshment of the vital forces to the exact amount of torpor essential to the revival of an absolutely exhausted organism. It is not the normal maintenance of labour-power which determines the limits of the working day here, but rather the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory and painful it may be, which determines the limits of the workers' period of rest. Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.

By extending the working day, therefore, capitalist production, which is essentially the production of surplus-value, the absorption of surplus labour, not only produces a deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal moral and physical conditions of development and activity, but also produces the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself.⁷³ It

the aristocratic hypocrites of Exeter Hall* particularly encourage this 'Sunday labour'. These 'saints', so zealous in *culte curanda*,[†] show they are Christians by the humility with which they bear the over-work, the deprivation and the hunger of others. *Obsequium ventris istis (the workers') perniciosis est.*[‡]

73. 'We have given in our previous reports the statements of several experienced manufacturers to the effect that over-hours ... certainly tend prematurely to exhaust the working power of the men' (op. cit., 64, p. xiii).

* A large hall on the north side of the Strand, built in 1831, and pulled down in 1907. It was used throughout its existence for meetings by religious bodies of various kinds, but especially by the Church Missionary Society. 'Exeter Hall' was in Marx's time a shorthand expression for that tendency among the English ruling classes which stood for the extension of English power in Africa with the aim of converting the 'natives' to Christianity, and at the same time stamping out the slave trade. It is associated with the name of Wilberforce.

† In attending to their bodily pleasures' (Horace, *Epistles*, 1, 2, 29).

‡ Horace's actual words were: '*obsequium ventris mihi perniciosis est cur?*' ('why is gluttony more ruinous to my stomach?'). Hence, here, 'gluttony is more ruinous to their (the workers') stomachs'. (Horace, *Satires*, Bk II, Satire 7, line 104.)

extends the worker's production-time within a given period by shortening his life.

But the value of labour-power includes the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of the worker, for continuing the existence of the working class. If then the unnatural extension of the working day, which capital necessarily strives for in its unmeasured drive for self-valorization, shortens the life of the individual worker, and therefore the duration of his labour-power, the forces used up have to be replaced more rapidly, and it will be more expensive to reproduce labour-power, just as in the case of a machine, where the part of its value that has to be reproduced daily grows greater the more rapidly the machine is worn out. It would seem therefore that the interest of capital itself points in the direction of a normal working day.

The slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse. If he loses his slave, he loses a piece of capital, which he must replace by fresh expenditure on the slave-market. But take note of this: 'The rice-grounds of Georgia, or the swamps of the Mississippi, may be fatally injurious to the human constitution; but the waste of human life which the cultivation of these districts necessitates, is not so great that it cannot be repaired from the teeming preserves of Virginia and Kentucky. Considerations of economy, moreover, which, under a natural system, afford some security for humane treatment by identifying the master's interest with the slave's preservation, when once trading in slaves is practised, become reasons for racking to the uttermost the toil of the slave; for, when his place can at once be supplied from foreign preserves, the duration of his life becomes a matter of less moment than its productiveness while it lasts. It is accordingly a maxim of slave management, in slave-importing countries, that the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth. It is in tropical culture, where annual profits often equal the whole capital of plantations, that negro life is most recklessly sacrificed. It is the agriculture of the West Indies, which has been for centuries prolific of fabulous wealth, that has engulfed millions of the African race. It is in Cuba, at this day, whose revenues are reckoned by millions, and whose planters are princes, that we see in the servile class, the coarsest fare, the most exhausting and unremitting toil, and even the absolute destruction of a portion of its numbers every year.'⁷⁴

74. Cairnes, op. cit., pp. 110-11.

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* Like all other laws, it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here.

We can now understand the foolishness of the economic wisdom which preaches to the workers that they should adapt their numbers to the valorization requirements of capital. The mechanism of capitalist production and accumulation itself constantly effects this adjustment. The first word of this adaptation is the creation of a relative surplus population, or industrial reserve army. Its last word is the misery of constantly expanding strata of the active army of labour, and the dead weight of pauperism.

On the basis of capitalism, a system in which the worker does not employ the means of production, but the means of production employ the worker, the law by which a constantly increasing quantity of means of production may be set in motion by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power, thanks to the advance in the productivity of social labour, undergoes a complete inversion, and is expressed thus: the higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely the sale of their own labour-power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital. The fact that the means of production and the productivity of labour increase more rapidly than the productive population expresses itself, therefore, under capitalism, in the inverse form that the working population always increases more rapidly than the valorization requirements of capital.

We saw in Part IV, when analysing the production of relative

surplus-value, that within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a machine, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate [*entfremden*] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital. But all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes, conversely, a means for the development of those methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.

This antagonistic character of capitalist accumulation²³ is enunciated in various forms by political economists, although they lump it together with other phenomena which are admitted

23. 'From day to day it thus becomes clearer that the relations of production in which the bourgeoisie moves do not have a simple, uniform character, but rather a dual one; that in the same relations in which wealth is produced, poverty is produced also; that in the same relations in which there is a development of the forces of production, there is also the development of a repressive force; that these relations produce bourgeois wealth, i.e. the wealth of the bourgeois class, only by continually annihilating the wealth of the individual members of this class and by producing an ever-growing proletariat' (Karl Marx, *Misère de la philosophie*, p. 116) [English edition, p. 107].

It is not enough that the conditions of labour are concentrated at one pole of society in the shape of capital, while at the other pole are grouped masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labour-power. Nor is it enough that they are compelled to sell themselves voluntarily. The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. The constant generation of a relative surplus population keeps the law of the supply and demand of labour, and therefore wages, within narrow limits which correspond to capital's valorization requirements. The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them. It is otherwise during the historical genesis of capitalist production. The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to 'regulate' wages, i.e. to force them into the limits

suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his normal level of dependence. This is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation.

The class of wage-labourers, which arose in the latter half of the fourteenth century, formed then and in the following century only a very small part of the population, well protected in its position by the independent peasant proprietors in the countryside and by the organization of guilds in the towns. Masters and artisans were not separated by any great social distance either on the land or in the towns. The subordination of labour to capital was only formal, i.e. the mode of production itself had as yet no specifically capitalist character. The variable element in capital preponderated greatly over the constant element. The demand for wage-labour therefore grew rapidly with every accumulation of capital, while the supply only followed slowly behind. A large part of the national product which was later transformed into a fund for the accumulation of capital still entered at that time into the consumption-fund of the workers.