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ARISTOTLE VERSUS MARX:
MODES OF USE, USE VALUE OR USEFUL OBJECT?

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Aristotle versus Marx: Modes of use, use value or useful object?

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Abstract

In the first three pages of his *Capital*, without any warning to the reader, Marx introduces a modification of the traditional meaning of the term “use value”. For Locke, Quesnay, and Smith, “use value” was the ability of a thing to satisfy human needs, for Marx it becomes the thing itself. This change of meaning has not been properly perceived, and many authors continue to attribute to Marx the same conception of use value than his predecessors have. When Marx translates some passages of Aristotle’s *Politics* from English to German, his translation surprisingly attributes the term “use value” to Aristotle; worse, Marx does not attribute to Aristotle the predominant meaning of this term but the new meaning adopted by him.

This note offers a brief history of the term “use value”, summarizes the significant change of meaning introduced by Marx, conjectures about the possible motivations of Marx to act this way, and finally documents the amazing translation of Marx.

The origin of the term “use value”

The term “use value” emerges from the conceptualisation of commodity as something having a twofold nature, a thing destined to usage and to exchange. All authors who conceive commodity as having this twofold nature emphasize the idea that exchange value (or price) and use value have no relation at all between them. The most remote antecedent of the term “use value” can be found in the following passage of Aristotle’s *Politics*:

[...] of every article of property the mode of use is twofold: both modes treat the thing as what it is, but do not do so in the same sense: one is the proper, and the other the non-proper use of the article. Of a shoe, for instance, there is both its use to wear and its use as an object of barter; for both are modes of using a shoe.¹

Eric Roll affirms:

[...] in these words, Aristotle laid the foundation of the distinction between use-value and exchange-value, which has remained a part of economic thought to the present day.²

However, the term “use value” appears in economic thought not before the XVIII Century. It does not exist when Locke, in 1691, writes *Some Considerations of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interest and the Raising the Value of Money*, but its utilisation had

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¹Aristotle, *Politics*, book I, ch 9, 1257a-2, p. 134.

²Eric Roll [1938], pp. 21-22.

already been generalised when less than a century later, in 1776, Smith publishes *Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. In his work Locke affirms that commodities have two classes of value, an intrinsic natural worth and a marketable value. Note that for the first class of value he uses the word “worth”, for the second one he uses “value”.³ The passage reads as follows:

1. That the intrinsick natural worth of any Thing, consists in its fitness to supply the Necessities or serve the Conveniencies of human Life; and the more necessary it is to our Being, or the more it contributes to our Well-being the greater is its Worth. [...] 3. The Marketable value of any assign'd quantities of two or more Commodities, are *prohic & nunc*, equal, when they will Exchange one for another. [...]

The twofold use of commodity underlined by Aristotle –proper use and non proper use– reverberates in Locke’s separation of commodity in natural intrinsic worth and marketable value. The separation puts more stress on the thing than on the person, inasmuch as worth and value are capabilities of the thing itself and more than a subjective valuation about the thing: the natural intrinsic worth is the capability of the thing to supply the necessities or serve the conveniences of human life, while the marketable value is the capability of the thing to be exchanged.

The word “value” appears to replace “worth” –used in the first of the two capabilities mentioned above– in Nicholas Barbon’s works. Barbon is precisely one of the fathers of a theory of value based on utility. In a writing where he criticizes Locke’s conception of money, Barbon establishes that “the Value of all Things, arise from their Use”. He distinguishes “two general uses by which all Things have a Value: They are either useful to supply the Wants of the Body, or the Wants of the Mind.”⁵ The value of the things that satisfy the wants of mind comes from scarcity, meanwhile the value of things indispensable for life is “a real and natural value” originated in their use:

Things that supply the Wants of the Body, and support Life, may be accounted to have a real and natural value: They are at all times and in all places of value; and if any things could have an Intrinsick Value in themselves, they World be Cattel and Corn [...].⁶

In this passage, where Barbon tries to erase the separation between use and price and to found a theory of price based on use and wants, the term “value” appears for the first time linked directly to the use of the thing. This utilisation of the term “value” is widely generalised among political economists at the time Smith writes his *Wealth of Nations*, while the term “worth” disappeared. Smith introduces the term “value in use”, which today reaches us as “use value”, to replace “intrinsick natural worth”. Smith may have gotten the term from François Quesnay, who had a significant influence on him during the ten months they shared in Paris, and who played a fundamental role in the development of Smith’s economic thought. Quesnay utilises the terms “valeur vénale” and “valeur usuelle”,⁷ the former referring to exchange value or price, the latter referring to the capability of things to satisfy necessities. As Locke does before him, Quesnay underlines that both dimensions of commodity are independent and warns about the risk of confusing them:

³Concerning this usage, Marx states: “in English writers of the seventeenth century we still often find the word ‘worth’ used for use value and ‘value’ for exchange-value. This is quite in accordance with the spirit of a language that likes to use a Teutonic word for the actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflection.” Karl Marx [1867], 126, note 4.

⁴John Locke [1691], p 21-22.

⁵Nicholas Barbon [1696], p 2.

⁶Nicholas Barbon. [1696], p 6.

⁷François Quesnay [1757-1758a], p. 273.

[...] we should not confuse the price of items of exchangeable wealth with their use value [valeur usuelle], for these two values rarely have any connection with one another.⁸

As seen in the above passage, “valeur usuelle” is translated to English by Ronald Meek as “use value”, which is the same translation made currently of the term *Gebrauchswerte*, used later by Marx. The term “value in use”, adopted by Smith, is initially translated to French as “valeur en utilité”,⁹ different from Quesnay’s “valeur usuelle”, but some years later appears translated as “valeur d’usage” (in the 1802 translation made by Marquis Germain Garnier¹⁰ and in the 1843 translation made by Blanqui¹¹). The French translation of “value in use” as “valeur d’usage” coincides with all the translations to French of the term *Gebrauchswerte*, utilised by Marx.

The following famous passage by Smith constitutes the final definition of the term. It reached Marx and is generally known today:

The Word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that objects conveys. The one may be called ‘value in use’; the other, ‘value in exchange’.”¹²

The concept of a commodity as something having two separate dimensions, already present with Aristotle, is developed by Locke and consolidated by Quesnay and Smith. Despite the utilisation of the term “value” to refer to the usefulness of the object, Smith does not conceive “value in use” as a result of a subjective valuation, perception or feeling of consumer, as Barbon does, but as the capability of the object to satisfy a necessity, a capability which is inherent to the material nature of the object. Certainly an object becomes a use value because society recognizes its capability to satisfy certain needs, and to that extent we can say it is a human attribute of the object; nevertheless, the object has this capability by material properties that exist beyond those needs. Water has the capability to quench thirst, regardless of the actual amount or urge of thirst, or of the enjoyment or satisfaction resulting from its consumption.

This conceptualisation of commodity was crucial for the development of the theory of value during the next three or four generations. On the one hand, it was the basis of the labour theory of value. Ricardo starts his *Principles on Political Economy and Taxation* quoting that passage, and all his research about value and measure of value is based on the separation of commodities in the two kinds of “value” stressed by Locke, Quesnay, and Smith; Marx derives from this conceptualisation of commodity what he considers his main contribution to economic thought: the dual character of the labour embodied in commodities.¹³ On the other hand, this conceptualisation was for certain authors rather a barrier to the development of a value theory based on subjective valuation.¹⁴

Change of meaning introduced by Marx

Marx inherited this conception of “use value” as an objective property of the commodity. He goes beyond this conception by introducing a change of meaning that has gone unnoticed by most of his readers. He re-defines the term “use value” to mean the useful object itself. He does it in three steps.

Marx begins *Capital* by defining the commodity as follows:

⁸François Quesnay [1757-1758b], p. 90.

⁹Smith [1776c], p. 52.

¹⁰Smith [1776d], p. 57.

¹¹Smith [1776e], p. 35.

¹²Adam Smith [1776], p. 44.

¹³Karl Marx [1867], p. 131: “I was the first to point out and examine critically this twofold nature of the labour contained in commodities. As this point is crucial to an understanding of political economy, it requires further elucidation.”

¹⁴See for example Joseph Schumpeter [1954] p. 309 and Emil Kauder [1965] p. 28.

The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind.¹⁵

Two elements stand out in this sentence. On one hand, Marx defines commodity as an external object, a thing. This means that among all what is exchanged for money, only external objects could be considered commodities. This definition rules out the world of commodities as a considerable part of what is exchanged for money. Marx mentions conscience or honour, which “in and of itself are not commodities”, but “may be offered for sale by their owners.” According to his definition, human activities would also be discarded from the world of commodities, since they can hardly be considered external objects.

On the other hand, Marx says that commodity is an external object that, because of its properties, is able to satisfy human needs “of whatever kind”. Thus, a second condition is that this external object has to be one useful object, an object with a certain utility. The usefulness of the object appears as an attribute thereof, which derives from its material properties that make it able to meet human needs. In this context, the term “use value” is introduced for the first time in *Capital*:

The usefulness of a thing makes it a use value.¹⁶

Marx establishes here that “use value” is for him the thing itself. Use value is no more a property or capability of the thing, but the thing in its own material corporeity, given its ability to satisfy human necessities. He stressed the point:

It is therefore the physical body of the commodity itself, for instance iron, corn, a diamond, which is the use value or useful thing.¹⁷

Consequently, the commodity would be, first of all, a use value, defined as an external object that is able to satisfy necessities, or more precisely, as one useful object.

Finally, Marx gives an additional step in the redefinition of the term use value, always in the direction of conceiving commodities as two separate dimensions. He states that use value, redefined as the useful object itself, “may be looked at from the two points of view of quality and quantity.”¹⁸ This means that “use value” has to be quantitatively determined. Iron is not a use value, a ton of iron is. Only useful things that can be reduced to a certain measure of quantity are use values. In such a way, not every “useful thing” or every “thing to use” is a use value; air, sun, or landscape are useful things, but they are not use values because they are not quantitatively determined.¹⁹ Commodities, in their reality as useful objects or use values, have to be commensurate because capital can only embrace things included in the symbolic order of commensurability, which is a condition to private property and exchange can only embrace. Because “use value” is quantitatively determined, it is the bearer of exchange value: only what is measurable can be exchanged.

By imposing this third condition to “use value” –be commensurable– Marx culminates the modification of meaning of this term. For him, “use value” is (i) an external object, (ii) which is useful and (iii) quantitatively determined. Many readers of Marx did not (or do not) realize this change of meaning.²⁰

¹⁵Karl Marx [1867], p. 125.

¹⁶Karl Marx [1867], p. 126.

¹⁷Karl Marx [1867], p. 126.

¹⁸Karl Marx [1867], p. 125.

¹⁹The idea that the use value has to be quantitatively determined contradicts a passage where Marx affirms that “air, virgin soil, natural meadows, unplanted forests, etc fall into this category” of being a use value without being a value. Karl Marx [1867], p. 131.

²⁰For example, Paul Sweezy [1942], p. 26, affirms that for Marx “use value” and “utility” are synonymous, and Louis Althusser [1969], pp. 21-22, says that Marx speaks of social utility and exchange value.

Why does Marx decide to make this change of meaning? Commodity could be understood as a unit of useful object and exchange value; however, he prefers to maintain the old terminology: commodity is a unit of use value and exchange value, with value in use meaning useful object.²¹ The only possible objective of this amendment is that the separation between usefulness and exchangeability becomes clearer. By doing so Marx seeks to exclude the attempt of “vulgar economists” who deduct the exchange value from commodities’ usefulness.

In fact, the usefulness of the object is not commensurable –water properties enable a person to quench thirst, but measuring this ability is not possible. In their condition of useful objects commodities are not comparable. It is possible to affirm that two apples, as objects, are more than one apple. But are two apples more or less than an orange or a diamond? Likewise, their usefulness is also not comparable. The usefulness of water is incomparable with the usefulness of diamonds, they are simply different; diamonds are as useless to quench thirst as water is to be lucid in a choker. It is the material difference between objects, and thus between their usefulness that motivates the exchange; nevertheless, it is not this material difference that determines the proportion in which the exchange of both commodities takes place. It is because the material realities of commodities are so diverse that use values cannot be reduced to a common unity. By defining the use value as the object itself –unlike Smith– makes clear that the exchange is a relationship between two objects, not between their usefulness, called by Marx exchange value.²² The challenge proposed by Aristotle is to discover what makes the equality –resulting from exchange– between two completely different objects possible. It could not be the respective usefulness of those objects because usefulness can not be subject of any measure. This way Marx can state unequivocally that the use values, as objects, “constitute the material content of wealth.”²³

The “poetic license” of Marx

Marx attributes the term “use value” to Aristotle. On note 6 of chapter IV of *Capital*, he quotes Aristotle in German. His original source is the bilingual Greek-English edition of *Politics* edited by Bekker, from which he translates into and quotes some passages in German. He translates the expression “these things” as “*Gebrauchswerthen*”,²⁴ which hereafter is attributed to Aristotle and is translated into English as “use value”, into French as “*valeur d’usage*”, and into Spanish as “*valor de uso*”.

Let’s see Aristotle’s passage in the Bekker edition, translated by Marx:

Moreover, it is of these things [here Greek text about things] that genuine wealth seems to consist. For the sufficient supply of such sort of property for a good life is not ‘unlimited’.²⁵

This phrase is translated into German as follows:

Der wahre Reichtum [...] besteht aus solchen Gebrauchswerthen; denn das zum guten Leben genügende Mass dieser Art von Besitz ist nicht unbegrenzt.²⁶

As can be seen, in the English text -translated and quoted into German by Marx- the expression “use value” does not appear, instead we can read “things... necessary for life

²¹Louis Althusser [1969], p. 22, considers a mistake that Marx does not eliminate the word “value” from the expression “use value”. However, he proposes erroneously replace “use value” with the expression “social utility” rather than useful object, as I do.

²²Karl Marx [1867], p. 126: “Exchange-value appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind.”

²³Karl Marx [1867], p. 126.

²⁴Karl Marx [1867b], p. 113, note 6.

²⁵Aristotle’s *Politics*, p. 133.

²⁶Karl Marx [1867b], p. 113, note 6.

and useful”;²⁷ which evidently differs from Marx’s translation. This mistranslation of Aristotle is transferred into English, Spanish, and French versions of *Capital*. None of the translators of *Capital* seem to have consulted the English edition of Aristotle, which was translated to German by Marx. The main translators of *Capital* from German to English, Spanish, and French translate the term *Gebrauchswerthen* as “use-vale”, “valor de uso”, and “valeur d’usage”. Thus the term “use value” (and its translations) are attributed to Aristotle but not what he originally wrote, no to the original “these things”.

Pedro Scaron, for example, translates the passage from the German edition of *Capital* into Spanish as follows:

La verdadera riqueza [...] se compone de tales valores de uso, ya que no es ilimitada la medida de este tipo de propiedad suficiente para una vida buena.²⁸

Ben Fowkes translates the passage from the German edition of *Capital* into English as follows:

True wealth [...] consists of such use-values; for the amount of property which is needed for a good life is not unlimited.²⁹

Finally, the same happens to the main French translations done by Le Roy (realised under supervision of Marx), Lefebvre, and Rubel.³⁰

Ten years before, when he published *Contribution to the Critic of Political Economy*, Marx had made a similar mistranslation of another passage of Politics. A second Aristotle’s passage appears again mistranslated in note 3 of Chapter II of *Capital*. This time Marx translates another passage of the English Bekker edition into German: the phrase “for both are modes of using a shoe”³¹ is translated as “Beides sind *Gebrauchswerte* der Sandale [...]”³² As in the other case, the term *Gebrauchswerte* is translated as “valor de uso” in different Spanish editions,³³ and as “valeur d’usage” in French editions.³⁴ The first English translation is the only one that does not translate *Gebrauchswerte* as “use value”; the Aveling and Moore edition has the the best translation of the original text, but not the original version of Bekker, quoted by Marx.³⁵

There is no evidence that Aristotle has introduced the term “use value”, as Marx would like the reader to believe. However, it seems undeniable that it is Aristotle who suggests the dual nature of commodity. Precisely in the quote made by Marx in *Contribution*, and later in the second chapter of *Capital*, the Greek philosopher says: “Of every article of property the mode of use is twofold: both modes treat the thing as what it is, but do not do so in the same sense: one is the proper, and the other the non-proper use of the article. Of a shoe, for instance, there is both its use to wear and its use as an object of barter; for both are modes of using a shoe.”³⁶ These opposite uses of the object make it an object for use and an object for exchange, which is the origin of the dual nature of the commodity. Aristotle, however, does not derive a dual nature of value from this duality

²⁷ Aristotle’s Politics, pp. 132-133.

²⁸ Karl Marx [1867c], p. 186, note 6.

²⁹ Karl Marx [1867], p. 253. In the first English edition of *Capital*, made by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, under supervision of Engels and Eleonor, Marx’s daughter, the same mistranslation is made and the term “these things” is translated as “values in use”. See Karl Marx [1867d], p. 152.

³⁰ See Karl Marx [1867e], p. 156 note 2; Karl Marx [1867f], p. 172, note 6; and Karl Marx [1867g], p. 246, note (a).

³¹ Aristotle’s Politics, p. 134.

³² Karl Marx [1867b], p. 46, note 34.

³³ Karl Marx [1867c], p. 104, note 39. The other Spanish translations also attribute the term “use value” in both passages to Aristotle. See Karl Marx [1867h], p. 58 note 1 and p. 109, note 1, Karl Marx [1867i], p. 63, note 1 and p. 111, note 2, and Karl Marx [1867j], p. 49, note 3 and p. 108, note 6.

³⁴ Karl Marx [1867e], p. 96, note 1; Karl Marx [1867f], p. 97, note 39; and Karl Marx [1867g], p. 169, note (a).

³⁵ Aveling and Moore translate “Both are uses of the sandal” while Bekker’s translation says “for both are modes of using a shoe”. See Karl Marx [1867d], p. 85, note 1, and Aristotle’s Politics, p. 134.

³⁶ Aristotle, Politics, book I, ch 9, 1257a-2, p. 134.

in the use, i.e. a value that is derived from use and another derived from exchange. On the contrary, Aristotle is looking for a substance common to all commodities. For him the equalisation resulting from exchange of two objects so different is only possible by the existence of something –the substance– that makes them commensurable:

It [this proportion between shoes and house] cannot be secured unless the commodities in question be equal in a sense.³⁷

Aristotle is not able to find this “something common” which makes the commodities “be equal in a sense”. His concept of value is still very germinal, and evidently he does not postulate to utilise the term “value” in reference to the nature of the objects or to their “proper use”, as Barbon, Locke and Smith will do later. “Thing” is the word used by Aristotle in place of Marx’s use value.

Marx puts into the mouth of Aristotle the term “use value”, which in fact was coined by Smith, but redefined by himself: where Aristotle says “thing” he translates “use value”, as if for Aristotle “the physical body of the commodity itself, for instance iron, corn, a diamond [...] is the use value or useful thing.”³⁸ Marx legitimizes his proposal of a new meaning of the term “use value” by referring it to no one else but “a giant thinker like Aristotle”,³⁹ “the great investigator who was the first to analyse the value-form, like so many other forms of thought, society and nature.”⁴⁰

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³⁷Aristotle. The Nicomachean Ethics, book V, ch 5, 11, p. 285 [1133a-25 in XX numeration] . Lógica Nicomáquea. Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 1999, 252: “Esta proporción [entre zapatos y una casa] no será posible, si los bienes no son, de alguna manera, iguales. Es menester [...] que todo se mida por una sola cosa [...]”

³⁸Karl Marx [1867], p. 126.

³⁹Karl Marx [1867], p. 175, note 35.

⁴⁰Karl Marx [1867], p. 151.

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