

Seminar II, January 20th Utrecht.

On living labour
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- Let us, before going to our subject of tonight, return for a few moments to the previous seminar. So that we can understand a bit better the relationship between both seminars and eventually the general line of all seminars.
- If you as a student hear something new which touches you partly, locally, although you may not yet fully understand it, then it is advisable to start using it and repeating it materially as much as possible. So that you can sense yourself the doing of something new, the constructing of a new relationship, which has to do a lot with living knowledge. Why? Because one of the most striking characteristics of living knowledge is that is not an expression of things but an expression of the relationship between things, of what they have in common. You are relating the words that you just have heard, trying them by **expressing** them, physically, palpably. You try something new and something new is something that you now can and first could not. The new is always a new relationship, which is another way of phrasing the passion of joy.
- Joy wants you to go on by expanding what initiated it, joy strives for connectivity. So make sure to do something successfully, don't go for totalities, but for localities. By the way, this may give you maybe another perspective of the misery of the current university. That it endangers not so much just critical thinking. I would say that it rather endangers the roots of living knowledge itself. It's more of an ecological disaster which threatens the impetus of knowledge, the longing, the love for it. **There cannot be knowledge, which always means new knowledge, if there is no joy or love.** Think of that and confront it with what you yourself experience every day in the desolated universities.
- One more word about last week. You probably remember the pair that has been introduced by Fabiola Jara: living knowledge/ abstract knowledge. Now some of you felt uncomfortable about the way this has been presented. And I would say, right so because you easily

can have the feeling that you are in a dead end street, either against it or in favour of it. It is understandable that you will try to find a way out of it by introducing a zone in between, a grey zone. But let us see if there is not a more effective, powerful solution for your dead end street feeling.

- If you think one more time about what we said about living knowledge, that it is the continuous source/cause of anything you think, imagine and passionately feel, then perhaps you can understand that there can not be a opposite to this knowledge. Only between invariable things there can be fixed opposites. There can be no unchanging opposite to something which is constantly changing. So I would suggest that even abstract thinking is still an expression of living thinking and that even the most deadly classifications of the reality still need a certain amount of living knowledge to be set in motion. Even the most formal categories of logic and math imply this dynamic element. And also any academic measurement has to take into account the primacy of living knowledge. Knowledge in order to be quantified has to be in one way or another, living knowledge. Compared to all the measurements and captures of it living knowledge is as Spinoza would have said **substantial**

Now, let's start with our main topic of today: **living labour**. The dynamics of living labour are to a great extent identical to living knowledge. It brings us back to an old friend or if you like, an old spectre. I mean Karl Marx.

A lot can be said about the man but it all depends on us, how we use him. There is no pure Marx, there is, for the better or the worse, always the Marx contaminated by the use that we make of him. Today I will use a few fragments from **the introduction to the Grundrisse** entitled: **The method of political economy. (1)**

In the Method of political economy Marx mentions several times the concept of **living labour**. First a brief outline of living labour. **1 Living labour** is as continuous and substantial as living knowledge. **It's basically the human capacity or capacities of being in the world by changing it.** You can not be, you can simply not live if you are not related to this flux of labour, if you are not in the stream yourself. Watch now the next step, because it is an important one. **2** Marx now says that you only

can perceive this living dynamic force as something that constructs not just one thing, but the relationships between things, that which you may call a world, if it is possible to free yourself from the perception of just one object, one thing and the particular way it is produced. So, in other words to free yourself from thinking of labour as woodcutting, fishing, agriculture. Can this be done? Can you get to this abstraction?

3 The traditional answer to this question is a full heartedly 'yes'`. Off course one says, we can do that because the human brain has a sort of innate, timeless, bodiless capacity to generalize, to make abstractions.

Marx answer is somewhat different. He will cautiously say **yes, however** the generalizations I can make will depend on the actual situation I am in, if the world I which I'm living makes it possible. My ideas are not about the reality as if I am outside of it, on a hierarchical level on top of it but they are an immanent expression of it. There is a comparison with Spinoza: you can not think more than your body's power allows you to think.

4 Marx says that I only can conceive the idea of living labour, so the form of labour which is common to all kinds of specific ways of labour, **if this abstraction is not about the reality, but bound to it, an expression of the reality. In other words if this abstraction is real, is a real abstraction as Marx says.** We know now that a real abstraction is needed but how do we get to this specific real abstraction called **living labour.**

5 Again, in order to get to the abstraction of **living** labour you have to abstract from the material specificity of any labour activity. You focus on labour in general by abstracting from its specific material activities done by particular instruments that condition to a large extent the activity you are doing. Labour has to be seen apart from its specific instrument which make fishing fishing and farming farming. **Labour must be seen as something on its own, as labour in abstracto, abstract labour .**

Can you think of a real situation where that abstraction takes place, apart from in your own head? May be you cannot and still it is not that difficult. If you chase a farmer from his land into a factory, well then guys, you have an example of abstract labour. You have an abstraction now and it is real one, not just a generalization in your head. And it is not only a real one, its creation is written as Marx says in letters of blood and fire. We are here close to the origins of capital, the most terrifying real abstraction you can think of. And you may understand what our friend Matteo Pasquinelli

meant when he wrote in a manifesto for The factory of the common:
knowledge is coming only from conflict.

6 We may begin to grasp what a **real abstraction** is. You understand that your focusing on living labor is something that takes place in reality. In real circumstances labour after its bloody expropriation of its instruments becomes an isolated object that can be focused on. Now its natural power to change and to differentiate the material world can be concentrated on and infinitely empowered. At this specific moment of time labor as the differentiating source, which it always was in the history of mankind- has been discovered. It is opened up, freed to infinite exploitation.

7 Living labour cannot be conceptualised if you do not construct it as a real abstraction, but not only that, **it cannot be grasped without taking into account its bloody expropriation and its continuous exploitation. There is no way to create a concept of living labour if this living labour is not exploited. Or to phrase it more in a Marxian vein: there is no idea of living labour possible if this labour is not forced to produce surplus value. Once more: knowledge is coming only from conflict.**

8 One word about the differentiating power of living labour. Once living labour is separated from its instruments, its productivity, its differentiating power can be focused on and can be empowered to the extreme. It inevitably starts to produce more different products that eventually will keep on getting together on the market. The result of the empowerment of labour is an infinite variety of specific labour products- commodities- and only in that situation one can generalize labour as labour tout court. So generalise in the situation of an infinite variety of specific labour forms that as commodities circulate uninterruptedly among each other.

9 There must be countless real, palpable things in circulation with each other, streaming if you want, to get to a generalisation in terms of living labour. **Things have to circulate in order to be generalized.** In other words I can only generalize if **in** the real things is something that strives for generalisation. I can only generalize if the general, the common is active in every thing, if the generalisation does not come from an outside, from above.

10 Marx uses the word **real abstraction** for the first time in the Grundrisse where he also uses a synonym called **determined abstraction, 'eine bestimmte Abstraktion'** as he says sometimes in the Grundrisse. This concept is of an unheard novelty. It constructs the

continuity between two notions always clearly and distinctively separated, the general and the specific. In that tradition **real abstraction** would be considered as an oxymoron. In Marx however it means that something general must be specific and the other way round. If the specific changes, another specific changes too. So their relationship, that what they have/are in common, their generality, changes too. **The general, that which invariably timelessly should bring order to the world, changes and is changeable.** If the general changes well then it is not anymore the general tout court, but it is itself a singularity. It ends the hierarchy of general order words.

11 In Marx as in Spinoza the general and the singular are not any more the two extremities of a dichotomy, for the general changes singularly and the singular strives itself for its general. You must see to it that you understand at least a bit of this, in order to understand another important concept of these seminars: **the common.** And Marx can help you with it because what he is constantly doing is to limit the general, to localize it, to embody it, as Fabiola said to you last week. However, if you stick to your dichotomous capturing of the general and the singular, you will make it hard for yourself to understand the **common and make it equally hard to be your self a common.**

12 Before we get to the end of this seminar, let us look for a confirmation of the above mentioned in Marx' Method of political Economy. Here it is:

*Labour seems to be a very simple category. The notion of labour in this universal form, as labour in general, is also extremely old. Nevertheless "labour" in this simplicity is economically considered just as modern a category as the relations which give rise to this simple abstraction. **The fact that the specific kind of labour is irrelevant presupposes a highly developed complex of actually existing kinds of labour, none of which is any more the all-important one. The most general abstractions arise on the whole only when concrete development is most profuse, so that a specific quality is seen to be common to many phenomena, or common to all. Then it is no longer perceived solely in a particular form.** This abstraction of labour is, on the other hand, by no means simply the conceptual resultant of a variety of concrete types of labour. The fact that the particular kind of labour employed is immaterial is appropriate to a form of society in which individuals easily pass from one type of labour to another, the particular type of labour being accidental to them and therefore irrelevant. Labour,*

*not only as a category but in reality, has become a means to create wealth in general, and has ceased to be tied as an attribute to a particular individual. **The example of labour strikingly demonstrates how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity in all epochs – precisely because they are abstractions – are equally a product of historical conditions even in the specific form of abstractions, and they retain their full validity only for and within the framework of these conditions.***

11 I would like to mention one more aspect of bestimmte Abstraction, real abstraction, since it is strongly related to the concept of living knowledge. It will not be a surprise to hear that you can impossibly make a real abstraction on your own, individually. You need to be affected by reality made and not made by other humans. So a real abstraction is not something that you can think, but what is always that which is thought by more than one. It is that which makes you think, what makes your thinking possible. It is the common in your thinking, that which keeps your thinking going on, apart from whether you individually want it or not. So Marx was right in a very profound way when he said that being determines the conscience. That is what is called his materialism: you can only understand reality if you as a mode of it change it.

12 If a real abstraction is what makes you think, than you cannot think without it, outside of it. There is a striking example of this to be found in Marx Einleitung when he says that you cannot develop the concept of capital starting from a historical period that supposedly precedes it. The present is irreversible, you cannot know more than your actual material situation enables you to understand. **What you say about what happened before is always determined by what is happening now. Your ideas are caused by real abstractions, they bear the sign of the actual, of this moment. You cannot stop the arrow of time. You cannot undo abstractions of their time dimensions.** There is a striking example of this to be found in Marx' Einleitung when he says that you cannot develop the concept of capital starting from a historical period that supposedly precedes it. The present is irreversible.

Here is what Marx says about this issue in the Method of political economy:

'Bourgeois society is the most advanced and complex historical organisation of production. The categories which

express its relations, and an understanding of its structure, therefore, provide an insight into the structure and the relations of production of all formerly existing social formations the ruins and component elements of which were used in the creation of bourgeois society. (...) **The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape** Thus, although it is true that the categories of bourgeois economy are valid for all other social formations, this has to be taken cum grano salis, for they may contain them in an advanced, stunted, caricatured, etc., form, that is always with substantial differences. What is called historical evolution depends in general on the fact that the latest form regards earlier ones as stages in the development of itself and conceives them always in a one-sided manner, since only rarely and under quite special conditions is a society able to adopt a critical attitude towards itself; Just as in general when examining any historical or social science, **so also in the case of the development of economic categories is it always necessary to remember that the subject, in this context contemporary bourgeois society, is presupposed both in reality and in the mind**, and that therefore categories express forms of existence and conditions of existence – and sometimes merely separate aspects – of this particular society, the subject; thus the category, even from the scientific standpoint, by no means begins at the moment when it is discussed as such.

The same applies to rent. In all forms in which landed property is the decisive factor, natural relations still predominate; in the forms in which the decisive factor is capital, social, historically evolved elements predominate. **Rent cannot be understood without capital, but capital can be understood without rent. Capital is the economic power that dominates everything in bourgeois society. It must form both the point of departure and the conclusion and it has to be expounded before landed property. After analysing capital and landed property separately, their interconnection**

must be examined. It would be inexpedient and wrong therefore to present the economic categories successively in the order in which they have played the dominant role in history. On the contrary, their order of succession is determined by their mutual relation in modern bourgeois society and this is quite the reverse of what appears to be natural to them or in accordance with the sequence of historical development.'

Marx addresses in notebook IV, Grundrisse p. 363 etc the same issue: *Once production founded on capital is presupposed (...) and when capital has therefore itself posited, and posited in accordance with its immanent essence, the conditions which form its point of departure in production -- [then] the condition that the capitalist, in order to posit himself as capital, must bring values into circulation which he created with his own labour -- or by some other means, excepting only already available, previous wage labour -- belongs among the antediluvian conditions of capital, belongs to its historic presuppositions, which, precisely as such historic presuppositions, are past and gone, and hence belong to the history of its formation, but in no way to its contemporary history, i.e. not to the real system of the mode of production ruled by it. While e.g. the flight of serfs to the cities is one of the historic conditions and presuppositions of urbanism, it is not a condition, not a moment of the reality of developed cities, but belongs rather to their past presuppositions, **to the presuppositions of their becoming which are suspended in their being. The conditions and presuppositions of the becoming, of the arising, of capital presuppose precisely that it is not yet in being but merely in becoming;** they therefore disappear as real capital arises, capital which itself, on the basis of its own reality, posits the conditions for its realization. Thus e.g. while the process in which money or value for-itself originally becomes capital presupposes on the part of the capitalist an accumulation -- perhaps by means of savings garnered from products and values created by his own labour etc., which he has undertaken as a not-capitalist, i.e. while the presuppositions under which money becomes capital appear as given, external presuppositions for the arising of capital-[nevertheless,] as soon as capital has become capital as such, it creates its own presuppositions, i.e. the possession of the real conditions of the creation of new values without exchange -- by means of its own production process. These presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming -- and hence could not spring from its action as capital -- now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as posited by it -- not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its presence. It no longer proceeds from presuppositions in order to become, but rather it is itself presupposed, and proceeds from itself to create the conditions of its maintenance and growth. Therefore, the conditions which preceded the creation of surplus capital I, or which express the becoming of capital, do not fall into the sphere of that mode of production for which capital serves as the presupposition; as the historic preludes of its becoming, they lie behind it, just as the processes by means of which the earth made the transition from a liquid sea of fire and vapour to its present form now lie beyond its life as finished earth. That is, individual capitals can continue to arise e.g. by means of*

hoarding. But the hoard is transformed into capital only by means of the exploitation of labour. **The bourgeois economists who regard capital as an eternal and natural (not historical) form of production then attempt at the same time to legitimize it again by formulating the conditions of its becoming as the conditions of its contemporary realization; i.e. presenting the moments in which the capitalist still appropriates as not-capitalist -- because he is still becoming -- as the very conditions in which he appropriates as capitalist. These attempts at apologetics demonstrate a guilty conscience, as well as the inability to bring the mode of appropriation of capital as capital into harmony with the general laws of property proclaimed by capitalist society itself.** On the other side, much more important for us is that our method indicates the points where historical investigation must enter in, or where bourgeois economy as a merely historical form of the production process points beyond itself to earlier historical modes of production. In order to develop the laws of bourgeois economy, therefore, it is not necessary to write the real history of the relations of production, But the correct observation and deduction of these laws, as having themselves become in history, always leads to primary equations -- like the empirical numbers e.g. in natural science -- which point towards a past lying behind this system. These indications [Andeutung], together with a correct grasp of the present, then also offer the key to the understanding of the past -- a work in its own right which, it is to be hoped, we shall be able to undertake as well. This correct view likewise leads at the same time to the points at which the suspension of the present form of production relations gives signs of its becoming -- foreshadowings of the future. Just as, on one side the pre-bourgeois phases appear as merely historical, i.e. suspended presuppositions, so do the contemporary conditions of production likewise appear as engaged in suspending themselves and hence in positing the historic presuppositions for a new state of society.

13 If there is the realabstraction of capital there is no utopian escape from it possible to another world or another time. You are in this one world together with capital. There is no pure thinking, no immaculate concepts, they are contaminated, not generally superior to what you sense as being opposed to you. You cannot understand your reality without the captures, the bloody abstractions, the contradictions. There is for instance no paradise of the commons as Matteo Pasquinelli showed convincingly in his latest book A bestiary of the commons.(3) There is precarity and surplus value to be found hidden or unhidden everywhere in the world of the new culture, of the creative commons.

15 As said before living knowledge comes from conflict, whether you like this or not. This is the dramatic situation we are in right now. What its consequences are? Let me briefly enlist them at the closing of my presentation:

A We have to get writ of any puritan, dichotomous scheme of generic and 'uncommon' notions that still can be found in the old sinister house of the left, specifically the ones concerning the current university.* Dichotomies in this context are the material/immaterial, the general and the individual, the technological and the natural, the human and non human.

B To put it positively: we should develop joyful – made with love and with the common longing for new discoveries- knowledge for which the material virtually is there as we have tried to show you. Don't get desperate, because living labour/living knowledge always comes first. Knowledge in order to be quantified has to be in one way or another living knowledge and labour to be exploited has to be living labour.

C To be even more specifically: investigate most meticulously, extremely empirically, locally that which opposes you and realize you are not essentially different. You do not have another identity. Therefore **Know thou enemy. It is necessary and possible at the same time. Be brave and be cautious at the same time**

* I consider ideology as too general a concept to operate with. Ideology is interpreting the world not changing it. It is too much of an effect, a relatively powerless expression of living knowledge to reach the singular bodies. In my opinion one of the most convincing and practical refutations of the concept of ideology can be found in Michel Foucault, in particular in his *Surveiller et Punir*.**(4)**

(1) Karl Marx. *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen ökonomie*. Moskau, 1939. p. 21 etc

(2) *Grundrisse* p. 25 etc.

(3) M.Pasquinelli. *Animal Spirits. A bestiary of the Commons*. 2008 Rotterdam.

(4) M. Foucault. *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Paris, 1975.