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A Comment on Miller's Comment

Riel Miller says that my distinction between productive labour (PL) and unproductive labour (UPL) turns on two factors: “1) Whether or not employed labour-power creates a ‘material’ thing, a durable good, and 2) whether or not the ‘products’ created by workers are exchanged with revenue or capital.” Apart from the dangers of compressing a long essay into a couple of lines, such a summary is inadequate since it misses out a third, and equally important, factor, i.e. the use to which products are capable of being put in relation to the whole social capital. That is to say, unless certain products are capable of being used as productive capital on a social scale then the labour embodied within them must count, in certain circumstances, as being unproductive.

Moreover, Miller suggests that a) I do not take my caveat regarding the status of Theories of Surplus Value (TSV) seriously, and b) I ignore “a crucial section in Volume II of Capital on transportation,” and do not even once refer to Marx’s “Results of the Immediate Process of Production.” Miller asserts, without any attempt at proof, that these passages run directly against my own interpretation.

Let me deal with the question of TSV first. It was a little unfortunate that in the version of my article which was printed there did not appear to be an over-use of TSV. But, the version printed was
cut by at least one-third from the final version which I had submitted. And certain parts had been compressed. Since the editorial board have to keep a balance in the use of space I did not object to the cuts. And I mention this not to complain, but to indicate why an apparent over-use of TSV occurred. However, even in the published form, there were 17 references to TSV and 22 from Capital, Volumes I, II and III. And given the fact that much of my discussion of TSV was specifically directed at indicating the problems arising from a misreading of those volume, I find Miller’s criticism on this point pedantic and misleading.

Now, did I ignore “The Immediate Results...?” Not at all. The editors raised this same point with me early on and I pointed out that were I to deal with this material I could produce quotations from it to support my own position. But this would have merely extended an already overlong essay — from their point of view — without adding anything of substance to my arguments.

As to Marx’s references to transport in Volume II of Capital, these are not consistent with a number of the things he wrote elsewhere. And were I actually to have been engaged in an exercise in exegesis I could have given full rein to a happy pursuit of “contradictions” in Marx. (At least I could have done if the editors had been so foolish as to allow such a sterile exercise in their journal.) But my own purpose was to attempt to extract a working theory from Marx’s writings; without claiming it would be the one that he would have endorsed, but at least claiming to be in the Marxist tradition.

As I pointed out in my original article, most of what Marx wrote was not published in his lifetime and one must be careful not to place undue emphasis upon what are essentially drafts, which would have no doubt been revised had he prepared them publication. It was left to poor Engels to “make something” of all this material, and I am glad it was him, and not me, who had to wrestle with it all.

Regarding previous debates on this topic, here again I have to say that in my final version there was a lengthy section devoted to examining them, and in particular Ian Gough’s work. Unfortunately this was cut from the published version, again for reasons of space. I will only say here that I find Gough’s work somewhat confused on essential elements of the labour theory of value.

Let me now turn to some of the other comments Miller makes. It is amusing (I was going to say hair raising) to find it being seriously suggested that songs or haircuts are material objects. It is true that they are the result of material activity; but the results are not material in the more common, even vulgar, understanding of the term. Or
perhaps we are here engaged in a philosophical discussion on the relationship between matter and motion, in which case I will freely concede that there can be no matter without motion, nor motion without matter. But, I do not think such a discussion is appropriate within the confines of examining PL and UPL. One comment I would make, however, is that Miller insists throughout his article that we are dealing with logic. For myself, I would say that *formal* logic, which certainly has its place, must be subordinated to dialectics. Miller's approach, on the other hand, is close to being one of logical positivism, and therefore for me must be suspect. This becomes clear when Miller asserts that I am confused regarding the distinction between production and circulation. On the contrary, there is no confusion on my part, merely a recognition that production, circulation and distribution form distinct but integral moments of the circuits of capital in the process of valorisation. And in such a synthetic view formal logic will not suffice. In this respect I emphasize the contradictions in unity of the capitalist mode of production.

Miller suggests that the owner of an electric power plant would have an *odd* mixture of productive and unproductive workers, if one accepted my definition of PL and UPL. But there is nothing odd about it at all. There *would* be such a mixture, and it would be one found right across the whole gamut of capitalist production. Only a formal logical view can find such a situation puzzling, since it assumes that capitalism *is* a logical, rational mode of production. Such a view is the result of trying to chop up this anarchic system into neat packages labelled production, circulation, consumption etc. regardless of their reciprocal interaction. With such a view it is then possible to argue that the use — final destination — made of commodities has no bearing upon the nature of the labour involved.

This indicates that Miller continuously mixes up micro and macro analyses in his own attempts at definition, something I specifically warned against in my article. This is why, presumably, he mentions approvingly Rowthorn's essay, which attempts to demonstrate that arms production is surplus-value creating, not value consuming.¹

Here we come to a curious statement by Miller, to wit: "By insisting that the question of surplus-value production is decided solely on the basis of the character of production not exchange in the sphere of circulation, Marx isolates with precision the limits of profitability." Is Miller implying that I hold the view that surplus-value can be *created* in the process of exchange? If so it is a travesty of what I wrote, and flies in the face of the evidence. If he is simply saying that the *upper* limit of the social surplus-value is defined in the pro-
duction process, then I would agree. But this upper limit is not automatically reached, since surplus-value must not only be produced it must also be realized; and realization belongs to the sphere of circulation.² Potential surplus-value and realized surplus-value, in the form of profit, are not necessarily synonymous. However, this statement by Miller suggests that he is still not making the proper analytical separation of these two categories.

In this short note I could not pursue all the points raised by Miller's treatment. But I hope I have said sufficient to indicate the dangers, and sterility, of approaching Marx's — or anyone's — writings as a form of authority. To be a Marxist we need not accept every line, jot or tittle that Marx wrote as gospel. What he did write, is, of course, a foundation to be elaborated upon, but not worshipped. If we feel that in certain matters Marx was wrong, contradictory or inadequate then we have to say so, to the best of our abilities.

Notes

1. In this respect Rowthorn's criticisms of my essay on Rosa Luxemburg do not indicate a flaw in my arguments. All that Luxemburg and Rowthorn do is indicate that arms production consumes surplus-value and does not create it, which is the point I was making. If anyone doubts this, let them examine both Luxemburg's and Rowthorn's own expositions via the reproduction schemas: not once is there an attempt to show how arms production increases surplus-value directly. Both authors merely show a redistribution of existing surplus-value.

2. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the so-called transformation problem is that the prices of production sum of profit do not equal the exchange-value sum of surplus-value.