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# On value and abstract labour: A reply to Werner Bonefeld

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### Abstract

This article offers a reply to Werner Bonefeld's recent contribution to the debate on value and abstract labour, in which he critically engages with our previous articles dealing with these questions. We argue that Bonefeld's criticisms are not simply based on disagreements over these controversial issues, but also on a misunderstanding of our stance on abstract labour and value. In addition to clarifying our position, the article provides some brief critical remarks on Bonefeld's own intervention in the debate and shows that his contribution fails to offer a solid analysis of the fundamental categories of the critique of political economy.

### Keywords

value, abstract labour, materiality, social form

Werner Bonefeld has recently published an article in this journal (Bonefeld, 2010), in which he critically examines our contribution to the Marxian debates on the nature of abstract labour and value (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a; Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b; Starosta, 2008). While we welcome the critical reactions that our articles have stimulated, we feel that Bonefeld's criticisms are not simply based on disagreements over these controversial issues, but also on a misunderstanding of our position on those more

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abstract determinations of the capitalist mode of production. Since we believe that this misunderstanding has led Bonefeld to fail to reconstruct our argument accurately, we would like to use this short note to clarify our stance on abstract labour and value. Also, we shall offer some brief critical remarks on Bonefeld's own intervention in the debate. In this way, we shall argue that despite his claim to make explicit what is already implicit in Marx's treatment of abstract labour and value in *Capital* (Bonefeld, 2010: 261), he actually departs from the latter considerably. More importantly and regardless of 'what Marx really said', we show that Bonefeld's contribution fails to offer a solid analysis of the fundamental categories of the critique of political economy.

At the broadest possible level, Bonefeld rightly captures the essence of our argument: namely, we claim that while value is the simplest economic form specific to the capitalist mode of production, abstract labour (i.e. the former's social substance) is a material expenditure of human corporeality that bears no historical specificity (Bonefeld, 2010: 259, 270). However, beyond this very general point, which Bonefeld finds 'intriguing' (Bonefeld, 2010: 259), he misunderstands and/or misreads our position on several scores. Here, we shall mention only a few of them.

In the first place, he states that we 'see abstract labour as a transhistorical category that in capitalism is "represented" by the value-form' (Bonefeld, 2010: 259), when we state very clearly that it is *materialised* or *objectified* abstract labour that is socially represented in the form of value (or 'coagulates', in Marx's parlance. See Marx, 1976a: 142). This might seem an all-too-subtle difference, and therefore a minor issue. But this is precisely one of the central points on which, among other things, our critique of the circulationist view of labour as becoming abstract through the exchange of commodities against money rests (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 20; Marx, 1976a: 152-3).

Second, Bonefeld misrepresents our careful textual reconstruction of Marx's dialectical presentation in the opening chapter of *Capital*. Where we state that Marx's initial discovery of abstract labour in the first few pages of Chapter 1 only brings out the physiological materiality of abstract labour without actually explaining why this productive expenditure of human corporeality in general objectifies in the historically-specific form of value (Starosta, 2008: 308), Bonefeld reads exactly the opposite: that 'the analytical reduction of value to its substance reveals only the capitalist representation of abstract labour – it does not tell us anything about its generic materiality' (Bonefeld, 2010: 260).<sup>1</sup> In addition, we explicitly argue that Marx's starting point is the commodity as the most abstract form of capital (thus a social form specific to the capitalist mode of production) (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 16, Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 28) and that, as a consequence, his dialectical presentation consists in the 'ideal reproduction' of the 'immanent determinations' characterising this historical form of social wealth (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 35; Starosta, 2008: 298). This should be done by taking 'the individual product in our hand and [analysing] the formal determinants that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity' (Marx, 1976b: 1059). And yet, according to Bonefeld, we state that 'before developing the capitalist categories, Marx first sought to "discover" their generic material presupposition' (Bonefeld, 2010: 260).<sup>2</sup>

Third, we are said to postulate that 'class struggle rests on and develops the fundamental contradiction between transhistorically conceived materiality and social form' (Bonefeld, 2010: 261). Bonefeld seems to have in mind here the contradictory existence

of abstract labour as a generic material determination which in capitalism acquires a historically-specific social determination as substance of the most general social relation, namely, value (Bonefeld, 2010: 258). In other words, he appears to be suggesting that we consider the class struggle as the unmediated expression of this latter contradiction of the capitalist mode of production (Bonefeld, 2010: 269). But, on the one hand, we argue that the essential immanent contradiction of capitalism is between its *historically specific materiality* and its social form. This is why we highlight capital's inner *tendency* for the development of the *universality* of productive subjectivity, which only this mode of production brings about, and only on the basis of previously achieved historical presuppositions (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 39; Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 30; Starosta, 2011; Marx, 1993: 162). This entails a historically specific socialisation and universalisation of the *concrete character of labour*. In this strict sense, the materiality of abstract labour is of no immediate relevance to our argument. And far from endorsing positivist notions of progress (Bonefeld, 2010: 272), we explicitly note the alienated character of this historical process and the material mutilation of their productive subjectivity that workers suffer due to the inverted existence of their social being as an attribute of dead labour (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 37). On the other hand, the whole gist of our critique of De Angelis revolves around the historicity of class struggle as a specifically capitalist social form. More precisely, against its widespread 'ontologisation' in many Marxist currents, we see the class struggle as the most general collective *direct* social relation through which the *indirect* unity of social labour through the commodity form asserts itself (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 28). In other words, in our approach the foundation of the class struggle is socially mediated through and through, and has nothing to do with an abstract, unmediated contradiction between transhistorical materiality and social form, as Bonefeld believes.

Finally and more importantly, Bonefeld further claims that we consider that 'the transhistorical materiality of abstract labour obtains through specific historical forms' (Bonefeld, 2010: 272: 259), presumably because, in his (mis)reading, we allegedly argue that 'abstract labour is the material foundation of the human metabolism with nature' (Bonefeld, 2010: 259). Against this, we actually state that it is labour in its material unity as conscious productive activity (which always has a two-fold material character, abstract and concrete), that constitutes the specifically human form of the life process, i.e. the human species-being (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 19-20). As for abstract labour and its 'historically changing social forms', we are absolutely emphatic and unequivocal that, despite its character as a generic material determination of labour, its role as mediator in the establishment of the unity of the social character of productive activity is uniquely capitalist (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007b: 16). Since this is probably the main source of Bonefeld's confusion over our position, we shall say a few more words on this crucial point.

Perhaps the single most important point that we tried to make in our articles in this regard is that the contemporary view of abstract labour as the specifically capitalist form of labour, downplays, or simply obliterates, the actual historical character of value-producing labour. This historical specificity, we argued, lies in the *private and independent* form taken by social labour (or private labour for short). Our contributions therefore were not simply a case for the generic material nature of abstract labour but, more fundamentally, an attempt to restore the centrality of private labour in the debate over the

determinations of the value-form.<sup>3</sup> In order to bring out this historical specificity and the determination of abstract labour in it more clearly, let us first examine the case of non-capitalist societies.

All those 'first social forms' that precede capitalism (whether patriarchal, ancient or feudal) were based on direct personal relations in production (Marx, 1993: 156), in which the process of social reproduction was established through the 'natural or political super- and subordination of individuals to one another' (Marx, 1993: 159). Although all individual labour also had a social character in those societies, the material unity of the process of human metabolism as a whole was consciously organised before production actually took place and, therefore, 'it was the distinct labour of the individual in its original form, the particular features of his labour and not its universal aspect that formed the social ties at that time' (Marx, 1987: 275). In other words, it was the *concrete* character of labour, its particularity, which directly or immediately realised the establishment of the material unity of the social division of labour (Marx, 1976a: 170). This does not mean that abstract labour, as the universal or general aspect of the materiality of the labour of the individual (i.e. the expenditure of brains, nerves, muscles, etc., regardless of its particular form), did not exist or had no reality. But it did not act as the social form of individual labour and, consequently, its materialisation in the product (its existence not as 'motion' but as 'rest' – see Marx, 1993: 143) did not have to be socially represented in the form of value or in any other social form whatsoever. When social labour is consciously organised through direct social relations, 'there is no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality' (Marx, 1976a: 170). This is why Bonefeld cannot find any reference to other historical forms of social representation of abstract labour in our papers other than the capitalist form (Bonefeld, 2010: 259). To put it in plain English, it follows from our approach that there are no other historically specific social forms of representation of (congealed) abstract labour. And note that, in opposition to what Bonefeld believes we think, this applies to communist society as well. As the fully conscious organisation of the social life-process by the thereby free individuality of universally developed individuals (Marx, 1993: 158), communist society will not mediate the establishment of the unity of social labour on the basis of the abstract or general materiality of individual labour (i.e. of abstract labour). As much as the first social forms based on relations of personal dependence, the communist stage of development of the human species-being will establish the social character of labour on the basis of its concrete character. Communism consequently does not entail the affirmation of the abstract character of labour as social mediator beyond its capitalist integument. It involves the abolition both of value and of the alienated social determination of abstract labour as substance of that objectified form of social mediation. *Contra* Bonefeld, however, it does not and cannot conceivably entail the abolition of the abstract character of labour either, whose material determination as universal aspect underlying the varied useful kinds of labour remains a 'physiological fact' (Marx, 1976a: 165). The object of revolutionary action is not the overcoming of abstract labour but of private labour, through the conscious production of the direct association of the thereby truly free individuals.

Let us now return to the private character of labour that defines the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of existence of human productive activity. This mode of

production 'presupposes the dissolution of all fixed personal (historic) relations of dependence in production, as well as the all-sided dependence of the producers on one another' (Marx, 1993: 156). This means that at the very moment when the human individual has to set into motion the expenditure of her productive subjectivity in a particular concrete form, the only remaining social nexus among the private producers is that each of them embodies an aliquot part of the total labour power of society (Iñigo Carrera, 2007: 51). As Marx puts it in the section on the fetishism of the commodity, 'from this moment on, the labour of the individual producer acquires a twofold social character' (Marx 1976a: 166).<sup>4</sup> As in any other mode of production, she has to expend her productive subjectivity in a socially useful form. However, she has no manifest direct social relations that could tell her how to articulate the exertion of the individual labour power that she embodies with the needs of the rest of society. The material unity of the social division of labour is thus manifested indirectly through the determination of the products of labour as generally exchangeable things, i.e. as bearers of value. But as we argued at length in our articles (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 22), this *social* equivalence of different use-values as commodities can only be premised on the *material* identity of the varied useful labours as a physiological expenditure of human labour power in general, that is, 'as labour whose materiality as the expenditure of human labour power has not yet assumed a specific concrete form' (Iñigo Carrera, forthcoming). The private labour of the commodity producer thereby acquires a second, historically specific social character that must mediate the affirmation of the first sense of labour's sociality discussed above. Its material or physiological aspect as human labour in general (i.e. as abstract labour) has to socially relate the varied privately undertaken labours by 'congealing' in the form of the 'ghostly' objectivity of value (Marx, 1976a: 166). But in doing so, abstract labour does not abstractly negate its generic material nature; instead, it gives this materiality a unique social determination in the establishment of the unity of social labour. To put it differently, abstract labour as such cannot be simply identified with value-producing labour. The latter actually is *privately performed (socially necessary) abstract labour*. The following passage from Marx's section on the form of value (hardly a Ricardian one!), nicely and succinctly captures this twofold determination of abstract labour in capitalist society (material/generic and social/historically specific):

The innumerable equations of which the general form of value is composed equate the labour realized in the linen with the labour contained in every other commodity in turn, and they thus convert weaving into the general form of appearance of undifferentiated human labour. In this manner the labour objectified in the values of commodities is not just presented negatively, as labour in which abstraction is made from all the concrete forms and useful properties of actual work. Its own positive nature is explicitly brought out, namely, the fact that it is the reduction of all kinds of actual labour to their common character of being human labour in general, of being the expenditure of human labour-power.

The general value-form, in which all the products of labour are presented as mere congealed quantities of undifferentiated human labour, shows by its very structure that it is the social expression of the world of commodities. In this way it is made plain that within this world the general human character of labour forms its specific social character (Marx 1976a, 159-60).<sup>5</sup>

### *Bonefeld on value and abstract labour*

Methodologically, Bonefeld's perspective on abstract labour can be inscribed within the broad tradition initiated by Rubin, which we have already extensively critiqued in an earlier article (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 16 and ff.). Briefly put, through an axiomatic declaration of principles that stated that 'political economy does not analyse the material-technical aspect of the capitalist process of production, but its social form' (Rubin, 1973: 1-2), Rubin dogmatically ruled out from the outset all possible material character in the determination of abstract labour. As we have argued, the result was the formalist substitution of a 'sociological theory of abstract labour' for Marx's analysis of the commodity. Along the same lines, Bonefeld adopts an idiosyncratic 'social form-analytical' approach that, by definition, 'says that capitalist economic categories do not have a transhistorical validity' (Bonefeld, 2010: 263). And also like Rubin and in opposition to Marx, he 'applies' this approach to the 'concept' of abstract labour instead of starting out 'from the simplest social form in which the labour-product is presented in contemporary society' (Marx, 1975: 198) and seeing what the analysis of this 'concretum', the commodity, tells us about its own immanent determinations (including abstract labour among them). In this way, Bonefeld unsurprisingly concludes what he already knew from the beginning on the basis of his general methodological principles: namely, that 'abstract labour is a specific capitalist form of labour' and that to claim otherwise inevitably ends up naturalising capitalist economic categories (Bonefeld, 2010: 259). Again like Rubin, he assumes that in order to secure his conclusion he needs to deprive abstract labour of all generic materiality.<sup>6</sup>

Bonefeld, however, admits that our reading of *Capital* is on strong textual grounds, but seems to attribute this strength to an alleged ambiguity on Marx's part in the treatment of abstract labour. According to Bonefeld, 'he defines it in asocial physiological terms, and insists that it is a specifically capitalist form of labour' (Bonefeld, 2010: 258).<sup>7</sup> But rather than being ambiguous, the logic of his argument should lead him to claim that Marx's treatment of abstract labour is definitely and simply *wrong*. In effect, in the section on the twofold character of labour, Marx states that 'if we leave aside the determinate quality of productive activity, and therefore the useful character of the labour, what remains is its *quality* of being expenditure of human labour-power (...) a productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.' (Marx, 1976a: 134, emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> The originality of Bonefeld's contribution lies precisely in the rejection of the validity of this initial analytical move in which Marx discovers the abstract or universal aspect of the materiality of human labour by abstracting from its concrete particularity.<sup>9</sup> Whereas most Marx scholars who see abstract labour as historically specific would not deny this 'physiological fact', but would argue that this is not the correct 'concept' of abstract labour as substance of value (and some would also claim that Marx tended to confuse the two), *Bonefeld directly denies the reality of a material identity among the various kinds of useful concrete labours, irrespective of the problem of the connection between this 'physiological' abstract labour and value-production*.<sup>10</sup> For Bonefeld, 'in (material) reality' there is only concrete labour; the physiological identity between different useful labours has no materiality, hence no reality.

The real existence of labour is always concrete. Every physiological expenditure of labour is expenditure of concrete labour. That is, physiological expenditure of labour entails a specific productive application, and is thus concrete. Muscles do not burn sugar in the abstract. *Labour is concrete labour, not labour in the abstract.* (Bonefeld, 2010: 266)<sup>11</sup>

This outright rejection of the reality of the physiological determination of abstract labour leads Bonefeld to challenge Marx's discovery of a material identity between the various kinds of useful labours as sheer expenditures of human labour power. Instead, he argues that 'if we abstract from the useful labour expended on a product, we do not discover the so-called "generic materiality" of abstract labour. What we find is matter, something for use, furnished by Nature' (Bonefeld, 2010: 264).<sup>12</sup> But if this is so, how is it possible for different commodities to establish an exchange relation given that, as Bonefeld rightly claims, 'exchange cannot take place without equality, and equality not without commensurability' (Bonefeld, 2010: 265)? Since in his view, this commensurability cannot be grounded on the universal material determination of all human labour, he must of necessity conclude that that this equality is 'socially imposed' on irreducibly diverse concrete labours. This social imposition, his argument goes, is actually the subsumption of the variety of human activities to 'abstract time' (Bonefeld, 2010: 262).

According to Bonefeld, the reality of abstract labour and its objectification is not the premise of the exchange of use values as commodities (i.e. as material bearers of value), but rather is in the first place 'forcibly brought about by exchange' (Bonefeld, 2010: 264). This abstraction then 'projects the ghost of value that achieves validity in the form of money, back into production (...) that sucks living labour dry, reducing it to a "time's carcass"' (Bonefeld, 2010: 266). In so far as products are exchanged, concrete labours come to be considered as labour in motion that is in turn measured by labour time, 'a time of abstract, constant, and equal time units, measured by clock time', 'a homogeneous and empty time' (Bonefeld, 2010: 268). In other words, the 'abstraction' that socially forces the equalisation of otherwise irreducibly unequal human labours is their subjection to the same economy of time, so that 'the expenditure of labour does not occur in its own good time. It occurs within time – a time made abstract, and imposing' (Bonefeld, 2010: 267). Thus, in this view the different private labours are not socially related as equal on the basis of their existing material equality as expenditures of human labour power regardless of its form. Rather, their equality is forcibly imposed upon their irreducible material heterogeneity through their social reduction to an embodiment of abstract time. Strictly speaking, then, it is not first and foremost labour that becomes abstract but, more fundamentally, the time that measures concrete labours (the abstraction of labour being derivative of this according to Bonefeld's train of thought).<sup>13</sup>

This theoretical construction definitely parts company with the analysis of the commodity made by Marx, who after discovering the abstract character of labour as the substance of value asks, 'How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured? By means of the quantity of the "value-forming substance", the labour, contained in the article. This quantity is measured by its duration, and the labour-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days, etc.' (Marx, 1976a: 129). In other words, (socially necessary) labour-time determines the *magnitude* of value or constitutes value's *quantitative* determination. But the abstract character of (privately-undertaken) labour constitutes the substance of value and therefore constitutes its *qualitative* determination.

Moreover, as the quote from Chapter 1 reproduced in the previous section makes clear, abstract labour plays that part in the qualitative determinacy of value not simply as abstraction from concrete particularity, but in its 'positive nature' or *quality* as expenditure of labour power in general. In brief, whereas Marx in *Capital* clearly distinguishes between the qualitative and the quantitative determination of value, Bonefeld conflates them and actually converts the determinant of the magnitude of value into its qualitative content. Thus he approvingly quotes Bensaid's confused view that 'time appears simultaneously as measure of value and as its substance' (Bensaid 2002: 80, cited in Bonefeld, 2010: 267). Very much like Rubin's contribution, Bonefeld's approach suffers from a conceptual collapse or amalgamation of categories, not only value and abstract labour, but also their qualitative and quantitative determinacy.<sup>14</sup>

Still, Bonefeld's contribution cannot be simply read as a reinstatement of Rubin's position. In fact, he recognises limitations in Rubin's circulationist strand of thought (Bonefeld, 2010: 274). Thus, he tries to reconcile some of the insights found in the circulationist approach with a perspective that gives the sphere of production its due place in the determination of the value-form. He partly draws on the works of Chris Arthur and of Riccardo Bellofiore, but also takes insights from De Angelis's view of abstract labour as imposed work and therefore a concrete form of the class struggle (Bonefeld, 2010: 267). We have offered an in-depth critical assessment of the latter perspective in an earlier article in this journal, so we will not repeat our arguments here. Bonefeld, however, does not engage with our detailed critique of the idea of abstract labour as a mode of existence of the class struggle.

More importantly, Bonefeld's argument on abstract labour is either circular or incomplete. Thus, he grounds the abstract character of labour as activity in the projection of the ghost of value 'forcibly brought about by exchange' (i.e. the form of general exchangeability of commodities) back into production. But this begs the question of how different use-values can become formally identical, and thereby establish an exchange relation in the first place. Surely not on the basis of their identity as materialisations of abstract labour, since, according to Bonefeld, the latter is explained by the exchange relation itself. As we argued in our critique of Rubin and his contemporary 'circulationist' followers, to postulate that commodities are equal because they exchange and that they exchange because they are equal involves a logically fallacious reasoning. Alternatively, he would have to ground the abstract character of labour in a further social form taken by social labour, but this analytical step is missing from Bonefeld's account, thereby rendering his explanation incomplete.

## Endnotes

1. On this specific point, Bonefeld completely glosses over the relevant methodological distinction between the analytic and synthetic phases of the dialectical exposition that is more fully developed in Starosta (2008).
2. This obviously does not preclude the possibility that the dialectical analysis of the commodity encounters more abstract determinations that pertain to the social production process in general, and are therefore not specific to capitalist society. However, two methodological points are in order. First, these more general determinations are not discovered as external presuppositions of the concrete social form under investigation, but as an aspect of its immanent content. This means that they are not discovered by finding the common elements



between capitalism and other modes of production (and here Marx's methodological remarks on 'production in general' in the 1857 Introduction are insufficiently dialectical, or at least not rigorous enough). Instead, they are discovered by searching 'within' the singularity of the individual commodity as the simplest economic 'concretum' of capitalist society (Marx, 1975: 199). Following from this, the judgement about the validity or relevance of these more abstract determinations should not be the result of the application of general methodological principles, whether 'historical materialist' or 'form-analytical'. Dialectical analysis must proceed by 'reflecting in ideas the life of the subject-matter' (Marx, 1976a: 102) without any methodological prejudice.

3. It also aimed at emphasising the materiality of private labour as a historic form of development of human productive subjectivity. Bonefeld overlooks these other, more important aspects of our intervention in the debate. In fact, the private character of labour is mentioned only once in Bonefeld's article and, furthermore, in a rather confused (if not incoherent) formulation: 'The peculiar social character of labour in capitalism comprises the existence of private labour as "directly social in its character"' (Bonefeld, 2010: 263). The essence of the private character of labour is precisely the indirect nature of its immanent social character!
4. This means that the negation of the individuality of the human subject implied in her reduction to mere bearer of an aliquot portion of the total social labour power emphasised by Bonefeld is a historically specific determination. However, it does not follow from this that it is not the individual material expenditure of human corporeality that produces value, as he further concludes. It only means that, from the perspective of value-production, the only exertion of individual labour power that matters is that which is socially necessary (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 32; Marx, 1976a: 129; Marx 1986, 274).
5. As we shall see below, Bonefeld evidently reduces abstract labour to its 'negative' determination as 'abstraction from the concrete character of labour' and wholly misses its own 'positive' nature.
6. One possible source of Bonefeld's misunderstanding of our position is that he seems to be projecting his own formalistic method onto our substantive argument. Thus, he sees our approach as a mirror image of his own: all categories should be treated as a unity of an invariant generic material content and a historically specific social form. At this stage of our argument, it should be clear that nothing could be farther from our method.
7. Unfortunately, we are afraid that we cannot return Bonefeld's complimentary comment on the textual strength of our reading of Marx's *Capital*. The textual evidence supporting his claim that Marx insists that abstract labour is a specifically capitalist form of social labour is rather weak. In fact, like Rubin he tends to conflate value and abstract labour (simply assuming on the basis of general methodological principles that if value is specific so must be its substance, which is precisely what he should actually demonstrate). He then takes passages in which Marx is referring to value and 'applies' them to abstract labour. For instance:

'Marx conceives of abstract labour as a "purely social reality" that can only appear in the social relations of "commodity to commodity"' (Marx, 1983: 54). (Bonefeld, 2010: 259)

The text that Bonefeld is paraphrasing is from the second paragraph of section three of Chapter 1, 'The form of value or exchange-value', but a cursory reading suffices to see that Marx is unequivocally referring to value as having a purely social reality and not to abstract labour.

8. The reason for the emphasis in 'quality' will become clear below.
9. The full grounding or actual explanation of this initial analytic discovery (the 'why' rather than the 'what') occurs only later in Marx's presentation, in the synthetic phase of the dialectical exposition in chapter one that starts in Section 3 'The form of value or exchange-value'. On this, see Starosta (2008).

10. Cf. Rubin and his tripartite division of the concept of labour into 'physiological labour', 'socially-equalised labour' and 'abstract labour'. Similarly, Murray (2000) distinguishes between the general concept of abstract labour and the capital-specific 'practically-abstract labour'. As we have argued in relation to Rubin, the introduction of additional categories obscures rather than sheds light on the inner connection between materiality and social determination of abstract labour in capitalism (Kicillof and Starosta, 2007a: 23). Be that as it may, note that even authors on whom Bonefeld relies heavily do not seem to deny the reality of the physiological determination of abstract labour. They just do not consider that that is the relevant concept as the substance of value. Thus, Heinrich dismisses the physiological definition because it is a 'mental abstraction, in which at any rate any labour can be subsumed, irrespective of whether it is commodity-producing or not' (Heinrich, 2008). However, he does not seem to question the reality of the physiological determination.
11. Bonefeld seems to be offering a peculiar reason for his rejection of the reality of a material identity between different kinds of labour (i.e. of 'physiological' abstract labour), namely: it cannot be apprehended through sensuous perception. 'Abstract labour is not a substance that one can touch, see, smell or eat' (Bonefeld, 2010: 266).

Unless we are missing something, this statement relapses into the crudest kind of empiricism, which seems strange coming from someone who has made interesting and sophisticated methodological contributions to dialectical thought (see, for instance, Bonefeld, 1992). The fact that a certain determination is only accessible to us by means of thought or what Marx calls the 'power of abstraction' (i.e. by means of the specific attribute that sets our species-being apart from other life-forms) does not deny its materiality. No one can touch, see, smell or eat gravity. And yet it is obviously a real material determination of all bodies, as anyone jumping out of the window can tell.

12. We have to confess that we are simply perplexed by Bonefeld's denial of the reality of the underlying universal material identity between different useful labours. For us, and Marx seemed to believe this as well, it is just a self-evident fact. We are afraid we cannot even find ways of engaging with that view.
13. In our view, there is nothing historically-specific about 'abstract' time per se. Time is a *quantitative* differentiation of nature in which therefore *quality* is sublated (see Hegel, 1999: 189, although as usual he inverts the real determination into a category of 'pure thought' which is then repeated in an external form in nature). In this sense, time is always 'abstract' if by this we mean indifference to quality. As Marx notes in the passage that Bonefeld quotes, this temporal dimension of nature exists in human activity as well: 'Just as motion is measured by time, so is labour by *labour time*', which is 'the living quantitative aspect of labour as well as its inherent measure' (Marx, 1986: 272). What Bonefeld describes as 'abstract time' is actually a concrete *expression* of the alienated relation of human beings to the materiality of their own life-activity entailed by value-production. And this obviously includes its temporality. But it is not the *ground* of the value-producing character of labour.
14. Before *Capital*, Marx himself had not fully established the 'positive material nature' of abstract labour as expenditure of labour power in general. That is why it is possible to find several occasions on which he uses formulations that conflate qualitative and quantitative determinacy of value and abstract labour, especially in the *Grundrisse* but even as late as the 1859 *Contribution*. On this, see Iñigo Carrera (forthcoming). Bonefeld himself acknowledges that there is a potential tension in the way he handles qualitative and quantitative moments of the determination of value, but does not see this as a problem since 'there is no substance without measure' (Bonefeld, 2010: 273 fn. 12). This is true enough, but that is precisely the reason why his sheer dissolution of qualitative determination into quantitative determination of value is problematic: he is postulating a 'measure without a substance', that is, without a quality whose magnitude is being measured.

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