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# A comment on Bonefeld's 'Abstract labour: Against its nature and on its time'

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material substance of abstract labour

In a recent article in this journal, Werner Bonefeld (2010) raises some criticisms of my position on abstract labour (Carchedi, 2009). Bonefeld quotes Rubin to the effect that, 'it is not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labour with the historical character of the value which it creates' (Bonefeld, 2010: 258). Bonefeld agrees, and finds an ambiguity in Marx because Marx supposedly holds both a physiological and a social/historical notion of abstract labour. Clearly, the supposed ambiguity arises because one clings for some reason to the notion that abstract labour must be either one thing or another, and cannot be both at the same time. However, as I submit, for Marx, 'value is the specific social dimension of a material reality. It is neither only physical nor only social, it is both' (Carchedi, 2009:154). Notice that even if this notion were not Marx's own, it is one that fits perfectly well into his theory, and does away with the ambiguity Bonefeld claims to have found in Marx.

Is this notion a Ricardian one? Bonefeld seems to think so (Bonefeld, 2010: 274 18ff.). But then he should indicate where in Ricardo's work a notion of abstract labour as both material and historical (class-determined) can be found. As long as no theoretical proof or textual evidence is provided, the charge of Ricardianism can be easily dismissed. But this aside, the denial of materiality to abstract labour before exchange is absurd, given that any labour (including mental labour) is an expenditure of human energy, and

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given that any expenditure of human energy is material. If it is material, it is quantifiable, as my example of human metabolism indicates. And there is no question that labour, abstract and material, is also socially or class determined (has a social dimension) already in the process of production.

Bonefeld's critique is based on a misrepresentation of my position. First of all, mine is not a 'physiological definition of abstract labour' (Bonefeld, 2010: 274). It is evident that for me (following Marx), abstract labour is *both* physiological *and* social, with a class content (see below). Second, I do not submit that 'calories are the measure of value' (ibid.). I have been at pains to stress that the example of calories is just that – an example meant to show that abstract labour is both material and measurable, as it is evident if one chooses, for example, calories as a unit of measurement.

Concerning the physiological aspect, as I state,

what is needed is the proof that abstract labour is an observable expenditure of physiological and undifferentiated human energy. The following proof cannot be explicitly found in Marx ... However, it is inherent in and consistent with his work. The process essential for our purposes is the human metabolism. The analysis of the human metabolism shows that people, irrespective of their differences, produce the *same* undifferentiated type of energy and thus consume the *same* undifferentiated type of energy, no matter which specific activities they engage into. This is consonant with Marx's 'physiological', 'material' expenditure of undifferentiated human energy. As Marx says: 'all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities'. Abstract labour is a '*purely abstract activity*, a purely mechanical activity ... a merely *formal* activity, or, what is the same, a merely *material* [*stofflich*] activity, activity pure and simple. This is exactly what human metabolism is. The observation of the expenditure of calories during production is the observation of abstract labour. If one wanted to, one could measure a labourer's physical fatigue or the consumption of calories while at the same time observing her producing a specific use-value, i.e. engaging in concrete labour. This is what is commonly done in sport when the expenditure of calories is measured when one is running, swimming, etc. Denial of the existence of the material substance of value (abstract labour) is simply incompatible with modern medical science. (Carchedi, 2009: 149-150)

But, I add, 'emphasis on calories as *one of the possible* measures of the expenditure of undifferentiated human energy is *not* meant to replace time as a measure of value; (Carchedi, 2009: 150, emphasis added). Let me repeat it. Value measurement in terms of calories is not meant to substitute value measurement in terms of labour time; it is only meant to argue for the materiality of abstract labour also before exchange. Once the materiality of abstract labour is ascertained (and this is the usefulness of the example in terms of calories), i.e. once it is ascertained that it is something material that can be measured, the proper unit of measurement is a unit of labour time.

As for the social nature of abstract labour as the substance of value, I state, 'The expenditure of undifferentiated human energy is common not only to all people but also to all people in all societies. In this sense, it is trans-epochal. Nevertheless, its *discovery* as a trans-epochal phenomenon is socially determined,<sup>1</sup> and its *significance* (as abstract labour and thus as the substance of value) is *socially specific* both because 'abstract labour [is] expended during production' and thus under *capitalist* production relations, and

because 'in a society in which the different products of labour (use-values) must be exchanged, there must be a feature common to all different concrete labours. This is abstract labour' (Carchedi, 2009: 150). To hold that abstract labour and thus value is only social (the supposed break with Ricardo) is not only inconsistent with Marx (something presented *as if it were Marx* who is theoretically inconsistent, on the basis of a false 'either/or' ungrounded dichotomy), but is also inconsistent with the material reality of abstract labour.

Criticism of the double nature of abstract labour requires theoretical arguments and textual evidence. Gratuitous charges of Ricardianism will not do.

## Bibliography

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## References

- 1 Footnote 22 states, 'It is perhaps not by chance that studies on the human metabolism started in the seventeenth century. "The first controlled experiments in human metabolism were published by Santorio Santorio in 1614 in his book *Ars de statica medecina* that made him famous throughout Europe. He describes his long series of experiments in which he weighed himself in a chair suspended from a steelyard balance ... before and after eating, sleeping, working, sex, fasting, depriving from drinking, and excreting (see <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metabolism>>)."'

## Author biography

Guglielmo Carchedi is a retired professor of the University of Amsterdam. He is now adjunct professor at York University.