

On Work: A New Look at an Old Concept in Marx, Lukaćs, and Weber

Ismael P. Magadan, Jr.

*Bohol Island State University, Tagbilaran City, Philippines
University of San Carlos, Cebu City, Philippines*

Abstract. This paper offers a revisit to the philosophy of work in Karl Marx, Georg Lukaćs, and Max Weber. These three influential thinkers in philosophy, sociology, and economics accuse the humongous economic structure called capitalism (i) to have tampered the nature of work (or labor), (ii) by reducing it to a mere apparatus for an unbridled accumulation of wealth, (iii) in a manner that degrades the workers who are now being treated as mere tools in production, and (iv) ultimately ends up wreaking havoc on the objective physical nature that they call “the environment”. This conceptual revisit aims to show (a) how work had been originally received as a practical notion and (b) how the transformation of its inner logic is being facilitated to serve the grand designs of capital. Thus, in the foregoing sections, the paper presents a series of reviews of Marx’s “theory of alienation”, Lukaćs “theory of reification”, and Weber’s take on the “spirit of capitalism”. A synthesis then discusses a “new look”, arguing for the necessity to recover the subject (of work) (a la Spivak and Dejours), in the conclusion.

Keywords: Work, Capitalism, Wealth, Alienation, Reification, Spirit of Capitalism

Introduction

In cinematography, there is a technical term called “the parallax view”. This signifies an awareness of an opposite motion generated by a certain approach. So that, as one moves forward, she notices consequently some objects are going backward (sometimes at a faster speed rate). This, however, is neither a new sensation nor a new notion altogether. In 1750, the Genevan Romantic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, already saw this parallax in “the restoration of the Sciences and Arts” and its “contribution to the purifications of Morals”.¹ Albeit only metaphorically, for Rousseau the parallax effect lies when as the Sciences and Arts move forward, then the societal Morals jettison toward the opposite direction. This Romantic position, then, would become the model for the paradoxical relationship between scientific progress and moral decline, so much so that hundreds of years later this model is again made visible.

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Sciences and Arts,” in *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, edited and introduced by Susan Dunn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). 43-68.

To wit, just very recently, this parallax registered in the scrutiny of the International Trade Union Confederation (*ITUC*).² This time around, it dwells in two images, namely, the condition of workers on the one hand, and the so-called “global rights index”, on the other. In June 2025, *ITUC* made a study on the conditions of workers across the continents. Their findings are significantly interesting. According to *ITUC*, as the accumulation of global wealth surges, an inversion occurs within the working condition. To be specific, it is reported that the scores of the workers’ rights index “worsen”, hinting at a potential denigrating spaces for work even at top-tier economies, such us, “the Americas and Europe”. The former scores at 3.68; the latter, 2.78. The rest of the world would not be any better. In fact, the Philippines occupies a spot reserved for the so-called “10 worst countries for workers”. Alongside the Philippines are “Bangladesh, Belarus, Ecuador, Egypt, Estwani, Myanmar, Nigeria (NEW), Tunisia, and Türkiye.”

The intriguing question comes about the reason why workers’ condition plunges when the present milieu has already afforded so much progress especially in terms of technological advancements. With the current index, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), nano-technologies, quantum-computing, Krypto-currency and many others does not seem to alleviate the predicaments of the laborers who themselves may already have access to those artefacts mentioned. Another elephant in the room that needs to be addressed is the condition of wages. Unfortunately, there is a parallel fate enjoyed between work rights index and wage index. According to the International Labor Organization (*ILO*), the decline in wage is alarming since it has dived deep starting in the year 2006.³ The *ILO* says, “Wage inequality is the highest in low-income countries, with close to 22 per cent of wage workers there classified as low-paid.”⁴ What makes the condition worse is that “women and wage workers in the informal economy are more likely to be among the lowest paid,” they continue.

If this is not a *dé-jà vu* apropos of a certain parallax sighting, then we may not know how else to call it. A more logical anticipation would have been optimistic in terms of the relationship between progress (historical or scientific) and the human condition (in work and rights index). But the opposite happens. In the studies conducted by both the *ITUC* and *ILO*, the results show that the sophistication in highly technologized work spaces does not guarantee dignified benefits offered to the workers. At this point of

² <https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-global-rights-index-2025-EN>

³ <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/global-wage-report-2024-25-wage-inequality-decreasing-globally>.

⁴ <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/wage-inequality-has-declined-two-thirds-countries-worldwide-start-21st>.

being disadvantaged, should the workers not resort to governmental safeguards that are already put in place through constitutional guarantees, at least in democratic states? What then is the role of governments if they could not regulate this ongoing subjectivation of the workers?

Fortunately, the *ITUC* is not blind to the collusion between governments and neoliberal industries. For its part, *ITUC* has accused the billionaires of having control over governments. And democracies are not an exemption here. There is an invisible hand, which, ironically, is no longer that invisible and one that controls the governments themselves. “Governments have collaborated in decades of deregulation, neoliberalism, and neglect, leading to the collapse of workers’ rights.” “This has disenfranchised millions and paved the way for extremism,” *ITUC* continues, “authoritarianism and the billionaire coup against democracy that now threatens democracy itself.” Nostalgic – it sounds very much like it. The contemporary work conditions, human rights index, and technological advancements are reminiscent of first, this paradox between progress and decline, and secondly more about the classic analysis of the working class conditions at the annals of modernity. This is the backdrop of which this paper draws its impetus on. Here, however, the goal is minimal, one that only intends to refresh one’s understanding, as in an intellectual exercise and recollection at the same time.

Meanwhile, a recent study conducted by Furendal et al. about “the future of the philosophy of work” demonstrates that the reality of work has become even more lucid after the Covid-19 Pandemic.⁵ What is important is that this affirms the findings of *ITUC*, as shown above, as regards the sophisticated level of work today. And this sophistication in particular, is aided by the surge of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI which is the other guise of the ingenuous platforming of Large Language Models (LLM) is envisioned to be a perfect aid for humans at work. As a matter of fact, the use of AI (and there are a variety now of platforms on AI) does not only stay within the confines of industrial workspaces but also bridges across academic institutions and the space of legal practice. But while this is so, the lacuna presses on as the threats of the so-called AI invasion goes beyond mere algorithmic movement. What comes along with AI is the “potential to displace workers and change the nature of the job”, among others.⁶ This is a crucial point of observation. Real human workers are facing the threat of redundancy, if not extinction, at work especially in large industries. The implication to such a displacement cannot be underestimated to say the

⁵ Markus Furendal et al, “The Future of the Philosophy of Work,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 41, no. 2 (2024): 182.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 182, 183.

least. And accordingly, such a displacement even impacts not only the material/economic dimensions of the human individual; the impact even goes as far as moral and psychological brokenness – moral, that is in relation to the perception of “inequality” and psychological as in the sense of the loss of “self-esteem” and “confidence”.⁷

To date, the problematics of work remain, apparently, as footnotes to how work was originally problematized by the classic sociological-philosophical figures such as, Karl Marx, Georg Lukacs, and Max Weber. In this way, AI may now be seen as one extremely potent brainchild of advanced capitalism. Being so, the understanding of the threat of AI displacing workers must be redirected back to the problem of capitalism. And it is for this reason that a look at the classics remains essential even if such an excursion would not mean or offer a solution to the problem of today. A close look at these old concepts refresh our understanding and offer a view of what is really at stake, at least philosophically. Firstly, that work is essentially a human activity has already been asserted as the proper ontological starting point. Secondly, it may be understood as capitalism has ingenuously taken control of work in order to master the survival of the system itself. And lastly, that the burgeoning of the conditions of work carries the danger of the dissolution of the worker, or the proletariat in Marxist sense.

It is for this reason that this study recourses to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Christophe Dejour is in order to provide a conceptual re-reading of the proletariat as “the subject” who is not only displaced but is also, by way of extension, decimated by the takeover of capital (and inevitably by AI platforms). In both of these contemporary thinkers, one reads the necessity to reinstate the “subject” without whom work would not be all possible. Even the transition to AI cannot be thought of without passing first through the very phenomenon that called for it, and that is, the toil and suffering, the “alienation”, “reification” and the active “ethos” exerted by the laborer under stringent capitalistic pressure. It is the position of this study that if today’s understanding of work and its threat were to be raised, this understanding must be hinged on the need to reinstate the primacy of the subject.

Thus, this paper offers a revisit to the philosophy of work in Karl Marx, Georg Lukaćs, and Max Weber. These three influential thinkers. in philosophy, sociology, and economics accuse the humongous economic structure called capitalism (i) to have tampered the nature of work (or labor), (ii) by reducing it to a mere apparatus for an unbridled accumulation of

⁷ Ibid., 187, 188.

wealth, (iii) in a manner that degrades the workers who are now being treated as mere tools in production, and (iv) ultimately ends up wreaking havoc on the objective physical nature that they call “the environment”. This conceptual revisit aims to show (a) how work had been originally received as a practical notion and (b) how the transformation of its inner logic is being facilitated to serve the grand designs of capital. Thus, in the foregoing sections, the paper presents a series of reviews of Marx’s “theory of alienation”, Lukács’ “theory of reification”, and Weber’s take on the “spirit of capitalism”. A synthesis then discusses a “new look”, arguing for the necessity to recover the subject (of work) (*a la* Spivak and Dejours), in the conclusion.

A Conceptual Revisit in Marx, Lukács, and Weber

Karl Marx on the Alienation of Labor

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx articulates his rich insight on a certain mechanism that governs the expansion of the social environment of his time. In a language that is peculiar to Marx, the heart of these manuscripts is the “critique of political economy.” Although the *Manuscripts* can be seen for the most part as unfinished, it presents a variety of economic categories that are supposed to serve as the principles of social relations. In most cases, he proceeds from the economic theory of Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*,⁸ regarding it among others as a “classic economics.” The seventeen long citations on Smith in “Profit of Capital,” also elsewhere in the two earlier essays, only show his relevance to Marx’s serious critical engagement. Not only are the passages here lengthily reconstructed, Marx also appears to use them as a guiding conceptual thread. Interestingly, however, Marx’s citations are not friendly with Smith because they are conceived to expose the “contradiction” in the latter’s economic theory. It turns out that Smith only provides for Marx the very tool for a possibility of critique. Marx writes:

the more a commodity is worked up - the more it becomes a manufactured object - the greater it becomes that price which resolves itself into wages and profit ... In the progress of the manufacture of a commodity, not only the number of profits increases, but every subsequent profit is greater than the

⁸ See Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York, USA: Prometheus Books, 1988), 19. For a separate discussion on Smith, cf. Maria Pia Paganelli, “Self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*,” in *History of Political Economy*, 40, 2 (2008): 365-382.

foregoing; because the capital from which it is derived must always be greater. The capital which employs the weavers, for example, must always be greater than that which employs the spinners; because it not only replaces the capital with its profits, but pays, besides, the wages of weavers; and the profits must bear some proportion to the capital.⁹

One may emphasize the key concepts, namely, “capital,” “work,” “commodity,” “profit,” and “wages.” How do we make sense of them? In what manner can they be taken together to produce a coherent structure? “Capital,” “work,” “commodity,” “profit,” and “wages” – these categories play a significant role not only in the *Manuscripts* but also in Marx’s theory in general. In many ways the meaning of these concepts is critically investigated and their role in actual economic practice, stringently criticized. If there is a single concept that can accommodate these five names, it would be “capital.”

In “Profit of Capital,” Marx argues that Adam Smith’s economic theory is in essence the rubric of capitalism. Capital is defined as “a stored-up labor,” that is, “a quantity of labor stocked and stored up to be employed.”¹⁰ In “Wages of Labor,” labor is identified with the individual human work or the “individual activity” in which “all the natural, spiritual and social variety” of the human person, of the worker (the proletariat), is manifest.¹¹ Put another way, capital is the sum total of a human subjectivity exhausted in productive work. It is the objectification or, in Marx’s term, the “accumulation” of human subjectivity.¹² Further, inasmuch as the activity of man continues to produce, its product becomes a gain, “a profit.” Profit is a gain exclusive to capital.¹³ Wherever there is capital, there is also profit. However, there can be neither capital nor profit without the productive force that generates them, i.e., labor.

Two points need close inspection: On one end, in relation to capital, there is a need to develop a kind of technique that can sustain or improve the production of profit *via* labor. On the other end, with regard to the condition

⁹ Marx, “Estranged Labor,” 45. At the moment, the question is not whether the statement still holds the same truth under an altered economic-historical context but whether this has anything to do to affect Marx’s reading of history. While it is one thing to ponder the manner the quotation affects current social issues, it is another to trace its inception back to a certain context. Either way demands a definite level of hermeneutics and appropriation, i.e., of interpretation and application, which may need not be problematized at the moment. Instead, what is necessary is to bring out the thesis on which Marx’s critique is to stand.

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 22, 36.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

of the worker, a certain mechanism should be crafted in order that the worker can escape “beggary and starvation.”¹⁴ Without this mechanism the expansion of capital and generation of profit will be jeopardized. To meet these needs, “wage,” which is the fourth category in Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, bails the process of production out from paralysis and saves the worker from “starvation.” More particularly, wage is a kind of gain that is exclusive to the worker. It is the payment that the working man receives after serving the capital.¹⁵ While labor is the exhaustion of human subjectivity, as mentioned earlier, wage revitalizes this exhaustion. According to Marx, after having been paid for a long day of service for the capital, the worker is calmed down by the anticipation of the benefit of working.

Meanwhile, the owner of the capital sees wages to promote an opportune circumstance, all in favor of his enterprise. Subsequently, with the expansion of capital comes also the expansion of work and the multiplication of work-spaces. Needless to say, there arises a demand for efficient work with regard to the quantity of the product of labor. Subsequently, the increase of the volume of manufacture carries the pressing demand to “raise the wage.” In turn, according to Marx, the “raising of wages excites the worker.”¹⁶ But the setback is also horrible, because consequently the “raising of wage gives rise to overwork among the workers.”¹⁷ The worker is now prompted to produce as much as he could to the extent that his labor becomes “machine-like,” governed by the logic of “calculations.”¹⁸ At the onset, labor is the objectification of human subjectivity. But in political economy, says Marx, it has become a mere “wage-earning activity,” a “disguised bondage.”¹⁹

But what exactly is wrong with the mechanism of political economy? This question should not be read beyond its literal meaning. What is *wrong* here must not be understood from the perspective of ethics or morality. That is, at the moment, we must be content with the limitation that Marx’s critique of political economy is free from ethical presupposition. Nowhere can we find a theory of ethics/morality in the chapters “Wages of Labor,” “Profit of Capital,” and “Rent of Land.” However, one can encounter a variety of economic categories, terms and formulae that are spread along these texts, such as “prices provisions,” “economic system,” “price fluctuations,” “relative-income,” “free transaction,” “interests,” “monopoly-price,”

¹⁴ Ibid., 20, 23.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20-31.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Ibid., 23, 26, 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., 27, 33.

“circulating capital,” and the long list of trade and labor conditions in Marx’s time. These exchange relations and many others constitute the economic fact to which Marx dedicates his mental powers. If the critique is to be understood as a *description* and at the same time a *reproach* of trade and commerce, then a certain idea of *right* and *wrong* is needed, at least to ground the *criticism*. Then again, this concern does not point beyond the premises of economics. For Marx, the problem of capitalism lies in its “indifference towards men.”²⁰ This is because “political economy considers labor in the abstract as a thing; ‘labor is a commodity’.”²¹

Arguably, as shown in the previous section, the relationship between capital and labor stands on an unfriendly ground. The unwelcoming circumstance between these categories resulted from a denial of the indispensable role that human labor plays with regard to the expansion of capital. For Marx, the conceptual error that plagues political economy lies in the assumption that in the beginning there was already capital, when what actually took shape first was the situation of a human person working and producing for subsistence. Eventually, the same person enters a larger relationship that sustains a communal scale of production.²²

The exploitation of human labor is the main idea that Marx gives in the essay “Estranged Labor,” which is famously known as the “theory of alienation.” In the structure of commodity exchange, the worker who is the source of labor herself is systematically hidden, pushed into the background, his effort and subjectivity undermined and, worse, “sunk into the level of a commodity.”²³ The theory of alienation departs from the distortion that commodity exchange has wrought onto society.

But what constitutes the problem of the structure of commodity exchange? The initial answer says that the problem lies in its “indifference to men.” Or that in political economy, man sinks into the level of commodity. If we trace its conception back to Smith, then we can understand Marx saying that Smith’s picture of political economy is painted on the wrong canvas. Having painted it that way, Smith appears to have forgotten who deserves the credit in the full flourishing of commerce and trade. What appears as the consequence is an improper assignment of an *existential* priority to the *one* who is responsible for the origin, sustenance, and expansion of capitalism.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ Ibid., 32.

²² This presumption constitutes Marx’s “historical materialism” explicitly written in his earliest work *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (USA: International Publishers, 1995).

²³ Marx, “Estranged Labor,” 69.

²⁴ The term “existential” here doesn’t necessarily have to be understood from the perspective of Martin Heidegger or Jean-Paul Sartre or the other so-called “existentialists.” Rather, the phrase “improper assignment of existential priority” only means the failure of Smith to identify a certain

This is what Marx's complaint is all about. For him, Smith takes private property, another word for capital, as the starting point but does not account for its beginning,²⁵ when the most appropriate thing to do is to place private property at the end, as no more than a product of social labor, of the laborer herself. Thus, Marx says,

On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks into the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities ... [Political] economy proceeds from the facts of private property but it does not explain it to us ... it defines the relationship of wages to profit, it takes the interests of the capitalists to be the ultimate cause, i.e., it takes for granted what it is supposed to evolve.²⁶

In this citation, Marx shows how political economy neglects the role of *the worker*, who is *the human person*, in the course of production and the expansion of capital.²⁷ This is what Marx means when he says that private property "takes for granted what it is supposed to evolve." It turns out that in the series of events going on beneath the activities of commerce, or the exchange of commodities and the accumulation of profit, the human person who drains his subjectivity, i.e., his "natural, spiritual and social variety," is seen as a sheer tool for more accumulation of profit in favor of the industry owner. If not neglected, the worker and his productive power are identified with the tools he employs while producing. In political economy, the human person, the laborer, is treated as a mere "machine;"²⁸ his reality is pushed aside in "a gray nebulous distance," where she only becomes "all the poorer the more wealth he produces."²⁹ For Marx, the horror of political economy is "the devaluation of man" and "his labor."³⁰

proponent, among others, whose efforts enable the genesis and the development of commerce and trade.

²⁵ Marx, "Estranged Labor," 69.

²⁶ Ibid., 69-70.

²⁷ In any of Marx's texts, for instance, in *Capital*, *The German Ideology*, or *Manuscripts*, "production" refers to or is the other name of "work".

²⁸ Marx, "Estranged Labor," 73.

²⁹ Ibid., 70-71.

³⁰ Ibid.

The necessary consequence of “the devaluation of men” is “Estrangement,” “Alienation.”³¹ There are three components that revolve around the theory of alienation, namely, “worker,” “labor,” and “capital.” In Marx’s analysis, these categories enjoy a close connection with one another inasmuch as they share one original source. But when the emphasis on private property comes to view, the categories already start to maintain a certain distance. The triangular relationship is so crucial that for Marx it is what the guiding thread of political economy fails to see, if not neglects. “Political economy proceeds from the facts of private property.” Here, “private property” refers only to “capital.” Put another way, private property is identified only with capital, and nothing more. The implication is that the two others, namely, worker and labor, are excluded. Political economy does not give credit to what accounts for the emergence of capital itself. So that, even at the theoretical level, there is already an “indifference” to man and his work.

From that theoretical plane, what is explicit is a kind of separation between man and labor from capital. Marx calls this “estrangement” or “alienation.” These concepts show a loss of relationship, a disconnection, where one becomes a different other, an “alien” and “independent power.”³² The “capital” which is supposed to be the product of the worker’s “labor” has now become “an alien object,” “a power independent of the producer.”³³ On the practical plane, the phenomenon of alienation works more stringently than on the theoretical one. Its theoretical impact affects only a concept, while leaving a burdensome and exhaustive effect on the worker.

Caught up in the advent of industrial revolution in the early 19th centuries, Marx remains in a descriptive stance and enumerates the many sides of the estrangement of labor. The point is that the relationship between man, his work and capital does not only suffer from a one-sided distortion. There is a single (theoretical) identity that shapes the fact that is shared by the three categories. Marx says that “alienation” is “a concept of this fact” – “the fact of political economy.”³⁴ The analysis of “alienation” is an analysis of the facts of political economy.³⁵ Therefore, Marx “proceeds from an actual economic fact,” which is alienation.³⁶

³¹ Ibid., 71. According to Anthony Giddens, the theory of alienation occupies the central space in Marx’s analysis of capitalism. For a substantive discussion, see Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 10-16.

³² Marx, “Estranged Labor,” 71.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 79.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 71.

According to Marx, there are four instances that constitute the phenomenon of alienation in the structure of commodities. *Firstly*, in the political economy, man, the laborer, is alienated from the product of his work. *Secondly*, she is alienated from the means of production itself. *Thirdly*, man is alienated from his species. And *lastly*, man is alienated from his fellow men. Here, we notice that political economy is not any more at the center of the explanation but has already become the background with which the estrangement occurs. Evidently, being the author of the laws that govern the production, private property escapes the negative consequences of the very mechanisms it created. What is put at the center of things is the laborer who turns out to be the recipient of the stinky residue of the mechanics of commerce. Thus, at the center of the experience of estrangement is the laborer.

At this juncture, let us briefly explain the four moments of estrangement. The first task is to give Marx's account of the undistorted relationship between man and his labor.³⁷ The second task is to show how political economy accounts for the distortion of the said relationship.

In the beginning there was a man, and she works. Work is his essential nature. As he works, he realizes herself. So that labor is self-realization. As man works she drains his "subjectivity," his "social and natural variety." At the same time, while realizing herself, he produces. He owns his work. His produce is rightfully his own as well. He sees the product of his labor as the "objectification" of herself, i.e., the concrete instantiation of his peculiarity. The product of his labor is his achievement, his realization objectified. Moreover, according to Marx, the labor process entails not only man and his labor power but also the "sensuous external world" which provides the raw material.³⁸ Labor transforms the objective physical world into something that fits the needs of the worker. Thus, self-realization already includes the sensuous external world which "is the material on which his labor is manifested, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces."³⁹ The sensuous external world is the "inorganic body" of man because she survives through it in the form of "food, heating, clothes, and dwelling," even if it is not necessarily his own body.⁴⁰ Consequently, she is caught in a situation where "he is confronted by the *other* man."⁴¹ Marx speaks of a "relationship" where one man stands for the other.⁴² While

³⁷ A more elaborate account of this can be read in *The German Ideology*, 39-52.

³⁸ Marx, "Estranged Labor," 72.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁴¹ Ibid., 78.

⁴² Ibid., 79.

producing, man produces for the other man. The relationship is reversible because “what applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to herself, also holds in a man’s relation to the other man, and to the other man’s labor and the object of labor.”⁴³ This uninterrupted sequence of the labor process constitutes the realization of man’s “species being.” This means that she is able to maintain his “free universal self.”⁴⁴ In labor, man realizes one’s free universal self: free because it is a spontaneous or “conscious life-activity” and universal because it accommodates the physical world and every other man in the intersubjective labor relationship.⁴⁵

But according to Marx, capitalism thwarts man’s self-realization *via* labor, denying the direct relationship between man, his labor and its product.⁴⁶ Worse, it snatches labor away from man as in “bondage.”⁴⁷ Labor is treated as a mere commodity, a thing for exchange. It loses its qualitative character, i.e., its being a “spontaneous life-activity.” Because in the form of “wage,” private property acquires labor itself, labor becomes a slave to wage. Wage “is the better payment for the slave.”⁴⁸ The amount of money paid for the worker purchases not only the product of his labor but also his labor power. Because his labor power is already sold, it follows that regardless of the quality and quantity being produced, the worker can no longer claim any possession. Therefore, she is cut off, disconnected, from the product of his work and from his labor power. And this constitutes the *first* and *second* moments of alienation.

Further, the mediation of private property does not come easily for the worker. Because one capital moves with the logic of “competition” alongside with other capitals, the worker is caught under a keen pressure to maximize his production in order to put profit on a larger scale.⁴⁹ However, the more she produces, the more products are being stolen away from him. The more she produces, the more labor power she spends. According to Marx, man’s labor is transformed from a “spontaneous life-activity” to one that is “coerced, forced labor.”⁵⁰ In losing his “conscious life-activity,” she loses his “freedom.”⁵¹ This loss entails the destruction of his “inorganic body,” which is the sensuous external nature. The reason for this is that under the

⁴³ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72-73.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

structure of commodity exchange the latter is appropriated only indirectly, that is, it has already become a raw material for the profit of the capital. If human labor is already purchased and there is none left anymore, then the cultivation of the sensuous external nature becomes a prerogative of capital who also already owns the productive work. Ultimately, because of this sheer disconnection, man ceases to produce for herself and for the other man. For Marx, in political economy, because she is estranged, the human individual, by which we mean the worker, has nothing to begin with. What is presented above constitutes the *third* and *fourth* moments of alienation.

From the reconstruction above, the origin and transformation of “estranged labor” is made explicit. It was shown in the analysis that living labor is the means not only of subsistence but also of self-realization or what Marx calls the realization of man’s species-being. But in the structure of commodity exchange, labor is purchased through wage. Once purchased, the former already belongs to the one who has purchased it. The necessary consequence, as presented earlier, is disconnection, alienation. So far, what comes to surface in the exposition of the theory of alienation is the human condition which is reduced to the level of a mere instrument for the expansion of capital and the accumulation of wealth of the industry owner. What Marx calls the “indifference to men” becomes an important concept in the investigation of the logic of this social pathology, alienation.

Georg Lukács and the *Becoming* of the “Thing-like Self”

In the essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Georg Lukács departs from Marx’s theory of alienated labor. However, the theory of reification does not get the inspiration from the *Manuscripts* of 1844; instead, Lukács borrows his framework from the section on “The Fetishism of Commodity and Its Secret” of *Capital*.⁵² The historical distance of these theorists on the contradiction of the capitalist economic system and its negative impact on the lives of human individuals does not hinder them from engaging in a certain discourse that promotes a critical resistance toward capitalism. Like Marx, Lukács faults capitalism for causing social problems. The former’s influence on the latter is vivid in the famous work, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, which according to Slavoj Žižek is the creed of Lukács’ Leninism.⁵³ Here, Lukács

⁵² Lukács had already published the theory of reification before the *Manuscripts* came out in the market as a posthumous publication. For a discussion on the fetish character of the commodity, see Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (England: Penguin Books, 1990), 163-177.

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, “From History and Class Consciousness to the Dialectic of Enlightenment...and Back” *The New German Critique* 81 (2000): 107-123.

identifies the salient points that make up the destructive effect of the so-called capitalistic economic enterprise. That capitalism is the consistent and ultimate cause of social problems is the categorical thesis of Lukács' essay.⁵⁴

Earlier, Marx accused capitalism of devaluing man and reducing him to the level of a commodity. The same argument is familiar to Lukács who argues with Marx that capitalism turns the laborer into a mere object for exchange, i.e., a commodity. The worker is commoditized. This commodification of the laborer is the central aspect of a new version of the critique of political economy. In Lukács, a pathological condition is given a new name, "reification." Simply put, alienation is reification. The deliberate disconnection of the laborer from the significant aspects of his "species-being" spells out the reifying tendency of capitalism. Upon close inspection, one can notice that this presupposition carries a negative idea about the occurrence of capitalism in human relationships. This is manifest in Lukács' attempt to establish a connection between human relationship and the economic system that now appears to overshadow it.

Capitalism commoditizes the worker. It changes the "qualitative" aspect of the human person. According to Lukács, in reification, "the relation between people takes on the character of a thing."⁵⁵ Commodity becomes man's "second nature."⁵⁶ The relation between men transforms into a relation between things. And this "thing-like" manifests in two ways: one is "objective;" the other, "subjective." The objective manifestation of the "thing-like" identity of human relation is pervasive in every capitalistic economic activity where "a world of objects and relations between things springs into being."⁵⁷ This objectification can be seen in the market activities where the exchange of commodities acquires higher relevance than the human individuals that enable it.

What is called the qualitative character of the human person is seen from a linear viewpoint. Here, the human person is now treated as an entity that co-produces a good amount of commodity side-by-side the machinery that he utilizes. Human work produces as many commodities as it possibly could because in the first place it becomes the capitalist's most effective machinery. Subjectively, therefore, "a man's activity becomes estranged from himself" and "turns into a commodity which must go its own way

⁵⁴ Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1976), 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

independently of man just like any consumer article.”⁵⁸ If reification is alienation, then the former must manifest the same pathological side. Lukács synthesizes the four moments of alienation in Marx into the two problematic features of reification, namely, “fragmentation” and “dehumanization.”

This radical alteration of treatment towards men entails “*a qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness*,” one that is called “the reified structures of consciousness.”⁵⁹ Being the originator of this renewed cognitive behavior, capitalism is now seen as the structure of a reified thought. It behaves as if it were the author of social reproduction. Capitalism is “the vendor” of the “objectified world.”⁶⁰ It sees the world the way it wants it to be. The capitalist consciousness revolves around the world, the laborer and his labor power. Lukács holds that in capitalism, i.e., the system of commodity exchange, the world has become “an abstraction,” a product of the capitalist “contemplative attitude.”⁶¹ But in what manner is this “contemplation” carried out?

“Rationalization” or “bureaucratic levelling” is the utmost form of the capitalistic “contemplation” and refers to the “calculative” tendency of capitalism.⁶² Bureaucracy entails the quantification of the amount of work to be done and of the method in carrying out the work; it employs a mathematical estimation of the desired outcome with a disposable figure of operational costs in production. With this calculative apparatus, capitalism brings out the greatest possible proficiency as regards the attainment of its goal, that is, the maximizing of profit. Through “rationalization,” capitalism carefully selects the economic subject and measures its potential for production. Here, the most fitting subject is discovered and molded. However, this can only be seen as an attempt to fit him into the mechanics of work and none other. When capitalism seeks and assigns its subject, it only does so in order “to exploit and dehumanize” it.⁶³ Bureaucracy is only after the profit of the capital. Thus, “bureaucratization implies the adjustment of one’s way of life, mode of work and hence of consciousness to the general socio-economic premise of the capitalist economy.”⁶⁴

Lukács points out that the capitalistic bureaucratic contemplation originates somewhere in time. It was born from the womb of modern philosophy, the Enlightenment. According to him, the slogan of the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 98, 99. Lukács’ italics.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 88.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 98.

Enlightenment is to build “a formal system of thought” and “to create” a world that is patterned to it.⁶⁵ Enlightenment had a strong faith in the power of human reason so that human relations and everything else can only be construed “normal” if they follow some rational scheme. Lukács’ point of departure is Kant who calls the rational scheme of thought as the “conceptual system of human understanding,” the faculty of Reason.⁶⁶ Accordingly, rationality not only brings into light the genesis and structure of the physical nature; it also *rigorously sets* the coherence of the same world. The world, once apprehended, is brought into the cognitive level where the templates of the human understanding assign to the world a whole new set of classification, of identity. The conceptual system of human understanding ascribes an identity to the object that exists outside it, the physical Nature. The categories of the human understanding have now created a new identity for what was once apprehended as external raw material, i.e., the physical world.

For Lukács, this creation explains the inception of *the content* of thought. Let us reverse the process at the moment: the content of our thought necessarily has an objective beginning in the external world. But because it doesn’t originate from thought itself, the object doesn’t share the same rational nature. This is because only the conceptual system, i.e., categories, of human understanding is rational. Hence, anything that exists spatially outside the mind is “Irrational.”⁶⁷ Simply put, the objective natural world is Irrational and thus needs “to be created.” Fortunately, human reason has categories around which the physical world revolves and acquires identity or “characteristic.” With this, rationality generates “valuation,” which means again the capacity to ascribe identity and value-judgment to the world.⁶⁸ Subsequently, notes Lukács, valuation leads to continual creation. And the specific relevance of something is transported, i.e., expressed in the dimension of exchange. So that whatever has importance is a value in itself.

This kind of valuation shares the social nature of the one who values the other. From this, whatever has value will necessarily enter the domain of exchange. Beneath the overarching philosophy of the bourgeoisie, the objective physical world and many others become “calculable,” “ordered,”

⁶⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁶ Ibid. For similar discussions on the Enlightenment’s excessive trust in Rationality, see Robert Pippin’s account of Kant’s notion of “coherent unity” in the first few pages of *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (USA: Princeton University Press, 2011), 6-9.

⁶⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 120-125.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 144-145.

“priced.”⁶⁹ Lukács holds that rationalism assumes the role of world changing power. What emerges in the Enlightenment is the consistent call to overcome irrationality and the transformation of the physical world through the categories of thought. The world cannot be left to “its own being, for in that case it would remain ineluctably ‘contingent.’ Instead, it must be wholly absorbed into the rational system of the concepts of the understanding.”⁷⁰ The challenge to transform the Irrationality of the given world is taken by the Enlightenment. Its tool to carry out the task is human rationality itself. With reason, the given world now appears to be created. For Lukács, the Enlightenment “resolves” actuality into “necessity.”⁷¹ Rationality is now seen to have created the world.

Lukács laid down an historical materialist critique of the bourgeois philosophy of the Enlightenment. For him, the latter’s anxiety about the imminent danger of Irrationality motivates it to develop the abstract principles of human understanding. There is something problematic with the manner the Enlightenment behaves. For Lukács, the bourgeois philosophy misunderstands the condition of its claim to be a world-creating power; it is blind to its “methodological limits.”⁷² For him, the bourgeoisie’s denial of the constitutive role of history in the reproduction of the social world is a symptom of its excessive trust in rationality. The contemplative thought of the Enlightenment is “unable to comprehend reality,” which is now “frozen” with its cold calculative power.⁷³ It fails to understand that the economy, which seems merely authored by the industry owner (whoever he might be), owes its existence to some historical forces. These are, for Lukács, the active historical agents who, although coerced by physical misfortunes, are able executioners of the “passive” contemplation of the other. Accordingly, they are the “individual historical monads.”⁷⁴ And they are responsible for carrying out the “structural forms,” i.e., the material condition of a society.⁷⁵ They execute the framework for the objective world: they are the proletariat, not the abstract concepts of human thought.

Lukács argues that the emancipation of the proletariat begins with his acquisition of the consciousness of his “present” reality.⁷⁶ Being the historical monad of the economic processes, the laborer becomes conscious of its being “objectified” beneath the contemplative calculation of the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁷¹ Ibid., 116.

⁷² Ibid., 154.

⁷³ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 159.

capitalistic enterprise. Now, she realizes that she is the “subject-object” in the historical processes.⁷⁷ That the individual worker is the subject means that she is the acting (active) agent who drains his “idiosyncrasies,” i.e., the “decisive qualitative categories of his physical, mental and moral existence.”⁷⁸ Whereas the bourgeois individual preoccupies herself with sheer contemplation, the proletarian individual drains his labor-power while building up the world. The proletariat, and not the bourgeoisie, represents the acting agent in history. For Lukács, it is the former who erects the “structural forms” of society. But at the same time, she is conscious of his being objectified, his thing-like self; he is aware of this objective, reified self. It is true that it is the proletariat who “employs the spinners,” but this does not save him from being employed by the capitalist bureaucracies. While working, she exists along-side his tools. From a viewpoint, the proletariat works in the same manner that his tools do. In the capitalist bureaucracy, both of them are calculated, objectified.

Only by the awareness of this “contradiction” can the proletariat be emancipated.⁷⁹ The historical knowledge of his present condition opens up the awareness that it is the working subject who created the social world. This conscious awareness “opens the emergence of the truly objective form of existence and the destruction of those categories of reflection which had deformed true objectivity,” and breaks the false process of this “doubling of personality,” of this “fragmentation.”⁸⁰ Therefore, “the proletariat is the conscious commodity.”⁸¹ For Lukács, this realization of the proletariat of his condition is a turning point of his conscious relation with the world of things that exist outside him and his being surrounded by individuals who just get released from the contemplative tendency of the bourgeoisie. As he finds herself beneath “the reifying cloak,”⁸² She also finds the other man. Lukács holds that the emancipation of the proletariat entails “the self-revelation of the capitalist society.”⁸³ That is, “beneath the cloak of the thing lay the relation between men; beneath the quantifying crust there was a qualitative, living core.”⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 166 – 167.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 161.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁸¹ Ibid., 169, 199.

⁸² Ibid., 166.

⁸³ Ibid., 168.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 169.

Max Weber and “The Spirit of Capitalism”

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber exposes “the social ethic of capitalistic culture.”⁸⁵ His insightful reading of capitalism can be viewed from two ends. On the one hand, she establishes an historical approach in identifying the motivational sources of the emergence of what became a “dominant” economic system of his time. And, on the other hand, his work stands as a kind of radical correction to the widespread influence of Marxian “historical materialism.” Weber does not view capitalism as a default economic system, but one that has a social origin among other systems. Also, she refrains from identifying capitalism with the broad concept of economy in general, arguing that the former is nothing more than a mere aspect of the latter. More importantly, he discards the idea that “culture” is a mere projection of the “mode of production,” the economic-material human condition, as contended by the historical materialist.⁸⁶ Rather, Weber holds that economy and culture coexist in time. With this in mind, he rejects historical materialism altogether, describing it as a product of a naïve conceptual analysis.⁸⁷

Despite this, when Weber speaks of domination, he means nothing less than the same notion found in Marx and Lukács, though not sharing the same conviction with them. Nonetheless, his contribution to social philosophy remains indispensable to the understanding of the tradition of social criticism. His briefly written yet most controversial work *The Protestant Ethic* contains the bold thesis that defies the deeply entrenched presence of capitalism in the social practices. “Capitalism dominates the economic life, educates, and selects the economic subjects which it needs through the process of survival of the fittest.”⁸⁸ For Weber, capitalism constantly attempts to structure human thinking and relationship on certain premises whose goals aim at nothing less than the acquisition of more and more, “forever renewed profit.”⁸⁹ However, mere profit-making does not constitute the essential aspect of a capitalistic economic activity. For Weber, profit-making is as old as the history of man, so that capitalism cannot be identified with it. This is because the former which is identical with the “impulse” to “acquisition of money and gain” is a default psychological makeup of men, regardless of gender and social standings. Accordingly, this impulse “exists and has existed among waiters, physicians, coachmen, artists, prostitutes,

⁸⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Great Britain: Routledge, 2001), 19.

⁸⁶ Cf. Marx, *The German Ideology*, 42-47.

⁸⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 20.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

dishonest officials, soldiers, nobles, crusaders, and beggars.”⁹⁰ Hence, to maintain that capitalism develops upon the logic of profit-making would be a mistaken assumption.

But, if not because of the aim to gain, what causes the emergence of capitalism? Having maintained his reservation toward historical materialism, Weber argues that capitalism generates from a particular culture, and not the other way around. “It originates from a way of life common to whole groups of men.”⁹¹ The capitalistic economic activity proceeds from the religious ethics of the Reformation. The said ethics is premised on the “obligation to fulfill” one’s “calling.”⁹² The “call” refers to God’s commandment to cultivate the “temporal gifts” endowed upon man. Mostly, these “gifts” manifest in material possessions or economic belongings. And the cultivation of them would further mean maximizing one’s material condition, both physical and economic. The calling is a task sent by God. The failure to improve one’s economic life would mean a disobedience to the task. In other words, a materially poor life is a concrete sign of neglect, while an affluent living means fulfillment of the said task. In order to fulfill one’s call, one must “work.” Work is the ethic of the religious life: the “colored maxim for the conduct of life.”⁹³ And the fulfilment of the call constitutes “the spirit of capitalism.”⁹⁴ Because of this, one can understand that the protestant ethic is itself the spirit of capitalism. Thus,

the question of the motive forces in the expansion of modern capitalism is not in the first instance a question of the origin of the capital sums which were available for capitalistic uses, but, above all, the development of the spirit of capitalism. Where it appears and is able to work itself out, it produces its own capital and monetary supplies as the means to its ends.⁹⁵

Put another way, capitalism is the necessary result of the ethics of work. The “calling” is the motivation for hard work. It connotes that every human person is necessitated by God to cultivate and maximize the temporal gifts endowed upon him or her: “the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could

⁹⁰ Ibid., xxxi.

⁹¹ Ibid., 20.

⁹² Ibid., 36.

⁹³ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

assume.”⁹⁶ To flourish in one’s material conditions would imply a cultivation of the gifts that God has entrusted to man. Again, what can be read behind the line is that the failure to flourish economically suggests one’s ingratitude to Divine Providence. According to Weber, in Calvinism, the concrete expression of neglecting “the call” is shown neither in heresy nor in rejecting the doctrine of “the saintly life.” Rather, the sheer disrespect to “the call” manifests itself in “asceticism”, which neglects one’s mundane, otherwise temporal obligation. An example of this is “the monastic life” which renounces “the duties of this world.”⁹⁷ Weber holds that, for the Protestant, the cutting out of oneself from the worldly affairs only shows the “ascetic’s” indifference to the world as a certain kind of “selfishness.”⁹⁸

The exact opposite of asceticism is “labor” in a “calling,” which is an external expression of “brotherly love.” Thus, “the fulfillment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way acceptable to God. It and it alone is the will of God, and hence every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God.”⁹⁹ For Weber, capitalism, which is a dominant economic system, has come to its full development because it has been adopted as the “core morality” of the Protestant sect.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, there is no other existing social and economic structure which enjoys intense power than the capitalist economic system. The “calling” is a task sent by God.¹⁰¹ Since the satisfaction of the economic standing can only be met with the growth of properties or investments, the Protestant “way of life” is now motivated to earn more and more. Fulfillment is identical with prosperity, where the latter is construed from the viewpoint of economics. Hence, capitalism is the utmost expression of a successful task carried through temporal matters. Weber says,

A specifically bourgeois economic ethic had grown up. With the consciousness of standing in the fullness of God’s grace and being visibly blessed by Him, the bourgeois business man, as long as he remained within the bounds of formal correctness, as long as his moral conduct was spotless and the use to which he put his wealth was not objectionable, could

⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁸ Weber identifies the four major Protestant Sects that arose from Martin Luther’s Reformation, namely, Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism and the Baptist sects. Ibid., 53-101.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 104-107.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 45.

follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so. The power of religious asceticism provided him in addition with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God.¹⁰²

That capitalism is cultural, that is, one which originates from “a way of life” of a group of individuals, is clear enough in Weber. Stretching the argument further, one can say that the said economic system that is strongly criticized by Marx and Lukács is now understood as a mere projection of, but one that is also very remote from, the psychological makeup of few individuals who are anxious about the afterlife and eternal damnation.¹⁰³ It turns out that the concern about the salvation of one’s soul is the practical birthplace of capitalism, in so far as Weber is concerned. “Calling” is the “ethical foundation” of capitalism, which is “directly willed by God” and is “a sign of God’s blessing.”¹⁰⁴

However, and importantly, what Weber does is more than identifying the birthplace of capitalism. Importantly, he conceptualizes, that is, accounts for its development. In doing so, he goes outside the discourse “on salvation.” Instead, a more philosophical thesis is developed. According to Anthony Giddens, Weber’s study, in general, transcends a mere description of “culture.” Weber’s works must be seen to point at the interplay between the psychology and economy of a culture. “Neither *The Protestant Ethics* nor any of the other studies was conceived of by Weber as a descriptive account of types of religion,” Giddens says. “They were intended as analyses of the divergent modes of the development of the rationalization of culture and as attempts to trace out the significance of such divergence for socio-economic development,” he continues.¹⁰⁵

If capitalism is born to the religious calling of the Protestant sect, then “rationalization” is the logic beneath its full expansion.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Ibid., 121.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 114, 117.

¹⁰⁵ Anthony Giddens, preface to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max Weber (Great Britain: Routledge, 2001), xiv.

¹⁰⁶ Weber’s concept of “rationalization” does not stand far from the position of Lukács. It might be even argued that Lukács patterns his take on rationalization along with that of Weber. One can read an account of this intellectual indebtedness in *History and Class Consciousness*, 95. For lack of a better space, the researcher does not anymore venture an extensive elaboration.

A New Look at Work: Renewing the Call to Recover the Subject of Work

Centuries passed but how different is the transformation of the dimension of work now with how this has been viewed in Marx, Lukács, and Weber? Has the chronological distance coupled with technological advancements been able to facilitate the favorable conditions that were being denied according to the literatures being revisited above? While *ITUC* can be read to have laid out damning reports about the regression of work globally, I would like to relocate the core of this problem in the issue about the relationship between work and the subject. I argue that the sophistication of work today does very little to recover the subject. This means quite a few things: first, that the worker today still suffers “alienation”; second, that the sophistication of work brings about more threat to what Marx and Lukacs calls “the object physical nature”, manifesting in the worsening global climate condition; and thirdly, that working condition at present can be seen today to manifest the need to underline the struggle for autonomy and integrity either in collective or individual pursuit. The idea is that today, as ever, capitalism, however this behemoth may be called, remains a monolith for exploitation. Because of this, the struggle for the recovery of both individual and collective humanity may now be read as a universal pursuit. This pursuit, being universal, transcends class. The recovery of the human as a subject of work may be engaged as a renewed calling. After all, in Weber, the salvation, that is, the redemption of the subject remains an active ethos.

Apropos of the renewed call for the recovery of the subject (both the individual and the collective) of work, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points to the danger that capitalism has only ever so slightly given up control over production. For Spivak, unfortunately, capitalism emerges triumphant decades after decades of having been contested both actively (as in the case of workers protests and unionism) and theoretically (in relation to a handful contestations brought about by the left and the new-left). It is not doubt that the cultural revolution of the 60s significantly effected changes on some social configurations, especially in the realm of the so-called “politics of identity”. However, this reception and opening up to a multiplicity of subjective positions with regard to gender preferences and calls for fair treatment of ethnicity succeeded only so much. While it opens up the space of the social for a more broader contexts of value pluralism, this cultural revolution did not influence significantly the economic set-up. Capitalism remains the dominant structure. As a matter of fact, according to Spivak, Capitalism masters the logic of representation. While for Marx, as well as for Weber, capitalism was just an irrational structure, for Spivak, this structure

has been conscious all along. Spivak says: “the capitalist is defined as the ‘conscious bearer [Träger] of the limitless movement of capital.”¹⁰⁷ The capitalist emerges as a persistent historical subject only to frustrate the aspiration of Lukács. In this case, “both in the economic area (capitalist) and in the political (world-historical agent), Marx is obligated to construct models of a divided and dislocated subject whose parts are not continuous or coherent with each other,” Spivak continues.¹⁰⁸

The necessity to recover the subject of work is instructive for the reason that such necessity also reconstructs the concept of work itself. Christophe Dejours looks at “work” more objectively through “clinical” optics: “work is what is implied...by the fact of working”.¹⁰⁹ Further, this “fact” involves the subjective components, such as, “gestures, know-how, the involvement of the body and the intelligence, the ability to analyze, interpret, and react to situations”, which in other words refers to “the power to feel, to think, and to invent.”¹¹⁰ These integral dynamics of work, i.e., the conglomeration of both the psychical and physical, may have been referred to but only in passing in the early sociological accounts. Dejours breaks them down in order to highlight the point that a capitalistic control over work has significant impact on the subject of work herself. And for an extension, by way of an inverse, the integral dynamics of work are what constitute of the subject of work. The psychical and physical dimensions are what constitute the “proletariats” who worked under heavy mechanistic condition during Marx’s time. The same dynamisms were integral but were not fully accounted for in Lukács, perhaps due to a certain commitment to prioritizing a “class” position. In the case of Weber, this dynamism is not denied even if it was only received ever so lightly. Weber’s stiff attention to economic proliferation to secure salvation backfired into a certain degree of oblivion to the psychic-physical conditions of the subject of capital. While it may be anachronistic to accuse Marx, Lukács, and Weber of conceptual neglect, the call to press their analysis further remains a significant task, especially in today’s context on “intelligent” work. Afterall, the subject of work is unified in a corporeal body which is not only “always involved from the outset” but is also exposed to all sorts of accidents and epidemic.¹¹¹ For his part, Dejours reactualizes the concept of “collection action” which constitutes “coordination and

¹⁰⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988). 71.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 71ff.

¹⁰⁹ Christophe Dejours, “Subjectivity, Work, and Action,” *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 7, no.1 (2006): 47.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

cooperation” among subjects of work.¹¹² The recovery of the subject of work is not isolated but may be treated as a strategic block leading to the formation of ties of solidarity among workers, sharing the same forms of misery under capitalist pressures (albeit under different degrees). This means that work is “a social relationship” in a space “characterized by relationships of inequality, power, and domination.”¹¹³ Elsewhere, unionism may embolden this collective subjectivity as part not only of the recovery of the subject but also in “the shaping of the collective will.”¹¹⁴

Against this contemporary resettlement, one time and again, still can reread in Marx, Lukács, and Weber an image of a society under the cold calculation of the capitalist economic system. In their frame of thought, a portrait of a “wretched” human condition effected by cold commodifying practices gets painted on a theoretical canvass, which appears to demand nothing more than a sympathetic notice. The alienating as well as the reifying tendency of capitalism is now seen from a viewpoint which on the outset appears to be indifferent, but when understood deeply can actually be seen to call for the rejection of all possible means that proliferates the logic of the capitalist bureaucracy. Marx’s bold, although methodically inexplicit, call for “emancipation” in the *Manuscripts*, received a profound elucidation in Lukács’ “quasi-vanguardist” account of “the phenomenon of reification.”¹¹⁵ Nothing is more explicit than their unanimous appeal to eradicate the dominant force that is responsible for the distortion of the social life, which refers to “the relations between men” in general.

For Marx and Lukács, the mechanics of political economy suffers from a paradoxical reversion. Accordingly, this is the contradiction that Adam Smith’s economic theory fails to see. All things being considered, the relationship between labor and commodity structure only shows a denial of the indispensable role that the former plays as a prerequisite to the development of the latter. If in the beginning there was labor already and the structure of exchange only proceeds from it, then labor deserves the existential priority, at least, in so far as a theoretical valuation is concerned. Further, if labor means “living labor” or a productive activity of a human person, then at the highest consideration, it is the worker who must be above

¹¹² Ibid., 55, 56.

¹¹³ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 58. (Elsewhere, on unionism, see also Nancy Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics,” pp.68, during The Tanner Lecture on Human Values. Delivered at Stanford University on April 30-May 2, 1996, especially p. 23. Downloaded from <https://tannerlectures.org/lectures/social-justice-in-the-age-of-identity-politics-redistribution-recognition-and-participation/>)

¹¹⁵ For an interesting account of the Leninist “political tone” of Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, see Žižek’s, “From History and Class Consciousness to the Dialectic of Enlightenment...and Back,” 108.

all valued. However, this is not the case with political economy. Capitalism denies this relationship; instead, it turns the “worker” into “the most wretched of commodities.” It reduces “human dignity and status” into the level of tools and instruments for the capital’s survival in the competition for and generation of profit.¹¹⁶ Marx speaks of the contradiction: “political economy starts with labor as the real soul of production; yet to labor it gives nothing, and to private property everything.”¹¹⁷

It appears that Marx sees the contradiction from this economic fact where the neglect of the human person is only shown after the underlying logic of political economy is revealed. Toward the last few paragraphs of “Estranged Labor,” Marx says that there is only one way to save man from his “servitude” to capital, i.e., “the emancipation of society from private property ... expressed in the political form of the *emancipation of the workers*,” although there never was a “blueprint” in carrying it out.¹¹⁸ While this may be true, one can read *The Communist Manifesto* to contain the political form of the emancipation of the proletariat.¹¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Lukács picks this up and later elaborates its philosophical justification in the third, fourth, fifth and sixth chapters of the third section of “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”¹²⁰ He emphasizes that the emancipation of the proletariat is carried out in the “positive” form, in order to overcome the contemplative behavior of the bourgeoisie.

Meanwhile, an elaboration of the “rationality thesis” comes to fore in the exposition of Georg Lukacs' Marxism. At the same time, as shown earlier, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* accounts for a similar critique. The historical gap between Marx's critique of political economy and Weber's “sociology of religion” carries some significant elements necessary for the continuation of an assault against capitalism. From here, the theoretical point where Marx, Lukács, and Weber converge enjoys a level of prominence since it is where the founding principle of the Frankfurt School is given with a secure footing.¹²¹ What transpires along their positions is the attempt to identify the layer within the human relationship which contains a certain amount of problematic behavior. While Marx locates the source of social pathology in the exploitation of “living labor” under capitalism, Lukács traces its reifying tendency back to the bourgeois philosophy of the Enlightenment. Sealing his

¹¹⁶ Marx, “Estranged Labor,” 82.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82. Marx's italics.

¹¹⁹ Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in the *Manuscripts of 1844*.

¹²⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 173-209.

¹²¹ Harvey Greisman and George Ritzer, “Max Weber, Critical Theory and the Administered World,” *Qualitative Sociology* 4 (1981): 34 – 55.

divergence from Marx and Lukács, Weber goes as far as arguing that capitalism, specifically Western Capitalism, proceeds from a “religious anxiety” about the afterlife.¹²² For Weber, a certain “bourgeois theology” lies beneath the expansion of the capitalistic enterprise, the theology of the Reformation.

As it turns out, it is the unmasking of the hegemonic tendencies of capitalism, which constitutes the unifying theme in the philosophies of Marx, Lukács, and Weber. Capitalism is said to be guilty of distorting the fabric of human relationship. Its bureaucratic nature has created a “new cosmos” subservient to the goal of “forever renewed profit.”¹²³ As discussed above, capitalism tends to permeate into and dominate the important aspects of the social life, namely, culture and economy. Through Weber and Lukács, we finally understand that the calculative tendency of the bourgeoisie sets the guiding motif of an individual person’s way of life and the her motifs on how to affect everyone around her. Capitalism behaves like a ruler over human subjects, both in her economic and cultural dimensions. Capitalism is, at its core, “world domination.”¹²⁴

References

- Dejours, Christophe. “Subjectivity, Work, and Action.” *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 7, no. 1 (2006): 45-62.
- Furendal, Markus et al. “The Future of the Philosophy of Work.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 41, no. 2 (2024): 181-201.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Greisman, Harvey and George Ritzer. “Max Weber, Critical Theory and the Administered World.” *Qualitative Sociology* 4 (1981): 34-55.
- Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1976.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* Volume 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. England: Penguin, 1990.
- _____. *The German Ideology*. Edited by C. J. Arthur. USA: International Publishers, 1995.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Martin Milligan. USA: Prometheus, 1988.
- Paganelli, Maria Pia. “Self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.” *History of Political Economy* 40, 2 (2008): 365-382.
- Pippin, Robert. *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit*. USA: Princeton University Press, 2011.

¹²² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 67.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts." *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, edited and introduced by Susan Dunn. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, pp. 271-313 (Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988).
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. Great Britain: Routledge, 2001.
- Zizek, Slavoj. "From History and Class Consciousness to the Dialectic of Enlightenment...and Back." *The New German Critique* 81 (2000): 107-123.

Internet Sources

- <https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-global-rights-index-2025-EN>. Accessed on Nov. 10, 2025
- <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/global-wage-report-2024-25-wage-inequality-decreasing-globally>. Accessed on Nov. 10, 2025
- <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/wage-inequality-has-declined-two-thirds-countries-worldwide-start-21st>. Accessed on Nov. 10, 2025
- Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics," pp.68, during The Tanner Lecture on Human Values. Delivered at Stanford University on April 30-May 2, 1996. Downloaded from <https://tannerlectures.org/lectures/social-justice-in-the-age-of-identity-politics-redistribution-recognition-and-participation/> . Accessed April 23, 2026