

## Original Paper

# Interpreting the Temporal Ideas in *Das Kapital* and Their Contemporary Implications

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### **Abstract**

*In contemporary society, technological advancements have continuously enhanced social productivity. However, the progress of capital logic and the forceful competition mechanisms have imposed a severe sense of time urgency on individuals. Simultaneously, within limited leisure time, people find themselves ensnared in the consumption trap constructed by capital. Time has gradually lost its orderly rhythm and narrative tension, atomizing into scattered points without any inherent support. Once connected to nature and human essence, time has now undergone a complete rupture from these factors under the reshaping influence of capital, becoming the chain that firmly locks workers within the framework of capital production. Drawing on the rational aspects of both old materialist and idealist perspectives on time, Marx revolutionarily linked time to practice and material production activities, bringing about a transformative shift in temporal thinking. In *Das Kapital* utilizing time as a crucial key, he exposes the true nature of the bourgeoisie and calls upon the proletariat to embrace class consciousness, undertake their historical mission, and strive for a communist society where free time universally prevails. A thorough examination of Marx's temporal ideas in *Das Kapital* and their integration with contemporary realities can provide valuable guidance for overcoming the temporal challenges faced by modern society.*

### **Keywords**

*Das Kapital, time, commodities, surplus value, freedom*

## **1. The Revolutionary Transformation Realized by the Temporal Ideas in *Das Kapital***

Time has always been a prominent topic in the history of philosophy. The development of Western temporal thought, from Plato to modern times, mainly encompasses three factions: the physical conception of time, represented by Aristotle and Newton, advocates for time as an absolute objective existence closely linked to motion; the theological interpretation of time, represented by Augustine, subjectivizes and theologizes time, aiming to demonstrate the eternity of God, establishing a connection

between time and the subject; the liberating concept of time, primarily represented by Kant, considers time as “a priori sensuous intuition,” achieving the subjective objectification of time and linking it with freedom, albeit confined to the phenomenal realm and the thing-in-itself, without successfully resolving the contradictions between the two (Note 1). In Western philosophical thought, time is either an objective existence unrelated to humans, a subjective conception extended by thought, or a priori sensuous intuition. The relationship between time and human society fluctuates between proximity and distance, suspended in the air above the world, until the emergence of Marx, who brings time into the realm of human affairs. Marx, building on a critical appraisal of preceding doctrines, creatively develops his own temporal ideas. In *Das Kapital* he constructs time from three perspectives: the philosophical standpoint—time is the social time based on practice, achieving a shift towards a materialist historical perspective on time; the political economy standpoint—critically exposing time exploitation in capitalist society through the critique of capital logic; the communist standpoint—asserting that the universal possession of free time is the inevitable path to achieving communism (Note 2).

From the first perspective, the previous conception of time regarded it as unrelated to humans, uniformly elapsing as an abstract, linear, and continuous time. This rendered all historical processes flattened and homogenized into non-historical time. Marx connects time with practical activities, where social practice serves as the historical foundation and driving force of time, achieving a correct linkage between time and real individuals. In Marx’s view, time is an active existence for humans, a measure of life, and a space for human development (Note 3).

From the second perspective, Marx exposes temporal exploitation in capitalist society through the abstraction and commodification of time, addressing two aspects of the “legitimate” occupation of labor time. At the outset of *Das Kapital*, Marx introduces the concept of commodities, portraying capitalist society as a vast accumulation of commodities. To facilitate the smoother exchange of commodities on a broader scale, concrete labor is gradually abstracted until it evolves into a quantifiable attribute measurable with specific goods. The original characteristics and attributes of labor are completely obscured. In capitalist society, time is also commodified. A segment of an individual’s lifetime is subjected to “equivalent exchange” with capitalists, granting them natural ownership rights over this period. During this time, if workers deviate from the capitalist consciousness, it is considered a breach of contract, akin to a form of theft. In the law of surplus value production, Marx reveals how capital, in its pursuit of endless surplus value production, continually shortens necessary labor time, extends surplus labor time, diminishes socially necessary labor time, enhances social productive forces, yet leads to ongoing unemployment and decreasing wages for workers. This generates an inherent, unmanageable contradiction in capitalist society, unveiling the historical trend of capitalism’s inevitable demise.

From the third perspective, free time is the time utilized for developing the abilities of individuals and the potential of society without pursuing any direct practical goals. It is the time for human self-creation, self-service, and self-choice.

The development of capitalist society objectively promotes the shortening of labor time and the extension of free time. However, in a society based on private ownership, the extended free time becomes surplus labor time unremuneratedly seized by capitalists. In *Das Kapital* Marx, utilizing his theory of time, sketches a blueprint for the future society—universal possession of free time forms the basis for human liberation. The materialized time scale measuring wealth will be discarded, and in the logic of capital, abstracted homogeneous time becomes the value form for measuring wealth. Simultaneously, the pursuit of surplus value by capitalists inevitably leads to the contraction of workers' free time. In the future, free time will become the measuring scale of social wealth, realizing the dialectical unity of free time and labor time. Free time is labor time, and labor becomes the primary need for individuals who continuously objectify their self-consciousness in the objective world through practice.

## **2. Interpretation of Temporal Ideas in *Das Kapital***

### *2.1 Commodities and Time*

Capitalist society manifests as a “vast accumulation of commodities,” representing the aggregation of various use values that constitute the material foundation of social productivity (Note 4). The use value of a commodity serves as the material bearer of its exchange value. The need for exchange arises because items with different use values belong to different owners. Two commodities with different use values can be exchanged, indicating a certain commonality between them that allows for quantitative conversion. When we strip away the use value of commodities, which is the specific labor embodied in them, commodities become the product of human intellectual and physical labor. Concrete labor produces the use value of commodities, while abstract labor produces the value of commodities. The value of a commodity is determined by the undifferentiated human labor that goes into forming the commodity, with the quantity of labor measured by the duration of labor, such as the modern units of time created by humans, such as days, weeks, and months. However, if we calculate value in this way, does it mean that the lazier a person is and the lower their production efficiency, the higher the value of the commodities they produce? The process of commodity exchange is a socialized one, and the labor that produces a commodity, from a societal perspective, is of the same kind. Therefore, the value of this commodity is determined by the social average value entity embedded within it, specifically the socially necessary labor time. “Socially necessary labor time is the time required to produce a certain use value under the existing social conditions of production, considering the average skill and intensity of labor in society.” For example, a piece of cloth that once took a manual worker an hour to weave can now be completed in just 30 minutes with the help of machines, resulting in a halving of the value of the cloth.

Labor, viewed from one perspective, is the means of production aimed at achieving specific purposes, resulting in the creation of use value. From another perspective, it is simply the expenditure in the physiological sense, representing undifferentiated, generic human labor. The increase in labor productivity leads to a higher quantity of commodities produced within a given time, yet the use value of an individual commodity remains unchanged. Consequently, the total use value increases,

accumulating as the material content of societal wealth. However, abstract labor, detached from specific forms, determines value solely based on the quantity of abstract labor, or labor time. While labor productivity increases over a certain period, the amount of labor, or labor duration, remains fixed, and a certain amount of labor must now be distributed among more commodities. In essence, as the material content of societal wealth grows, the value of an individual commodity decreases, giving rise to this dialectical movement rooted in the dual nature of labor.

The exchange of commodities has undergone a lengthy developmental process. Initially starting with barter, where commodity holders exchanged goods to enhance the usefulness of their possessions, the evolution of exchange value led to the general value form and eventually the development of money. Money facilitated the separation of the form and substance of value, externally manifesting as the opposition between commodities and money. The emergence and evolution of money aimed to facilitate the exchange of the same social unit—human labor—to obtain more use value. However, with the ubiquity of commodities, people began to forget the specific labor that produced them. There was little concern for the use value of commodities, and even the connection between labor time and value was overlooked. Human labor became equated with the manifestation of value—money. Money obscured social relations between individuals, creating an illusion that commodities possessed a natural ability to attract money, and money, in turn, seemed to possess a magical power to bring countless use values and even social power.

Within the process of commodity exchange, the commodities held by both sellers have value for themselves but lack use value. To actualize the use value of a commodity, it must first be realized as value. However, for the value of a commodity to be realized, it must demonstrate its use value. The private labor of the commodity producer, on the one hand, only becomes exchangeable when it possesses certain utility, meeting a societal need and proving itself as part of the social division of labor, qualitatively distinct from the private labor of others. On the other hand, the purpose of commodity production itself can only be realized when this private labor, as part of the total social labor, is recognized by society and can be exchanged for another form of private labor. This is the dual contradiction inherent in the labor of commodity production. While commodity owners aim to transfer their goods in an individual process, the realization of the value of commodities is a societal process. They must undergo a “perilous leap”—a process that cannot simultaneously be individual for all commodity owners and societal. If commodity exchange fails to accomplish this “perilous leap,” it is not the commodities themselves that shatter but their owners. The intrinsic contradiction between use value and value, concrete labor and abstract labor, private labor and social labor unfolds along the dimension of time, becoming a profound crisis concealed within capitalist society.

## *2.2 Surplus Value and Time*

The commodification of time resulting from the ubiquity of commodities is merely a superficial phenomenon. The deeper reason lies in capital’s insatiable appetite for surplus value. The secret of surplus value production lies in the capitalist’s relentless extraction of labor time from the workers.

Capitalists realize that it is not the commodities or money per se that create value; it is the labor power that creates value. The transformation of labor power into a commodity is a significant feature of capitalist society. Capitalists, through the “equivalent exchange,” “legally” appropriate the labor time of the workers. This labor time can be divided into two parts—necessary labor time and surplus labor time. The necessary labor time of the worker reproduces their own value, while the value produced during surplus labor time is uncompensated and appropriated by the capitalist, constituting the secret to their profits. However, all of this is done under the cover of “equivalent exchange” and is thoroughly concealed under the guise of materialized time. People perceive time as a unidirectional, linear measurement—a timeline composed of countless identical points. Superficially, when labor contracts are signed, employers and workers negotiate the daily working hours and wages, so the wages received by workers are considered an equivalent value for the labor time within the contract. However, the value created by the worker may only require half of their necessary labor time. With the increase in labor productivity, this time span continually shortens, leading to more surplus labor being appropriated by the capitalist. Yet, from the worker’s perspective, they are providing the same amount of labor within the specified time according to the labor contract. Materialized time becomes thoroughly solidified under the impetus of surplus value production.

In capitalist society, socially necessary labor time not only determines the value of commodities but also symbolizes the scale and value of human life. As life becomes a commodity that can be freely bought and sold, human existence undergoes complete alienation. Workers reproduce their own value within the necessary labor time, manifested as the price of labor power. According to Marx, the commodity of labor power possesses the same attributes as other commodities, and its value is likewise determined by the socially necessary labor time required for its reproduction. This value is reflected in the value of the goods produced within the socially necessary labor time, encompassing the value of the necessities for the normal living conditions of the worker and their family, as well as the expenses for the worker’s training. Due to the competitive mechanism inherent in capitalist society, the continuous increase in labor productivity shortens the labor time required to produce a single commodity, thereby reducing the value contained in a unit of the commodity. However, the use value embodied in a unit of the commodity remains unchanged. This trend prompts a relative decline in workers’ wages, despite the possible concealment of this fact by absolute growth in productivity. Once workers have fully produced their own value, their labor becomes “surplus labor” for the capitalist, entirely appropriated by them. Capitalists employ various means to extend surplus labor time while shortening necessary labor time, including either absolute extension of the length of the working day (absolute surplus value production) or shortening the necessary labor time while relatively extending the surplus labor time (relative surplus value production). Considering moral and biological limits, capitalists primarily employ the method of relative surplus value to promote surplus value production.

Capital shapes time to produce social power with the aim of value accumulation. On one hand, the changing form of time determines the development process of modernity. Capital, through the shaping

of spatial-temporal aspects of production, forms a modern time consciousness. Capital logic pervasively infiltrates human social life, encompassing consumerism in daily life and the pursuit of limitless accumulation of surplus value in production. The bourgeoisie attempts to transform bourgeois ideology into universal values, internalizing it among various social strata, and portraying capitalist society as the end form of human society using the concept of modern time to eternalize capitalism. On the other hand, social sequences of time and power mechanisms are continually produced. Capital, through the dominance of abstract labor, governs the entire world, and the standard of global production is set by capital. Through the universalization of commodity production, societal power is firmly held by the bourgeoisie, solidifying capitalist production relations as the sole relations of human production, perpetually engaged in production aimed at the accumulation of surplus value.

### *2.3 Labor Time and Free Time*

The defining feature of capitalist society is the commodification of labor power. Labor power as a commodity has both value and use value. Its value, like that of other commodities, is determined by the socially necessary labor time required for its reproduction, i.e., the value of the material goods necessary for the survival of the worker. The use value of labor power is labor itself. Through the process of equivalent exchange, capitalists employ workers for their labor. However, within a certain working day, workers not only produce their own value but also a labor surplus beyond the necessary labor time—a surplus labor time, generating surplus value for the capitalist. Both necessary and surplus labor times are phenomena persisting in every period. Necessary labor constitutes the foundation of societal existence, while surplus labor showcases the development of societal productivity. In capitalist society, due to the dual influence of private ownership and wage labor, necessary labor and surplus labor become entirely opposed dimensions—either one or the other. With societal progress, capitalist production has entered the era of relative surplus value production. Machines significantly increase labor productivity, reducing necessary labor time, prolonging surplus labor time, and simultaneously displacing and expelling workers, turning them into an industrial reserve army. The increase in labor productivity lowers the value of commodities, leading to a decrease in the value of the worker. Despite some resistance to this pattern during the development of capitalism, it is an ongoing trend. Thus, on one hand, the necessary labor time of workers continues to decrease, while surplus labor time constantly lengthens. Although societal productivity continually advances, free time should logically extend, yet the exploitation of workers intensifies. The opposition between necessary and surplus labor times characterizes the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The wealth and freedom of the capitalist class are achieved by appropriating the labor time of the proletariat, adding their necessary labor time to the workers. On one side is the constant accumulation of poverty, on the other side is the continuous accumulation of wealth. Labor time continually produces more social wealth, laying a solid foundation for free time. The development of science and technology creates a practical dimension for the extension of free time. However, on the other hand, technological advancement also provides capitalists with new methods to intensify exploitation. While machines enhance labor productivity, they pose a threat of replacement and

unemployment for workers. As automation progresses, a large number of workers are displaced, becoming surplus labor or part of the industrial reserve army, exacerbating the miserable conditions of the working class. The development of digital technology, in particular, blurs the boundaries between production and leisure, turning the entertainment of the masses into a productive process. Workers, from waking to sleeping, devote all their time to creating value for capitalists. The production of entertainment, by “serving” the public and casting them in the role of consumers, not only willingly involves them in creating value for capitalists but also compels them to sacrifice their leisure time, creating data and value for capitalists.

Marx’s concept of free time refers to the span of time in which individuals, devoid of any labor purpose, can fully explore their potential. Free time is the source of tremendous development in human creativity, subjectivity, and scientific understanding, serving as the foundation for the comprehensive development of human freedom. The universal possession of free time entails the complete abandonment of individual private ownership, achieving the unity of labor time and free time. Labor becomes the primary need for human survival, allowing individuals to fully develop themselves in practice. Free time is the practical path to achieving human liberation. In *Das Kapital* using time as a guiding thread, Marx explores the secrets of capitalist development, presenting the unresolved contradictions inherent in capitalist society that will ultimately lead to its dissolution and humanity’s transition to communism. The unlimited accumulation of surplus value in capitalist society propels the development of societal productivity, serving as the real foundation for human liberation. The improvement of labor productivity simultaneously creates the possibility for the realization of free time. However, within the production relations of capitalist private ownership, the shortened labor time resulting from technological advancements paradoxically leads to more surplus labor time being seized by capitalists, empowering them to exert greater control over the working class. The working class needs to continually cultivate proletarian consciousness, recognizing the class contradictions with the bourgeoisie and assuming the historical mission to hasten the victory of communism and the demise of capitalism.

### **3. Contemporary Insights from the Temporal Ideas in *Das Kapital***

In the industrial era, humanity created a world where the temporal system gained independence, no longer controlled or monopolized by any entity. Conversely, it began controlling everyone, becoming an alien force. Linear, one-way time emerged as the spokesperson for a cold, alien, lifeless, and meaningless physical world. The world detached itself from the constraints of the natural environment and direct life experiences. We are no longer interconnected with the natural world but exist and work in an industrialized world created by humans. Time is no longer a symbol of the natural rhythm but symbolizes the monotonous repetitive actions of machines, binding humanity to these repetitive motions. Time becomes the conductor, the supreme standard of value. Punctuality is the highest virtue in contemporary society, with schools serving as models for implementing the temporal system in the technological age. They cultivate students’ sense of time required for the technological era—a necessity in this age. Time is

omnipresent, constantly there, yet not as naturally inherent as in traditional societies. Time is divided into working time and leisure time. We spend our working time doing things we might not necessarily want to do, then seize entertainment in our leisure time. Time is assigned value; time is money. The price of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time required to produce it. Labor, being unquantifiable, becomes quantifiable only through labor time, endowing time with value and turning it into a commodity. All modern inventions aim to enhance efficiency, to save time. However, after taking control of time, people invent and manufacture numerous things to help them pass the time. Being idle is an absolute commandment in the technological age; wasting time is wasting life. Despite various inventions and creations in the technological age designed to help humans save time, the paradox is that people find themselves increasingly busy and unable to pause. The crucial insight from the reinterpretation of the temporal ideas in *Das Kapital* lies in making people aware that they are falling into this temporal predicament and understanding its root causes. Simultaneously, the revelation from the time concepts in *Das Kapital* suggests a future societal trend: the continual reduction of alienated labor time and the extension of free time. This dimension of free time provides a practical possibility for constructing a better life for humanity.

Capitalist logic reinforces and solidifies the consciousness and concepts of time as commodified entities. Time management becomes increasingly meticulous, forcing modern humanity to progress along a linear timeline, relinquishing dominance and control over time. All of this is a consequence of the accelerated erosion caused by capitalist logic. Constant acceleration is an inherent requirement for the survival of capital—to achieve more accumulation of surplus value, there is a need to continually increase labor productivity, thereby elevating the overall societal labor productivity. To achieve faster value realization, capital needs to constantly eliminate space with time, promoting globalization until the development of digital technology renders physical space distances negligible. Busyness becomes a significant criterion for measuring individual value, and the concept of an accelerated society deeply ingrains itself, making individuals slaves to time, losing all leadership and subjectivity. Marx's perspective on time emphasizes the subjectivity of time; time is generated in individual practical activities. Individuals must establish an active, creative, and independent subject in time, mastering the rhythm and pace of time rather than being driven forward by it.

Under the dominance of capitalist logic, consumption has deviated from its initial purpose. Due to the vast accumulation of commodities produced in capitalist society, their true value can only be realized through consumption, completing a cycle of capital. Capital processes this ideology, alienating consumption completely. Modern societal consumption more closely resembles a mandatory social relationship. Unlike production, consumers, under the erosion of such ideology, gradually accept their consumer identity. Therefore, the alienation of consumption time is more concealed and firm compared to production time. Originally, free time was meant for individuals to engage in leisure activities and explore their potential. However, its meaning has been completely subverted, being hijacked by consumerism, becoming the most significant aid to help capital realize value. The working class has



become an efficient assistant in their own exploitation. To break free from this situation, it is necessary to adhere to the guidance of Marx's Marxist view of time, step out of the trap of consumerism, establish a correct view of leisure, and achieve the free and comprehensive development of individuals.

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## Notes

Note 1. Huang, J. & Bao, J. The Genesis, Connotation Narrative, and Contemporary Value of Marx's Time View: A Textual Study Based on Capital and Its Manuscripts. *Journal of Shanxi University (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 35, no. 10, 2023, pp. 15-21.

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Note 4. Marx, K. *Das Kapital* (Volume 1). People's Publishing House, 2004.