

Critical Analysis of Conceptual Metaphor: The Case of the "Labour-Process" in Marx's *Capital*

By Mehdi Morchid

Abstract

This article employs the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as developed by Lakoff and Johnson, to critically analyse the metaphorical conceptualisations underlying Karl Marx's use of the phraseologism "labour-process" in *Capital*. By identifying and examining the recurring metaphors embedded in Marx's text, the study reveals how the labour-process is constructed not merely as a neutral mode of production, but as a malleable concept shaped by figurative thought. The analysis identifies multiple source domains through which Marx conceptualises the labour-process as: a journey, a puzzle, a site of production, a site of confrontation, an act of ingestion, a mechanism of dehumanisation, a mode of exploitation and a torture chamber. These metaphors are not stylistic embellishments. Rather, they constitute strategic conceptual tools through which Marx foregrounds the experiential reality constructed by capitalism. It follows that Marx's figurative language underpins his critique, framing labour under capitalism as a process of alienation, coercion and suffering. This metaphor-based reading contributes to broader discussions on the role of metaphor in political economy and critical theory.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, CMT, cross-domain mapping, source domain, target domain, Marxist Studies, political philosophy, economic philosophy, metaphor analysis, critical discourse analysis, phraseology, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor analysis, corpus linguistics.

1. Introduction

In *Capital* (1887), a key component of Marx's critique of capitalism lies in his deconstruction of its foundational principles through the medium of the conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). He seeks to demonstrate that these principles are not the outcome of natural development, as proponents of capitalism claim, but are deliberately constructed to reshape society and establish power relations amongst its members. Employing Conceptual Metaphor Theory as an analytic framework, this paper explores how Marx deconstructs capitalism through a series of metaphorical conceptualisations of the phraseologism "labour-process" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Skandera, 2007).

In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson redefine metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of human cognition, rather than a mere rhetorical or aesthetic device. They show how metaphors permeate all forms of language, from casual everyday speech to highly technical and theoretical discourse. Conceptual metaphors involve "cross-domain mappings," whereby elements from a "source domain," typically more concrete, are mapped onto a "target domain," typically more abstract, allowing people to understand complex or unfamiliar concepts in terms of more familiar ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 245). A classic example recurrently used by Lakoff and Johnson is ARGUMENT IS WAR, where the concrete source domain of war structures how argument is comprehended. Argument is thought of as involving attack, defence, capitulation, victory and loss. Lakoff and Johnson argue that if argument were conceptualised through a different metaphor, like ARGUMENT IS A DANCE, the concept of arguing would be differently constructed in people's minds. Their thought processes and behaviours would be different.

Building on the cognitive understanding of the workings of metaphor, this paper investigates how Marx metaphorises the labour-process in *Capital* (1887) to deconstruct capitalism. The phraseologism labour-process appears thirteen times in the book, and each instance supports a particular metaphorical framing that serves Marx's broader ideological project.

2. The Teleological Framing of the Labour-Process through the Journey Metaphor

Marx conceptualises the labour-process as a journey that leads to two distinct destinations, one within and one outside of capitalism. He emphasises a fundamental distinction between how humans and animals approach labour, and he expresses this distinction through the metaphorical framing of labour as a teleological process as it can be analysed in the following concordance line.

But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every **labour**-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the **labourer** at its commencement. (Marx, 1887, p. 127)

Marx underscores that the human condition is markedly different from the animal condition, particularly in their respective relationships to labour. Animals labour instinctively, producing repetitive outcomes devoid of creativity or innovation. In contrast, humans begin by envisioning the desired product and then act to bring it into existence. This dynamic is metaphorically conceptualised as a journey that begins with a mental image and concludes with a tangible object. The expressions "at the end of every labour-process" and "at its commencement" instantiate the metaphorical mapping from the source domain of spatial-temporal motion onto the target domain of the labour-process.

The labourer is framed as a traveller who consciously chooses a destination, the envisioned product, and deliberately embarks on a path towards it. The process is thus structured, purposeful and infused with intentionality. The labourer visualises the end-product before she sets out to create it as it is analysable in the following concordance line.

At the end of every **labour**-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the **labourer** at its commencement. (Marx, 1887, p. 127)

The labour-process is conceptualised as a trajectory with a predetermined endpoint. The realisation of the envisioned product marks the successful completion of the journey and elicits a sense of relief and gratification. According to Marx, it is precisely this foresight and control that elevates human labour above animal labour. Under this conceptualisation, any system, such as capitalism, that deprives individuals of control over their labour and its teleological purpose is fundamentally injurious to their humanity.

3. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Labour-Process within and outside Capitalism

The following concordance line captures Marx's bifurcation of the labour-process into its pure and conditioned forms:

We shall, therefore, in the first place, have to consider the **labour**-process independently of the particular form it assumes under given social conditions. (Marx, 1887, p. 127)

This line suggests the existence of a pristine, unconditioned labour-process that precedes its distortion by capitalist structures. The metaphorical conceptualisation here involves understanding the labour-process as a fluid substance capable of "assuming" different forms. In this framework, "social conditions" are conceptualised as moulds, and the labour-process is poured into them and shaped accordingly.

The preposition "under" implies verticality, connoting subordination and control. The labour-process is thus depicted as subordinate to the dominant social structure, which in Marx's broader critique is capitalism, though it could also refer to feudalism or slavery. This mapping entails that the labour-process is flexible and malleable, reshaped by the contours of the socio-economic framework it is subjected to. The conceptualisation of an "elementary" form of labour, independent of these

conditions, foregrounds a critical comparison. The original process is natural and autonomous while its capitalist version is an ideological and structural perversion.

4. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Labour-Process as a Puzzle

Marx refers to the labour-process as a conceptual puzzle, which he analytically solves as it is pellucid in the following concordance line.

The **labour**-process, resolved as above into its simple elementary factors, is human action with a view to the production of use-values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; (Marx, 1887, p. 130)

Here, the verb "resolved" suggests the action of deciphering or solving a composite. The metaphor frames the labour-process as a constructed whole, composed of multiple interlocking components. This metaphorical treatment reinforces the idea that the capitalist version of labour is not innate, but rather an assembled construct.

Much like a puzzle, the labour-process contains essential elements that can be isolated and analysed. Marx's analytical resolution of the process into its elementary factors implies that the capitalist system introduces additional, non-essential elements that distort its organic form. Thus, the metaphor allows Marx to distinguish between a natural, pristine labour-process and the altered version designed to serve capitalist interests.

5. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation the Labour-Process as a Site of Production

Marx conceptualises the labour-process as a physical location where production happens. The conceptualisation is instantiated through placing "man's activity," "instruments of labour" and "material worked upon" within the labour-process.

In the **labour**-process, therefore, man's activity, with the help of the instruments of **labour**, effects an alteration, designed from the commencement, in the material worked upon. (Marx, 1887, p. 128)

The labour-process is metaphorically treated as a physical location, a site that contains and facilitates transformation. The phrase "designed from the commencement" further suggests that this spatial site operates under a pre-established plan. It is a locus of intentional, structured transformation where human labour, tools and raw materials converge.

In tracking what becomes of the products of labour, the spatial framing is extended in Marx's description of how products re-enter the labour-process.

Whenever therefore a product enters as a means of production into a new **labour**-process, it thereby loses its character of product, and becomes a mere factor in the process. (Marx, 1887, p.) 129

Marx conceptualises the labour-process as a container that favours the continuous introduction of means of production. The labour-process as a container entails that its capacity to create value is dependent on the means of production and the forces that operate within it. Products of labour benefit the capitalist when they are sold for profit as output, but their benefit is even greater when they re-enter the labour-process as input. The phenomenon, itself, whereby products of labour become parts of labour-processes is not inherently injurious. However, Marx's conceptualisation of the labour-process as a container that favours the continuous introduction of products of labour as means of production underscores how profitable labour is when its products return to the labour-process as a value creating force. Means of production are products of labour that generate value for the benefit of the capitalist over long periods of time. Yet, the labourers whose energy, time, skills and experience

are encapsulated in these tools and machines have no claims to the continuously-created value from which they are alienated.

6. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Labour-Process as a Site of Confrontation between Dead and Living Labour

Marx metaphorically frames the labour-process under capitalism as a site of confrontation between active human labour and the congealed labour embodied in the means of production.

By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of **labour** confronts the **labourer**, during the **labour**-process, in the shape of capital, of dead **labour**, that dominates, and pumps dry, living **labour**-power. (Marx, 1887, p. 285)

In this metaphor, machinery, the product of past labour, is conceptualised as "dead labour" while the human worker represents "living labour." The metaphor maps attributes from the source domain of death, stillness, coldness and absence of agency onto the target domain of industrial machinery. Marx frames the relationship between human labourers and manufacturing machines, conceptualised as dead labour, as antagonistic through his use of the verb "confronts". Thus, the factory, or the workplace in general, is reimagined as a battleground, a site of structural antagonism in which cooperation and free agency are replaced by conflict and alienation.

"Dead labour" dominates "living labour," reversing their natural hierarchy. The tools, which once were subservient to the human, extending the human body, now confront and subjugate it. The labourer no longer controls the tools. Rather, the tools control the labourer. The metaphor extends to describe machines as extractive entities that "pump dry" the vitality of the labourer. The metaphor enriches the mapping by drawing from the conceptual domain of liquid extraction. Labour-power is conceived as a finite and fluid substance. Correspondingly, the labourer is no longer a free and

conscious agent, but rather a mere container to be depleted, further solidifying Marx's critique of the dehumanising aspect of capitalism. The metaphor underscores the exploitative asymmetry and dehumanising tendencies of industrial capitalism, as the labourer becomes subservient to the machinery she once animated.

7. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Labour-Process as Ingestion

In line with Marx's historical materialist framework, the capitalist mode of production fundamentally alters the nature of the labour-process (Marx & Engels, 1970). After elaborating a pristine model of the labour-process, Marx metaphorically reframes the capitalist labour-process as an act of ingestion.

The **labour**-process, turned into the process by which the capitalist consumes **labour**-power, exhibits two characteristic phenomena... First, the **labourer** works under the control of the capitalist... Secondly, the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the **labourer**, (Marx, 1887, p. 131)

Here, Marx states that under capitalism, the labour-process is "turned into" something different through an act of transformation, specifically where the capitalist "consumes" labour-power. This metaphor is supported by two underlying conceptual metaphors: THE LABOUR-PROCESS IS INGESTION and LABOUR-POWER IS FOOD. The verb "to consume" is central to this metaphor, as it implies destruction through incorporation (Chambers, 1874, p. 91). The labour-process is associated with the destruction of that which is consumed, labour-power, thereby implying that the process is detrimental to the labourer. Labour-power, once consumed, ceases to belong to the labourer and is subsumed into the capitalist apparatus.

This metaphor also encapsulates the dual structure of capitalist control. First, the labourer is subordinated to the capitalist's authority, having no autonomy over how labour is delivered. Second, the labourer is dispossessed of the product of her labour. These dynamics embody a broader theme of alienation where the labourer is severed from both the activity of labour and its outcome.

8. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Labour-Process as a Mechanism of Dehumanisation

Marx intensifies his critique of capitalism by metaphorically conceptualising the labour-process as a mechanism of dehumanisation. This is particularly evident in the following concordance line.

The **labour**-process is a process between things that the capitalist has purchased, things that have become his property. (Marx, 1887, p. 131)

In this formulation, both the worker and the means of production are reduced to "things" and commodified through the act of purchase. The metaphor equates human labour-power with material instruments. There is a transfer of ownership similar to how the purchase of instruments of production means the transfer of their ownership to the new party that buys them. Conceptualising human labour as a material object effaces the ontological boundary between person and object. Once purchased, the labourer is no longer in possession of her own capacities. They become detachable commodities, alienated from her.

This dehumanisation is structurally embedded in the capitalist system. By transforming human ability into a tradable commodity, capitalism severs the subject from her labour. The metaphor reveals how the capitalist system commodifies human essence, reducing labour to a mechanised function within a larger apparatus of production, stripping it of personal, social or moral content.

9. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Labour-Process as a Mode of Exploitation

A core claim in Marx's critique of capitalism is that the system transforms pre-existing social relations to intensify exploitation. This transformation is metaphorically framed as a shift in the nature of the labour-process.

If then, on the one hand, the capitalist mode of production presents itself to us historically, as a necessary condition to the transformation of the **labour**-process into a social process, so, on the other hand, this social form of the **labour**-process presents itself, as a method employed by capital for the more profitable exploitation of **labour**, by increasing that **labour's** productiveness. (Marx, 1887, p. 233)

Marx describes how capitalism intervenes upon the labour-process and transforms it into something it is not. The adverb "historically" situates capitalism as temporally contingent rather than inevitable. It is neither natural nor eternal, but rather provisionally arising from a specific context, suggesting that the labour-process under capitalism is not the culmination of rational progress, but a historically specific construct. The word "transformation" signals a radical reconstitution of the labour-process. Marx's use of the expression "presents itself to us" is consistent with a fundamental pillar in his deconstruction of capitalism. It is the idea that capitalism manages to maintain its control over society through dissimulating realities and replacing them with constructed obfuscations.

In his analysis of the capitalist labour-process, Marx describes how outside capitalism, the labour-process consisted of workers being in control of every aspect of how their labour was delivered because they worked for themselves. He critiques the appearance of "social" coordination as an ideological cover. Rather than resulting from voluntary collaboration among workers, the sociality of the labour-process is imposed by capitalists seeking to maximise productivity. Coordination becomes coercion. Labourers do not freely pool their efforts. They are directed to do so under hierarchical

10

authority. Consequently, the capitalist mode of production is metaphorically conceptualised as a mode of exploitation, an apparatus for extracting greater value by organising labour in ways that benefit capital, not the labourer. Marx's conceptualisation of the capitalist labour-process is anchored in the theoretical foundation that systems stem from material conditions rather than from any rational progression of thought guided by moral considerations (Marx & Engels, 1970). Within this understanding, the capitalist labour-process is shaped by capitalism's contingency on overproduction, the accumulation of surplus-value and the exploitation of the labourer.

10. The Metaphorical Conceptualisation the Labour-Process as a Torture Chamber

Marx conceptualises the capitalist labour-process as a torture chamber, offering one of his most visceral images.

the social combination and organisation of **labour**-processes is turned into an organised mode of crushing out the workman's individual vitality, freedom, and independence. (Marx, 1887, p. 229)

The metaphor of "crushing out" maps meanings of force, pressure and destruction onto the labour-process. The source domain of a physical substance being crushed conveys bodily harm and psychological trauma. This framing reinforces the brutal reality of industrial labour, where individual agency is systematically dismantled.

Marx begins with an account of labour in its natural, unalienated form to contrast it with its capitalist deformation. Under capitalism, the labourer loses autonomy, creativity and dignity. Labour is reduced to monotonous, machine-like repetition. The metaphor of the torture chamber captures the physical and existential toll exacted by capitalist production, wherein the labourer is crushed not only in body, but also in spirit.

11. Conclusion

This analysis has applied Conceptual Metaphor Theory to examine how Marx constructs the labour-process in *Capital* (1887) as a complex, ideologically charged concept. Rather than treating the "labour-process" as a neutral or merely technical term, Marx repeatedly reconfigures it through various metaphors to underscore the contradictions, violence and alienation he associates with capitalism. The labour-process is depicted as a journey, a puzzle, a spatial container, a site of confrontation, a mechanism of dehumanisation, an act of ingestion, a mode of exploitation and a torture chamber. These metaphorical constructions are not incidental. They are strategic as they form the cognitive backbone of Marx's critique.

Each metaphor serves to highlight different facets of capitalist production: the loss of human agency, the commodification of labour, the dominance of machinery and the erosion of freedom and creativity. In doing so, Marx constructs capitalism not as a natural or rational system, but as a historically contingent, ideologically loaded apparatus designed to extract and accumulate surplus-value at the expense of human vitality and social cohesion.

By employing the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper has uncovered how Marx's use of metaphor shapes the way readers cognitively frame the labour-process and its role within the capitalist mode of production (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Marx's metaphors are not floral. Rather, they are epistemologically foundational as they guide interpretation, intensify critique and render the abstract violence of capitalism intelligible and visceral. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Marx's metaphorisations are central to the cognitive architecture of his economic and philosophical thought, revealing the deep entwinement of language and ideology in as complex a text as Marx's magnum opus.

References

- Braverman, H. (1998). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. nyu Press.
- Chambers, W., & Chambers, R. (1874). *Chambers's etymological dictionary of the English language: A new and thoroughly revised edition*. W. & R. Chambers.
- Group, P. (2007). *MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse*. *Metaphor and symbol*, 22(1), 1-39.
- Harvey, D. (2010). *The enigma of capital: And the crises of capitalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Heinrich, M. (2004). *An introduction to the three volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*. NYU Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lebowitz, M. A. (2006). *The politics of assumption, the assumption of politics*. *Historical Materialism*, 14(2), 29.
- Marx, K. (1887). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. Volume I: The process of production of capital (S. Moore & E. Aveling, Trans.; F. Engels, Ed.). Progress Publishers. (Original work published 1867)
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1970). *The German Ideology* (C. J. Arthur, Ed.). International Publishers.
- Ollman, B. (1976). *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in a capitalist society (Vol. 9)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Skandera, P. (Ed.). (2007). *Phraseology and culture in English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

