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# Living Labour and the Rule-Following Paradox

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## Résumé

Marx's distinction between living and dead labour is central to his labour theory of value, to his hypothesis regarding the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and to his conception of capital itself. Yet Marxists – to say nothing of Marx himself – have always seemed a bit hazy about what living labour is, and what distinguishes it from dead labour. "Vital energy", "will", "form-giving fire", "self-negating capacity", the "blood" on which the vampire of dead labour feeds to produce surplus – the cloud of nouns that surrounds the concept of living labour is suggestive, but unending and often stubbornly metaphorical.

A century after Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps without intending to, contributed a new formulation of the Marxian contradiction between living and dead labour – a formulation that, this paper will argue, is of great help in clarifying the continuing relevance of the contradiction in an age of computer-mechanized law and renewed struggles over the commons. Wittgenstein's "rule-following paradox" states that rules – which can be taken to include the "frozen" algorithms that both 19th-century steam-driven machinery and 21st-century computers are designed to "execute" repeatedly at high speeds using thermodynamic energy – are useless in the absence of people who, working at a meta-level, understand when they apply and when they can be broken (which is why "work to rule" is such a powerful weapon of labour resistance). And similarly for any second rule anyone might formulate about how to interpret the first rule; and so on.

In their efforts to see the history of mechanization under capitalism steadily and to see it whole, political economists can benefit greatly from the assistance of philosophers and sociologists of scientific knowledge – such as Harry Collins and Martin Kusch – who have engaged in empirical studies of the rule-following paradox in action in contexts where machines and humans operate together. As a case study, this paper will explore recent visionary efforts to graft a Decentralized Autonomous Organization onto a German forest, using blockchain and automated "smart contracts" to produce the first instance of "Nature 2.0". It will show how the Nature 2.0 case once again brings to the fore very old capitalist desires, anxieties and internal conflicts regarding perpetual motion machines and the inability of automation, by itself, to create capitalist value.

**Mots-Clés:** labour, value, mechanization, computers, commons, Marx, Wittgenstein, algorithms, automation

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