Was Karl Marx a Political Economist (or Just an Economist)?
Class Power in Relation to the Entry Points of Capital

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In his stimulating short essay, H.W. Arndt [1991, 114] quotes Edward Nell on the approach which neo-Marxist, in contrast to neoclassical, economists take with respect to political economics:

Orthodox economics tries to show that markets allocate resources according to relative efficiency; political economy tries to show that markets distribute income according to relative power.

Such relative power is based on the relative power of classes. Class relations, for Karl Marx, are certainly always antagonistic – even when they are not consciously so. They are defined by the symmetrical opposition which people occupy in the production process. Given Marx’s numerous writings on classes and political struggles in France and Germany, it would be interesting to find out if Marx adhered to the neo-Marxist position that class struggle determines distribution in market-coordinated production. Such an adherence would definitely entail that Marx was a political economist. But what is “political economics” to start with?

In section one, I try to argue that we should adhere to a short-range, narrow definition of political economics. Otherwise, the term would lose effectiveness. Given my narrow definition, public choice and the Chicago law and economics program do not qualify to be called political economics agendas. In sections two and three, I explore Marx’s entry points to the analysis of capitalist production, viz., the labor theory of value. This allows us to examine whether he incorporated class and polity at first level of approximation. In specific, section two deals with his highly connected concepts of social labor and relations of production, while section three inspects his highly related concepts of abstract labor and forces of production.

In section four, I show how Marx’s two different concepts of class – describing two distinct kinds of social formations – are consistent and related to the entry points of Capital, i.e., the concepts of social labor and abstract labor. In the conclusion, I answer whether Marx, in light of his theory of the capitalist and pre-capitalist modes, should be considered a political economist, or even a political anthropologist, and not just economist.

1. What is Political Economics?

Like all definitions, one has to select the most useful range of broadness. If we use the long-range definition of political economics, all economists should be considered political economists. The analysis of every economist must, although with varying degrees, touch on some policy questions. Most economists have dealt with the allocative and productive consequences of government subsidies, price controls, environmental regulations, taxes, fiscal and monetary policies, anti-trust policies, and even family legislation. The long-range definition would label even Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman as political economists for the sheer fact of the argument for restraint.

However, many of these economists would drop out of the category if we apply a medium-range understanding of political economy. Unlike the study of the economic effects of diverse government policies and laws, the medium-range definition would only admit economists who aim at studying the making of such policies and laws. That is, the entry to political economics is restricted to those whose primary analysis is not the market, but rather the polity and the legal system.

Within the medium-range, two main traditions have risen – public choice and the Chicago law and economics agenda as epitomized, respectively, by the works of James Buchanan and Richard Posner. With regard to Buchanan [e.g., Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; see Khalil, 1987], he extends the tools of neoclassical economics to the analysis and prediction of the behavior of politicians, the legal rules they construct, and even the constitution of the state. Buchanan understands the political arena as the allocation of resources via public rather than private choice. As such, the politicians’ ultimate motivation is the self-interest of getting elected. The politician, hence, has to appeal to the private
interests of concentrated groups for financial support. The result is inefficient laws and the nurturing of rent seeking behavior.

Buchanan, of course, recognizes the role of the state and power. However, he rejects the idea of power as a self-subsisting stream in human motivation. He [in Buchanan & Tullock, 1962] argues that it is merely a mean, like other endowments, or a surrogate for the want of other goods or the pursuit of other interests. However, when confronted with evidence that people enjoy the feeling of being powerful and even may get sick if they totally lack control over their environment – public choice theorists are ready to elevate power from the category of resources to the category of preferences along other tastes. 1

While public choice aims at predicting government policies in light of the rent-seeking groups and self-serving politicians, the basic objective of Richard Posner, Ronald Coase, and others is the prescription of rules according to the condition of economic efficiency. 2 The Chicago law program differs from the long-range definition of political economics in one regard: While the latter is mostly concerned with the application of price theory to find out the consequences of legal rules, the Chicago law approach applies the maximization criterion in order to determine what these rules should be in the first place. The entry point of the Chicago law approach is that the primary purpose of law is the promotion of efficiency.

If we apply a short-range definition, Buchanan and Posner might not be political economists. The short-range definition would restrict entry to those who understand human affairs, at first level of approximation, as permeated with complexity. That is, when humans demand products, like the pursuit of knowledge, they satisfy a complex need: First, they satisfy the primary interest of curiosity. Second, they satisfy the secondary want of pride, respect, or power. The latter good cannot be demanded separately. It is the inevitable by-product of the consumption of knowledge or other primary goods [see Elster, 1983; Khalil, n.d.].

Thus, the action of politicians should not be normally explained in terms of the exclusive wanting of power. This amounts to the treatment of power as a primary good. To wit, it would be self-defeating for a politician to declare that he prefers naked power, i.e., independent of other civic goals. In order to explain the complex aspect of power at the entry level of theory, the scientist must attend simultaneously to economic as well as to reflective, higher-level or non-economic moments. If we define the economic moment as the concern with efficiency and the pursuit of preferences, the non-economic moments are concerned, inter alia, with reflective by-products like power, self-esteem, respect, fairness, and justice. It would be abnormal behavior, and even pathological, to pursue power, self-respect, and justice as primary preferences.

While their approaches are innovative and fresh, Buchanan's and Posner's programs are essentially neoclassical economics with added twists. They extend the neoclassical dictum of maximization of returns given the constraints to the political and legal arenas. As such, they really subsume the polity as an appendage to the economy. They do not have a theory of the polity, but rather an economic theory of politics. Their versions of political economics travel on the same road trodden by Gary Becker's sociological economics and Oliver Williamson's organizational economics.

Thus, given the short-range definition, public choice and the Chicago law approaches should not be considered political economics. To be clear, the short-range definition is not restricted to any particular view. It must, however, be defined in terms of the adherence to the complementarity, at first theoretical approximation, of economic spontaneity and political command. That is, the political economy approach should neither reduce the political/command moment to the economic/spontaneous action to the political sphere.

One such political economist, who advocates the complementary of command and spontaneity, is Janos Kornai. Kornai [1971, p. 176-187] makes a distinction between automatic functions, what I call spontaneous, and higher functions, what I call command. In fact, he borrows the distinction from physiology. Some activities like the pumping of the heart and auto-immune system are automatic. In contrast, other activities like breathing, and certainly activities like mobility, are more controlled at a higher level of the neurological system. Spontaneous and command actions are indispensable to each other. He argues that economic organization is also characterized by automatic functions and command regulations and intervention. Both should be seen as integral to the self-organization of human affairs. The controlling functions
should not be viewed as an appendage to the automatic ones, as much as the brain is not an external organ in relation to other organs.

The hero of my short-range definition of political economics is Sir James Steuart [Khalil, 1987]. He should not be regarded à la textbook version as a mercantilist. He differs from mercantilist (as well as Keynesian) economists in the sense that he grounds the role of the polity in a comprehensive metaphysical system. Furthermore, Steuart accords the economy a spontaneous role at first theoretical approximation. Steuart puts a theory of the “statesman” as an innovator — not unlike Joseph Schumpeter’s entrepreneur. The statesman is also a publicly spirited leader — not unlike Adolph Lowe’s [1977] proposal of what is known today in the U.S.A. as “industrial policy.”

Thus, Steuart is the apotheosis of political economics. He has advocates the management of the economy at the state level. So, at his hands, economics was no longer a household affairs as it was in the Greek polis. I may suggest the term “polinomics,” in order to underscore the short-range meaning of political economics.

In light of the above, it should be obvious that I favor the short-range definition of political economics. Such a definition implies a theoretical distinction between the conception of human affairs as the outcome of the complementarity, at entry point, of command and spontaneity, on one hand, and the economic theory of polity or the application of price theory, on the other. However, the next best conceptual clarity could be achieved if authors make clear at the outset to what range they are referring when they use the term “political economics.”

In light of the short-range definition, the task ahead is to examine whether Marx is a political economist. The investigation must start with his most celebrated work, Capital, and in specific with the foundation of his labor theory of value [Marx, 1976, pp. 125-187]. However, a full understanding of such foundations, especially the concept of abstract labor, necessitates the examination of the Grundrisse and his anthropological observations. The challenge is to find out if the concept of power, polity, or class act as an entry points to Marx’s economics, and maybe to his historical anthropology.

2. Marx’s Concepts of Social Labor and Relations of Production:
   It is recognized that Karl Marx’s concept of social labor is a fundamental bedrock — along with the concept of abstract labor — of the law of value, referred to usually as the labor theory of value. However, Marx’s notion of social labor is rarely related to his concept of rationality. In another place [Khalil, 1990b], I showed that his notions of social labor and rationality are based on his implicit, and sometimes explicit, collectivist approach.

Marx’s concept of social labor denotes that laboring, in any mode of production, amounts to the rational control, by society as a collective individual, over the allocation of resources. Marx considered market exchange as the epitome of negation of the sociality of labor. Stated differently, in capitalist production, the appearance of private market exchange betray the essence of social or collective labor. The decentralized-decision making or market anarchy allows competition to fragment agents and hence alienate them from their species-essence as rational people.

It is ironic that, in Marx’s analysis, market anarchy only engenders minor business fluctuations — not a secular decline of economic activity. One has to refer to his theory of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall in order to explain the supposed secular decline. Such a theory is based on the incessant progress of forces of production, heightened by competition, which engender a tendency for decomposing capital to increase. However, such progress is transhistorical. This suggests that the falling rate of profit theory is, after all, not the specifica differentia of capitalist production [Khalil, n.y.].

It seems that Marx’s concept of social labor is transhistorical. The concept refers to a collective production activity which typifies humans. The collective nature of labor is suspended in capitalist production because of the anarchic character of market relations. However, the suspension is skin deep: The sociality of labor asserts itself in a mediated manner: In market anarchy, the sociality switches residence or migrates from the conscious producers to the products.

As a result, the product is no longer a mere good, but rather a good with value, i.e., a “commodity.” The commodity dictates to people what and how much to produce so that aggregate output could match a given composition of needs. Market anarchy is coordinated by the rule of the law of value behind the backs of agents. This entails the switching of human rationality from
producers to products. Such a switch is the crux of Marx’s well-known concept “commodity fetishism.” Commodity fetishism is supposedly characteristic of only capitalist production. That is, pre-capitalist and socialist (i.e., planned) productions do not suffer, by definition, from commodity fetishism.

A planning board would reclaim its rationality from the product and eliminate the hidden and unconscious operation of the law of value. The board would make allocation decisions consciously. In this manner, human needs are met without subjecting humans to the rule of the commodity, the uncertainty of market dynamics, and the business cycle. That is, the expression “rational plan” is a redundant for Marx. Plan is rational because it ensures that the calculation of time allocation is not conducted by the mischievous forces of supply and demand.

While both the market and the plan produce in the end the required composition of products, the plan is superior in two respects. First, the plan could achieve market results with greater efficiency than the market. Second, the plan realizes the transhistorical essence of labor to be social. Thus, the plan allows agents to realize their sociality, control their destiny, and build a truly unified community of “free men.”

The concept of social labor is usually not related, in the secondary literature, with Marx’s notion “relations of production.” The probable reason for the neglect of the link is that the notion of relations of production appears mostly in Marx’s non-economic writings. In specific, Marx discusses relations of production when he deals with topics linked to historical materialism. Historical materialism deals with the laws to which all modes are subject. Few self-declared Marxist economists pay attention to the study of historical materialism – which is part of the nineteenth-century belief in laws of human evolution.

The notion of production relations has been mainly associated in the secondary literature with Marx’s concept of class relations. However, as I elaborate below, Marx does not have a universal concept of class relations which could correspond with his generic concept of relations of production. The much-touted class struggle in Marx, usually emphasized by non-economists and neo-Marxists, is really a concept which derives its standing from each particular mode of production. What is needed is to connect his transhistorical concept of social relation with what is generic, viz., his concept of social labor.

The concept of social labor deals with the universal problem of matching-composition of production with composition of demand. Marx argued that the most suitable relations, according to criteria of efficiency as well as to liberty, are the ones constructed around economic planning. Such planning allows the social essence of agents to flourish. Thus, at the heart of the transhistorical concept of relations of production is the generic concept of social labor. The social labor concept deals with relations of production with regard to the coordination of labor-time among diverse activities. Class configuration should not be identified with the generic relations of production concept because class relations, as shown below, are derived or secondary features of the particular mode of production.

My assessment of Marx’s first entries is compatible with Andrzej Walicki’s [1988] approach to the whole corpus of Marx’s edifice. Walicki argues that Marx was basically a philosopher of freedom. While he identifies two sources of freedom in Marx, he fails to relate them to his concept of social labor and, what is discussed next, abstract labor. The direct connection between Marx’s philosophy of freedom and his labor theory of value refutes the thesis – usually put forward by the followers of Louis Althusser – that Marx’s notion of species essence is restricted to the young, romantic Marx.

3. Marx’s Concepts of Abstract Labor and Forces of Production:

Marx’s concept of abstract labor is the second pillar of his labor theory of value. While I concur with the received interpretation of the idea of abstract labor, the idea has not been linked, as far as I am aware, to Marx’s understanding of technology vis-à-vis environmental nature.

As widely recognized, the concept of abstract labor argues that, given the absence of barriers based on natural given like gender and caste, a laborer has the potential to undertake any productive activity. The only constraint, presumably, for switching professions is the effort it takes to re-train. That is, a laborer could be a carpenter, a doctor, or a butcher after allowing for re-training. The abstract capability of laboring is the basis, for Marx, of the exchange of goods according to an objective standard, labor-time. If human labor is not abstract, it would be impossible to compare a carpenter’s labor-time with a butcher’s. However, abstract labor is suppressed when the division of
labor is confined to what is perceived as a natural given like gender, age, status, ethnicity, race, or caste. This suppression characterizes pre-capitalist production, which engenders exchange based on haggling rather than on an objective standard.

On the basis of another work [Khalil, 1992b], I came to the conclusion that Marx’s concept of abstract labor is transhistorical. That is, contrary to Lucio Colletti’s [1972, pp. 83-84] argument, abstract labor is not the specifica differentia of capitalist production. Colletti grounds his thesis on the idea that abstract labor is the sufficient condition for the capitalist law of value. However, the law of value, as we have seen, is the consequence of the alienation and mutilated expression of social labor. It would be a major slip on Marx’s part to associate abstract labor – the transhistorical physiology of laboring – with transitory market anarchy. To wit, Marx associates abstract labor with the transhistorical tendency of development of human labor-power [Marx 1976, p. 134], i.e., what he calls in other places “forces of production.”

Adolph Wagner [see Marx, 1975] detected an idealist streak in the argument that labor is transhistorically abstract. He noted that the appendix to the first chapter which appeared in the first German edition of Capital, Volume 1, casts doubt on Marx’s credentials as a materialist. Wagner asserted that a true materialist would have to reject the argument that a particular activity of laboring is a mere epiphenomenon of pre-existing, universal essence. For Wagner, human productive activity is not a priori theoretical, but rather shaped by experience, learning-by-doing, and process of development over time.

However, Marx could not concur with Wagner and reject the abstract labor notion. Wagner’s thesis would lead to the repudiation of the labor theory of value. So, Marx continued to pretend that the abstract labor notion is not contrary to his proclaimed materialist mode of conception. In fact, he adopted an aggressive tone and attacked Wagner as an idealist who sank into “childish twaddle” and “helter-skelter quibbling over the concepts” [Marx 1975, p. 191].

To put Marx’s notion of abstract labor in a historical perspective, it does not entail that labor was abstract at every stage of the progress of forces of production. The potential for abstractness became actual only under advanced technological forces witnessed in capitalist production. In such advanced stage, laborers can switch professions easily – after allowing for some friction. This implies that the human agent has a great command over the development of his/her personality. It also entails that the human actor has the potential of mastering environmental nature through technology or forces of production. If humans are seen as weak or helpless towards nature, they could not redirect or reformulate their careers or expertise with abstract or great ease.

The supposed transhistorical mastery of one’s career as well as of nature is suspended, according to Marx [1973a], in pre-capitalist production. In such modes of production, technological tools or forces of production are relatively primitive. The suspension of abstract labor, though, is skin deep again: The power of humans over nature – abstract labor – switches residence from the self to the leader of the community, which does not have to be mortal or terrestrial. That is, as a result of the feeling of helplessness vis-à-vis nature, people experience indirectly their frustrated abstract labor through the belief in the power of leaders and gods. The assumed power of the leader or god is nothing other than the alienated power of humans.  

Since humans in pre-capitalist production are unable to directly experience their power over nature, they consign it subconsciously to the supposedly all-powerful leaders and gods. Through the appeasement of such higher ranking entities, they regain the feeling of control of nature. That is, the anxiety of primitive consciousness is assuaged through reverence of leaders and gods. Stated tersely, the thwarted abstract labor and the potential of humans to conquer nature appear in a mutilated fashion through the conviction in the invincible powers of tribal ancestors, patriarchs, priests, kings, and spirits.

This implies that the reverence of authority has waned in capitalist production because of the development of forces of production. Such development allows the direct realization of abstract labor. Of course, in market-coordinated relations, people worship another thing, the commodity. However, commodity fetishism arises from the inhibition of social labor, which is unrelated to abstract labor.

I suggest calling the reverence of leaders “rank fetishism.” The mediation of abstract labor through the fetishism of rank explains why categories like age, gender, and status have great importance in pre-capitalist social formations.
People who fit certain categories are usually the object of great respect and honor. This tends to constrict the division of labor. The hindrance of abstract labor has great consequences with regard to economic development. However, for Marx, the rectilinear drive of forces of production is too vigorous to be ultimately frustrated by rank fetishism.

To note, the alienation associated with rank fetishism is different from commodity fetishism. While commodity fetishism arises from the apparent suppression of social labor, rank fetishism emerges from the suppression of abstract labor. Both kinds of fetishism are really the result of the species essences turning around and appearing on the stage in an circuituous manner, once in the form of the value of commodities and the other in the form of the value of rank. While commodity fetishism supposedly evaporates once a planning board replaces the irrational market, rank fetishism vanishes with the development of technology in capitalist and cooperative (socialist planning) modes of productions.

Most commentaries on Marx have failed to distinguish, in an unambiguous manner, social labor from abstract labor. To underscore the difference, one has to separate the two problematics with which each deals. To recapitulate, social labor is Marx’s conception of the question of the allocation of labor-time across the economy in order to satisfy a given composition of aggregate need. In contrast, abstract labor is Marx’s conception of the question of the labor process, organization of the firm, technology, and environmental nature.6

4. Is Marx’s Concept of Class Primary?

Marx certainly recognizes political power and the role of class struggle. However, political power is merely conceived as a means or as a resource in order to accumulate and maintain economic interest. To be clear, however, Marx’s economism differs from the economism of Buchanan and other hard-core neoclassical economists.

Buchanan and mainstream political scientists generally define interest in terms of the set of preferences of the individual or club. In contrast, Marx defines interest in terms of class. That is, while Buchanan’s economism is reductionist, Marx’s is functionalist.

A problem arises in Marx’s discussions and in secondary literature when the class is not conscious of its interest and hence is not united in order to defend it. The problem is worked out by drawing a useful distinction between two concepts of classes, “in itself” and “for itself.” Class “in itself” is a circumstantial or objective class whose members share a common position with relation to the mean of production and usually have the same kind of consumption basket and many other characteristics like the infant mortality rate. In contrast, class “for itself” is a subjective class whose members are aware of their unity and act as a group in the pursuit of their objective.

However, Marx and many Marxists, as Anthony Giddens [1973, p. 94] and Robert Hefner [1990, p. 26-28] show, ultimately did not preserve the distinction. For example, in his Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx [1973b, pp. 143-249] recognizes the gap between the objective position of French peasantry and its subjective hostility towards progressive politics. However, he wavered and, in turn, asserted that such discrepancy will disappear since the objective condition will eventually dictate the consciousness of the class. This has been, generally speaking, the position of many Marxists. Many Marxist social scientists have usually dismissed the fragmentary consciousness of class in itself as a transitory phenomenon of “false consciousness.” This entails that class in itself is an embryonic stage of class for itself.

In light of the above, does his concept of class mean that Marx is a political economist according to the short-range definition? In order to qualify what I dubbed earlier “polinomist,” one has to conceive, at the entry point of analysis, power as an integral aspect of human affairs, complementing the spontaneous/economic aspect. It is clear that Marx’s Capital does not start with class power, but rather with the world of commodities. To wit, it does not discuss formally the question of class until the last two pages of the last, third volume.

Nonetheless, the underlying assumption of much of Capital is the antagonistic class relation between workers and capitalists. The two main classes fight over, inter alia, the length of the working day. Such length determines absolute surplus value and, hence, the rate of exploitation (known as the rate of surplus value). As stated at the outset, Marx defines classes with respect to their relations of production. However, as argued earlier, relations of production in the market system are nothing other than the negation of social labor. In fact, Marx does not commence Capital with the concept of class.
Rather, he starts with market anarchy which gives rise to the law of value and its consequent feature, commodity fetishism. Class antagonism arises when labor service becomes itself a commodity. This makes the compensation of labor service a fetish as well, i.e., assume the form of what Marx calls “value of labor-power.”

In other words, the commodification of labor is the source of class antagonism. Thus, the concept of class in capitalist production is not the entry point. Rather, it is a derived feature or a specific form of commodity fetishism in general. Capitalists are able to obfuscate their supposed exploitation of workers because such exploitation is conducted through the “free,” contractual exchange between labor and capital. The value of labor-power camouflages the unpaid portion of the working day. This happens because labor-power is as much a fetish as any other commodity. Classes acquire their unique meaning in capitalist production from the historically unique arrangement of market-coordinated production. Thus, what is the essence or primary in capitalist production is not class exploitation, but what makes such exploitation possible, viz., the law of value [Khalil, 1992a].

Given my interpretation of Marx’s understanding of the essence of capitalist production, one may argue that Marx’s approach to history is premised on class struggle. Thus, he should be considered as a polinomist or, at least, as a political anthropologist. However, Marx does not have a transhistorical concept of class. To wit, each particular kind of social formation engenders its radically unique type of class configuration. (To clarify, Marx juxtaposes different kinds of social formations along the pre-capitalist/capitalist divide.) That is, the specifica differentia of a kind of social formation is the particularity of its class arrangement.

To substantiate the thesis that, unlike the concepts of social labor and abstract labor, Marx’s concept of class is not transhistorical, I need to briefly examine his idea of progress. Marx argued that each stage of human progress has its particularly unique essence constructed around the mode of production. As widely known, each mode is defined by its level of forces of production (technological prowess) and relations of production. To recall, Marx called the mode of production along with its associated political order, art, religion, etc., “social formation.”

Marx implicitly ranked each unique social formation with regards to its attainment of freedom.7 Freedom for Marx is the universal standard which allows one to judge how far each social formation has progressed. To wit, for Marx, freedom has two relatively independent dimensions: freedom from necessity and freedom from the market.

With regard to necessity, freedom is attained through technological prowess, i.e., the progress of forces of production, which affords the minimization of effort expenditure per unit of necessary products. The minimization of necessity through the control of nature engenders a new kind of human dependency. Rather than being personally dependent on chiefs and kings as shown above, social relations would be based on free associations.

With relation to the market, freedom is attained through planned coordination of exchange. Such a position emerges from Marx’s concept of social labor, as shown above. In specific, it arises from his consequent analysis of the essence of capitalism as basically determined by the rule commodity exchange [Khalil, 1992a]. According to my interpretation, in planned coordination, the law of value and commodity fetishism would have no reason to subsist any longer. They would be substituted by rational relations of production. Rational coordination affords the coincidence of the moments of social labor and private labor. This is supposedly superior to how the law of value (forces of supply and demand) haphazardly coincides the two moments together.

Put differently, once freedom is attained in its two distinct senses, human society attains a high-level of forces of production (technology) and rational relations of production (planning system). Thus, the concept of class division, which prefigures prominently in much of Marxist social science, is not an entry point in Marx’s theories of capitalist or pre-capitalist modes of production.

For Marx, the concept of class assumes different meanings depending on the particular essence of each mode of production; the concept has no transhistorical essence. In pre-capitalist modes (which are lumped together), the particular essence is constructed around primitive forces of production. This engenders political subordination. In contrast, in capitalist modes, the particular essence is formulated around irrational relations of production (market anarchy). This engenders subordination to the law of value (commodity fetishism).

Stated succinctly, the pre-capitalist class
formation is based on rank fetishism, i.e., the substitution of the frustrated domination over nature with political domination. In contrast, the capitalist class configuration is grounded on commodity fetishism, i.e., the substitution of the foiled human rationality with the subordination to commodities. Thus, Marx has no universal concept of class which could act as an entry point to his theoretical edifice.

5. Summary
Stated broadly, power and command do not occupy an entry point in Marx’s theory of capitalist mode production. The entry points, as we have seen in our review of the concepts of social labor and abstract labor, are about economic concerns. Even when Marx, the anthropologist, analyzes pre-capitalist modes, the entry points are purely economic. The only difference is that while capitalist production permits the direct expression of abstract labor and the indirect expression of social labor, pre-capitalist modes experience the reverse.

Marx, like most nineteenth-century anthropologists, implicitly lumped together all pre-capitalist modes of production – as if they belong to one kind. Thus, the pre-capitalist modes only suffer (since most production is consciously planned) from the cancellation of abstract labor, while the capitalist mode suffers from the annulment of social labor. While the former arises from the irrationality of market relations of production, the latter emerges from the relative primitiveness of forces of production.

The supposed irrationality of the market and the primitiveness of technology are almost purely about spontaneous/economic matters. They do not accommodate, according to the short-range definition of political economics or polinomics, the concept of power, command, or class. Thus, Marx, at the highest entry level of theory, is neither a political economist nor a political anthropologist.

References

Notes
*I owe this piece greatly to the stimulating discussion I had with Victor Burke. I appreciate the editing help of Carole Brown. Neither should be blamed, however, for any inaccuracies.
1. However, power is not a primary product. It cannot be willed like the willing of listening of an Italian opera, playing tennis, or eating a ham sandwich [Elstner, 1983]. This explains why it would be self-defeating for a politician to proclaim that he wants to be elected because he loves power, while a shopper’s declaration for the wanting of a ham sandwich is appropriate.
2. The Chicago law and economics program suffers from the same normative assumptions which inflict welfare economics and social choice in general. However, the discussion of such assumptions would take us away from our main focus here.
3. I became interested in Steuart after I learned that his work is experiencing a revival among Japanese historians of thought. They find his system suitable to the Japanese model of planning and government-sponsored markets.
4. The etymology of the word “economics” is the Greek word “oikonomilos.” The Greek work literally means house management (oikos; house, nomos; managing).
5. Marx’s idea in the Grundrisse of the estrangement of our power and its attribution to imagined entities recalls Ludwig Feuerbach’s philosophy of the essence of christianity. The philosophy had enormous influence on Marx’s early writings. Such a connection sheds doubt on Louis Althusser’s thesis of discontinuity between the idealist, young Marx and the scientific, mature Marx. I contend, without being able to substantiate further, that the difference between the young and the mature amounts to style, not content.
6. I have underlined the difference between the two problematical by calling the allocation question as the treatment of the economy as a “natural system,” while the process or welfare question as the consideration of the economy as a “natural complex” [Khail, 1990a].
7. To warn, one should not confuse Marx’s universal standard of freedom with his mode of scientific explanation, viz., historical materialism. Historical materialism is the theory by which Marx explains the interconnection of the different spheres within the social formation and why the social formation evolves. Historical materialism postulates that all cultures (and maybe nature) are subject to the same processes or laws. Such a metaphysical concern, which is outside the parameter of the essay, is different from Marx’s Eurocentric classification of the particular social formations.
8. Marx’s vision is similar to Émile Durkeheim’s [1931] thesis that the progress towards modernity (and especially socialism) represents the substitution of “mechanical solidarity,” based on kinship and personal commitment, with “organic solidarity,” based on free will and impersonal contracts.
Review of Social Economy, October 1987, 45:2, pp. 113-132.


"Is Marx's Theory of the Falling Rate of Profit Specifica Differentia of Capitalist Production?" Unpublished paper, n.y.


