ARGUMENT
BIANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL
e-ISSN 2084–1043 p-ISSN 2083–6635
Published online: 31.03.2025
Vol. 14 (2/2024) pp. 201–214
www.argument-journal.eu

The jargon of productivity

An inquiry into the seizure of critical thought by political economy

Filip BRZEŹNIAK-KUJDA*

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ongoing domination of philosophical vocabulary and imagination by political economy, focusing specifically on the views of Marxism and Critical Theory. Drawing particularly on a reconsideration of Jean Baudrillard's critique of productivism within Marxism, as presented in *The mirror of production*, the paper departs from Baudrillard's argument to explore the relationship between language, theory and its authors. Inspired by Theodor Adorno's critique of the jargon of authenticity, the paper introduces the concept of "the jargon of productivity". Herbert Marcuse's reflections on labour serve as a key example. By tracing the connections between the jargon of productivity and the jargon of authenticity, the article uncovers the hidden obsessions and blockages that hinder emancipatory processes. The concluding reflections emphasise the necessity of scrutinising the interplay between language and the socio-economic forces it both reflects and reinforces within philosophical and critical endeavours. This article goes on to lay the groundwork for future research into the role of economic language in psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, offering insights into how these fields engage with economic discourse.

KEYWORDS

work; labour; production; productivity; political economy; critical philosophy; critical theory; Theodor Adorno; Jean Baudrillard; Herbert Marcuse; Anson Rabinbach; jargon; authenticity; language

* Ph.D. candidate, Graduate School for Social Research, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw. E-mail: filip.brzezniak@gssr.edu.pl.

DOI: 10.24917/20841043.14.2.3

INTRODUCTION

The old notion, born alongside philosophy itself, that the philosopher does not labour or work but rather rules, counsels or teaches in the civilisation of labour returns *à rebours* as an accusation — a charge the philosopher now seeks to deny. This defence manifests through the ceaseless metrics, forms and other bookkeeping activities demanded by university and state bureaucracies. The philosopher validates the assertion of being a cog in the grand Enlightenment machine by presenting numbers and reports as evidence of their labour (Foucault, 1984). Through these proofs, the philosopher, perhaps even a social critic, takes on the guise of a well-adjusted worker within the very same system they complain about on other occasions.

The second audience for this spectacle is society — both external and internalised as the judgment of the superego. Here, the notion of "being a productive member of society" brands the philosopher as an impostor, and they feel the weight of this judgment. The requirement of "having a job" and "working" pierces the old safeguards of scholarly prestige and privilege — whether that of the philosopher in the royal court or bourgeois civil society. In a civilisation where labour reigns supreme — an abstract ideal akin to "the good" that it is often equated with — philosophers find themselves in a peculiar predicament.

To alleviate this pressure, the language of philosophy adapts. In a neurotic response, the philosopher begins "producing knowledge". If that is insufficient, their concepts must "work"; their thoughts must become "effective" and "productive". These elements in their texts serve as tangible evidence of labour, sites where abstract work is not only witnessed but is also extended into potential future endeavours. Passages like this generate additional, literal and metaphorical, "workplaces" within the philosophical enterprise. The adoption of economic language here is symptomatic of what the philosopher does in response to the abstractness of labour and its widespread valorisation.

Of course, philosophy constantly borrows — or steals — from the languages of others, whether they be disciplines, peoples or times. This is not an innocent act but a forceful one, with its own set of consequences, the most significant being that philosophy itself is often stolen by the very object of its own theft. Contemporary philosophical discourse is no exception, and there is a substantial risk for those schools of philosophy that consider themselves c r i t i c a l — whether this term is being used in reference to a particular program and style of thinking developed around the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt or to unrelated thinkers who position themselves negatively against power structures, oppressive norms and exploitative "dispositifs".

Elizabeth Grosz noted this risk concisely: "Critique always affirms the primacy of what is being critiqued, ironically producing exactly the thing it wants to problematize" (Kontturi & Tiainen, 2007: 255). Yet, just a few sentences

later, Grosz advocates making feminism more "productive". Ultimately, for some post-structuralist thinkers, and those influenced by this paradigm, the wish is only to find a better way to "accelerate" the "productive" forces. In doing so, they unwittingly prolong the domination of political economy in our thinking. This illustrates the underlying problem that is not addressed in the conflict between negation and affirmation. No matter the method or axioms, a certain monotonous vocabulary that has not been reflected upon — a social force that guides, pre-judges, and pre-decides from the shadows — maintains its power. A jargon, one might say. Perhaps, then, the crucial point is not to hastily abandon critique but to heed Herbert Marcuse's admonition: "Critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis" (Marcuse, 2009: 115).

My intervention arises out of frustration with the current state of affairs and pursues specific preliminary aims. I am not attempting an exhaustive account of the sources and users of the jargon of productivity in contemporary philosophical discourse. While I briefly refer to psychoanalysis and post-structuralism[1] — particularly their roles in centring work in the psychic processes and mechanising philosophical language — these areas require further analysis. Instead, I begin with a revision and reconsideration of Jean Baudrillard's critique, integrating Adorno's analysis of crypto-fascist language in the philosophy and societies of his time. This juxtaposition also facilitates reflection on the relationship between the notion of authenticity, as discussed by Adorno, and the drive toward productivity examined in the paper. More importantly, I seek to conceptualise the jargon of productivity, tracing its infiltration of frameworks, sentences and trajectories.

UNFORGETTING BAUDRILLARD: FROM SUBVERSION TO SUBMISSION

Provocatively, and with a hint of cynicism and the tone of theoretical trolling, Baudrillard opens the preface to his unjustly forgotten — or at least dismissed — *The mirror of production*, by appropriating a cliché from *The communist manifesto*:

[1] In a few places, Baudrillard extends his analysis to psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, noting: "What we have said about the Marxist concepts holds for the unconscious, repression, Oedipal complex, etc." (Baudrillard, 1975: 49). This link between Marxist and Freudian schemas on labour is echoed by contemporary scholars: "Freud's theory of mental apparatus more or less explicitly equated thought and labour, proposing something like a 'labour theory of the unconscious'" (Tomšič, 2022: 110). Baudrillard sees Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's approach as a "revolutionary", "optimistic" variation on old, "pessimistic" Freudianism, which was based more or less on the principles taken from the field of economy (like Marxism with its "needs" and "capacities"), presented as the science of energetics. In this sense the liberation of the Unconscious means the liberation of the productive capacities of the Unconscious.

> A specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical theory of the mode of production does not touch the principle of production. All the concepts it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the contents of production, leaving production as a form intact. This form reemerges, idealized, behind the critique of the capitalist mode of production. Through a strange contagion, this form of production only reinforces revolutionary discourse as a language of productivity. From the liberation of productive forces in the unlimited "textual productivity" of Tel Quel to Deleuze's factory-machine productivity of the unconscious (including the "labor" of the unconscious), no revolution can place itself under any other sign. The general formula is that of a productive Eros. Social wealth or language, meaning or value, sign or phantasm — everything is "produced" according to a "labor" (Baudrillard, 1975: 17; emphasis added).

As in the *Manifesto*, Baudrillard critiques figures emblematic of broader historical tendencies — in this case, Deleuze (and elsewhere in the book, Sigmund Freud). However, the primary target of his critique lies elsewhere. Baudrillard directs his attack towards the legacy of Karl Marx and Marxism, exposing what he sees as their fundamental mistake: an uncritical fixation on political economy. For Baudrillard, this "error" and the preoccupation with economic thought in general are the main target of his critique of the "principle of production" (Baudrillard, 1975: 17) and, more broadly, the forms of political economy which he argues remain unchallenged even with the appearance of theoretical and practical critiques of capitalism. According to Baudrillard, historically contingent concepts of political economy — and the corresponding framework as a whole — are often treated as if they were transhistorical or ahistorical. Retroactively, political economy projects itself onto past societies, colonising their conceptual space. But if one cannot conceive of societies before the emergence of political economy, i.e. without its concepts as points of reference, then how can one envision societies after its dissolution? While Marx's critique of capitalism is effective within the framework of that paradigm, it fails to offer alternatives that transcend its logic. Baudrillard goes further, asserting that Marx overlooked the deep entanglement between the order of production and its modes of representation, claiming that "these two orders are inseparable" (Baudrillard, 1975: 20). Consequently, the "objective" categories Marx employs to critique political economy remain unexamined in their historical specificity. Indeed, Baudrillard provocatively suggests that Marx's critique replicates the same flaw Marx himself identified in Feuerbach's critique of religion:

> At a much higher level, his critique falters under his own objection to Feuerbach of making a radical critique of the contents of religion but in a completely religious form. Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but still in the form of political economy (Baudrillard, 1975: 50).

Baudrillard points out that Marx never tried to dialecticise dialectics, historicise history or ultimately to ask what and how production gets produced. Here we can again pose the question that we are struggling with: Does critical theory not produce production, does it not "reproduce" production with all the baggage that those terms carry, at the level of revolutionary promises? This failure and the acceptance of the foundational assumptions of productivity and transcendent, abstract labour limit the "revolutionary imagination". For Baudrillard, true liberation requires freeing ourselves from the categories of political economy and their multifaceted roles. These categories do not merely describe an "objective reality" of labour in capitalism, they also construct a theory with which one risks identifying oneself. He writes:

> The system of political economy does not produce only the individual as labor power that is sold and exchanged: it produces the very conception of labor power as the fundamental human potential. More deeply than in the fiction of the individual freely selling his labor power in the market, the system is rooted in the identification of the individual with his labor power and with his act of "transforming nature according to human ends." In a word, man is not only quantitatively exploited as a productive force by the system of capitalist political economy but is also metaphysically overdetermined as a producer by the code of political economy (Baudrillard, 1975: 31).

While retaining ultra-left passions, the book stands as a monument to Baudrillard's intellectual departure from Marxism. In a footnote, Baudrillard underscores Marx's pivotal role, stating that Marx "played an essential role in the rooting of this productivist metaphor" (Baudrillard, 1975: 18). While the roots of this obsession with labour and productivity stretch back to German Idealism — Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Ying, 2014) — Baudrillard emphasises Marx's unparalleled influence, describing him as "an unconditional reference" (Baudrillard, 1975: 18) for those seeking alternatives to capitalism.

For Anson Rabinbach — historian of 19th-century obsession with fatigue and its counter-obsession with labour and productivity, embodied in the figure of the "human motor" — Marx stands at the forefront of the socialist version of productivist utopia. Marx appears as one of many figures and tendencies striving to reduce or eliminate fatigue and burden, so as to unlock human productivity and optimise it to achieve a state of hyper-productivity. While the legacy of reflections on *poiesis* and *praxis* remains central to Marx's thought and particularly to Marxism, Rabinbach attributes to Marx, above all, re-conceptualisation of the category of labour power (*Arbeitskraft*). This concept is rooted on the one hand in earlier considerations of *Kraft* (Rabinbach here mentions Jakob Böhme, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Johann Gottfried von Herder and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel) and, on the other, in the modern

thermodynamic revolution[2] which stripped labour of its earlier humanist or religious values — redefining it as a measurable force, a universal energy. Ultimately, labour power becomes the fundamental category of *Capital*, Marx's critique of political economy. As Rabinbach summarises:

> The discovery of labor power — and its subsequent elaboration in political economy, medicine, physiology, psychology, and politics was emblematic of a society that idealized the endless productivity of nature. Semantically, this meant that the word "work" was universalized to include the expenditures of energy in all motors, animate as well as inanimate. The Promethean power of industry (cosmic, technical, and human) could be encompassed in a single productivist metaphysic in which the concept of energy, united with matter, was the basis of all reality and the source of all productive power — a materialist idealism, or as I prefer to call it, *transcendental materialism*. The language of labor power was more than a new way of representing work: it was a totalizing framework that subordinated all social activities to production, raising the human project of labor to a universal attribute of nature.
>
> The nineteenth-century distinction between labor and labor power thus expressed a remarkable shift in the magnitude of social explanation. Labor became an ordering principle of both nature and society (Rabinbach, 1990: 4; emphasis added).

Baudrillard's critique is multifaceted and undoubtedly requires more thorough investigation. At this juncture, however, we have enough understanding for our purposes. We are not focusing on the alternative he proposes in this book or others. Instead, we aim to explore a thread that has been largely neglected thus far: his emphasis on the language inherited from political economy, language that has engulfed revolutionary and critical philosophy, extending its influence to ever more aspects of social and human life. This language, far from being merely descriptive, serves as a continuation of political economy's logic. To pursue this thread, we will employ tools developed by Theodor Adorno — a move suggested by Baudrillard's text itself, when he points to the connection between the drive for production and a certain sense of authenticity:

> The capitalist system of production is to be subverted in the name of an authentic and radical productivity. The capitalist law of value is to be abolished in the name of a de-alienated hyperproductivity, a productive hyperspace (Baudrillard, 1975: 18; emphasis added).

[2] At the same time, according to Rabinbach, thermodynamics marks a departure from the foundations of political economy and the anthropological vision of labour (Rabinbach, 1990: 36). Nothing is further from the truth. It is rather the case that political economy adapted to the energetic paradigm post facto and through language. This becomes all the more evident the closer one adheres to the vocabulary of its forms, as Baudrillard recommends.

It is only through labour that is freed from the constraints of capitalism that the full potential of human-inhuman labour power, its productivity, can be fully optimised. This is authenticity.

JARGON: FROM AUTHENTICITY TO PRODUCTIVITY

The central term jargon of productivity is not merely a verbal reference to Theodor Adorno's seminal work, *The jargon of authenticity* (1973). Adorno's book provides a methodological framework and, intriguingly, highlights an overlooked connection between authenticity and productivity. It helps us establish a critical distance from the language of philosophy and society at large, resisting its naturalisation — the process by which language becomes self-evident and invisible. Rather than relying on goodwill to focus solely on the intended message, we should critically interrogate how something is said: which terms are used, how they are valued and what purposes they serve. Only from this vantage point can we begin to register the mechanisms of communication.

Much like our examination of the jargon of productivity, Adorno was able to identify a series of terms that constitute the jargon of authenticity he critiques: "existential", "in the decision", "commission", "appeal", "encounter", "genuine dialogue", "statement", "concern", "authentic", and "inauthentic". Adorno emphasises, however, that this list is not intended as an *Index verborum prohibitorum* but as a foundation for analysing the linguistic functions of jargon (Adorno, 1973: 6–7). What are these functions? How do they arise? And what do they reveal about the jargon itself?

While these terms are concepts of the German existentialist philosophy which Adorno is critiquing (*inter alia*: Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Martin Buber and, most prominently, Martin Heidegger), this discourse is not limited to an exclusive group of thinkers. Adorno situates it within broader societal institutions — schools, businesses, advertising, administration, theology, and youth organisations. Why such a broad scope? Adorno explains that:

> The importance of this jargon is not to be underestimated simply because a small group writes it. Innumerable real-life people speak it, from the student who in his exam lets himself go on about authentic encounter, to the bishop's press secretary [...]. Their unmediated language they receive from a distributor (Adorno, 1973: 19).

In cases of authenticity and productivity, the jargon is never a neutral "technical language", but a medium saturated with unspoken judgments. By tracing this jargon across institutions (and by extension, philosophers, even deceased ones, as para-institutional poles of influence), Adorno dismantles the illusion

of philosophy as an exclusive, detached endeavour. Instead, he exposes it as socially embedded and complicit in broader dynamics of power. The focus then is not on any particular argument but on the broader currents of influence carried by this language. This aligns with his earlier warnings about the persistence of the underground authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies Adorno was interested in:

> I do not wish to go into the question of neo-Nazi organizations. I consider the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy. Infiltration indicates something objective; ambiguous figures make their comeback and occupy positions of power for the sole reason that conditions favor them (Adorno, 1998: 90).

Jargon itself operates as such an infiltration. Subtle and unnoticed, it shapes the underlying logic of discourse. Adorno underscores this when he notes that while the models of this jargon existed before 1933, it became pervasive only after Nazi language fell out of favour (Adorno, 1973: 19).

In a similar way, the jargon of productivity is not confined to a narrow group of philosophers. It emerges as a survivor of critiques (of political economy) and the social upheavals that, to varying degrees, challenged capitalism. In this sense it is different as it survives and continues to flourish as the result of criticism that did not go far or deep enough. One might even correlate its development with the shifting status of industry (but that is perhaps a discussion for another time) in developed countries. This jargon, far from being a relic, adapts to new contexts, shaping the logic of the society and constraining imaginative alternatives.

Analogously, Adorno describes the jargon of authenticity as "a waste product of the modern that it attacks" (Adorno, 1973: 45). Its words become "products of the disintegration of the aura" (Adorno, 1973: 10) — an aura whose disappearance was noted by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2008), and is now artificially evoked by existentialist rhetoric to mystically reclaim meaning in a meaningless, disenchanted world. For Adorno, this whole situation is rooted in the domination of political economy. Its apex lies in the contradiction that time ostensibly free from production does not feel like freedom but rather as a break from the only activity imbued with authenticity and productivity. Adorno observes:

> Socially, the feeling of meaninglessness is a reaction to the wide-reaching freeing from work which takes place under conditions of continuing social unfreedom. The free time of the subjects withholds from them the freedom which they secretly hope for; their free time chains them to the ever-same, the apparatus of production — even when this apparatus is giving them a vacation (Adorno, 1973: 35–36).

The realm of "production" is so overarching that even "free" or "spare time" is subordinated to its rules of unfreedom. In another text Adorno explains this even more clearly:

> In accordance with the predominant work ethic, time free of work should be utilized for the recreation of expended labor power, then work-less time, precisely because it is a mere appendage of work, is severed from the latter with puritanical zeal (Adorno, 1991: 164).

Adorno could scarcely have predicted how far these dynamics would extend, with discourses of "self-development" and "working on oneself" saturating supposedly "free time". "Personal growth" as always already "economic growth", from simple reproduction of labour to expanded reproduction.

If the jargon promises meaning in a world bereft of it, we must ask how the jargon "plans" to achieve this. As previously mentioned, this conditioning occurs through (a strict subjection to) the specific language, but Adorno delves deeper into its mechanisms. He highlights how the jargon of authenticity merges the mundane with the elitist, the archaic with the modern-bureaucratic — an operation often found in fascist rhetoric. This strategy simultaneously flattens and transcends empirical reality, imbuing everyday language with artificial profundity and severing it from lived experience: "Elements of empirical language are manipulated in their rigidity, as if they were elements of a true and revealed language" (Adorno, 1973: 7).

Proponents of this jargon claim it reveals hidden details of existence. Yet Adorno exposes its quasi-religious character — hollowed and perverted. He describes the jargon as "religious customs cut off from their religious content" (Adorno, 1973: 25) and adds that "those who have run out of holy spirit speak with mechanical tongues" (Adorno, 1973: 10). In this sense, the jargon mechanises authenticity, turning it into a disciplined, almost militaristic mode of expression. Religiosity is reframed as "faith unto Being" and "commitment", where "patriotic pedagogues would say that commitment was actually the name of religion", and it "is the current word for the unreasonable demand of discipline" (Adorno, 1973: 69), masked as a necessity of choice.

This military or para-military guidance is quite important. The aforementioned transcendence over the empirical is effectively a construction of the authoritative absolute: it demands speaking absolutely and in absolutes. It takes not only affective but also grammatical form. Adorno illustrates this with Heidegger, whose linguistic discipline mirrors military command:

> The same holds true for the trick of military command, which dresses an imperative in the guise of a predicative sentence. By eliminating all linguistic traces of the will of the superior, that which is intended is given greater emphasis. Thus the impression is created that it is necessary to obey, since what is demanded already occurs factually. [...]

> Heidegger, too, cracks the whip when he italicizes the auxiliary verb in the sentence, "Death is" (Adorno, 1973: 88).

This demand for discipline extends even further: philosophy must first be reduced to mere thinking and then transformed into what Adorno calls a kind of "reflected unreflectiveness" (Adorno, 1973: 55), which finally becomes the silence of farmers and the philosopher among them. The linguistic imperative finds its practical (or fantasmatic?) correlate, which ends up making thought itself banal. To Adorno, this praise of (forced) simplicity by Heidegger aims to "deafen any suspicion that the philosopher might be an intellectual" (Adorno, 1973: 53). As Heidegger stated: "Philosophical work does not take place as the spare-time activity of a crank. It belongs right in the midst of the labor of farmers" (Adorno, 1973: 53–54).

And labour belongs right in the midst of the philosopher of authenticity. At this point, one might hypothesise that the connections between authenticity and productivity extend far beyond the parallels of their common, technical denominator of "jargon" as we are attempting try to analyse it here (Theweleit, 1989: 243–251). It is not implausible to suggest that the longing and drive for such authenticity are now "channelled" in a similar manner — perhaps somewhat subdued, yet equally feverish — through the language and imperatives of political economy, the culture of hyper-workaholism and pan-labourism. This paradigm demands relentless labour as it reimagines every aspect of life through the lens of economic rationale and codifies this structure in linguistic expressions. Indeed, much of what Adorno identifies as the machinery of authenticity now appears to serve the constructs of labour. Adorno himself notes how the jargon once confined to philosophical treatises has been enthusiastically adopted by market enterprises, evolving into the language of modern advertising:

> The jargon becomes practicable along the whole scale, reaching from sermon to advertisement. In the medium of the concept, the jargon becomes surprisingly similar to the habitual practices of advertising (Adorno, 1973: 43).

The concealed authoritarian function of commandment in this jargon proves useful for the administration of both sales and populace — as well as in promising something more "authentic". Through this interplay of authenticity and productivity, even anti-consumerist rhetoric is transformed into the ideal of "proper consumption" — a consumption supposedly aligned with one's essence and one's fate. Crucially, "proper consumption" is validated only if it is productive. We recognise this attitude from a more recent analysis:

> For the real truth of the matter — the glaring, sober truth that resides in delirium — is that there is no such thing as relatively independent spheres or circuits: production is immediately consumption and a recording process (enregistrement*)

> without any sort of mediation, and the recording process and consumption directly determine production, though they do so within the production process itself. Hence everything is production: production of productions, of actions and of passions; productions of recording processes, of distributions and of co-ordinates that serve as points of reference; productions of consumptions, of sensual pleasures, of anxieties, and of pain. Everything is production, since the recording processes are immediately consumed, immediately consummated, and these consumptions directly reproduced. This is the first meaning of process as we use the term: incorporating recording and consumption within production itself, thus making them the productions of one and the same process (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000: 4; emphases added).

The authoritative tone of the passage above, with its invocation of the "real truth", the totalisation of production and the reduction of consumption to a subordinate aspect of production, closely mirrors the dynamics that Adorno critiques.

Today, the aura of authenticity resides in labour itself and in the silent acceptance of one's work as both necessity and fate. Phrases like "being productive", "growing", "developing oneself" and "investing one's time" have become the contemporary measures of "authenticity". As Adorno observes elsewhere: "The idea of freedom from labour is replaced by the possibility of choosing one's own work" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1971: 37).

In this context, "one's own work" is transformed into something authentically one's own and a supreme symbol of authenticity.

* * *

One does not need to refer directly to Heidegger or Deleuze to uncover the connection between authenticity and productivity. Shifting the focus to critical thinkers, this relationship is articulated explicitly by Herbert Marcuse in his Freiburg period, particularly in his 1933 essay *On the philosophical foundation of the concept of labor in economics* (Marcuse, 1973).[3] In this work, Marcuse examines the "division of labor", not as a strictly sociological or organisational concept but literally as the "fragmentation" (Marcuse, 1973: 10) of the unitary idea of labour itself within economic theory and the sciences:

> The economically relevant differentiations of labor (as for example, the distinctions between supervisory and supervised, free and unfree labor, and the types of labor in

[3] In addition, it is particularly troubling that Marcuse, in this essay, aligns himself with the views of Friedrich von Gottl, a proponent of Fordism, who saw it as not only a solution for efficient production but also for broader social issues. Gottl even referred to Fordism as "white socialism" (*weißer Sozialismus*) or *Führersozialismus*, touting it as a means to prevent Bolshevik revolution.

> various branches of production) can all be placed within the range of the economic concept of labor. Thus, the elaboration of a "general" concept of labor does not seem to be required by economic theory (Marcuse, 1973: 9).

The absence of a "definitional" concept of labour (Marcuse, 1973: 9) and its indeterminate character in both theory and everyday usage leads Marcuse to search for a "third way". He wished to transcend economics entirely (Marcuse, 1973: 17, 31) through the "higher" dimensions of philosophy, particularly via a synthesis of Hegel, Marx and Heidegger. As Marcuse writes:

> Perhaps this discussion (which we will only introduce here in a general way) will also contribute to focusing on the material [*sachlich*] interconnection between philosophy and political economy — an interconnection that was last operative in Marx and has been lost since (Marcuse, 1973: 10).

However, this emphasis on the "material" (found, ironically, in the abstractness and vagueness of Heidegger) risks neglecting the tangible, real-life dimensions of thinking with labour — a point that is difficult to ignore now.

In an effort to redeem labour from its "narrow" definitions in economic theory, Marcuse elevates it to an abstraction as an authentic foundation of human existence, assigning it near-universal significance. Does this not evoke Adorno's critique of the "transcendence of the empirical" and the pursuit of an authoritative absolute (mentioned above)? The labour theory of value turns into the valuing theory of labour. This "labour fundamentalism" becomes particularly striking, even absurd, in Marcuse's treatment of play. Although he acknowledges ethnological studies suggesting that play predates labour, creating techniques and then transitioning from leisure to utility (Marcuse, 1973: 15), he quickly reverses this order in accordance with the following demands:

> However, his formulations of the relations between play and labor can give rise to dangerous misunderstandings. In the structural sense, within the totality of human existence, labor is necessarily and eternally "earlier" than play: it is the starting point, foundation, and principle of play insofar as play is precisely a breaking off from labor and a recuperation for labor (Marcuse, 1973: 15).

This passage reveals the extent to which labour, for Marcuse, is not just an economic category but an ontological and dogmatic foundation — a principle defined by its timeless and universal quality. Play becomes subordinated to labour, reflecting what Adorno critiques elsewhere as the servitude of "spare" or "free" time to the ethic of work and production.

Thus, labour transitions from a flawed economic category to a central pillar of philosophical anthropology. For Marcuse, it becomes an "ontological concept of human existence as such" (Marcuse, 1973: 11), a "task" (Marcuse, 1973: 18), and

a "mode of becoming" (Marcuse, 1973: 22) that enables humanity to make the world "one's own" (Marcuse, 1973: 13) and attain "permanence" (Marcuse, 1973: 12, 21). These descriptions echo the jargon of authenticity that Adorno critiques, making parallels between authenticity and productivity all the more apparent.

These examples illustrate the linguistic and conceptual mechanisms through which terms from the lexicon of political economy — labour, production, work — are elevated to metaphysical, ontological, or even logical absolutes. Such terms, once abstracted, are framed as universal, eternal and transhistorical, mirroring the rhetoric of the jargon of authenticity.

That said, it would be intellectually dishonest to present Marcuse and Adorno as static figures within this line of critique. Later in his career, Marcuse reevaluated his anthropological assumptions and critiqued the same language he had earlier espoused. Adorno, for his part, demonstrates a curious ambiguity: while he rigorously critiques the abstraction of labour and its linguistic manifestations, he also unreflectively uses similar abstractions himself. For instance, he dismisses "free time" as an "abstract generalisation" (Adorno, 1991: 162) but refers to "work" in similarly abstract terms, describing his own "job" as "the production of philosophical and sociological works" (Adorno, 1991: 163).

CONCLUSIONS: HOW DOES IT WORK?

As Theodor Adorno demonstrates in his writings on the jargon of authenticity, the language employed in philosophical and critical endeavours is never merely "technical" or neutral. Or, more precisely, its technicality does not solely pertain to the presentation of thought but also to the construction of the one who receives it. In this sense, this philosophical language is not necessarily isolated from extra-linguistic factors. Rather, it accommodates certain feelings, desires, and fantasies — implicit elements that cannot be openly articulated or find expression except through the jargon itself. This language resonates with interlocutors; it connects, shapes interiorities, and disciplines them.

Another defining characteristic of jargon is its tendency to spread, its colonising impulse. It infects other concepts and fields, propagating itself — especially through its most abstract notions, as we have seen in the case of productivity. Here, it links abstract values like the good, the bad, the active and inactive, the useful, or consequentiality — shaping our understanding of these values within the framework of productivity.

This perspective also illuminates why the frequent anti-intellectual accusation — most prominently levelled against Marxism or post-structuralist thought (particularly the Deleuzo-Guattarian variety) — that these discourses are mere jargon or rhetorical manipulation misses the broader point. These discourses are much more than mere arguments, and their linguistic specificity

is less significant than the shared linguistic framework underlying them. As we have argued, this framework, terminology and logic are deeply indebted to economics.

If we read Marx's critique of political economy as demonstrating that political economy is in no way natural, necessary or inevitable but is a historically contingent structure, then the question of how to move beyond the political-economic frame of reference becomes key for any emancipatory effort.

Until now we have followed the path of the language of critical philosophy, mostly taking Marxism as a case study. Our preliminary sketch of the jargon of productivity can serve as a starting point for further exploration — not only within general Marxist and Marxist-adjacent theoretical proposals but also in the realms of psychoanalysis and post-structuralist thought after Deleuze and Guattari.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (1971). Towards a new Manifesto. *New Left Review*, *65*, 27–52.

Adorno, T.W. (1973). *The jargon of authenticity*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Adorno, T.W. (1991). *The culture industry: Selected essays on mass culture*. London–New York: Routledge.

Adorno, T.W. (1998). The meaning of working through the past (pp. 89–103). In: T.W. Adorno. *Critical models: Interventions and catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1975). *The mirror of production*. St. Louis: Telos Press.

Benjamin, W. (2008). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. London: Penguin Books.

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2000). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment? (pp. 32–50). In: P. Rabinow (Ed.). *The Foucault reader*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Immanen, M. (2021). *Toward a concrete philosophy: Heidegger and the emergence of the Frankfurt School*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Kontturi, K. & Tiainen, M. (2007). Feminism, art, Deleuze, and Darwin: An interview with Elizabeth Grosz. *Nora: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, *15*(4), 246–256.

Marcuse, H. (1973). On the philosophical foundation of the concept of labor in economics. *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary*, *16*, 9–37.

Marcuse, H. (2009). *Negations: Essays in critical theory*. London: MayFlyBooks.

Rabinbach, A. (1990). *The human motor: Energy, fatigue, and the origins of modernity*. New York: Basic Books.

Theweleit, K. (1989). *Male fantasies*. (Vol. 2). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Tomšič, S. (2022). Labour/work (pp. 110–125). In: C. Soto van der Plas *et al.* (Eds.). *The Marx through Lacan vocabulary: A compass for libidinal and political economies*. Abingdon Oxon: Routledge.

Ying, X. (2014). The principle of production and a critique of metaphysics: From the perspective of theory of Baudrillard. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, *9*(2), 181–93.