

[Disposable time, surplus population, and the limitation of the hours of labour](#)

HM Online 2021 conference: Marxism and Political Economy

Tom Walker, Simon Fraser University, Canada

My presentation today stems from a two-decades long engagement with the 1821 pamphlet, *The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties* which, according to Engels, Marx "rescued from its oblivion." In *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Moishe Postone *twice* quoted a provocative passage from the *Grundrisse* that begins, "Capital itself is the moving contradiction..." At the end of the paragraph containing that passage, Marx paraphrased and cited, "*The Source and Remedy* etc. 1821."

My curiosity about that citation led me to the basement of the U.B.C library where I retrieved a microfilm copy of the pamphlet. In "The Ambivalence of Disposable Time: *The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties* at Two Hundred" I examined the influence of the pamphlet on Marx's critique of political economy, an influence that has largely gone unacknowledged. My subsequent research is concerned how Marx's critique surpassed *The Source and Remedy's* already formidable critique of political economy.

Several times when discussing my essay, I mentioned that the author of the pamphlet, Charles Wentworth Dilke, had a concept of "socially necessary labour time," although he didn't call it that and it was different from Marx's category. Soon, I realized I needed to check for myself exactly what Marx's category was about before making any rash pronouncements. The first thing I discovered was that Marx hadn't used the term at all in the *Grundrisse*, although the germ of the as-yet-unnamed category was embedded in his discussion of disposable time, the superfluous-and-the-necessary, and relative surplus population.

As I rummaged through the *Grundrisse* for traces of the emerging category, my searches converged on two sections that bore lexical and syntactic similarities to crucial passages of the well-known "fragment on machines." Consequently, I now argue there is not one, but three fragments on machines. The first two fragments illuminate the sense of the terminology Marx used in the third.

Now, I would like to outline what I hope will be five takeaways from my presentation today:

First, I agree with Postone that Marx's analysis of the historical specificity of value in the *Grundrisse* 'provides a key to interpreting his mature critique of political economy,' and that Marx characterizes there 'a possible postcapitalist society in terms of the category of "disposable" time'

Second, Postone's interpretation, in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, of "the superfluous form" and of disposable time needs to be amended. The real significance of those two terms is revealed gradually over the course of all *three* fragments on machines.

Third, *disposable time* is the foundation of Marx's analysis of surplus value and his crisis theory.

Fourth, "The theory of surplus population and surplus capital" is Marx's crisis theory in a nutshell.

Fifth, Marx's analysis of disposable time and his theory of surplus population and surplus capital, are relevant to addressing contemporary issues of social disintegration and environmental degradation.

Before I continue, I need to say a few words about "socially necessary labour time" as Marx defined it in *Capital*.

Marx's technological definition of socially necessary labour time refers to the average amount of labour time it takes in society as a whole to produce a unit of a given type of commodity. That average quantity of labour time determines the value of the commodity.

Subsequently, in chapter three of volume one and again in volume three, Marx presented a market modification of socially necessary labour time such that if there is not enough demand for the entire quantity produced of a commodity, then it is *as if* too much time had been spent on the production of each unit.

There is some controversy about whether the market modification is consistent with the technological definition. In my view, this controversy is pointless in that it ignores the role of surplus population.

The links between the three fragments can best be illustrated by highlighting key words that occur repeatedly and/or exclusively in those pages of the *Grundrisse*. In the Penguin edition that is pages 397-401, 608-610, and pages 706-708.

Disposable time, *surplus population*, and *superfluous* are the conspicuous terms. *Disposable time* occurs exclusively in the fragments one and three. *Surplus population* occurs mostly in the fragments. *Superfluous*, paired with either *necessary labour time* or *surplus population* occurs only in the fragments and in all three fragments.

The distinctive dialectic of the superfluous and the necessary and its relation to disposable time commences in the first fragment where Marx established a transhistorical or anthropological frame:

The whole development of wealth rests on the creation of disposable time. The relation of *necessary* labour time to the *superfluous* (such it is, initially, from the standpoint of necessary labour) changes with the different stages in the development of the productive forces.

Under capitalism, Marx continued, "the existence of *necessary* labour time is conditional on the creation of *superfluous* labour time." The priority of the necessary and the superfluous is thus *reversed* in capitalism.

By the second fragment, this reversal of the superfluous and the necessary has progressed to include the creation of a relative surplus population as necessary for capital. There, Marx developed the analysis that "labour capacity can perform its necessary labour only if its surplus labour has value for capital, if it can be realized by capital."

Only a handful of authors have acknowledged the importance of surplus population to Marx's category of socially necessary labour time. Marx himself didn't make the connection explicit in *Capital*. One scholar who has explored this grim characteristic of socially necessary labour time is Fabian Arzuaga in his essay, "Socially necessary superfluity: Adorno and Marx on the crises of labor and the individual." See especially the section on, "Producing 'socially unnecessary' human beings." In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels also pointed out the relationship between relative surplus population, crises and the labour-time socially necessary for the production of "the specific commodity labour-power."

Speaking of crises... in a passage in the third fragment on machines, Marx presented two lists of items nature does not build -- "machines, locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc." and then a bit later "railways, canals, aqueducts, telegraphs etc." but this second time he explicitly excluded "machinery directly active in the direct production process."

Sandwiched between the two lists, Marx drew an analogy between the factors governing the magnitudes of surplus labour in the industries producing consumption goods and the total labour time employed in the production of fixed capital.

Investment in the production of fixed capital depends on high productivity in the consumption goods industries to enable the withdrawal of wealth from production for use.

Dilke had presented a similar argument in *The Source and Remedy*, "the possessors of the surplus produce... will employ [the population] upon something not directly and immediately productive, for instance, in the erection of machinery, &c. &c. &c." Oddly, the first six words of that passage are the only lines from *The Source and Remedy* that Marx quoted in the first French edition of *Capital*.

In his notes on *The Source and Remedy* in his 1861-63 manuscripts, Marx chided "our pamphleteer" for overlooking two things: "As a result of the introduction of machinery, a mass of workers is constantly being thrown out of employment" and capital "therefore finds fresh labour for which it can be exchanged without any increase in population."

Marx's analogy between surplus labour time in direct production and total labour time in the production of fixed capital zeros in on the precise point where disproportions arise leading to crisis. As Marx concluded the passage on fixed capital in the fragment on machines:

...in the constant under- and overproduction of modern industry - constant fluctuations and convulsions arise from the disproportion, when sometimes too little, then again too much circulating capital is transformed into fixed capital.

Marx expanded on that huge topic elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, As William Jefferies discussed in a session of this conference last Saturday on, "Marx's Forgotten Transformation Solution."

In *Capital*, Marx dealt with this disproportion in two places, the chapter on accumulation in volume one: "*This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*" – "this" being the expansion of a relative surplus labour population -- and in the chapter on the falling rate of profit in volume three (pp. 328-330, penguin edition):

"In the same proportion as capitalist production develops... there also develops the possibility of a relative surplus working population, not because the productivity of social labour declines but rather because it increases, that is, not from an absolute disproportion between labour and means of subsistence, or the means of producing these means of subsistence, but rather from a disproportion arising from the capitalist exploitation of labour, the disproportion between the progressive growth of capital and the relative decline in its need for a growing population.

In his inaugural address to the International Working Men's Association, Marx hailed passage of the English Ten Hours' Bill as "the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class."

What might a political economy of the working class look like today?

In the wake of the Covid pandemic, Finland, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Scotland, and Spain have conducted or announced pilot projects to study the benefits of moving to a shorter work week. Legislation for a four-day week has been introduced in the United States. The decades-long plague of precarious work underscores the relevance of Marx's analysis of relative surplus population and capitalist accumulation. Responses to climate change also call for re-evaluating the imperative of economic growth and pose reduction of working time as an alternative.

Marx's dialectic of the necessary and the superfluous from the *Grundrisse* is essential for comprehending the logic of capital behind social disintegration and environmental degradation and developing strategies adequate to address those crises.

As an example, advocates of degrowth often prescribe reduction of working time on the grounds that it can be an *alternative* to economic growth as a way to create jobs to offset the negative employment effect of productivity gains.

Marx's analysis of surplus population, however, shows that capitalist economic growth itself necessarily produces relative surplus population and capital relies on it for expansion.

Addressing only the symptoms without understanding the underlying disorder may lead to half-measures that perversely get blamed for the problem they failed to solve. The analysis of disposable time and surplus population suggest three ways these proposals could be improved:

1. Worktime reductions could be far more radical than the timid reductions usually proposed.
2. Reduction of working time needs to be complemented by reappropriating disposable time to be socially available for the "artistic and scientific development of the individuals in the time set free" instead of being passively *consumed* by isolated individuals as entertainment.
3. The facilities for accessing and communicating general social knowledge need to be recognized as the common pool resources they are whose enclosure in the name of corporate intellectual property is, strictly speaking, a confiscation of wealth that was created by society and belongs to all members of society.

In closing, I would like to caution that Marx's analysis should not be taken as the exclusive source of wisdom about disposable time or the reduction of working time. *The Source and Remedy*, of course was the original on disposable time. The pamphlet's author, Charles Dilke, in turn, was inspired by William Godwin, who first presented the case for universal enjoyment of leisure. Within the neoclassical tradition Sydney Chapman's theory of the hours of labour confirms Marx's analysis in many respects but also goes beyond in terms of the analysis of the productivity gain from reducing working time, a theme pioneered in the 1870s by Thomas Brassey.