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Meacci, Ferdinando

University of Padova

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RICARDO AND MALTHUS: A COMMON ERROR IN THEIR CONFLICTING THEORIES OF THE VALUE OF LABOR¹

by

FERDINANDO MEACCI

University of Padova

Department of Economics and Management

E-mail: ferdinando.meacci@unipd.it

Fax: 39 049 8274270

A particular aspect of the labor theory of value, whether put forward by the classics or further developed by the moderns, is that this theory is usually focused on the cause, measure and variations of value without distinguishing the value of commodities, as products of labor and the value of labor as labor. This trend originated with Adam Smith himself in those ambiguous parts of his work where he seems, first, to confuse these concepts as if there were no difference between the point of view of an individual and the point of view of the whole society (*Wealth of Nations*, I.v.3); and where he seems, secondly, to contradict himself when introducing the important distinction between work done and work to be done in his public-mourning example (*Wealth of Nations*, I.vii.19)². The main consequences of Adam Smith's inaccuracies on these crucial issues can be detected in the Ricardo-Malthus controversies concerning the theory of value in general (starting from the principles of labor embodied and labor commanded) and of the value of labor in particular (starting from the role played by the principle of demand and supply in determining this value). At the roots of these controversies is, as is well known, Ricardo's rejection, and Malthus's support, of the principle of labor commanded along with Ricardo's confinement of the principle of demand and supply to the determination of market prices, in contrast with Malthus's extension of this principle to the determination of natural prices, including the natural price of labor.

The conflicts between Ricardo's and Malthus's theories of the value of labor are brought to the fore in different parts of their *Principles* and are then amplified, first, in their voluminous correspondence and in Ricardo's *Notes on Malthus's Principles* [(1821)1951-1973, Vol. II] and, secondly, in Ricardo's *Notes on Malthus's Measure of Value* [(1823)1992]. In all these circumstances the terms *value* and *labour* have been sometimes used without paying due attention to the different concepts they convey depending on whether these terms are used to mean the *use* value or the *exchangeable* value; and on whether, in the former case, the use value it comes to is the use-value of labor from the standpoint either of the laborer or of the one who employs the laborer,

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² For a detailed analysis of these ambiguities and seeming contradictions, see Meacci (2012).

and on whether, in the latter case, the exchangeable value it comes to is the exchangeable value of labor either as *labor* (power), or as *living* labor, or as *dead* labor.

The purpose of this article is to examine Ricardo's and Malthus's conflicting theories of the value of labor in the light of the interpretations and criticisms of these theories in classical and modern periods. While McCulloch, Bailey, De Quincey, J.S. Mill and Marx are the main authors who engaged in these debates in the first period, a much greater number of writers have re-engaged themselves in equivalent debates after Sraffa's revival of interest in classical theory in the modern period³. After an examination of the main contributions on these issues, it will be eventually found that Ricardo's and Malthus's conflicts on the value of labor were based on their common error of intending the constant value of labour in a direction which has nothing to do with the meaning assigned to it, however ambiguously, by Adam Smith, the author they respectively tried to attack or to defend on this as well as on other issues .

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 is focused on Adam Smith's initial and crucial ambiguities on the value of labour from the standpoint of the laborer, on the one hand, and of the person who employs the labourer on the other. It will be shown that these ambiguities reach a climax in the unfortunate term *price* used by Smith in the passage concerning the sacrifice faced by the laborer when performing his labor. Section 2 moves to a direct examination of the impact of these ambiguities on Ricardo and Malthus's conflicting theories of the value of labor as they are set out, first, in their *Principles* and, then, in their subsequent correspondence and publications. Section 3 is the core of the paper. This section provides an assessment of the conflicts examined in Section 2 with regard to *which* of the two sides of the conflict is more convincing than the other; and to *whether* both sides are equally misleading in their common attempt to come to grips with the ambiguities of Smith's theory. This common attempt, it will be argued in Section 4, is carried out without paying enough attention -in the language adopted if not in the theory professed- to the difference between the concepts corresponding to the terms cause, magnitude and standard measure of exchangeable value. These differences, it will be argued, are necessary steps in the development of the theory of the accumulation of capital and of its impact on the natural price of labor. Some final considerations are put forward in Section 5.

³ See Myint (1965), Dobb (1973), Meek (1973), Rankin (1980), Rashid (1981), Costabile (1983), Dorfman (1989), Dooley (2005, Chs. 8-9), Glyn (2006), Hollander (1979; 1987; 1997; 2010), Hueckel (1998, 2000, 2002), Waterman (2009, 2012), Peach (1993, 2009), Asproumorgos (2010a, 2010b), Meacci (2012, 2014).

1. Smith's original ambiguities respecting the value of labour

The words used by Ricardo when pointing to Smith's "original error respecting value" (*Works*, VII, 100) may be re-utilized, without entering here into the scope and consequences of Ricardo's allusion, to represent an issue which is somewhat unrelated to what lies behind this allusion (and Sraffa's interpretation of it). This issue relates instead to what may be called, in Ricardo's textual footsteps, Smith's original ambiguities respecting the value of labour. These ambiguities are original not only in the same sense in which the term original must be understood in Ricardo's assertion above; i.e. in the sense that they lie at the root not only of a number of obscurities to follow in the *Wealth of Nations* but also of a number of misunderstandings to follow in the subsequent literature. These ambiguities, however, are not only original in this sense. They are also twofold in so far as they concern two distinctions that are put forward, and obscured at the same time, in some crucial passages of the *Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Chapter V. These passages are those concerned, on the one hand, with the real price of labour as distinct from the real price of commodities and, on the other hand, with the value of labour to the labourer as distinct from the value of labour to the person who employs the labourer (italics added). We shall soon see that, while criticizing one another on the value of labor, both Ricardo and Malthus share a common misunderstanding of the misleading words used by Smith in these different contexts. The two quotations to follow have been altered with the purpose to highlight the alternative words that should replace those used by Smith in order to make his arguments more coherent with his system of thought and less misleading for the authors to come:

The real price of every ~~thing product of labour~~, what every ~~thing-product~~ really costs to the man who wants to ~~acquire-produce~~ it, is the toil and trouble of ~~acquiring-producing~~ it. What every ~~thing product~~ is really worth to the man who has ~~acquired-produced~~ it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people. What is bought with money or with goods is purchased by labour, as much as what we ~~acquire-obtain~~ by the toil of our own body. That money or those goods indeed save us this toil. They contain the ~~value-toil and trouble~~ of a certain quantity of labour which we exchange for what is supposed at the time to contain the ~~value-toil and trouble~~ of an equal quantity. Labour ~~was-is~~ the first price, the original purchase-money that ~~was-is~~ paid for all things. It ~~was-is~~ not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all the wealth of the world ~~was-is~~ originally ~~purchased-obtained~~; and its ~~exchangeable~~ value, to those who possess it, and who want to exchange it for some new productions, is precisely equal to the quantity of labour which it can enable them to purchase or command (*Wealth*, I.V.2).

It is worth noting that in the altered quotation above the verb ~~to acquire~~ has been replaced by the verb ~~to produce~~ and that the term ~~value~~ has been replaced in some cases by the words ~~toil and trouble~~ while, to highlight its new meaning, it has been specified with the adjective

exchangeable⁴. The reason for these alterations is to highlight the distinction between labor and commodities as products of labor, as well as between the exchangeable value and the use value of labor as labor. This use value is here intended in the *negative* sense of the toil and trouble suffered by the laborer and not in the *positive* sense of the benefits that this toil and trouble provides to somebody else. These alterations are suggested by Smith himself when, to highlight the superiority of labor over gold and silver as a reliable standard for measuring exchangeable values (in that commodity which is itself continually varying in its own value, can never be an accurate measure of the value of other commodities), he proceeds in the quotation to follow by strengthening both his previous insights and his previous ambiguities (alterations have been introduced again to get rid of what are perhaps the most dangerous passages of the whole *Wealth of Nations*):

Equal quantities of labour, at all times and places, may be said to ~~be of equal value to~~ involve the same disutility for the labourer. In his ordinary state of health, strength and spirits; in the ordinary degree of his skill and dexterity, he must always lay down the same portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness. The ~~price-sacrifice~~ which he ~~pays-undergoes~~ must always be the same, whatever may be the quantity of goods which he receives in return for it. Of these, indeed, it may sometimes purchase a greater and sometimes a smaller quantity; but it is their exchangeable value which varies, not ~~that the disutility (negative use value)~~ of the labour ~~which for the labourer who~~ purchases them. At all times and places that is dear which it is difficult to come at, or which it costs much labour to acquire; and that cheap which is to be had easily, or with very little labour. Labour alone, therefore, never varying in its own value negative use value, is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the exchangeable value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only (Wealth, I.V.7).

This brings us back to the two distinctions above and, more particularly, to the distinction between the real price of commodities and the real price of labour. This relates to the other distinction between the value of labour to the labourer and the value of labour to the person who employs the labourer through the distinction, also mentioned above, between commodities as products of labor (which is implicitly understood in the expression real price of commodities) and

⁴ For a similar interpretation of the verb *to acquire* used by Smith in the quotation above, see Peach (2009). For a diverging interpretation of this verb, and for an interpretation of the expression *real price of labor* similar to the one used in the text above, see Naldi (2013). In a previous article, however, this author argued that the interpretation of the verb *to acquire* in the sense of *to produce* is based on the idea that *labor commanded* must be understood as a special case of labor employed in production (2003, 551). If this were correct, the expression *labor commanded* would obscure the possibility that the word *labor* used in this expression be intended sometimes as *work done* (i.e. as labor already embodied in commodities) and sometimes as *work to be done* (i.e. as labor still to be embodied in commodities). But Smith's ambiguity can be dissolved -and even defended- if one thinks that *labor commanded* may be intended only in the latter sense (i.e. as work to be done) if it comes to the demand for labor in the whole *society*; and in both senses (i.e. as work done and work to be done) if it comes to an *individual* who may use his purchasing power to command either labor (as work to be done) or the products of labor (as work done) of another individual. For a further discussion of the distinction between these aspects of labor in the light of the standpoint of an individual as distinct from that of the whole society, see Meacci (2012). See also Myint (1965, Chap. II).

labor as such (which is directly mentioned in the expression *real price of labour*). If one starts from the final sentence of the passage just quoted, one can easily find that the *real price of commodities* is here intended (in partial contradiction with the definition of the *real price of every thing* provided by Smith himself in the first quotation above) as the *toil and trouble* or sacrifice, that they entail for the laborer, while the *real price of labour* is then intended as the commodities (wage goods) exchanged for a given amount of labor⁵.

2. Ricardo versus Malthus on the constant value of labour two rounds

Speaking of Malthus and Ricardo's different lines of thought, Bonar once said that these two political economists spring from Adam Smith, just as theologians start off from the Bible (1966). Does this also apply to Malthus's and Ricardo's lines of thought when it comes to the particular issue of the value of labor? The answer depends on whether one starts from Malthus's *Principles*, (1820), Ricardo's *Principles* (1821) and Ricardo's *Notes on Malthus's Principles* (*Works*, Vol. II), or from Malthus's subsequent essays and Ricardo's related criticisms. The two rounds of this conflict are examined in the following two subsections as an introduction to the more important conflict on the value of labor resulting from Smith's ambiguities as highlighted in the previous section⁶.

2.1. The first round of the Malthus-Ricardo controversies on the e-value of labor arises within the two authors' more general theories of value. It is known that while Ricardo's theory is based on the principle of labor embodied, Malthus's theory is based, in Smith's footsteps, on this principle as well as on the principle of labor commanded. Hence their different views of how the e-value of labor is determined, once the principles of value they start from are developed in the light of the

⁵ The ambiguous use of the term *real* throughout Smith's work was first noticed by Malthus [(1827) 1986, Vol. 8, 12]. On the two meanings of the expression *real price* in the passages above, see Dooley (2005, 116-9; 146-7). In this connection, it is worth noting that Smith's arguments on why *actual* wage rates are so different in different employments of labor and stock (*Wealth*, bk. I, chap. 5) seem to be an attempt to argue that this is *not* inconsistent with the principle, put forward in Smith's previous chapter V, of the constant u-value of labor *to the laborer*. Which implies, contrary to what is argued by Marx (1859), that if the e-value of labor happens to be constant this is *not* because its u-value to the laborer is constant; and, contrary to Blaug's argument that *we* are better off if we work less to produce one unit of output (1985, 49-53), that Smith's argument on the u-value of labor to the laborer rather implies that if *we* are better off this is *not* because we work less to produce one unit of output, but because we earn more per unit of our output-producing labor (on this issue, see also Hueckel, 1998). As for the distinction between *real price* and *money price* mentioned at the end of Smith's last quotation, it should be noted that this is in turn not inconsistent with his previous arguments for, whether that *real price* is intended as the sacrifice undergone by laborers or as the goods exchanged for their labor, it remains nonetheless a real, rather than a nominal, price.

⁶ Due to the two meanings normally associated with the term value (use value and exchangeable value) and prior to coming to a further discussion of the different meanings associated with each of them (use value of labor to the laborer or to the person who employs the laborer vs. exchangeable value of labor in terms of wage goods or of wage goods in terms of labor), they will be shortened in what follows into the expressions *u-value* and *e-value* (Meacci, 2012) while the term value will be maintained when these specifications are unnecessary.

distinction between the natural and the market price of labor, on the one hand, and the principle of demand and supply, on the other⁷. These views lead to a notion of the natural price of labor which is determined, according to Ricardo, by the amount of labor embodied in the wage goods necessary to enable the laborers to subsist and to perpetuate their race, without either increase or diminution (1821, chap. V), whereas it is conceived by Malthus as the price which in the actual circumstances of the society, is necessary to occasion an average supply of laborers, sufficient to meet the average demand (1836, chap. IV, sec. ii). The value of labour thus becomes an expression invariably used by both authors to denote the exchangeable value of labor, the only difference being that this value, if intended as a natural rather than as a market price, is regarded by Ricardo as determined by the labor embodied in the wage goods exchanged for a given amount of labor while it is regarded by Malthus as the amount of labor exchanged for a given amount of wage goods⁸. This conflict was soon extended to the deeper issue of the measure of value an expression often used by both authors (with ambiguities to be examined below) to allude to the invariable standard by which the size and variation of exchangeable values can be properly measured. While Malthus argued, in the first edition of his *Principles* (1820, chap. II, sec. vii), that this invariable standard is provided by labor commanded or by a more practicable *mean* between corn and labor, Ricardo got rid of this mean as a complete fallacy (*Works*, Vol. II, Note 42) and focused repeatedly on the inconsistency of Malthus's measure as a less incredible standard. This is made evident in one of those passages where Ricardo first agrees with Malthus that what we want is a standard measure of value which shall be, and therefore shall accurately measure the variations of other things but then proceeds by wondering:

And on what does Mr. Malthus fix as an approximation to this standard? The value of labour. A commodity shall be said to rise or fall accordingly as it can command more or less labour. Mr. Malthus then claims for his standard measure invariability! No such thing; he acknowledges that it is subject to the same contingencies and variations as all other things. Why then fix on it? It may be very useful to ascertain from time to time to power of any given revenue to command labour, but

⁷ The principle of demand and supply referred to in this paper is the one presented by Malthus in his *Principles* [(1836)1986, bk. I, chap. II, sec. ii) and has nothing to do with the curves of demand and supply of the neoclassical theory (an issue cleared up by a number of authors such as Garegnani, 1983, 1984, Stirati, 1994, 1995, and others). The principle we are talking about belongs so fully to the classical theory that it was developed by Malthus in his twofold attempt, first, to reject Ricardo's own *version* of this theory and, within this version, Ricardo's own *doctrine* of the variations of the natural price of labor; and, second, to defend Smith's different version of that theory along with Smith's different doctrine of these variations.

⁸ This is consistent with the different starting points of both authors' theories of value as well as with their common ambiguities on whether the labor for which commodities are exchanged is to be intended as work done or work to be done. Malthus contributes to clearing up these ambiguities when using the past participle and future tense first in the titles of sections IV and V of chapter II of his *Principles* (1836) and then (though not always) in many of his arguments. For some hints on the twofold meaning of the word labor in the expression labor commanded see Napoleoni (1976, chap. 4.4).

why select a commodity that is confessedly variable for a standard measure of value? (Works, Vol. II, 29-30)⁹.

2.2. The second round of the Ricardo and Malthus controversies on the value of labor arose after the publication of Malthus pamphlet *The Measure of Value* [(1823)1986, Vol. 7, 175-121] and can be traced in the voluminous Ricardo-Malthus correspondence (Works, Vol. IX), in Ricardo *Notes on Malthus Measure of Value* [(1823)1992] and in Ricardo final essay *Absolute and Exchangeable Value* (Works, Vol. IV). Malthus pamphlet starts by silently replacing (possibly as a result of Ricardo criticisms) the corn-labor joint index as put forward in the 1820 (and expunged from the 1836) edition of his *Principles* by a completely new index¹⁰. This is aimed at reproducing Smith ambiguous idea of a constant value of labor along the new lines of a constant value of the wage goods exchanged for a given amount of labor. Malthus arguments on this index and Ricardo criticisms have been the object of repeated attention in Ricardo correspondence with McCulloch, Trower and J. Mill (Works, Vol. IX) and in a variety of comments by authors such as Malthus himself [(1823, 1824, 1825, 1827 chap. VIII) 1986], Bailey [(1825 (1967)], De Quincey [(1823, 1824)1970, Vol. IX], J. S. Mill [(1823)1965-1991], Marx [(1862-3)1969, Pt. I, 75ff: Pt. III, 23-25]. These comments and criticisms have been extended in more recent times by Costabile (1983), Porta (1992), Hollander (1997, chaps.7 and 10), Hueckel (2002), Glyn (2006), De Vivo (2012) and others. The various limits, contradictions and truisms of Malthus pamphlet have already been highlighted, more or less in Ricardo footsteps, by most of these authors. In this subsection we will focus only on those aspects of Malthus and Ricardo arguments that are common to both of them and that lead, in spite of their direct conflicts, equally to a common and indirect conflict with Adam Smith view of the same issue. This conflict will be examined in the next section.

The second round of these controversies was introduced by Malthus initial observation on that aspect of Smith theory by which this author does not make it quite clear whether he means the

⁹ Ricardo criticism is reiterated throughout his work and finds its best formulation when he wonders: But why should gold, or corn, or labor, be the standard measure of value, more than coals or iron? more than cloth, soap, candles, and the other necessities of the laborer? why, in short, should any commodity, or all commodities together, be the standard, when such a standard is itself subject to fluctuations in value? (Principles, 275). Note that, in criticizing this passage, Malthus (1820, 100-1) resorts to the expression the sacrifice of toil and labor to denote the amount of labor embodied in commodities (as an insufficient component of their exchangeable value) rather than the toil and trouble which, in Smith words, denotes the substance of labor as the source of absolute value. For Ricardo own counter-criticism, see Works, Vol. II, Note 44.

¹⁰ This change of approach is similar, in a counterproductive direction, to the transition, promoted by Malthus (Principles, II, iv), announced by Ricardo himself (Works, Vol. II, Notes 24-25) and eventually noted by Sraffa (Works, Vol. I, xliii-xliv), between Ricardo view of the effect on values of a rise of wages in edition 2 and his view of the same issue in edition 3 of his own Principles.

labour which is worked up in a commodity, or the labour which it will command (two notions, he adds, that are essentially different) [(1823)1992, 5]. Far from developing this criticism into his attempt to reconstruct Smith's theory so as to free it from Ricardo's attacks, Malthus frames this attempt in the direction of introducing and developing the new notion of absolute or natural value as distinct from nominal or relative value [(1823)1992, 8]. The method adopted by Malthus was to start from Ricardo's own starting points in order to prove that a constant value of labour does exist even in the latter's theory as a special result of his own arguments on the wage-profit inverse relationship and on the law of diminishing returns to land. Malthus goes so far in this direction as to include in his arguments a notion of the e-value of labor equal to the e-value of the wage goods exchanged for it¹¹. He regards this e-value as invariably determined by the profits plus the wages paid to the labor embodied in wage goods, and invariably resulting in the command of an amount of labor equal to the amount employed in the production of these very goods (10 laborers). Hence Malthus's conclusion, in what he supposes to be Smith's footsteps, that when the labourer earns a greater or a smaller quantity of money or necessaries, it is not the value of labour which varies, but, as Adam Smith says, it is the goods which are cheap in the one case and dear in the other (*ibid.*, 29-30).

Now, as the standard measure of value devised by Malthus in the first round of these controversies was regarded by Ricardo as a complete fallacy the new standard measure proposed in the second round was supported by arguments which, again, were regarded by Ricardo not only as fallacious from beginning to end (*Works*, Vol. IX, 287) but also as even worse than the previous ones in spite of their being based on the same error: the choice of a variable measure for an invariable standard (*Works*, Vol. IX, 282). For the variable measure chosen by Malthus was, again, the exchangeable value of labor which, however, is liable to change, Ricardo seems to argue having in mind both Smith and Malthus, regardless of whether it is labor as such or the goods exchanged for it which are cheap in the one case and dear in the other. Thus, relying on the examples of an epidemic disease, or of an increase of population, or of a change in the number of laborers exported or imported [(1823) 1992, Notes I, II and VIII; *Works*, Vol. IX, letters n. 535 and 536; see also Vol. IV, 362; 408-10], Ricardo invariably comes to the following conclusion:

Double the quantity of labour in a country, or diminish it one half, always leaving the funds which are to employ it at precisely the same amount, and you tell us -notwithstanding the condition of the labourer is in the one case a very distressed one, in the other a very prosperous one- that the value of his labour has not varied. I cannot subscribe to the justness of this language. The question is whether you are right not whether I am wrong (*Works*, Vol. IX, 305).

¹¹ There is indeed a passage where Malthus writes the value of wages, or of labor [(1823)1992, 30, italics added] and which may actually mean either the value of wage goods in terms of the labor exchanged for them (or viceversa) or the value of wage goods as the labor embodied in them

3. Malthus & Ricardo *versus* Smith on the constant value of labour

If Ricardo and Malthus's arguments and cross-criticisms on the constant value of labour as reconstructed in section 2 are examined in the light of the clarifications, provided in section 1 above, it becomes possible to focus not so much on *who* is right or wrong on this particular issue, but on *whether* both Malthus and Ricardo are wrong and, in the latter case, on the even more particular issue concerning who is *more wrong*. In section 2 we have seen that, when it comes to the issue of the value of labor, both Ricardo and Malthus develop their diverging theories starting from the common idea that the term value in the expression value of labour means to both of them exchangeable value. Now, if this is the common starting point of Ricardo and Malthus's conflicting theories of the value of labor, and if their arguments are evaluated once this starting point is given, it is inevitable to conclude, regardless of any conflict between them either on labor embodied and labor commanded or on the natural price of labor, that Ricardo's arguments are as consistent as Malthus's arguments are not. For, the e-value of labor is subject to as many variations as the e-value of all other things which are purchased and sold, and which may be increased or diminished in quantity. These variations result from whatever happens, in the short or in the long run and, therefore, with a distinct impact on the natural and market price of labor, on either side of the market, i.e. in the supply of labor (demand for wage goods) or in the supply of wage goods (demand for labor)¹². Hence Ricardo's criticisms first of Smith's and then of Malthus's views on this issue. For, it can properly be argued that, like Smith who after most ably showing the insufficiency of a variable medium, such as gold and silver, for the purpose of determining the varying value of other things, has himself, by fixing on corn or labour, chosen a medium no less variable (*Principles*, 14), so Malthus, after admitting in his turn the insufficiency of a variable medium and by fixing first on a corn-labor index and then on a constant value of labour of his own making, has himself chosen (we might say with Ricardo's words) a medium no less variable. Once, however, we are back in Ricardo's and out of Malthus's arms on this issue, we are still confronted with the different question as to whether we are out not only of Malthus's but also, as Ricardo would claim, of Adam Smith's more encompassing arms. This question may seem to deserve an easy answer once we extend to labor Smith's crucial observation (regarded by Ricardo as a self-contradiction) that a commodity which is itself continually varying in its own value, can never be an accurate measure of the value

¹² It is interesting to note that the principle of demand and supply which plays so large a part in Malthus's theory (to the extent that it supports, in contrast with Ricardo, the natural as well as the market price both of commodities and of labor) does not play such a part in his 1823 pamphlet in spite of the fact that the absolute or natural value of labor is there said to be constant while the principle of demand and supply is mentioned in the table in order to explain the varying corn wages associated with the varying fertility of land.

of other commodities (WN, I.v.7). The answer, however, requires an examination of whether Smith, on the one hand, and Ricardo together with Malthus, on the other, attribute the same meaning to the expression 'value of labour' and, more particularly, to the word 'price' used in the most crucial and misunderstood passage of the *Wealth of Nations*. This is the passage, quoted above, where this word is used to mean the sacrifice of the same portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness laid down by the laborer, and not the quantity of goods which he receives in return for it. Hence the double meaning of the expression 'value of labour' and of the even more ambiguous expression 'value of labour to the labourer' while the former is used by both Smith, Ricardo and Malthus to mean the e-value sometimes of labor in terms of the wage goods received by the laborer and sometimes of wage goods (corn) in terms of the labor purchased by the person who employs the laborer, the latter expression is intended by Ricardo and Malthus in one of these senses only (usually the former) whilst Smith intends it in the completely different sense of the 'oil and trouble' (a negative and constant u-value) that labor as such entails, whatever its e-value, for the laborer. This is the meaning that re-emerges in Smith's famous passage on the equal quantities of labour which, though always of equal [negative use] value to the labourer, yet to the person who employs him they appear sometimes to be of greater and sometimes of smaller [exchangeable] value. He purchases them sometimes with a greater and sometimes with a smaller quantity of goods, and to him the [real] price of labour seems to vary like that of all other things (WN, I.v.8; square brackets added to highlight ambiguities). Hence Ricardo's use of italics (*Principles*, 16-7) to stress his critical quotation and discussion of Smith's associated statement that 'labour alone, therefore, never varying in its own value, is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only' (WN, I.v.7).

While, however, Ricardo bases his criticisms of Smith's crucial statement directly on the assumption that the word value here means exclusively e-value, Malthus goes further by arguing, first, that he himself was wrong for a very long time when he believed that labor could not be an invariable standard of e-value; and, secondly, that Smith himself had contributed to this mistake for it is not really true, as stated by him, that the labourer in working lays down the same portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness (1827)1986, Vol. 8, 103]. But the explanation provided for this second argument is much less convincing than the ambiguous passages against which it was conceived. For the example of an Indian versus an English laborer provided by Malthus to prove that a day's labor is not invariable either in regard to intensity or time (*ibid.*, 103-4) is framed in terms of what Malthus calls in this essay the 'physical force exerted in a day's labour' and will later call the 'physical strength' of the laborer (see, for instance, *Principles*, 1836, 80 and 84). These

expressions, it should be noted, correspond to the expression *average strength* of the laborer used by Ricardo in a similar analytical context albeit with a different aim (see, for instance, *Works*, Vol. IV, 381; 392; 401-2). This similarity of words reveals, net of the more appropriate term *average* used by Ricardo, the common use of the term *value of labour* with the same meaning for both of them, i.e. the e-value of labor. This misunderstanding could be overcome only if one distinguished what Adam Smith left in an obscure state, namely the sacrifice faced by the laborer as the *price* paid for laying out his own labor, on the one hand, and the *manifestation* or *outcome* of this sacrifice in the quantity of labor employed in production, on the other. Thus the price that the laborer demands for the *price* which he pays corresponds to the price which is paid by the person who employs the laborer in exchange not so much for that *price* but for what Ricardo and Malthus call the *average strength* or *physical force* resulting from *it* and employed in production for the employer's own aims.

Hence Ricardo's and Malthus's common misinterpretation of Smith's ambiguous expression *value of labour* and their diverging attempts to reject (Ricardo) or to reconstruct (Malthus) this *value* as an invariable standard for measuring the e-value of all commodities (as products of labor). Hence Ricardo's consistency (and Malthus's confusions) in developing this misinterpretation into a number of further criticisms of Adam Smith both when Smith draws, in Book I or in other parts of the *Wealth*, the static implications of his insight on the *value of labour* to the laborer and when, in Book II or in other parts of the *Wealth*, he moves to the dynamic implications of the accumulation of capital in terms of the demand for labor and supply of wage goods¹³.

4. Ricardo versus Malthus versus Smith on the variations of the e-value of labor

Ricardo's criticisms of Malthus's 1823 pamphlet must have contributed to modifying Malthus's subsequent approach to the issue of the value of labor. Some of these modifications can be noticed in two distinct variations introduced in the 1836 edition of his *Principles* (see pages 48-

¹³ The importance of these misunderstandings seems to escape Sraffa's attention when hinting at some minor inaccuracies in Ricardo's reconstruction of Smith's passage (*Works*, Vol. I, 17, n.1). In this connection, it may be interesting to add that Smith's crucial sentence was misunderstood by Marx in a still different direction when, after interpreting Smith's *price* of labor as a sacrifice for the laborer, he moved to a different interpretation by which that word is understood in Ricardo's own sense, i.e. in the context of the exchange between labor and wage-goods (see *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII). Thus Marx ends up by attributing to Smith contradictions that do not exist but in his own mind: *The slaughter of the ox* -he argued in his attempt to reject Smith's argument- is always the same sacrifice, for the ox. But this does not mean that the value of beef is constant (*ibid.*, 614). Here Marx's irony is self-defeating in that the author who would consistently argue that *this* does not mean that the value of beef is constant is Smith in the first place. Such a misunderstanding is at the roots of a long series of misinterpretations of Smith's theory of value (including, for instance, Blaug, 1997, chap. 2, sec. 10) and is in turn the result of an approach to this theory as if there were no difference between the u-value and e-value of labor, on the one hand, and of commodities as products of labor, on the other.

51 and 79-99). Apart from the elimination of the section on the corn-labor index put forward in the 1820 edition, these variations include a short clarification of the distinction between cause and measure of value (an issue ambiguously dealt with by Adam Smith in the first place) and some arguments which, in Malthus's mind, seem to strengthen, against Ricardo's criticisms, Smith's view, discussed above, that it is not labor but the goods exchanged for it which are cheap in the one case and dear in the other. These arguments are based, on the one hand, on the distinctions, introduced by Senior and developed by Malthus [(1836)1986, Vol. 5, bk. I, chap.2, secs. 1-2], between intrinsic and extrinsic causes of variation of e-value as well as between intensity and extent of demand; and, on the other hand, on the distinction (ambiguously introduced by Smith, as argued above) between value of labour and value to the labourer. These distinctions will be used in the next subsections as steps required for clearing up a final difference between Smith's and Malthus's views of the variations of the e-value of labor as well as the final conflict on this important issue between these two authors, on the one hand, and Ricardo, on the other.

4.1. The latter distinction comes to light when Malthus, who believes to be strengthening Smith's and weakening Ricardo's theory of value, resorts to the example of the American versus the English laborer in order to argue that, if the former is paid more than the latter, this is because what is different in the two countries is not the u-value of labor to the laborer but the e-value of labor:

The [the American labourer] does not *give more* [units of his labour] for what he *receives* [products of labour, or units of corn] but *receives more* for [each unit of] what he *gives*; and unless we mean to make quantity of products the measure of value, which would lead us into the most absurd and inextricable difficulties, we must measure the value of what the labourer receives in the United States by the labour which he gives for it [(1836)1986, Vol. 5, bk. I, chap. 2, sec. iv, 88 (square brackets and italics added)]¹⁴.

Now, if the focus of attention were shifts to the other side of the labor market, it might equally be argued that, in these circumstances and given the reciprocal aspect of any exchange rate, the [the American capitalist] does not receive more [units of labour] for what [products of labour, or units of corn] he gives, but gives more [products of labour, or units of corn] for what he receives. If one moves to this different standpoint, it will appear that what Malthus achieves with his example is that he implicitly shares, contrary to his explicit aim, Ricardo's view of labor as a commodity which is exchanged, directly or indirectly, with any other commodity, so that any commodity can be used or

¹⁴ This example may have been in J. S. Mill's mind when, after arguing that a day's labor will purchase in America twice as much of ordinary consumable articles as in England, it seems a vain subtlety to insist on saying that labor is of the same value in both countries. He concludes that labor, in this case, may be correctly said to be twice as valuable, both in the market and to the laborer himself, in America as in England [(1871) 1976, 567]. Thus Ricardo's and Malthus's common mistake in considering the value of labor as an e-value is strengthened by J. S. Mill through a strange identification of the u-value of labor to the laborer with the e-value of labor. For further comments on this vain subtlety see Hueckel (1998).

regarded as a standard for measuring the e-value of any other commodity exchanged for it. If, on the contrary, the term labor had been intended by Malthus in the same sense in which it was intended by Smith in the crucial passages above, i.e. neither in terms of the average strength of laborers nor in terms of their physical strength or physical force both Malthus and Ricardo would have acknowledged the difference between the role of labor in production and the *disutility* faced by the laborer when laying out that average or physical strength.

The contrast between the u-value of labor to the laborer and the e-value of labor, however unrecognized by both authors, is nonetheless implicit in Malthus's arguments on the pay of curates and the value of banknotes (*Principles*, 60-2)¹⁵. Indeed, these examples might be re-utilized to come to the conclusion that, even if laborers were able to live on air, or on goods available in unlimited quantity, and therefore even if labor were costless and were not a commodity in this sense, they would nonetheless demand a compensation for their work due to the disutility, or negative u-value, that labor as such would entail for them. Hence the role of demand and supply (more precisely: of the relation of the one to the other) in determining the e-value of labor either at subsistence levels when the supply of labor exceeds the demand for it (which is normally the case in the early and rude state of society) or at levels where the condition of the laborer is flourishing and happy (Ricardo, *Principles*, 94), i.e. when the demand for labor exceeds its supply (which is usually the case if the accumulation of capital is proxy for the growth of labor demand- is strong enough to exceed the increase of population is proxy for the growth of labor supply)¹⁶.

4.2. The confusions on the u-value of labor to the laborer and the e-value of labor may be the result of the general ambiguities, which from Adam Smith onwards affect the whole classical theory, on the different concepts of *cause* (for causes), *magnitude* (for measure) and *standard measure* (rather than measure) of e-value. Malthus himself seems to have realized these ambiguities when, in a footnote added to the crucial sections on value in the 1836 edition of his *Principles* (bk.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that, in a further passage of the 1st edition of his *Principles*, Malthus extends these arguments to labor by saying that if in this, or any other country during the last twenty years, the production of labor had cost absolutely nothing, but had still been supplied in exactly the same proportion to the demand, the wages of labor would have been in no respect different. It is even more interesting to note that this passage not only went unnoticed in Ricardo's *Notes* (see *Works*, Vol. II, 225) but was eventually eliminated from the final edition of Malthus's *Principles* [(1836)1986, Vol. 6, 383-4].

¹⁶ The term proxy is used by Aspromourgos (2010b) when arguing that the difference between commodity pricing and labor pricing consists in the fact that the natural price of labor is subject (unlike the natural price of commodities) to a special form of hysteresis by which its increases from period to period are perceived as changes in the varying habits and customs of the people living in each particular period. Concerning this issue, see also Garegnani (1984, sec. 4 and 23) and Stirati (1994, 1995) who, however, regard these habits and customs as changing symptoms of a given natural price of labor rather than as an effect of its increases from period to period. Their arguments seem to be an attempt to deny (in accordance with Ricardo) the possibility of increases in the natural price of labor (as distinct from its market price) once the accumulation of capital, and the consequent rise in the demand for labor, is under way.

I, chap. 2, secs. iv-v), he points out that the labor which is worked up in a commodity is the principal *cause* of its value although it is not a measure of it whereas the labor which a commodity will command is *not* the *cause* of its value although it can be shown to be the measure of it (footnote 14, p.70; italics added). This footnote may have been inspired by the arguments on this issue put forward *a contrario* by Bailey [(1825)1967] and in a parallel direction by De Quincey [(1823, 1824)1970, 6th Dialogue], two of the sharpest critics of Malthus's pamphlet on the measure of value. Leaving aside the details of these criticisms (which are summarized, on behalf of many other authors, by De Quincey's indictment that Malthus [Malthus] is not only confused himself, but is the cause that confusion is in other men (1823)1970, 84], these authors, however divided by their conflicting views of Ricardo's thought, were also divided by a distinction that was at the core of De Quincey's contribution to the theory of value but was denied by Bailey and developed, however incompletely, by Ricardo in his final attempt to get rid of Malthus's measure of value (*Works*, Vol. IV). This is the crucial distinction between absolute and relative value. Bailey's denial consisted in rejecting the notion of absolute value (regarded by him as absurd as absolute distance) and in claiming that Malthus had fallen in the same mistake as Ricardo when sharing this notion (in spite of the conflicting meanings attached to it)¹⁷.

Bailey's criticisms, however, are easy to reject -while De Quincey's insights on the same issues are easy to share- if one starts from the difference between two elementary questions in the theory of value such as why do things have e-value? as distinct from the question what determines the magnitude of this e-value? and even more from the question what determines the variations of this magnitude? For the issue of labor embodied as the cause (or ground, essence, substance or foundation) and, indeed, the *only* cause (not the *principal* -as Malthus says- or the *main* cause -as Ricardo agrees in his Note 43 to Malthus's *Principles*) of the e-value of commodities (as distinct from the *goods* which are not produced by labor) must be distinguished not only from the issue of what determines the *magnitude* of this e-value (which includes profits and which is usually called *measure* by many authors, including Ricardo)¹⁸ but also from the issue of the invariable *standard*

¹⁷ The idea that absolute value is a concept relating to labor embodied as the *sole* cause of e-value, whatever the state of society, can be shared by Smith in two senses; i.e. first in the same sense in which it was distinguished from relative value by De Quincey [(1823, 1824, 1844)1970] who traced the former to the *principium essendi* (as the *regulative* idea concerning the cause of value) and the latter to the *principium cognoscendi* (as the *constitutive* idea concerning the magnitude of value); and, secondly, in the sense that labor embodied and labor commanded are two distinct concepts both when they amount to the same magnitude (as it happens in the rude and early state of society) and when they do not (as it happens in the capitalist state).

¹⁸ It should be noted that when Malthus and Ricardo argue (in the passages mentioned above) that labor embodied is the *main* or *principal* (rather than the *only*) cause of e-value, they prompt the reader to confuse the *existence* of the e-value of commodities in general and the *magnitude* (and corresponding variations) of the e-value of one commodity in terms of another. In this connection, it is worth adding that, among the occasional hints and allusions mentioned by Sraffa (*Works*, Vol. IV, 359) on absolute and relative value in Ricardo's writings prior to his final essay, are some

by which to measure the *variations* of this magnitude and, more particularly, of the magnitude of the e-value of labor¹⁹.

4.3. We have noted above that the main controversies between Ricardo and Malthus are about the second and, more particularly, the third of these issues, with Malthus claiming that the invariable standard is the *value of labour* and with Ricardo objecting that this standard is no less variable than the e-value of any other commodity. In what follows, we shall focus only on the third issue and only from the standpoint, rather neglected in the literature, of the e-value of labor as distinct not only 1) from its u-value to the laborer but also 2) from the e-value of its products. It is in this connection that Malthus's insights, mentioned above, on the intrinsic versus the extrinsic causes of the variations of e-value as well as on the intensity versus the extent of demand come to the fore with particular strength. With regard to the e-value of labor and, more particularly, to the variations of its magnitude, it is the second, rather than the first, distinction which contributes to strengthening Malthus's (and weakening Ricardo's) approach to the variations of the e-value of labor. But the first of these distinctions, however insightful, is misunderstood by Malthus in the counterproductive direction of strengthening Ricardo's (and weakening his own) approach. For, again, one thing is the (average) disutility of *labor* from the standpoint of the laborer, another thing is the *quantity* of labor supplied in the market by one laborer or, more importantly, by a given or increasing/decreasing number of laborers. If the focus is on the quantity of labor supplied/demanded in the market, we must side with Ricardo against Malthus and say that the e-value of labor is, in these circumstances, as variable as that of any of its products. If, on the contrary, the focus is on the (average) disutility that labor entails for the laborer, we must side with Adam Smith against Ricardo and Malthus, and stress that, net of Smith's initial ambiguities, the *price* paid by the laborer for laying out (one unit of) his labor is always the same, whatever the amount of goods he receives in return for *it*.

passages where the words labor and quantity of labor are used in the sense of conveying, in the former case, the idea of the cause (or *principium essendi*) and, in the latter case, the idea of the magnitude (and corresponding variations) of e-value (or *principium cognoscendi*). See, for instance, the opening sentences of chap. I, sec. II, and of chap. IV of Ricardo's *Principles*.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that Ricardo's inner consistency, based as it is on his ambiguities concerning the different questions *why* do things have e-value? and *why* do things have a greater/lower or increasing/decreasing e-value? was turned by Bailey into an inner, albeit different, consistency of his own when moving from his initial and explicit mistake of replacing the former with the latter question to his consequent view of the determination of the (natural) price of labor; a view which, however, is more appropriate in itself than the one reached by Ricardo when extending to labor his overall theory of natural prices (see, for a comparison, Bailey, 1825, chap. III: *On the Value of Labor*, and Ricardo, *Principles*, chap. V: *On Wages*).

²⁰ This helps to highlight Malthus's further confusion when, after criticizing Smith's ambiguity on *the* labor which is worked up in a commodity and *the* labor which it will command (see above, sec. 2.2), he eventually fails to distinguish, within the notion of labor adopted in the two parts of his criticism, the *physical force* of labor as the *great instrument of production* from the *evil and trouble* of labor as what should be more properly regarded as the original *source* of such an instrument (rather than -as Malthus unfortunately does in continuation with his previous and

4.4. The interaction between the intrinsic vs. extrinsic causes of variation of e-value and the intensity vs. extent of demand is of crucial importance when it comes to the forces that increase the e-value of labor in the long run and in the economy as a whole. The only force which, in these circumstances, can account for an increased intensity of the demand for labor (and only consequently for an increased supply of wage goods) and which acts, therefore, as an intrinsic cause of variation of the e-value of labor is nothing but the accumulation of capital. In such a context, the law of population, introduced by Malthus and eventually shared with admiration by Ricardo (*Principles*, 398), can be used to support the argument that the only possible increase in the long-run demand for labor is an increase in its *extent* and *not* in its *intensity*. This conclusion is reached by Ricardo in perfect consistency with his labor theory of value and, more particularly, of the natural price of labor. Yet it is avoided by Malthus in what is perhaps a silent attempt to reconcile his early theory of population with his late anti-Ricardian arguments on the intrinsic vs. extrinsic causes of variation of e-value and on the intensity vs. extent of demand regardless of any difference between the variations of the e-value of labor as labor and of commodities as products of labor. This attempt is consistent with Malthus's view of population as an *exogenous* variable governed by the passion between the sexes (or by moral restraint as one of its counteractive aspects). But it is inconsistent with a view of population (necessitated in Adam Smith's work by an implicit demand-and-supply theory of the natural price of labor as distinct from that of its products) as an *endogenous* variable governed by the accumulation of capital and the (resulting) increase in the demand for labor exceeding the (resulting) increase in its supply²¹.

5. Concluding remarks

Speaking of the language used in the economics literature of his times, De Quincey distinguishes between a *vicious* and a *virtuous* obscurity and regards the latter as pardonable in profound thinkers for they are led to suppress at least some of the links in a long chain of thought due to the disgust which they naturally feel at overlaying a subject with superfluous explanations (1824)1970, 9]. The interest on the relationship between words and concepts, never

more appropriate expression- the primary object given in exchange for everything that is wealth [(1827)1986, Vol. 8, 103, note 8].

²¹ On some reasons why the link between capital accumulation and population growth should be intended in Adam Smith's thought as a link between two different *rates* of growth, see Meacci (2012, note 22). As for Malthus's analysis of the same link in the 1820 and 1836 editions of his *Principles*, see Hollander's discussion of this analysis as something that suffers from serious ambiguities regarding causation (1997, chap. 9). As for Ricardo's analysis of this very link, it should be noted that Ricardo (*Principles*, 384-5), while commenting on Lauderdale's view of the role of demand in determining the long-run value of monopolized commodities fails to allude (again in perfect consistency with his own theory of value) to the possibility that labor be regarded as one of these commodities in the inter-generational context in which laborers re-appear as parents generating the laborers to come.

absent in the post-Smithian literature starting with Bailey (who was aware of the chameleon-like properties of language) [(1825)1967] and Malthus (who in turn objected to Bailey's indiscriminate use of the notions of exchangeable value and price) [(1827)1986, Vol. 8, chap. viii], has been scarcely focused on the multifaceted ambiguity of the expression value of labour in spite of the crucial role it plays in classical economics, to say nothing of the economy as a whole. We have tried above to dissolve this ambiguity by distinguishing the different meanings embodied in that expression. Thus, after starting from the elementary distinction between u-value and e-value, we have moved to the much more sophisticated meanings attached to these concepts depending on whether they are formulated from the standpoint of the laborer (the owner of labor power) or of the person (the owner of wage goods) who employs the laborer. This was done, first, by highlighting in section 1 the obscurities embodied in that expression as laid out by Adam Smith in chapter V, book I, of the *Wealth of Nations*; and, then, by focusing on the common misunderstanding by which Ricardo and Malthus developed their diverging theories of the value of labour. We have accordingly tried to show how, in spite of the greater consistency of Ricardo's system of thought, both Ricardo and Malthus were unable to extricate from the notion of the value of labor two concepts as distinct as the u-value of labor to the laborer and the e-value of labor (which in its turn can be understood from the standpoint either of the laborer or of his employer). The final outcome of Smith's ambiguities and of Ricardo and Malthus's resulting misunderstanding can be detected in their different (and, in Malthus's system of thought including his theory of population, contradictory) views of what is of utmost importance to Adam Smith and to all friends of humanity (Ricardo, *Principles*, 100), i.e. the long-run increase in the natural price of labor (in the sense of the quantity and quality of the wage goods exchanged for it) as the accumulation of capital goes on from generation to generation.

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