Summary of chapters 12, 13 and 14 of *Capital, Volume 1*

**Introduction**

These chapters of Capital give us further insights into Marx’s methodology and his grasp of emergence, whilst still retaining his particular materialist underpinning. Marx investigates the emergent properties of particular organisations of labour and integrates the latter with a larger, developing theory of the exploitation of workers in capitalist society.

**Chapter 12 – relative surplus-value**

In this chapter Marx looks at the strategies employed by capitalists to favour the accumulation of surplus-value. For the duration of this chapter we must assume, as Marx does, that the exchange-value of commodities is constant. Thus in this chapter we are primarily concerned with those instances in which the productivity of labour increases without the lengthening of the working day. We are therefore introduced to the rationalisation of the production process as a means of reducing the labour-time necessary for sustaining workers. This capitalist strategy yields the production of *relative surplus-value* (as opposed to *absolute surplus-value*, which is a result of the lengthening of the working day). All this presupposes competition as the force which, in this particular circumstance, encourages the development of more efficient means of production.

Close attention needs to be paid here at how close Marx’s discussion is to the reality of production – i.e. one which never develops instantaneously, but is rather a process of gradual adjustment to new conditions. When a single capitalist benefits from a technological advantage over her competitors, she will be able to produce a commodity at a cost lower than that which afflicts the average capitalist. Thus Marx notes that what makes it possible for an individual capitalist to extract relative surplus-value from the production process she controls is the fact that the real value of the commodity produced is not its individual (bearing in mind that the commodity is now being produced at a diminished expense for the capitalist), but its social value. It is therefore not until the technological development in question has spread to the production of a particular commodity in general (i.e. when the advantage has spread across all competitors) that it starts to constitute the new average. It follows that in the time gap between the introductions of new developments into production and the latter’s gradual expansion to all instances of production, the advantaged capitalist is able to undercut her competitors in the market whilst still extracting surplus-value (“he will therefore sell them above their individual but below their social value” [434]).

Crucially, when this comes to be true also in the production of those commodities which comprise the means of subsistence of the workers, we can see that it becomes possible for the capitalist to invest less in the re-production of the workforce. This is the moment when the necessary labour-time for the worker’s subsistence is reduced, and relative surplus-value increases. In simple terms, if the goods which are used by workers to satisfy basic needs are produced more easily through improved technology on a generalised social scale, then it follows that the their wage, which serves just this function, will not need to be as high as before once those goods become available on the market at a reduced cost to the worker. In this context, no capitalist can afford to lag behind and is constantly afflicted by an impetus to improve her production methods; and even when most capitalists have adopted the new, more efficient methods, the impetus remains to keep modernising. We thus have the following: “The value of commodities stands in inverse ratio to the productivity of labour. So, too, does the value of labour-power, since it depends on the values of commodities. Relative surplus-value, however, is directly proportional to the productivity of labour. It rises and falls together with productivity” (436).

What is politically salient about all this, however, is that it is therefore easy to envisage how the workers witness an increment in their exploitation: with the previous chapter in mind [11], it
becomes evident how the objective of capitalist development of the means of production is the reduction, in relative terms, of that chunk of the working day devoted to the production of surplus-value (i.e. free labour for the capitalist) against that devoted to the attainment of the means of subsistence. At the close of the chapter, Marx also notes that the aforementioned strategy of the cheapening of commodities is only one amongst other methods of producing relative surplus-value.

Chapter 13 – co-operation

In this chapter Marx looks at co-operation in its specific capitalist form. Co-operation is extremely important because it comprises the basis of capitalist production – i.e. capital’s ability to bring workers together, realising their powers as collective labourer whilst still benefiting from them as producers independent of each other. We are thus edging closer to the implications of that which was discussed in the previous chapter on the social relations of production. In this chapter, some of us may have picked up a distinctively emergentist perspective; for example, Marx emphasises the importance of the simultaneity of the bringing together of workers under whichever arrangement happens to suit the capitalist best at a given moment and in a particular society. There is, therefore, a “social character” to labour, as Marx calls it, which increases the total productivity of the workers brought together: “Not only do we have here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of co-operation, but the creation of a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one” (443); “the time necessary for the completion of the whole work is thereby shortened” (445). In simple terms, bringing workers together under a particular arrangement awards the collective of workers with additional properties – a power through which, Marx argues, the worker “strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species” (447).

Once again, we need to look at what is politically salient about this, since here Marx gives us notable insights regarding class struggle and alienation:

1. “Concentration of large masses of the means of production in the hands of individual capitalists is a material condition for the co-operation of wage-labourers…
2. The extent of co-operation, or the scale of production, depends on the extent of this concentration” (448)
3. The capitalist’s planning, command and surveillance of production becomes a necessary condition of the production process (448-449)
4. Here Marx also asserts that “the greatest possible production of surplus-value” is basically equivalent to “the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist” (ibid.)
5. “As the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and, necessarily, the pressure put on by capital to overcome this resistance” (ibid.)
6. Given this, there is an “unavoidable antagonism” inherent to the capitalist production process (ibid.)
7. Furthermore, as we are here concerned exclusively with capitalist co-operation, Marx notes that when workers are brought together as labour-power purchased by capital, they become increasingly unable to enjoy the fruits of their own and reciprocal labour through other mediations. That is, their respective labour comes to gain a social character exclusively insofar as it conceals the planning and authority of the capitalist. Workers therefore “enter relations with the capitalist, but not with each other” (450-451).

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1 I emphasise this because the empirical evidence that Marx provides shows how at times it was more advantageous for the English capitalist to exploit cheaper labour rather than modernise the production process by bringing it up to its contemporaneous American standards.

2 It is true that from reading the text it would seem that Marx gained this insight from the resources referenced in the notes of this chapter; but there would also seem to be further evidence in Marx’s previous methodological texts that this insight is developed and employed by him in a novel and more thorough way, which has bearing on a larger theory of emergence rather than that which some political economists had noticed and framed exclusively in the terms of what they noted from their observations of production.
8. The additional productive power of a collective of workers labouring in unison for the capitalist becomes a “free gift to capital”. This power which belongs to the collective of workers thus comes to appear to the individual worker as the property of the capitalist, i.e. as something external to the worker and outside her control (451).

On page (452) Marx also gives us a few points about pre-capitalist forms of co-operation, before moving on to looking at the development of co-operation alongside the development of manufacture.

Chapter 14 – division of labour and manufacture

In this chapter Marx completes his discussion of co-operation by tracing its bearing on the development of tool-making in manufacture as the historical precursor of the invention, development and introduction of large-scale machinery into the factory. We are looking here at the period between the mid-16th and late 18th centuries, when the capitalist social division of labour enters the picture with all its political implications. Manufacturing grows out of two processes of handicraft: (1) the thorough specialisation of labour to the extent that the production of a particular commodity depends on the combination of independent tasks; (2) the splitting of a trade into minute tasks and operations within a group of co-operating craftsmen. The result is a division of labour and, eventually, a wage hierarchy between skilled and unskilled workers. “The different stages of the process, previously successive in time, have become simultaneous and contiguous in space” (464), allowing the capitalist to make production even more cost-effective by increasing the intensity of labour. Once the most efficient arrangement is discovered by the individual capitalist, all that is left for her to do is to increase the scale of production accordingly. This plays to the advantage of the capitalist, for whom the value of labour-power falls and, conversely, the rate of surplus-value increases. We thus begin to delve deeper into how workers’ labour is regulated by and appears exclusively through the exchange of commodities. When exchange becomes the sole means of bringing together different branches of production, the social division of labour arises. The consequences of this are many: the separation of town and country; the disintegration of communities; the specialisation of certain areas of a country according to the social division of labour; the homogenisation of tasks; workers becoming mere appendages of the workshop; the need to discipline indispensable highly-skilled workers; the introduction of large-scale machinery into production.

The full consequences of this on the heightening of the antagonism between workers and capitalists in the stage of large-scale industry will appear in later chapters. But we can already see that the activity of the individual worker who forms part of a highly defined technical division of labour in the manufacturing period is beginning to be reduced to that of tending to the machines – stultifying workers and resulting in the general de-skilling of a large portion of the workforce.

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3 “…whatever may have been [manufacture’s] particular starting-point, its final form is always the same – a productive mechanism whose organs are human beings” (457; my emphasis).

4 In the final sections of this chapter Marx repeatedly compares the social division of labour in capitalist manufacture with the social (organic) division of labour in pre-capitalist societies, where possession of the land was held in common, where said division was relatively simple and, most importantly, where authority was not held by a single planner of production for reasons outside those set by the community because labour-power could not be purchased as a commodity and because the means of production did not yet appear to be autonomous from the workers as capital.