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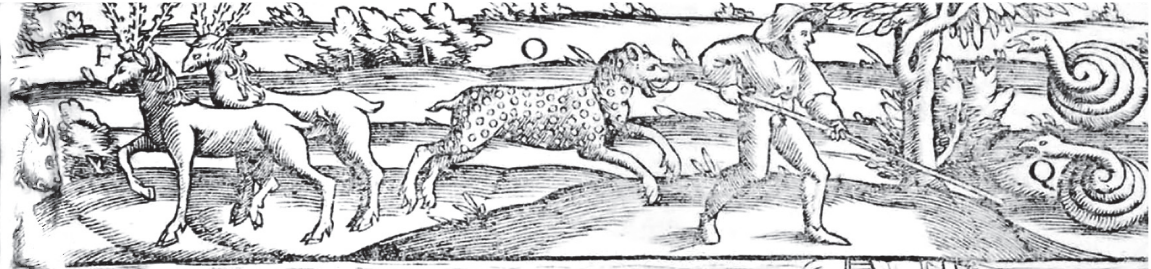
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# The Devil's Party

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Marx, Theory and Philosophy





‘The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God, and at liberty when of devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it.’

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

‘M. Proudhon [aims] to eliminate the bad in every economic category, in order to have nothing left but the good. ... It is always the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle.’

Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*

‘The Devil’s party—the “historical evil” that leads existing conditions to their destruction, the “bad side” that makes history by undermining all established satisfaction.’

Guy Debord, script to the film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*



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## Foreword

This collection of essays arose from a one-day event held by Goldsmiths College's Centre for Cultural Studies in June 2008, entitled 'Marx and Philosophy'. Themes relating to the philosophical content and implications of Marx's work had been developing at the Centre for some time, largely through reading groups and informal discussions; and with the intention of making some of this interest coalesce, we sent out a call for papers that invited considerations of Marx, philosophy, social theory or the combination thereof. This resulted in a successful afternoon of presentations and debate.

The high number of attendance confirmations we received meant that our initial choice of venue was too small, and had to be changed. This, we thought, reflected little more than good fortune on our part; or rather we did so until March this year (2009), when the full scale of the contemporary interest in Marxism and philosophy was evidenced at Birkbeck College's 'On the Idea of Communism' conference. This event, which boasted some of the biggest names in the field (e.g. Badiou, Negri, Žižek), was so overwhelmed with attendance applications that it had to be moved not once but three times. The apparent celebrity of its speakers even led one journalist to remark that 'The hottest ticket in London this weekend is not for a pop singer or a football match but for a conference on communism.'<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years ago such interest may have appeared anachronistic, and for some even regressive.<sup>2</sup> Yet if the failure of Russian and Eastern European communism caused the retreat of this approach in the 80s and 90s, the prominence of the anti-capitalist movement in the late 90s and early 2000s perhaps served to revitalise it. If this is so, the debt owed to that de-centred, but no less global movement may inform one of the chief virtues of its current manifestation: as at its best, such philosophy offers not only the interrogation of given assumptions but also the re-thinking of their traditional alternatives. The critical perspective required for that latter has in turn been facilitated by an increased historical distance (although, as Sayers points out, this aspect of Western Marxist philosophy can be traced back to the impact of 1956).<sup>3</sup> We might also add that the recent financial crisis seems to have brought a degree of popular appeal to Marx's

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1 Duncan 2009

2 Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) constitutes a rather trite example of this view, but deserves mention nonetheless: 'The collapse of Marxist ideology in the late 1980s', Fukuyama claimed, 'reflected...the achievement of a higher level of rationality on the part of those who lived in such societies.' (p.205).

3 'The Soviet invasion of Hungary and Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin had a major impact on the left. These events led a number of people to break with the Communist Party. Some abandoned it altogether, but others began to develop Marxism in new and innovative ways.' Sayers 2006



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writings. In October last year *The Times* declared that copies of *Capital* were ‘flying off the shelves’ (an event of some significance, given that in their view the book had until this point been used ‘mainly as a doorstop’<sup>4</sup>). Marx’s publishers, it would seem, had been able to find a silver lining within the economic downturn.<sup>5</sup>

However, those suspicious of a philosophical approach might complain of its separation from the concerns behind that more popular appeal; and this, they might argue, can be seen in the difficulty that a (purely) philosophical reading may face in explaining the economic and historical basis of events such as the crisis. In this respect the broadness of our call for papers proved to be a virtue, as all of the essays gathered here relate philosophical and theoretical concepts to a variety of social and political concerns. Some deal with sociological and cultural issues: for example, Andy Christodoulou brings Marx’s concept of use-value to bear on culturally specific notions of symbolic value; Alberto Toscano uses Marx’s criticisms of philosophy and religion to indicate the shortcomings of contemporary atheistic discourse; and John Hutnyk discusses the theme of appearance implicit within the opening words of *Capital*, and its relation to the society that those words describe. Other essays focus more specifically on theory, yet do so with a critical eye on its abstraction. Nicole Pepperell discusses the link between Marx’s reading of Hegel and the standpoints taken in the first chapter of *Capital*; Nick Grey and Rob Lucas evaluate the extent to which Marx’s concept of subsumption is able to serve as a historical category; Ben Polhill also deals with subsumption, and discusses the manner in which Antonio Negri’s use of the term relates to his departure from class analysis. More explicitly economic issues are also raised by Lee Wan-Gi and Nick Salazar; the former discusses the political and cultural implications of global finance capital, whilst the latter compares mathematical and philosophical abstraction within Marx’s work. Other essays discuss the connection between thought and practice: Sam Meaden reflects upon the virtues and failings of the Reclaim the Streets movement, and my own essay discusses the factors involved in the relation between a philosophical practice and a practical political movement.

However, having argued that these essays have the virtue of bringing abstract concepts into contact with concrete concerns it seems necessary to add that casting all purely speculative and abstract thought as automatically suspect is itself inherently dogmatic. Given the limits (and indeed the prevalence) of such a position, the contemporary resurgence of Marxist philosophy may invite a re-acquaintance with older views on the validation of philosophical work. For example, Korsch’s classic *Marxism*

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4 Boyes 2008

5 “Marx is in fashion again,” said Jörn Schütrumpf, manager of the Berlin publishing house Karl-Dietz which publishes the works of Marx and Engels in German. “We’re seeing a very distinct increase in demand for his books.” Connolly 2008

*and Philosophy* (1923) attacked the inadequacies and repressive aspects of the Party, and claimed that radical thought should oppose all dogma and ideology; but Korsch also maintained that the credibility of such attacks must be predicated upon their relation to militant struggle.<sup>6</sup> From such a perspective it could be argued that the real merit of any 'idea' of communism lies in its relation to actuality.

Polemics aside, it remains to thank all of our contributors for their time and labour. However, particular mention ought to be made of Ben Polhill for his invaluable assistance in readying this material for publication; Andy Christodoulou and Alison Hulme for their help with proof reading; and John Hutnyk, without whom this would not have happened.



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6 "The philosophers have only interpreted the world; it is now a question of changing it." This does not mean...that all philosophy is shown to be a mere fantasy. It only expresses a categorical rejection of all theory, philosophical or scientific, that is not at the same time practice—real, terrestrial, immanent, human and sensuous practice... Korsch 1970, p.83



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## When Is It Safe to Go on Reading *Capital*? Nicole Pepprell

### I. One Line May Hide Another Line

In a poem, one line may hide another line,  
As at a crossing, one train may hide another train.  
That is, if you are waiting to cross  
The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at  
Least after the first train is gone. And so when you read  
Wait until you have read the next line –  
Then it is safe to go on reading.

Kenneth Koch, 'One Train May Hide Another'<sup>1</sup>

*Capital* confronts its readers repeatedly with conflicting lines of argument—sometimes without the conflict being explicitly marked in the text. Claims that seem initially to be put forward with confidence are often undermined and contradicted by later passages. The most obvious lines of argument are commonly revealed over time to have concealed within themselves the potential for very different sorts of arguments, which only become explicit much later in the text. As the text unfolds, the introduction of layer upon layer of new lines of argument—lines which were hidden securely away at the opening of the text—completely transforms our sense of what the original argument had once self-evidently seemed to mean. This counter-intuitive presentational strategy means that *Capital* offers repeated opportunities for readers to be blindsided by an argument they did not realise was heading their way. It is a text, in other words, for which Kenneth Koch's poem could have been written: a text where it is uncommonly important to wait until we have read the next line, before we conclude that it is safe to go on reading.

In this paper, I explore just how difficult it can be to tell when it is safe to read *Capital*, by reconstructing what I take to be the main narrative arc for the opening chapter. To anticipate and foreshadow the argument I make below: my central interpretive claim is that this narrative arc is surprisingly difficult to find. This difficulty arises in the first place because, as I argue below, the first chapter must be understood as a kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Koch 2005, p. 441.

play within a play, in which Marx demonstrates—in a very compressed, concentrated form—the central thematic concerns that recur throughout *Capital*, as well as key aspects of the presentational strategy through which the text explores those concerns.

In this microcosm of *Capital* as a whole, Marx pursues the question of how we can best grasp the wealth of capitalist societies. The answer to this question at first seems straightforward: the text turns to the commodity and examines the social and material properties of this object, as these properties are immediately evident to the senses. This initial empiricist analysis soon runs into difficulties, however: in addition to its immediately sensible properties, the commodity possesses, as it turns out, supersensible properties that cannot be discerned by the senses, but must be deduced by reason as transcendental conditions for commodity exchange. This transcendental analysis soon runs into difficulties of its own, as a dialectical analysis demonstrates further dimensions of the commodity that can be understood only when commodities are explored within the context of the dynamic relations that they form with other commodities. The opening chapter of *Capital*, in other words, successively introduces a series of *conflicting* answers to its central question. Variations on this presentational strategy, as it turns out, will be deployed throughout *Capital*: the first chapter thus establishes the need for the reader to beware, and foreshadows that crossing the complex intersections of this text will involve navigating a number of conflicting lines of argument.

Layered onto this already complex presentational style is a subterranean dialogue between Marx and Hegel. Most commentators on Marx now recognise the importance of his relationship to Hegel, and so it is nothing unusual for an interpretation of *Capital* to stress the connection to Hegel's work—particularly the connection to Hegel's *Science of Logic*. I also see Hegel's *Logic* as important to an understanding of Marx's method. When confronting the opening chapter of *Capital*, however, I suggest that reference to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* may be equally useful. In my reading, the narrative structure of the first chapter of *Capital* marks out a number of parallels with the early chapters of Hegel's *Phenomenology*—parallels that then resurface, in some cases quite explicitly, at key moments in the other early chapters of this work. The subtle references to the *Phenomenology* in the opening chapter are far more implicit. As I attempt to show below, they are most visible in parallels between the narrative arcs of the two works; parallels which suggest that elements of *Capital* are designed as a sort of dark, comedic restaging of aspects of Hegel's work. This subterranean spoof of Hegel allows Marx, as the chapters unfold, to put forward a deflationary, pragmatist account of the social origins of much of what Hegel takes to be metaphysical phenomena. Marx overtly applies such a deflationary strategy to the political economists; his quarrel with Hegel, whose method infuses Marx's at a more fundamental level, is by contrast acted out in mostly tacit ways in the background of the text.

While the purpose—or even the existence—of such complex textual strategies are nowhere *explicitly* thematised, the chapter is shot through with subtle gestures that draw the reader’s attention to the *artificiality* of the performance playing out in the main text, by recurrently destabilising and undermining the claims that are put forward in various moments of this performance. By focussing on these destabilising gestures, and by drawing attention to the voicing and the dramatic structure of the various sections of the chapter, I hope to render plausible the claim that the text deliberately sets out to undermine the claims with which it opens—and then to explore why Marx believes it is important to open his text with claims that he intends to undermine.

## II. Obvious, Trivial Things

In the opening sentence of *Capital*, Marx quotes himself, referencing his own earlier work: ‘The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails,’ he tells us, ‘appears as [self-quotation] ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’.<sup>2</sup> This gesture is peculiar. Having opened the text and set about reading, we would generally assume that we are engaging with Marx’s argument about capital. Only a handful of words in, however, and we are confronted with a curious problem: if we are *already* reading Marx, then why does the text need to quote him? Has he not been speaking all along? If he has, why does the text not simply restate his position, perhaps footnoting his earlier work if the goal is to mark the origin of the idea being expressed?<sup>3</sup> What is the benefit of intruding into the main text with an explicitly marked quotation of the author’s own earlier writing?

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2 Marx 1990, p. 125.

3 The opening self-quotation is not unique, although the decision to quote his own work in the first sentence, and before citing any sources, does immediately raise for the reader questions of the distinction between what Marx elsewhere calls the ‘method of investigation’ and the ‘method of inquiry’ (Marx 1990, p. 102)—drawing subtle attention to the possibility of a distinction between the research process through which Marx arrives at the conclusions that inform *Capital*, and the form of presentation of *Capital* itself. The first chapter presents various different sorts of procedures that appear to be put forward as examples of the forms of analysis actually used to draw the conclusions presented. This opening citation to his own earlier work draws a tacit line between the forms of analysis presented in the text (which I will analyse in this chapter as performances illustrating conflictual forms of engagement with the commodity), and the forms of analysis Marx actually used in arriving at these results. Further along in the text, Marx periodically references his own work, just as he references the work of other authors throughout, in order to mark the earliest historical moment when the concept he is analysing in the text has been articulated explicitly. Engels discusses this practice (Marx 1990, p. 108). My suggestion is that this seemingly small gesture holds substantive theoretical implications: Marx symbolically places himself within the frame of his own analysis, refusing to exempt himself and his own positions from the sort of critical historical and social analysis he applies to other theorists. He criticises the political economists for behaving as though ‘there used to be history but there no longer is any’—for exempting themselves from historicising analyses they willingly apply to others. Marx pointedly refuses to copy this practice; the process of self-quotation is one small aspect of Marx’s attempt to reflexively grasp the possibility for his own positions, by showing in the unfolding of his theory how dimensions of the social process he is analysing, make the insights on which his own theory relies socially available.

This gesture suggests a distance between the voice expressed in the text, and Marx's own citable positions. It hints that the voice speaking to us in the opening sentence of *Capital* is somehow not fully identical to Marx's voice, such that the intrusion of Marx himself into the text must be explicitly marked in the form of a quotation. Somehow the argument being made in the opening sentence *references* Marx—Marx's position is in some sense positioned as *immanent* to the opening declarations about how the wealth of capitalist society 'appears'—but, at the same time, the very act of quotation seems to suggest the main text is somehow disjointed from Marx's views. What the distinction might be between the Marx who is quoted, and the voice otherwise speaking to the reader in the main text, remains at this point quite unclear. How should the reader make sense of this bifurcation, this play within a play or Marx within a Marx, in the opening sentence of *Capital*? Perhaps—already here, in the first sentence of the work—we have been reading too quickly. Maybe we need to wait and read the next line, to make sure it is safe to go on reading.

A few sentences later, and we stumble across another subtle warning—another trace of multiple lines operating simultaneously in the text. In the main body of the text, we are being told: 'The discovery...of the manifold uses of things is the work of history'.<sup>4</sup> A footnote provides a citation to Barbon—a quotation that seems to support the claim being made in the main text: 'Things have an intrinsick vertue', Marx quotes, 'which in all places have the same vertue; as the loadstone to attract iron'.<sup>5</sup> Reading the next line, however, changes this picture: it turns out that Marx is criticising Barbon here—and, by implication, criticising the position put forward in the main text, which the Barbon citation supports. Barbon speaks of 'intrinsick vertue', and the main text tells us that uses lie latent, waiting the long years until at last we discover them in history. In the footnote, Marx disagrees, arguing, 'The magnet's property of attracting iron only became useful once it had led to the discovery of magnetic polarity'. But what could such a statement mean? How could Marx possibly disagree with the claim that material things have intrinsic properties that humans discover over time? Even more perplexing, given that Marx seems to *have* such a disagreement, why whisper it in a footnote, while declaiming quite the contrary so prominently in the main text?<sup>6</sup> Who exactly is speaking in the main

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4 Marx 1990, p. 125

5 Marx 1990, p. 125, n. 3

6 Note that, because I do not want to multiply examples unnecessarily above, I focus solely on the footnote on Barbon as an illustrative example of this sort of textual trace of multiple lines operating simultaneously in Marx's text. Marx's footnotes, however, frequently undercut or destabilise the explicit claim being made in the main body of the text. Attending to the metacommentary he provides in this way often provides a fairly clear sense that Marx is using the main text to illustrate positions of which he is critical, allowing those positions to express themselves in their 'own' voice as part of a critique that operates by accepting the 'social validity' of the positions being criticised, while seeking ultimately to

body of *Capital*? Why does Marx appear marginalised and bracketed—footnoted and quoted, but nevertheless strangely excluded from the main line of argument in the body of his own text?

This problem only deepens as we continue to move forward, hoping to find the point at which it is safe to go on reading. The opening paragraphs tell us that ‘first of all’ the commodity is an ‘external object’ that satisfies our changeable needs through its own intrinsic material properties.<sup>7</sup> Our needs are described as contingent and as varying with time; not, however, the properties of material things that satisfy those needs, which are described as intrinsic to the materiality of those things. We discover material properties—given time and effort—but these properties themselves subsist outside us: they are objects of our contemplation, more essential, more timeless, more stable than we. Use-value, bound as it is to material properties, is also more essential: the text describes it as a transhistorical substance of wealth, as contrasted with the more transient and socially specific *form* of wealth, which in capitalism happens to be exchange-value.<sup>8</sup> Exchange-value is then itself described as a purely relative form—as an expression of the ways in which quantities of commodities may be equated to one another—without a substantive content specific or intrinsic to itself.<sup>9</sup>

At this point in the text—if we ignore Marx’s unsettling intrusions and puzzling objections from the sidelines—it looks as though we know what the commodity is: it is a unity of sensible properties, some more essential than others, but all subject to direct empirical investigation by a contemplative consciousness that sets its sense perception working hard to determine the characteristics of the commodity, understood as an object external to consciousness.

Bizarrely, just as we seem to have all this settled, and to be arriving at a decent sense of what the commodity might be, a second voice intrudes—enter stage left—and an argument breaks out.<sup>10</sup> This new character tells us that the first voice is sadly mistaken: a commodity cannot at all be understood with reference to its sensible properties alone, as in order for commodities to be exchanged they must share some property in common. This common property, however, cannot be anything in the commodity’s sensible form, as sensible properties vary from good to good. The condition of possibility for commodity exchange must therefore be something that transcends sensuousness entirely—a supersensible property whose existence can be intuited by reason, but to which our sensory perception remains sadly blind.

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argue that this validity can be unravelled by the transformation of society.

7 Marx 1990, p. 125

8 Marx 1990, p. 126

9 Ibid.

10 Marx 1990, pp. 126-31

This second voice then engages in a virtuoso demonstration of its deductive acumen, dazzling us with a bit of geometry,<sup>11</sup> and then walking us through a sort of transcendental deduction of the existence of the supersensible category of value, deriving the determination of value by labour time, and then unpacking the intuition that the labour involved here derives from some strange entity the text calls ‘human labour in the abstract’.<sup>12</sup> These supersensible categories are presented as something like transcendental conditions of possibility for commodity exchange; conditions whose existence was invisible from the perspective of the opening voice, which doggedly held fast to what could be perceived directly by the senses, and which therefore overlooked these intangible properties that subsist *behind* the world of sensuous experience.

In this supersensible world, the apparently arbitrary and contingent appearance of exchange-value is dispelled. Exchange-value, it turns out, does have an intrinsic content—an essence—albeit an intangible essence that cannot be directly perceived by the senses: value.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in this supersensible world, the proportions in which commodities exchange no longer appear purely arbitrary and conventional, but rather exhibit lawlike properties: the determination of value by socially necessary labour-time emerges as an immanent order behind the apparently random motion of goods that is immediately perceptible to our senses.<sup>14</sup>

So have we finally found Marx in this text? Is this second voice—tussling explicitly with the first—Marx’s proper entry onto the main stage of *Capital*? Here it helps to know that Hegel has staged something like this play before. A comparison of the opening chapter of *Capital* with the early chapters of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* suggests that Marx is adapting an earlier work—appropriating the plot and turning it to his own ends, rather than staging a fully original production. A quick review of the narrative arc that structures Hegel’s chapters on Perception and Force & Understanding will bring to light important similarities between the drama unfolding in Hegel’s work, and what I suggest is the comedic restaging of Hegel’s plot in the first chapter of *Capital*.

### III. The Phenomenology of Capital

In these early sections of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel sets out to show how consciousness seeks certainty of its object, which consciousness initially assumes subsists separately outside itself. Consciousness assumes a number of different shapes in its attempt to grasp its object, propelled forward into new efforts as each shape proves

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11 Marx 1990, p. 127

12 Marx 1990, pp. 127-31

13 Marx 1990, pp. 129-31

14 Marx 1990, p. 131



unstable—unable to offer the certainty consciousness seeks because, in Hegel's account, this certainty can never be attained so long as consciousness clasps tight to the presupposition that its object subsists in a separate substance or world that is severed from consciousness.

When these sections of the *Phenomenology* are read against the opening sections of the first chapter of *Capital* a number of striking parallels leap out. Hegel traces a shape of consciousness—he calls it Perception—that in one of its configurations takes its object to be a thing outside itself, a collection of sensible properties. Consciousness takes this thing to be more essential than itself, and adopts a contemplative stance toward it, assuming that anything transient or unstable about its perception of this object derives from the error-prone and ephemeral nature of consciousness itself.<sup>15</sup> In Hegel's account, Perception fails to achieve the certainty consciousness seeks, and consciousness finds itself driven toward a new shape, which Hegel calls Understanding. Understanding attempts to reach beyond Perception by taking its object to be *supersensible universals*. It therefore searches for certain knowledge that transcends the sensible realm but can be intuited by reason.<sup>16</sup> The opening sections of *Capital* appear to be retracing Hegel's steps, suggesting that Marx believes there are parallels between the movement Hegel traces out and the attempts of political economy to work out 'where to have' the commodity.<sup>17</sup> Hegel's narrative of strategies through which consciousness seeks to grasp its object is being restaged here, in the form of a narrative of how we can best grasp the ontological status of the object that is the elementary form of wealth in capitalist societies.

This parallel with Hegel's text already suggests that the introduction of the second voice will likely not be the final act of Marx's production: it is still not safe to read *Capital*. For Hegel, Understanding also fails to provide a stable resting place for consciousness as it seeks certainty of its object. Understanding does open up for consciousness an appreciation of the lawlike regularities that lie behind the apparent randomness of what can be perceived by the senses. In spite of this useful insight, however, Understanding falls into the error of presupposing that these laws subsist in some separate substance or world that lies *behind* the flux perceptible to the senses, thus replicating in a new form the separation of consciousness from its object that has plagued Perception. This new shape of consciousness is therefore also unstable, leading in Hegel's narrative to a restless oscillation through which it finally confronts what Hegel calls an 'inverted world'.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Hegel 2003, pp. 64-6

16 Hegel 2003, pp. 72, 74, 90

17 cf. Marx 1990, p. 138

18 Hegel 2003, pp. 90-1.

Within the *Phenomenology*, consciousness's confrontation with the inverted world provides one of the major dramatic pivots of the text. Through this confrontation, consciousness realises that what it had taken to be a realm of flux and appearance is generative of lawlike regularity, and what it had taken to be a realm of law and timeless essence is generative of flux. In the process, consciousness comes face to face with the instability of the ontological divisions and hierarchies into which it had previously attempted to carve its world. What consciousness had taken to be *separate* substances or worlds now come, through the confrontation with the inverted world, to be grasped instead as mutually-implicated and interpenetrating moments of the very *same dynamic relation*. This relation, moreover, implicates *consciousness* as one of its moments, such that consciousness comes to realise that it can no longer position itself as external to its object, but finally grasps that it has been its own object all along. At this point in Hegel's drama consciousness achieves Self-Consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

This part of Hegel's narrative, in which Understanding confronts an inverted world and achieves Self-Consciousness, is paralleled in the third section of the first chapter of *Capital*. In this section a third character enters the stage, arguing with the previous two and insisting that the commodity cannot be understood adequately in terms of *either* its immediately sensible properties *or* of some sort of 'transcendental' essence that subsists 'behind' what can be perceived by the senses. Instead, this third voice insists, the commodity must be understood *dialectically*, as a *dynamic relation* comprised of mutually-implicating moments.<sup>20</sup> This section of *Capital* is rife with references to self-reflexivity in both footnotes and within the main body of the text, and it mimics particularly closely the concerns of Hegel's analysis of Force and the Expression of Force, morphing it into an analysis of value and its expression. This third, 'dialectical' voice derives the money form through an analysis that it claims would be unattainable from the standpoint of the 'empiricist' or 'transcendental' perspectives and in the process of doing so unfolds a series of 'inversions' in which moments of the same dynamic relation are shown to be expressed by their opposites—thus demonstrating the intrinsic interconnection and mutual presupposition of aspects of experience that, taken statically, might appear to be antinomically opposed.

It is at this point, after the dialectical voice confronts the reader with the existence of an 'inverted world', that Marx opens the section titled 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof'. The narrative arc of the first chapter of *Capital* thus inserts the commodity fetishism discussion at the precise point where Hegel's *Phenomenology* draws aside the curtain that has been separating consciousness from

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<sup>19</sup> Hegel 2003, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Marx 1990, pp. 138-163.

its object to reveal that consciousness has been its own object all along. The section on commodity fetishism thus seems, at least at first glance, to occupy the point in the dramatic structure of the text where Hegel would present consciousness achieving Self-Consciousness.

The dramatic structure of the text seems to hint that we have now found Marx's voice: that the 'empiricist' and 'transcendental' characters might be confused about the commodity's ontological status, but a bit of dialectics has thankfully dispelled this confusion. Here I would urge caution and suggest that all is still not as it seems: this text is not yet safe to read; even the 'dialectical' analysis will ultimately be revealed as the performance of another actor on the stage. But before I discuss the reasons for drawing this conclusion, I want to pause for a moment to examine more closely some of the implications of the parallels Marx is making with the *Phenomenology*.

The parallels between the first chapter of *Capital* and Hegel's *Phenomenology* suggest that the first chapter of *Capital* must be seen, at least in part, as a metacommentary on Hegel's earlier work. Like Hegel's grand drama of how consciousness struggles to attain certainty of its object, and how, in the process, gradually transforms its conception of its object and thereby of itself, the first chapter of *Capital* also stages a struggle over 'where to have' an object. In the case of *Capital*, however, this elusive object is the commodity, and the production takes the form of a burlesque squabble over how to grasp the wealth of capitalist society. Marx is suggesting, through the very structure of the chapter, that what he will later call the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'<sup>21</sup> that emerge in Hegel's narrative already arise in a much more everyday and indeed crass context; namely, in the course of commodity production and exchange. The most basic, most common, most apparently self-evident object of our economic experience—the commodity—has in this chapter been shown to be capable of generating great ontological confusion. What is a commodity, this chapter asks? A collection of sensible properties? A transcendental unity that lies behind sensible experience? A dynamic relation with mutually-implicated parts? All of these positions, unfolded originally in the course of Hegel's high drama, re-emerge here in *Capital* in a sort of debauched parody of Hegel's work.

I have suggested above that all of the voices that have been speaking thus far in *Capital* have been *characters*—actors Marx has brought on stage to perform for the reader's edification their own particular interpretation of the commodity, enacting parts that display different perspectives for the reader's benefit. But what benefit does Marx expect the reader to derive from this production? I suggest that he wants to confront the reader with the existence of an inverted world. *Not* the inverted world

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21 Marx 1990, p.163

displayed by the dialectical character—who does indeed perform various dialectical inversions, but who does so, I suggest, to set the scene and establish its character, much as the ‘transcendental’ character displays a bit of geometrical knowledge for a similar end. I do not mean to suggest that Marx rejects the *validity* of what can be derived from the dialectical (or any other) act. I will come back to this point in a moment. I do, though, suggest that Marx conceptualises the *entire chapter* as a demonstration—by means of a play within a play—of a complex, layered world whose component elements do not always carry the same implications, consequences or potentials. Aspects of this multifaceted world may differ or even ‘invert’ one another, confronting the inhabitants of that world with multiple, co-existent, socially-plausible interpretations of even the apparently straightforward category of the commodity.

The narrative of this chapter, I suggest, unfolds a bit like the joke about the three blind men trying to determine what an elephant is by touch. One grabs hold of its ear and proclaims that it is like a giant fan; another latches onto its tail and proclaims that it is like a garden snake; a third grasps its leg and announced that it is like a tree trunk. *All* of these perspectives are ‘right’ to some degree; they are all saying something valid, so far as it goes, about their object. The problem is that they simply do not realise that their object is a lot larger and more complicated than the part they are touching, and they therefore do not know to ask how their part might possibly relate to other parts.

Marx sees the categories of political economy in something like this way: as grappling hooks that fasten to some aspect of the reproduction of capital; as categories that are, as Marx phrases it, ‘socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production’.<sup>22</sup> He therefore does not attempt to *debunk* such categories. Rather, his critique proceeds by trying to grasp what these categories cannot: their own social presuppositions or conditions—and therefore their limits and boundaries. Marx does not want to *dismiss* political economy, but rather to understand what sort of world is required in order to make political economy a socially plausible sort of theory. By examining the social presuppositions of political economic categories Marx intends, so to speak, to reverse engineer the production of capital. Having thus reconstructed how capital is produced he then intends to analyse how this production could be *adapted*, in order to generate a form of collective life that transcends the limitations of the original work.

At this point I want to turn from the analysis of the overarching structure of the first chapter to a much more fine-grained discussion of the section on commodity fetishism. The preceding analysis should make it a bit easier to grasp the strategic intention of moments of the commodity fetishism section that are often overlooked or interpreted

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<sup>22</sup> Marx 1990, p. 169.

away, because this section is too often read without an awareness of the ‘theatrical’ character of those passages that precede it. When these earlier sections are read as a series of straightforward declarations of Marx’s position, rather than as performances of analytical approaches that will become the targets of Marx’s critique, the text appears at best wildly internally inconsistent and methodologically naïve. As a result, the problem for which the discussion of commodity fetishism is intended to provide a solution does not come readily into view, obscuring the substantive claims being put forward in that section of the text. In the following sections, I attempt to resuscitate some aspects of those substantive claims, through a close reading of the commodity fetishism passage.<sup>23</sup>



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23 The original paper delivered at the Goldsmiths ‘Marx and Philosophy’ event continued from where this essay breaks off to provide: a close reading of the section on the commodity fetish; an analysis of how Marx understands the social character of commodity-producing labour; and then a discussion of the implications of this analysis for the standpoint of critique deployed in *Capital*. The full text of the original talk may be found online at: <http://www.roughtheory.org/content/when-is-it-safe-to-read-capital/> (unrevised version delivered on the day) or, for updated versions: <http://www.roughtheory.org/thesis/>.



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## Marx's *Capital*: The Importance of the Preface to the First Edition

Andrew Christodoulou

'What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production'<sup>1</sup>

Within Marx's simple statement of intent/framing above, we are introduced not just to the content of this gargantuan endeavour, which remained unfinished, but also to its *limit*. Marx does not simply say 'this is what *Capital* will be about', but 'this is *only* what *Capital* will be about'. In what follows I will argue that dicta in the 1st Preface of *Capital* enable a correct reading of the scope of Marx's central terms (e.g. 'materialism', 'economics', 'labour', 'production', 'commodity', 'value' and 'fetishism'). I will conclude by tentatively suggesting that these expanded concepts potentially allow a fresh investigation into the very origins of human culture.

Immediately preceding the above, Marx writes:

The physicist either observes natural processes where they occur in their most significant form, and are least affected by disturbing influences, or, wherever possible, he makes experiments under conditions which ensure that the process will occur in its pure state.<sup>2</sup>

*Capital* will be a laboratory experiment. It will isolate and examine significant elements of the system in turn, describe their qualities, show how each element fits into the system and how they interrelate with each other. Marx will do so by *presenting* his data schematically, pretending that surrounding elements within a particular analytical moment remain neutral (when in reality they do not), in order to demonstrate the *internal* contradictions of capitalist organisation. *Capital* is, after all, both a scientific treatise and a polemic, but in order to succeed in its dual task it must treat the capitalist mode of production *as if* it were an hermetic unity: a closed system or totality.

In the preface, Marx presents *Capital in its entirety* as schematic. He writes:

To prevent possible misunderstandings, let me say this. I do not by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers [Träger] of particular class-relations and interests. My standpoint, from which the development of the

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1 Marx 1990, p.90

2 Marx 1990, p.90

economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘capitalist’ and ‘proletarian’ are *analytical figures*, not sociological categories. They do not exist outside the schematic structure that is *Capital*. Marx certainly does not consider bourgeois economic categories as in any way ‘natural’, yet his is a ‘natural history’, so that his definition of the ‘economic’ must differ from that of political economy. *Capital*, however, must make use of the bourgeois category to succeed in its critique. The work of the Preface therefore serves to remind us that ‘capitalism’ remains a partial system at best, a set of behaviours and categories that remains subordinate to human social interaction in general.<sup>4</sup> These insights enable us to re-read other foundational passages from *Capital*. On the first page of Volume 1, Marx writes:

The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.<sup>5</sup>

To understand this passage outside its context in *Capital*, we must ignore the apparent subject of the piece, the commodity, and thing-ness in general. These are just particular results of the process of the satisfaction of human needs. Both are particular, not because there has ever been a society that has managed to satisfy its collective needs without things (of which some are commodities), but because it is not only things that satisfy those needs. Crucially, with the words ‘makes no difference’, Marx deliberately *erases the difference* between what might otherwise be called material (stomach) and immaterial (imagination) needs. He is telling us that it is in the *nature* of human needs to be ‘material’, regardless of their manifestation.

Marx’s ‘materialism’ does not refer only to what is physical, but what is meaningful/important: what ‘matters’. Consequently, ‘labour’ also includes *every* meaningful activity and ‘production’ refers to all the results of such activity. We might re-write the first sentence of the above thus:

[Labour] is, first of all, [some]thing which through its qualities [and within a process called production], satisfies human needs of whatever kind.

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3 Marx 1990, p.92

4 See also Georg Lukács, ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, in Lukács 1971, pp.83-222

5 Marx 1990, p.125.

On the second page of Volume 1, Marx writes:

The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter.<sup>6</sup>

Once again, I wish to sidestep the reference to things. Marx *must* talk about things in *Capital* because he is talking about industrial commodities, because what he has to examine is the capitalist mode of production. The usefulness of a thing clearly attaches to its physical properties, but the usefulness of a non-thing has no physical properties to which usefulness can attach, except the material existence of the community relations within which resides the labour that produces that phenomenon. We might re-write this passage thus:

The usefulness of a[ny]thing makes it a use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the [material relations] of the [community], and has no existence apart from the latter.

The concepts of ‘economy’, ‘labour’, ‘production’ and ‘material’ offered by bourgeois philosophy are retained within Marxist formulations, but Marx has extended their scope. The same is true of the concept of ‘value’.

Within *Capital*, Marx always refers to the concept of *use-value*. This is necessary within the schema, as *use-value* here appears always as the corollary of *exchange-value*. Exchange-value in any thing (commodity) can only exist if there also exists a corresponding *use-value* (demand), otherwise that thing will fetch no price at market (its exchange-value will be zero). Exchange-value represents the quantitative comparison of commodity-things against the ‘universal commodity’: the money-form. From *this* perspective (we are examining the capitalist mode of production), the underlying *use-value* of any thing appears (*erscheint*: this appearance is illusory) *only* as qualitatively different from the *use-values* of every other thing, but this is based upon the narrow conceptual definitions required by commodity- and abstract-utility-based economics and by definition, the project called *Capital*. From this perspective (or any idea of ‘economics’ (*oikonomia*) that restricts itself to physical things and their circulation), the common denominator of *exchange-value* and *use-value* remains invisible. Outside this perspective, *use-value* does not only refer to a diversity of incomparable things that can be contrasted with *exchange-value*’s set of comparable things. Difference *itself* is all about

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6 Marx 1990, p.126.



comparison. To be labelled 'different' two or more phenomena must first be *related to each other* in some way (they must first be made similar). To be labelled 'similar' they must first not be the same actual thing (they must first be different). These *qualitatively different uses* nevertheless require something in relation to which they are useful. In relation to this other thing, uses are always comparable.

The notion of *value*, however, denotes a special kind of comparison. 'Value' presupposes both series/regime and hierarchy. The number '5' is only a value because it exists within a set that contains higher and lower comparable elements. If *only* '5' existed, it would cease to be a value. Bourgeois economics uses the money-form as *the* medium of comparison, but a notion of 'utility' always underpins it. 'Utility', within political economy, remains singular, abstract and nebulous, because it actually represents the reification of bourgeois ethnocentrism. In reality, exchange-*value* and use-*value* are linked by 'usefulnesses' that are, in every case, particular. Exchange-*value* represents a secondary comparative register that performs as if it replaces, or as an attempt to subsume under a single quantitative series, the primary comparative registers that are represented by use-*values*. To do so, the money-form is substituted for that 'other thing' that first allows usefulnesses to be compared. That 'other thing' represents any set of behaviours within which particular behaviours are ranked from desirable to undesirable. These primary systems or regimes of usefulness are not things fixed, nor can they be fixed, but represent the material conditions of social life. Thing and non-thing, sign and object, concept and process, at any point in history, find their usefulness within the duration of the embedded, interested, practical lives of the members of the social whole. All these elements, therefore, exist in quantitative relation to each other, but in a state of constant flux. This quantitative aspect of use-value cannot be reduced, as with exchange-value, to a homogeneous, abstract element against which each value measures its equivalence in so many units, but each is in quantitative relation nevertheless. Anthropologists describe these diverse systems of value as 'symbolic order', or 'meaning-system' (thus, per my argument, 'materialism', also known as 'culture'): an ever-changing site of contestation upon which conditions people organise their collective lives.<sup>7</sup>

Marx's novel conceptions of 'materialism', 'labour', 'production' and 'value', accessible in *Capital* only through a correct reading of the first preface, allow him to recognise the 'economic' as the very fundament ('base') of social life, including, but not restricted to, the conscious manipulation of material resources. It is the primacy of the material conditions of social reproduction that *determines* the shape of the institutions

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<sup>7</sup> See Graeber 2001. Graeber comes to a similar conclusion about Marx's notions of the 'material' and 'value', with which I naturally agree. I suggest only that such a reading is essentially 'orthodox', rather than 'idiosyncratic'.

or associations people construct ('superstructure') that enables that reproduction's effective performance. It is an economics that takes into account intellectual as well as physical production, in which 'products' (and attendant 'needs'), within increasingly complex societies, intertwine and proliferate.

I will conclude by examining the effect of the above on the central concept of the 'fetish' in Marx and its relationship with the 'commodity'. Marx writes:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things ... It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them [producers and consumers under capitalism], the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>8</sup>

The forum of commodity exchange (the 'market') *appears* populated only by equivalents, including the commodity of wage-labour, thus hiding a) the *violence* that was a necessary prerequisite, via the medieval processes of enclosure and eviction and their subsequent legalisation, for the existence of the primary inequalities between people who progressively own the means of industrial production and those who progressively own only their own labour-power, and b) the exploitation of labour in production, where the capitalist appropriates a part of the *value* produced by labour without paying for it, despite having paid the full market *price* for that labour-power, thereby exacerbating those progressive inequalities in 'a' above.

So far, so good, but I wish to concentrate on the *general* function of the religious concept of the 'fetish'. The word 'fetish' comes from the Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning 'sorcery', from the Latin *facticius*, meaning 'made by art'.<sup>9</sup> It refers to an object, usually inanimate, that is believed to possess magical powers. First, we should note that Marx locates this term within 'the misty realm of religion', i.e. *religion-in-general*, rather than limiting the term to 'primitive' religious practice, which would represent its common

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8 Marx 1990, pp.164-165

9 Murray et al. 1933

usage. For Marx, all religion is a mystification. Contrast his comments from the previous page, when he writes:

The mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value ... however varied the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities, it is a physiological fact that they are functions of the human organism ... the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs. In all situations, the labour-time it costs to produce the means of subsistence must necessarily concern mankind ... as soon as men start to work for each other in any way, their labour also assumes a social form. Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself.<sup>10</sup>

The fetish, then, is something religious-in-general, fundamentally intertwined with the commodity-form and arising from the act of *exchange*. A commodity under capital is something produced specifically for exchange, something to be 'taken to market' in an 'economy' (in the narrow sense) overwhelmingly governed by marked divisions of labour. Such 'labour' in this context is, at all times, 'socially necessary' labour, including every manipulation, distribution and consumption of physical resources, plus many seemingly 'unproductive' tasks, such as brokering, transportation, administration, policing (including the protection of 'intellectual property') etc. and unpaid 'domestic' and other labour. Of paramount importance is not the number, type, sophistication, mechanism etc. of these tasks, but their *social nature*. Bearing in mind our expanded conceptions from the preface, a wider definition of the 'commodity-form' (by Marx's own insistence, the very locus of fetishism), could be 'anything (object, idea, attitude), which is the result of human social endeavour of whatever kind (i.e. something that 'passes between' human beings), and which is either designed to, or simply does, influence others in their behaviour', or simply put: '*anything produced with other people in mind*'. This expanded notion of the commodity-form invites an expanded notion of the fetish beyond the narrow confines of an enigmatic quality of objects otherwise conforming to bourgeois ethnocentric notions of utility.

If all creatures exist by dividing the world up according to their interested perspectives (values), but human beings, in addition, use that interested perspective to impose new values back upon the world beyond those necessitated by their animal instincts (in turn

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10 Marx 1990, p.164. Incidentally, the contrast between 'expenditure of brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs' in the latter quote, and simply 'products of men's hands' in the former, need not signify a contradiction. The former refers to 'production' in general, while the latter refers to capitalist commodity production, whose products purport to conform to bourgeois society's general concept of 'utility'.

creating new kinds of ‘instinct’ or ‘second-nature’ through cultural processes),<sup>11</sup> then every symbol acts, at least in part, as a ‘fetish’. Recognition of the fact of ‘symbolicity’ at the heart of human relations must entail the recognition of ‘fetishism’ as a fundamental aspect of the production of meaning *per se*.<sup>12</sup> Signs exist when something is recognised by another. Signs presuppose the ‘passing between’ of human beings: their sociality.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, no ‘meaning’ (as the attempt to arrest a certain set of denotations/connotations within a particular context) can be universal, nor can it be neutral. Following Derrida, it must produce a ‘violent hierarchy’ and be maintained by that same violence.<sup>14</sup>

If so, and if, as Marx claims, the fetish emerges hand-in-hand with the commodity-form, this ‘misty realm of religion’ takes on a new significance. To recapitulate, a religious fetish is some object that seems to have ‘magical’ properties. These, however, as with all other qualities, do not ‘dangle in mid-air’. They are only recognisable because they ‘concern’ people in their everyday lives. All such qualities are therefore ‘values’. Further, they can only be recognised as magical in opposition to qualities that are considered ordinary or mundane, but these mundane qualities (they are all ‘meanings’ in the sense discussed above), also being ‘values’, can themselves never be neutral, unproblematic or invariable. They cannot be ‘true’/‘real’ recognitions in contrast to the ‘untrue’/‘fantastic’ misrecognition of magical qualities. Every such process involves a value judgement, every such ‘recognition’ is a one-sided gesture: a violent hierarchy.

Marx notes that religious fetishes ‘appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own’, but are really ‘the products of the human brain’.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, human labour produces ideas, which circulate among/pass between people, and are consumed by them, leading to modifications in their future behaviour, including the production of their future ideas. This fits precisely the wider definition of the commodity-form we deduced above. Neither do ideas, however, no more or less than any other ‘thing’, ‘dangle in mid-air’. Ideas, too, are products of the whole collective endeavour, of every physical and mental process that preceded them. As the commodity-fetish is the product, not of the pure imagination and greed of an autonomous class of people called ‘capitalists’, but rather the organic development of the dynamics of the system of commodity-exchange, of the material relations of human collectives (note again Marx’s warning in the preface to *Capital* against personifying the force of capital except within an hypothetical

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11 See Taussig 1993, e.g. at p.xiii, ‘the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature’.

12 See Jhally 1987. At p.29: ‘... fetishism consists of seeing the meaning of things as an inherent part of their physical existence when in fact that meaning is created by their integration into a system of meaning’.

13 See Volosinov 1981.

14 See Derrida 2004.

15 Marx 1990, p.165

'figure' to aid analysis), so the religious fetish must be the organic product of those same material relations.

The wide scope of the conceptions enabled by a serious reading of Marx's 1<sup>st</sup> preface, I argue, enables the following claims:

If symbolicity is fundamental to the lives of human beings, and if 'fetishism' emerges within the very process of signification (thus in the commodity-form itself), then a 'religious' attitude would appear to be implicated in the earliest forms of such value production, of fetishism: of the transformation of the immanent 'material' relations between members of a community through the medium of an external 'symbol', that then begins to assume a certain autonomy, a certain 'natural' essence (reification). Every 'mode of production' must constitute the successful organisation and reproduction of a given human collective. If the earliest human organisations were religious, religion may represent one of the earliest modes of production. If ideas emerge from the *practical* ('material') concerns of a community, if every such community produces symbols and if violence lies at the heart of every process of signification/differentiation, then we should expect violence to be one of the most fundamental of these quotidian concerns. We should therefore expect the urgent need to manage violence to lie at the heart of religion and every subsequent mode of production. If so, it may be that every mode of production, from religious to capitalist, has always represented an attempt at a solution to the same problem: how to organise a community to limit internal conflict, how to shield the community from the influence of violence from outside and how to ensure that, at the times when such forces threaten the community's very existence (crises), a process is found that results in the community's renewal rather than its destruction.



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## Capital, Subsumption and the History of the Class Relation

*Rob Lucas and Nick Gray (Endnotes)*

### Introduction

In a moment of cataclysmic crisis for capital, yet one in which the old projects of a programmatic working class politics are almost nowhere to be seen, a central question which confronts us is that of how to understand the specificity of this moment in the history of the capitalist class relation. It seems evident that on some fundamental level, this relation today is not quite what it was from Marx's time into the latter half of the twentieth century; yet at the same time whatever novelty there is here, it also seems clear that capital remains capital, and that its Marxian critique still holds. This world is still oriented primarily around the accumulation of surplus-value and dependent upon wage labour; and personal reproduction remains first and foremost something to be won through the sale of labour-power. The critique which Marx developed in *Capital*, and its later development through value form theory and systematic dialectic<sup>1</sup> are important for understanding our present situation yet—in themselves—considered only as the systematic characterisation of the core logical structure of capitalist social relations, these theories cannot tell us much about the historical development of these relations, nor are they sufficient to explain the character of our present moment.

If we want to really grasp the historical development of the capitalist class relation, and thus to understand the specificity of the present moment, we need in some sense to move beyond the systematic core of *Capital*. Yet at the same time, this movement cannot be one of a mere descent into the muck of contingent historical flux, or the development of one possible descriptive periodisation in an arbitrary set of various others. It will ultimately be problematic to preserve the theory of the essential logic of capitalist social relations on the one hand, whilst merely describing the history of those relations on the other as if system and its history were only arbitrarily related; as if system were the realm of necessity, and history that of contingency. Ultimately then, we must aim to simultaneously understand system in its historicity and to grasp history systematically. If we want to truly grasp the character of our present moment, the goal will be to show how the essential character of this moment is something that emerges from an intelligible logic in the historical development of the capitalist class relation.

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1 Several important recent works in the area of value form theory have been produced by participants in the International Symposium on Marxian Theory, such as Patrick Murray, Geert Reuten, Chris Arthur, and Riccardo Bellofiore. For an elaboration of systematic dialectic as distinct from historical dialectic, see Arthur 2002.

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There have been various theories and characterisations of the distinctness of the current phase. A multiplicity of periodisations locate some turning point around the late 1960s or early 70s: Fordism becomes post-Fordism, industrial society becomes post-industrial society, modernism becomes post-modernism. Recently, in a moment of its apparent unravelling, the importance that the *financialisation* of capital has had in this epoch has been rammed home to us. If, at the heart of the transformations which these theories signal, we are to search for an explanation in the playing out of the historical logic of the capitalist class relation, we must be attentive not simply to the unfolding of merely *economic* forms but to the actual social relations in which these forms are constituted. Indeed these economic forms, such as the commodity, money and capital, are themselves nothing other than reified social relations; they *are* the mode of being, or the reified shape, of social relations in capitalist society, and their movement is the movement of these relations themselves. The systematico-historical development that is to be theorised, then, is that of the *form-determined* relation between capital and proletariat.

Thus while theorists in the tradition of *operaismo* and subsequently autonomist Marxism have sought to correct the objectivism of a merely economic Marxism by turning towards the subjective moment in the relation, they have for this very reason been blind to this sense in which capitalist social relations are form-determined by capital, and to the sense in which the capitalist class relation is a relation of reciprocal determination. In spite of this defect, the subjective turn of the Italian workerist/autonomist tradition has allowed its theorists to develop a theory of the historical character of the working class itself through the concept of 'class composition'. Thus Negri periodises the development of the working class into different moments defined by the 'craft worker' (*operaio professionale*), the 'mass worker' (*operaio massa*), and the 'socialised worker' (*operaio sociale*). More recently, Negri has attempted to theorise a movement towards what he calls the 'multitude'. If the turn in this tradition towards the subjective moment hinders its ability to grasp the development of the class relation precisely *as* a relation of two mutually implicated poles, still at points its very attentiveness to the modes of activity of the working class has brought it, despite all its theoretical confusion, to the recognition of fundamental shifts in the relation which have not been duly acknowledged by most more rigorous Marxist theory.

An approach which *does* attempt to grasp more systematically the shifts that characterise the present epoch, and which attempts to supersede the dualism of both 'objectivist' and 'subjectivist' variants of Marxism, has been developed by the French communist journal *Théorie Communiste* (TC). TC has developed a theory of fundamental historical transformations in the class relation itself and attempted to historicise the character of class struggle, describing a movement not towards the 'multitude'

but to the breakdown of the programmatic forms of class struggle that characterised much of the twentieth century, and a restructuring in the core relationship between capital and proletariat. Both TC and Negri place the concept of *subsumption* at the centre of their periodisations, as do many other thinkers.

Given the systematic priority which Marx accords subsumption in his drafts of *Capital*, if it is indeed viable to employ this category as the basis of a historical theory of the capitalist class relation, subsumption might seem to offer us a promising starting point from which to begin to think this history systematically. At the same time, thinkers working in the area of value form theory and systematic dialectic, such as Murray<sup>2</sup> and Arthur employ the categories of subsumption primarily as conceptual terms, putting in doubt the viability of their usage for a historical periodisation of capitalist society<sup>3</sup>. We will thus here examine the categories of subsumption in terms of the question of the relation of system and history.

### **Formal and Real Subsumption in the ‘Results...’ and in *Capital* Vol. 1**

In ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’<sup>4</sup>, the categories of formal and real subsumption are tied very closely to those of absolute and relative surplus-value. As Marx states:

If the production of absolute surplus-value was the material expression of the formal subsumption of labour under capital, then the production of relative surplus-value may be viewed as its real subsumption.<sup>5</sup>

Absolute surplus-value is defined by Marx as surplus-value extracted by capital through the extension of the (social) working day, given a pre-existing mode of labour and corresponding level of development of the productive powers of labour. In contrast, relative surplus-value is extracted on the basis of technological innovations and other alterations in the labour process which increase the productivity of labour, thereby devaluing the commodities which are required for the reproduction of labour-power, and thus decreasing necessary vis-à-vis surplus labour for all capitals. The production of relative surplus-value is mediated by the competition between capitals: individual

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2 Murray 2004

3 For Arthur, though subsumption is a systematic rather than historical concept, it is not simplistically transhistorical in application: insofar as we can distinguish between ‘the truth of a concept and its actualisation’ we may say that formal subsumption precedes real subsumption historically, though the tendency to restructure the labour process in the attempt to overcome all obstacles to accumulation (i.e. to really subsume it) is implicit in the very concept of capital. See Arthur 2002, pp.75-76.

4 Appendix to Marx 1976

5 Marx 1976, p.1025



capitalists are spurred on to seize the initiative by the fact that while the value of commodities is determined by the socially necessary labour-time for their production, if they introduce technological innovations which increase the productivity of labour, they will be able to sell commodities at a price above their ‘individual value’.<sup>6</sup> For Marx then, formal subsumption is the simple bringing of the labour-process under the valorisation process—and thus labour under the wage-form—and involves only the extraction of absolute surplus-value. Real subsumption, on the other hand, is the qualitative transformation of the labour-process which occurs through the pursuit of relative surplus-value.

We see here how formal and real subsumption are intrinsically ‘historical’ in several senses. Firstly, formal subsumption of labour under capital can be understood as the transition to the specifically capitalist mode of production.<sup>7</sup> In the context of formal subsumption Marx discusses the transformation of forms of production such as slave, peasant, guild or handicraft production into capitalist production, as producers associated with these forms are transformed into wage-labourers. Marx explains that real subsumption can only proceed on the basis of formal subsumption: formal subsumption of labour under capital is both a *logical/systematic* and a *historical* prerequisite for the *real* subsumption of labour under capital. Thus Marx designates as formal subsumption ‘the takeover by capital of a mode of labour developed before the emergence of capitalist relations’.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, real subsumption has a directional historical dynamic in that it entails a constant process of revolutionising the mode of production, both through material and technological transformations which increase the productivity of labour, and through the concomitant transformations of the relations of production between workers and capitalists. Real subsumption, as the modification of the labour-process under specifically capitalist lines, is exemplified in the historical development of the productive powers of social labour as the productive powers of capital. This occurs through cooperation, the division of labour and manufacture, machinery and large-scale industry, all of which are discussed by Marx under the heading of ‘The Production of Relative Surplus-Value’ in *Capital*, vol. 1. As systematic categories, formal and real subsumption are thus already ‘historical’. We can underscore this with reference to the fact that Marx’s primary discussion around these categories is a historical one—it appears as part of Marx’s own attempt at dealing with the ‘transition debate’: that of how specifically capitalist production comes about.

Yet at the same time, none of this supports the view that the concepts of subsumption can actually be used for a *periodisation* of the history of the capitalist class relation.

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6 Marx 1976, p.1023-4

7 Marx 1976, p.1021

8 Marx 1976, p.1021

According to Marx, though formal subsumption must precede real subsumption, real subsumption in one branch can also be the basis for further formal subsumption in other areas. If the categories of subsumption are both systematic and in some senses historical, they are at the same time ‘nonlinear’: which is to say that whilst their systematic character has at the same time a specific temporal/historical character, they do not apply simplistically or unidirectionally to the historical development of the class relation. Whilst we could plausibly say that at the total level, at any given stage in the development of this relation, the labour process is ‘more’ or ‘less’ *really* subsumed under the valorisation process than at any other given moment, this can only be a relatively weak and ambiguous claim, and can hardly form the basis for a truly systematic historical theory.

### Secondary Literature & Recent Theories of Subsumption Beyond Marx

If, even accepting the senses in which the categories of subsumption have a historical character, the prospects for a periodisation based upon these categories appear tenuous, the work of theorists such as Patrick Murray and Chris Arthur—who are focused primarily on articulating or reconstructing the systematic core of the project of Capital—puts such a periodisation further in doubt. For Arthur, though formal subsumption may well precede real subsumption historically, real subsumption is inherent to the concept of capital from the outset<sup>9</sup>. If Arthur is correct, this would thus undermine any strong attempt to systematically periodise the development of capital as anything other than an *actualisation* of something already implicit. Murray argues that the terms ‘formal subsumption’ and ‘real subsumption’ refer first to *concepts* of subsumption and only secondarily—if at all—to *historical stages of subsumption*. Murray alleges that Marx considers the possibility of a distinct historical stage of *merely* formal subsumption but finds no evidence of one.<sup>10</sup> Jacques Camatte, on the other hand, offers an interpretation of the ‘Results’ in which he establishes a periodisation on the basis of the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital. For Camatte, the most important distinguishing feature which marks out the period of real subsumption from that of formal subsumption is that in the period of real subsumption, the ‘essential element’ becomes fixed capital.<sup>11</sup> The period of real subsumption is then characterised by the application of science, ‘this general product of social development’, in the immediate process of production, such that ‘the means of production become no more than leeches drawing off as large a quantum of living labour as they can’.<sup>12</sup> Thus

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9 Arthur 2002, p.76

10 Murray 2004, p. 252

11 Camatte 1988, p.43

12 Marx 1976, p.988

Camatte highlights the ontological inversion that characterises the period of real subsumption of labour under capital—that is to say *specifically* capitalist production—in the process whereby, as Marx states,

this ability of objectified labour to transform itself into *capital* i.e. to transform the means of production into means of controlling and exploiting living labour, appears as something utterly appropriate to them ... as inseparable from them.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere Camatte speaks of the ‘total subsumption of labour under capital’,<sup>14</sup> and argues that capital exercises an absolute domination over society, and indeed tends to *become* society: this is ‘the final stage in the development of its social character’.<sup>15</sup>

Negri similarly develops a periodisation on the basis of the categories of subsumption in his essay ‘Twenty Theses on Marx, Interpretation of the Class Situation Today’<sup>16</sup> and elsewhere. He identifies periods of capitalist accumulation, or phases of capitalist development corresponding to manufacture, two phases of large-scale industry, and the current phase of socialised, immaterial post-industrial production. These phases of capitalist development are characterised by corresponding class compositions and models of contestation: thus we have the class composition around the ‘professional’ or ‘craft worker’ in the first phase of large-scale industry and the ‘appropriative’ phase of the proletarian movement (Negri dates this period 1848-1914); then the class composition based on the hegemony of the ‘mass worker’ in the second period of large-scale industry and the corresponding ‘alternative phase of the revolutionary movement’ (1917-68); and finally, the current phase where the ‘socialised worker’ (*operaio sociale*) predominates, and in which this class composition gives rise to the ‘constituent’ model of proletarian ‘self-valorisation’ with respect to capital; for Negri, this model encompasses the preceding ones. Thus, according to Negri, after 1968 there began a new phase of political history, characterised by what he terms the ‘subsumption of the entire society under capital in the process of capitalist accumulation’<sup>17</sup>; this, argues Negri, marks the ‘end of the centrality of the factory working class as the site of the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity’.<sup>18</sup> Negri thus echoes Tronti’s earlier ‘social factory’ thesis, in arguing that in the present period the capitalist process of production has attained such a high level of development as to encompass even the smallest fraction of social production. Production is no longer limited to the sphere of industrial production, but rather is diffuse, and occurs

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13 Marx 1976, pp.988-9

14 Camatte 1988, p.45

15 Camatte 1988, p.45

16 Negri 1996

17 Negri 1996, p.149

18 Negri 1996, p.149

across society as capitalist production; it is this phenomenon that Negri terms the ‘real subsumption of society in capital’; the contemporary mode of production ‘is this “subsumption”’ according to Negri.<sup>19</sup>

### **Théorie Communiste**

For us, the historical periodisation of the class relation in terms of subsumption that is offered by *Théorie Communiste* (TC) is the most sophisticated, and the richest in historical analysis; we will thus examine it at some length. TC’s account employs the categories of subsumption to periodise the development of the *relation* between capital and proletariat. As such, for TC, the periods of subsumption of labour under capital correspond to specific *cycles of struggle*. As we shall see, TC divide the history of the capitalist class relation not just into distinct periods of formal and real subsumption, but also into two separate phases *within* real subsumption.

TC follows Marx in drawing a relation between the categories of formal and real subsumption and those of absolute and relative surplus-value. The key to TC’s historical periodisation lies in their interpretation of this systematic inter-relation of categories. For TC, absolute and relative surplus-value are conceptual determinations of capital, and formal and real subsumption are historical configurations of capital. Thus while the formal subsumption of labour under capital proceeds on the basis of absolute surplus-value, for TC relative surplus-value is both the founding principle and the dynamic of real subsumption; it is ‘the principle which gives structure to and then overturns the first phase of [real subsumption]’.<sup>20</sup> Thus relative surplus-value is both the principle which unifies the two phases of real subsumption, and that in terms of which it is possible to explain the transformation of real subsumption (and its consequent division into two discrete phases): ‘real subsumption has a history because it has a dynamic principle which forms it, makes it evolve, poses certain forms of the process of valorisation or circulation as fetters and transforms them’.<sup>21</sup>

In this connection, TC establishes a crucial conceptual distinction between formal subsumption and real subsumption in terms of their extension: formal subsumption affects only the immediate labour-process, while it is argued that real subsumption extends beyond the sphere of production to society as a whole. Thus formal subsumption for TC corresponds to the historic configuration of capital based on the extraction of absolute surplus-value, which is, by definition, limited to the immediate labour-process: capital takes over an existing labour-process and intensifies it or lengthens the working-day. The relation between real subsumption and relative surplus-value is more

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19 Negri 1996, p.152

20 *Théorie Communiste* 2004, p.108

21 *Théorie Communiste* 2004, p.108

complex however. The increased productivity of labour resulting from transformations in the labour-process can only increase relative surplus-value insofar as this increased productivity lowers the value of commodities entering into the consumption of the working class.

This basic theoretical point is further amplified by TC. As relative surplus-value is the structuring principle of real subsumption, and the basis of its extraction is the lowering of the value of commodities which enter into the reproduction of labour-power, then real subsumption introduces into the equation the reproduction of the proletariat, insofar as the wage changes from an historical *given* for capital to a variable quantity affected by the productivity of labour in industries producing wage goods. Real subsumption thus establishes the *systematic and historical* interconnection between the reproduction of the proletariat and the reproduction of capital:

The extraction of relative surplus-value affects all social combinations, from the labour process to the political forms of workers' representation, passing through the integration of the reproduction of labour-power in the cycle of capital, the role of the credit system, the constitution of a specifically capitalist world market ... , the subordination of science ... Real subsumption is a transformation of society and not of the labour process alone.<sup>22</sup>

The reproduction of the proletariat and the reproduction of capital become increasingly interlocked through real subsumption; real subsumption integrates the two circuits (of the reproduction of labour-power and the reproduction of capital) as the self-reproduction (and self-presupposition) of the class relation itself. Thus TC defines the real subsumption of labour under capital as 'capital becoming capitalist society i.e. presupposing itself in its evolution and the creation of its organs'.<sup>23</sup>

TC argues, then, that the real subsumption of labour under capital, based as it is on the extraction of relative surplus-value, transforms the capitalist class relation not only in the sphere of production, but in the sphere of reproduction and across society as a whole. TC affirms that the criterion for the dominance of real subsumption, which is itself defined in terms of transformations of the labour-process has, paradoxically, to be sought outside the labour-process in the modalities (both political and socioeconomic) of reproduction of labour-power. These accompany and are to some extent determined by the material transformations accomplished in the labour-process. Here TC refers to social welfare systems, the 'invention of the category of the unemployed', the importance of trade unionism, and to all those modalities which 'ensure (and confirm) that

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22 Théorie Communiste 2004, p.109

23 Théorie Communiste 2004, p.109

labour-power no longer has any possible “ways out” of its exchange with capital in the framework of this specifically capitalist labour process’. It is these modalities of the reproduction of labour-power which are fundamentally altered by the restructuring of the capitalist class relation which begins in the 1970s. It is on this basis that TC argues that it is ‘the broad phases of transformation at the level of the modalities of the general reproduction of the proletariat’ which are to serve as ‘criteria for the periodisation of real subsumption’<sup>24</sup>

We can now put some flesh on the bare bones of TC’s historical periodisation of the capitalist class relation as we have presented it so far. Their approximate dating corresponds closely to that proposed by Negri (and in fact there are some important parallels, as well as fundamental divergences, between the two periodisations). According to TC, the phase of formal subsumption of labour under capital, up to the turn of the century or around the First World War, is characterised by the positive self-relation of the proletariat as pole of the class relation. In this period the proletariat affirms itself as the class of productive labour, against capital, which is an ‘external constraint from which the proletariat must liberate itself’.<sup>25</sup> The qualitative character of the contradictory relationship between capital and proletariat in this phase is such that the revolutionary self-affirmation of the class finds its limit in the reproduction of capital. It is true both logically and empirically that proletarian self-affirmation can never beget proletarian self-negation and the negation of capital; thus—in this phase—the communist revolution was impossible.

In the subsequent phase, denoted by TC the ‘first phase of real subsumption of labour under capital’ (approximately 1917/1923—1968/1973), the relation between capital and proletariat becomes what we might call a mediatedly internal one, where ‘the autonomous affirmation of the class enters into contradiction with its empowerment within capitalism, in that this is more and more the self-movement of the reproduction of capital itself’.<sup>26</sup>

The class relation thus undergoes a qualitative transformation in the transition from formal to real subsumption, in that the reproduction of the proletariat is now increasingly integrated with the circuit of reproduction of capital, albeit in a mediated fashion. The mediations in question include the institutional forms of the workers’ movement, trade unions, collective bargaining and productivity deals, Keynesianism and the Welfare State, and on the geo-political level the division of the World Market into discrete national areas of accumulation and on a higher level, zones of accumulation (East and West).

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24 *Théorie Communiste* 2004, pp.127-8

25 *Théorie Communiste* 1997, p.40

26 *Théorie Communiste* 1997, p.41

These two phases (i.e. the phase of formal subsumption and the first phase of real subsumption of labour under capital) are characterised by the programmatic self-affirmation of the proletariat; the first phase of real subsumption is increasingly revealed however to be the 'decomposition' of this programmatic proletarian self-affirmation, even as the proletariat is increasingly empowered within the class relation.

With the capitalist restructuring after 1968-73 (which must be understood as a restructuring of the relation between capital and proletariat), all these mediations are (tendentially at least) swept aside: the new period, christened the 'second phase of real subsumption of labour under capital' by TC, is characterised by an immediately internal relation between capital and the proletariat: the contradiction between them is now immediately at the level of their reproduction as classes. Proletarian programmatic self-affirmation is now dead and buried; however class antagonism is as sharp as ever. The only revolutionary perspective afforded by the current cycle of struggles is that of the self-negation of the proletariat and the concomitant abolition of capital through the communisation of relations between individuals.

## Conclusion

The historicisations which Camatte, Negri and *Théorie Communiste* offer apply beyond the immediate process of production. In Camatte and Negri, real subsumption is something held to be true of *society*, and for *Théorie Communiste*, formal and real subsumption can be said to characterise the fundamental *relation* between capital and labour in a sense that is not reducible to the immediate production process. There may appear to be some ground in Marx for pursuing such a usage of these categories, since Marx refers to transformations in the actual *social relation* between capitalist and worker—beyond production—that arise *in tandem with* or *as a result of* real subsumption:

With the real subsumption of labour under capital a complete revolution takes place in the mode of production itself, in the productivity of labour, and in the relation—within production—between the capitalist and the worker, *as also in the social relation between them*.<sup>27</sup>

It would seem evident that, with the constant revolutionising of production that occurs in real subsumption, the world beyond the immediate process of production is itself dramatically transformed. The important qualification here, however, is that

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<sup>27</sup> Marx 1994, p.107-8, our emphasis. A similar passage occurs also in the 'Results' with the qualification that this revolution is 'complete (and constantly repeated)', cf. Marx 1976, p.1035.

these transformations occur *with*—or *as a result of*—the real subsumption of the labour process under the valorisation process: they do not necessarily constitute an aspect of real subsumption itself, nor do they define it, and indeed they may actually be considered mere accompanying *effects* of real subsumption. Though massively significant changes to society as a whole—and to the relation between capitalist and worker—may result from the real subsumption of the labour process under capital, it does not follow that these changes should themselves be characterised in terms of the concepts of subsumption.

Subsumption as it is characterised by Marx has a distinct *ontological* character: when the labour process is subsumed under the valorisation process it actually *becomes* capital's own immediate process of production. As Jacques Camatte argues:

*Subsumtion* means rather more than just submission. *Subsumieren* really means 'to include in something', 'to subordinate', 'to implicate', so it seems that Marx wanted to indicate that capital makes its own substance out of labour, that capital incorporates labour inside itself and makes it into capital.<sup>28</sup>

The labour process in both real & formal subsumption *is* the immediate production process of capital. Nothing comparable can be said of anything beyond the labour process. While it is true that the valorisation process of capital in its entirety is the unity of the processes of production and circulation, and whilst capital brings about transformations to the world beyond its own immediate production process, these transformations by definition cannot be grasped in the same terms as those which occur *within* that process under real subsumption: nothing external to the immediate production process actually *becomes* capital, nor, strictly speaking, is subsumed under capital. Surplus-value is uniquely produced in the immediate production process, and only realised in circulation.

Whilst there is much that seems right about the periodisations offered by Camatte, Negri, and—in particular—TC, if subsumption cannot rigorously apply to historical periods *per se*, nor to anything beyond the immediate process of production, we must conclude that it is not ultimately a viable category—in anything beyond the limited sense that we have described here—for the type of theory that we are attempting to develop. We need other master-categories with which to grasp the development of the totality of the capitalist class relation in a manner which is not limited to the production process alone: we must look to categories other than those of subsumption.

In discussing the capitalist class relation Marx—of course—does not restrict himself

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28 Camatte 1988, chapter 3.



to the discussion of the immediate process of production, and the subsumptive relation that occurs there. The real result of the immediate process of production—according to Marx—is not only commodities and surplus-value, but also the reproduction of the relation between capital and proletariat itself.<sup>29</sup>

It is not just the objective conditions of the process of production that appear as its result. The same thing is true also of its *specific social* character. The social relations and therefore the social position of the agents of production in relation to each other, i.e. the *relations of production*, are themselves produced: they are also the constantly renewed result of the process.<sup>30</sup>

If the class relation itself beyond the immediate production process cannot ultimately be theorised in terms of subsumption, transformations in this relation may at least be characterised partially in terms of the *results* of the immediate production process. It is a result of the immediate production process that capital reproduces itself, the workers upon which it is dependent, and the very *dependence* of those workers upon capital. It is through this process that the capitalist class relation itself is reproduced. But the reproduction of this relation is not something unchanging. Rather, for Marx, the reproduction of this relation is one with determinate historical dynamics, such as those towards the expansion of the proletariat, and towards the expansion of capital into new branches of production:

Capitalist production is not merely the reproduction of the relationship: it is its reproduction on a steadily increasing scale ... it creates ever new supplies of workers and encroaches upon branches of production previously independent.<sup>31</sup>

Yet it is not only in quantitative terms that the reproduction of this relation changes over time. As recent events have made us acutely aware, both the reproduction of the working-class and the reproduction of capital—and therefore the reproduction of the class relation itself—have become increasingly financialised. For capital, financialisation has meant an augmented mobility, such that it has increasingly confronted the proletariat on a global scale, imposing ‘discipline’ on individual capitals and states; for a large section of the working class, on the other hand, it has meant that daily reproduction is increasingly mediated not only by the wage form, but also by consumer credit, and the value of the assets upon which this is secured. These qualitative transformations

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29 Marx and Engels 1988, p.116

30 Marx 1976, p.1065

31 Marx 1976, p.1061-2

occur within the very character of the *relation* between capital and proletariat itself, and are not restricted to the immediate process of production. It may be from the question of the historical character of the *reproduction* of the class relation that we can begin to think the history of this relation systematically.



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## Antonio Negri's Social Ontology of Real Subsumption *Ben Polhill*

The history of Italy's heterodox left is a rich one, steeped in political experimentation and theoretical overhauls. Perhaps its most formative phase took place between the early 60s and late 70s; a period that saw the emergence of workerism (*operaismo*) and its development into workers' autonomy (*autonomia operaia*). The theoretical lineage that leads to the development of Negri's peculiar brand of Marxism is too extensive to deal with adequately here. However, we may summarise that central to workerism are the following theses, which directly inform the origins and development of Negri's work: 1) labour and its struggles against capital are the principle determinations of the latter's development; and 2) capital has reached a specific historical stage of socialisation which brings with it new potentialities of working class self-liberation.

With these two strands of thought, Negri set out to reweave the fabric of Marxist theory at a time when to many it had become drab and outmoded. Towards this end, Negri would need to dispense with certain orthodox Marxist presuppositions of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). A key concept that fell within these traits was that of the 'law of value'. While this was never explicitly a systematic category in Marx, it is often referred to in workerist texts as if it were. It is predominantly understood as Marx's 'labour determination of value'—that value as such is determined by the socially necessary labour time that goes into the production of a commodity, and that this is regulated by capitalist competition. An extension of this law dictates that the degree of surplus-value is determined by the exploitation of unpaid surplus labour, and thus it often appears in *Capital* as the 'law of surplus-value'. Both terms, however, indicate the same basic principle put forth from the outset of Volume One of *Capital*; that capital measures value by the quantity of labour time expended in the process of production. The overcoming of this law can be seen as the central principle by which Negri developed his theories of the sociality of labour and capital, and which directly informed his reading of the concept of 'real subsumption'.

An important early figure of workerism was Mario Tronti, who produced perhaps the most crucial contributions to Negri's early thought. Regardless of their political differences (Tronti joined the PCI in 1969), his take on Marx's concept of 'social capital' would continue to inform Negri's theoretical development. This is particularly evident in Negri's adoption of the idea of the 'social factory': that society as a whole is structured as an extension of the factory. This view was also upheld by a further important figure for Negri; Romano Alquati. With recourse to life outside the factory, Alquati would argue that—in the case of Turin at least—'there isn't one aspect of the

“social life” of the city that is not a moment of the “factory”, understood in the Leninist sense of a “social relation of production”<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Tronti would claim that ‘the social character of production has been extended to such a point that the entire society now functions as a mode of production’.<sup>2</sup> That such factory-based production relations could be seen to extend beyond the factory walls is crucial to Negri’s formulation of the ‘socialised worker’ – a term coined by Alquati to replace the supposedly obsolete ‘mass worker’.<sup>3</sup> While left discourse of the time was generally touting the ‘mass worker’ as the current factory-based class vanguard, Alquati challenged the validity this claim, arguing that its ‘mass’ nature was fallacious due to the stratified and hierarchical nature of labour in the production process.

Although the concept of social capital appears sporadically throughout Volume One of *Capital*,<sup>4</sup> it is only in Volume Two that its true import is brought to light. It is here shown to unravel the essential cycles and movements that make capital capital. Hence the necessity, as Marx states, for ‘a different mode of investigation’<sup>5</sup>—one focussed on circulation. Whereas Volume One concerned itself with an analysis of *individual* capital and the motions by which this appeared to function, the second volume, having derived the concept of *social* capital, renders the self-standing object of the first volume conceptually inadequate.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Marx hints throughout Volume One that analytic reductions are necessary for the exposition of capital in its individual abstraction, but it is only in Volume Two that this abstraction is grounded in the contingent unity of processes of *social capital*. Marx states that ‘the form of motion of the sum of individual capitals [is] the *total social capital of the capitalist class*’<sup>7</sup>. In passing to Volume Two we can say that we are moving from the analysis of the *immediate* process of *production* to that of the *mediated* processes of *production and circulation*.

Volume One undertook a schematic consideration of the value-form of the commodity, and as such its particular material form was irrelevant: simply the *fact* that it possessed a use-value as one side of its dual form was enough at this level of

1 Wright 2002, p.80

2 Tronti 1973

3 Wright 2002, p.163

4 The phrase itself first appears when Marx mentions the ‘total capital of a society’ in chapter 11: ‘The growth of population ... forms the mathematical limit to the production of surplus-value by the total social capital’ (Marx 1976, p.422). It then makes casual appearances in: chapters 15 (p.578); 24 (p.758); and 25 (p.763).

5 Marx 1992, p.194

6 While space does not permit me to explain in detail Marx’s dialectical derivation of social capital, suffice it here to mention that Marx analyses in turn the three ‘figures’ in the circuit of an individual capital: money capital; productive capital, and; commodity capital. With the analysis of commodity capital, the social dimension of capital reveals itself where C’, being already valorised, points beyond the individual circuit. See the first four chapters of Volume Two.

7 Marx 1992, p.177 (my emphasis).

abstraction. Volume Two, however, embarks upon a more focussed consideration of the commodity's manifestation as an object with a particular material form. This is a fundamental result of the focus, at this stage, on relations between production processes, i.e. the *social capital*. At this level of analysis, the commodity produced and circulated—insofar as it is destined for productive consumption—manifests itself as a material element of the *total* means of production. It must be reinserted into the total social capital—as constant capital—in order to keep the nexus of productive circuits in motion. As such, the material, 'use'-aspect of the productively consumed commodity becomes fundamental to the total movement of capital. As Marx puts it later in Volume Two, the movement of social capital is:

not only a replacement of values, but a replacement of materials, and is therefore conditioned not just by the mutual relations of the value components of the social product but equally by their use values, their material shape.<sup>8</sup>

So, the ramified, 'social' dimension of capital reveals itself in the commodity's use-value. It follows that, as *constant* capital (means of production) must now be considered in its material manifestation, so too must the material form of *variable* capital (living labour) be revealed. And so, both in contrast to and as a development of its initial schematic appearance in Volume One, labour-power must here present the problem of its *collective* social reproduction. The cycles of collective—or social—capital and the social reproduction of collective labour power mutually necessitate each other. It is this problematic that opened up new theoretical paths for workerists like Tronti.

Tronti's interpretation of social capital prefigures Negri's own and perhaps directly influences the construction of the 'socialised worker'. In his book *Operai e Capitale* of 1966, Tronti states that social capital is capital that 'becomes uncovered, at a certain level of its development, as social power'<sup>9</sup>. Crucially, we are told it is also 'capitalism's maximum result and probably the final form of existence'<sup>10</sup>. Yet, Marx's analysis of social capital in Volume Two shows it to be the condition of the reproduction of individual capital as such. However, both Tronti and Negri, in their own considerations of social capital, see the latter as a 'qualitative leap',<sup>11</sup> as a distinct phase in the history of capital. In short, they read the third chapter of Volume Two historically, failing to differentiate the *systematic* dialectic of *Capital* from the *historical* dialectic of *capital*. Negri sees this new 'leap' of capital as one in which 'capital constitutes society [and]

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8 Marx 1992, p.470

9 Tronti 1973. (My emphasis. 'Power' here is presumably *potenza*).

10 Tronti 1973

11 Negri 1991, p.144

capital is entirely social capital'.<sup>12</sup> While we cannot dispute the latter claim here, the former—that capital constitutes society—is more problematic. Negri seems to imply that both claims express the same thing, yet he is mixing an empirical notion of society with the more general social logic of capital as systematised by Marx. It is this conflation that characterises an interpretation of social capital that Negri uses to complement both his theory of the socialised worker and his recasting of Marx's concept of real subsumption.

For Marx, the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital condition, respectively, the extraction of absolute and relative surplus-value.<sup>13</sup> Surplus-value, whether absolute or relative, always exists as surplus labour expended in the production process, and this surplus labour can only arise if the necessary labour of the worker is first fulfilled. Once it has been, the capitalist may procure absolute surplus-value through the extension of the worker's surplus labour time. Marx presents this as the initial form of surplus-value that capital is able to extract in the production process. It soon comes up against fairly obvious limitations: physiological and, later, legal.<sup>14</sup> Once it can no longer push any further in this direction, surplus labour must shrink from this extensive limit of the labour process and look to its intensive limit: the necessary labour time itself. This constitutes the relative form of surplus-value. While absolute surplus-value advances through the extension of the working day, relative surplus-value advances through the contraction of necessary labour time, enabled by the cheapening of the means of subsistence. The phase of formal subsumption denotes a merely formal change in a formerly existing production process now subsumed under capital (the relations of production may still appear feudal in content, for example). The phase of real subsumption, however, denotes a qualitative change to a specifically capitalist production process, where productivity is continually increased across the society of capitals.

It is via Negri's interpretation of social capital that he is able to construe real subsumption as, not merely the real subsumption of *labour* under capital, but as the real subsumption of *society* as a whole. In his 1982 essay, *The Constitution of Time*<sup>15</sup>, he argues that in contemporary capitalism, Marx's concept of 'real subsumption' has reached its overarching historical realisation. The real subsumption of labour under capital has reached its irreversible completion, culminating in the quashing of any temporal externalities to capital's process of valorisation. Totally pervasive, the latter

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12 Negri 1991, p.144

13 'If the production of absolute surplus-value was the material expression of the formal subsumption of labour under capital, then the production of relative surplus-value may be viewed as its real subsumption.' Marx 1976, p.1025

14 Cf. Marx 1976, chapter 10.

15 Negri, Antonio, 'The Constitution of Time', in Negri 2003, pp.21-138

now imbues the temporal fabric of all forms of labour with the specificity of capitalist production. Negri sees real subsumption, in its subjection of labour to the continual renewal and transformation of the capitalist mode of production, as underpinning *all forms* of social activity. In his view, the human is ontologically embroiled in the totally socialised real subsumption of labour under capital. Productive relations constitute social being, and once these relations are determined solely by a process of 'real subsumption', the *sociality* of this specifically capitalist mode of production can be seen as ontologically fundamental. Yet, Negri's workerist, labour-centric understanding of the dynamics of capital undermine the coherence of his Marxian deployment of such crucial concepts as 'temporality', 'sociality' and 'subsumption'. Furthermore, we can see Negri's rendering of the positivity of labour within capital as symptomatic of the workerist tendency to dispense with the ontological centrality of alienation found in Marx. This *positive* redressing of what can be seen as capital's *negative* determination—labour—allows Negri to reconstrue communism as immanence, in the unalienated redistribution of capitalistically-specific (i.e., really subsumed) productive capacities.

The claim that the worker, rather than capital itself, is the active subject of capitalism needs to be examined in light of this claim's consequences for the concept of real subsumption. For from this it follows that the way in which capital reproduces its means of production through the extraction of relative surplus value is predetermined by the struggles of the working class. For example, some workerists<sup>16</sup> claim that the struggle for a working day of a fixed duration—because of the curb this has on the extraction of absolute surplus-value—directly necessitates the move by capital to accumulate relative surplus value. Yet, it is evident on the surface of such claims that the theoretical slant towards the autonomy of labour's struggle leaves the movement of its opponent under-examined: even with the most pliant of work forces, capital would inevitably come up against *natural* limits of human capacity, forcing it to resort to the pursuit of relative surplus-value.

A further objection may be made to Negri's interpretation of real subsumption. With his thesis of a *total* social subsumption by capital, is he effectively claiming that *all* social labour, all social *activity*, is somehow directly productive of value? If so, this means that there is no longer any unproductive or reproductive labour that is not productive of value. Yet, for Marx, it is only labour-*power* that is 'put on the market' that can be productive of value, and subsumption is only ever subsumption of a process of production—a subsumption *by* capital *of* labour. Negri's idea of the 'socialised worker' (later, in his work with Hardt, to become the 'immaterial labourer') implies an unimpeded, viral spread of the labour-market into every fibre of the tissue of life.

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16 For example, see Yann Moulier's 'Introduction' in Negri 2005, p.22.

Such conclusions are deeply problematic. Furthermore, the idea of the historical culmination of real subsumption is rejected by Marx himself. In chapter sixteen of *Capital*, he shows that there is not necessarily a unilinear, historical passage from the production of absolute to relative surplus-value, in which the latter exhausts the former: 'Methods of producing relative surplus-value are at the same time methods of producing absolute surplus-value.'<sup>17</sup> An interplay of both processes conditions the advancement of capital at its mature stage.

Marx does state that real subsumption—as 'the specifically capitalist mode of production'—may become generalised throughout all productive spheres: Once a 'specifically capitalist mode of production' has spread throughout a branch of production, and once 'all the important branches of production' are thus subsumed, this mode of production (under real subsumption) 'becomes the universal, socially predominant form of the production process.'<sup>18</sup> However, this is not indicative of a totalised, fully realised, and therefore superseded real subsumption. Relative surplus-value continues to rear its head 'insofar as it seizes upon industries previously only formally subordinate to capital [and secondly,] insofar as the industries already taken over continue to be revolutionised by changes in the methods of production.'<sup>19</sup> Insofar as surplus value continues to expand, Marx leaves open the option for it to do so by either absolute or relative surplus value. But this is not to say that the increase in one excludes the other; relative surplus value and absolute surplus value may coexist in any sphere of production.

Two decades after *The Constitution of Time*, Negri and co-author Michael Hardt manage to completely relax the conceptual rigour of the notion of subsumption. They keep the term while dispensing with its determining dynamic: the labour-capital relation. While they introduce the concepts of formal and real subsumption on Marx's own terrain—as two modes of subsumption of labour under capital<sup>20</sup>—they toy with an expanded notion of subsumption which incorporates the subjection of environmental and social spheres to capital. The move from formal to real subsumption is described in terms of capital's move from the subsumption of the 'noncapitalist environment' to the subsumption of 'its own capitalist terrain'.<sup>21</sup> It is no accident that they do not discuss here, alongside the concepts of formal and real subsumption, the corresponding concepts of surplus-value. If they did so, it would be seen that it is only living labour, as the only possible route to valorisation, that is subsumed by capital in

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17 Marx 1976, p.646

18 Marx 1976, p.646

19 Marx 1976, p.646

20 Hardt and Negri 2001, p.255

21 Hardt and Negri 2001, pp.271-2



its subsumption. Of course, the formal subsumption of labour under capital entails a procurement of new environments or terrains as a necessary precondition, but only insofar as these new regions are already populated by non-capitalist productive activities. In Marx's terms, it is not particular terrains, tribes, cultures or societies that are themselves formally subsumed, but the *labour that these support*. Rendering the concept of subsumption autonomous from labour, Negri and Hardt are able to use it very generally to arrive at some very questionable conclusions. While formal subsumption characterised capital in the throes of modernity, we are told, real subsumption is its specific postmodern manifestation, and points toward a forward looking, redemptive stage of capital. Negri and Hardt even go so far as to bestow real subsumption with the potential to avert ecological catastrophe: real subsumption, they conclude, as a condition of 'postmodern accumulation'<sup>22</sup>, is an internalised subsumption of capital's own base, and as such it kerbs its external expansion into the 'noncapitalist environment'.

Of course, it must always be borne in mind how more than a century of changes in the capitalist mode of production bear upon the validity of Marx's arguments, and this is generally Negri's project. As an activist and a professor, his deep involvement in workers' movements of the time provided him with empirical fodder to attack the entrenched orthodox Marxism of the Italian Communist Party. His conclusions, however, derived as they are through a strategic contortion and reapplication of Marx's categories, can appear—even on their own terms—theoretically and politically confused.



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22 Ibid.



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## Translating Appearance: On the First Sentence of *Das Kapital* John Hutnyk

The admonitions to be happy, voiced in concert by the scientifically epicurean sanatorium-director and the highly strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry, have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home from his office. It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our own countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain. That is the model of an unhampered capacity for happiness.<sup>1</sup>

This is old Adorno in elegiac grumpy mood. You have to laugh, wryly. From a great book, *Minima Moralia*. I think the same points might be made today about trinkets, about plastic toy workshops in the South, shopping as civil war, indeed global war, brought here by container, packaged ready for Christmas, to teach kids to love capitalism. A mechanism of domination forbids recognition of sweatshop suffering. A separation of the worker from the body and brain; the separation of the soldier from the immediacy of killing—remote laptop bombardiers divorced from morality; separation of composer and audience, separation of writer and reader, producer and consumer, storyteller and crowd. Of course my argument will be that these separations are faulty—these pairs are co-constituted and simultaneously conjured into existence. The problem is how we have come to believe in these phantasms.

To elaborate this point, I will turn to the book *The Parallax View*, by Slavoj Žižek. I am sorry to say that Žižek sometimes gets things wrong on Marx. Perhaps this is pedantry, but I cannot help pointing out that Žižek twice quotes the wrong ‘opening sentences’ of *Capital*. I must presume Žižek quotes from memory. Speaking of ‘subjective illusion’, he says:

Let us read carefully the famous opening sentences of Chapter 1 of *Capital*: ‘A commodity appears, *at first sight*, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, *in reality*, a very trivial thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.’<sup>2</sup>

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1 Adorno 1978, pp.62-3

2 Žižek 2006, pp.171—Žižek’s emphasis.

The actual opening sentence of Chapter 1 of *Capital* occurs some 38 pages earlier (in the Penguin edition). I feel curiously compelled to point out that the page reference Žižek gives for his ‘opening’ is to page 163 of the (I think, superior) International Publishers translation of *Capital*. However, in that edition, page 163 occurs a few pages into chapter 5 on ‘Contradictions in the Formula of Capital’, and the quotation that Žižek uses is from the beginning of section 4 (to be found on page 163 of the Penguin edition, not the International edition cited). Nevertheless, Žižek correctly quotes his lines later on page 371, at least insofar as, second time around, he identifies them as belonging to subdivision 4, and he gives the appropriate footnote to the Penguin edition (etcetera etcetera ...). What is my point with this footnote fetish? It is time to carefully look at the actual (and also famous) opening sentence, which reads:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form.<sup>3</sup>

This is a great opening line; Marx as epic storyteller. Remembering that Žižek has italicised the words ‘at first sight’ and ‘in reality’ in the important, but different, passage he quotes (I shall now drop this petty routine on his sloppy referencing and sloppy Marxography—it’s unseemly and clerical anyway, like a son berating the father from the top of the stairs ... *pace* Adorno). The point is to illustrate an inversion of the ‘standard procedure of demystifying a theological myth’ and see that Marx is not simply bringing myth down to earth through critical analysis, but that ‘the task of critical analysis is to unearth the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” in what appears at first sight to be just an ordinary object’.<sup>4</sup>

What this ordinary object is, of course, is the commodity (plastic trinkets!). And the many readers of the first chapter of *Capital* have had much much fun with commodities; with coats and linen; with spindles and thread; sugar and iron; with tables that have wooden brains, that dance off to market and the like (Derrida had made them spectral beings). All well and good. But I am inclined to read the place of commodities at the opening of the story of *Capital* in a more fundamentally calculated way; as a crucial feint giving access to the organisation and purpose of the whole book, indeed to the entire architecture of *Capital* as presented by Marx. The authorly Marx mentions several times that there is a difference between the mode of presentation and the analysis. I think it is crucial that the commodity is the opening scene of a drama that has a wider purpose for

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3 Marx 1990, p. 125 (Penguin edition)

4 Žižek 2006, p.351

demystifying. It is the opening to a work that will provide the ‘implied reader’ of *Capital* (I follow Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Scattered Speculations’ essay of 1985 here<sup>5</sup>) with the x-ray vision to see through the trick of market exchange, control of production, distribution, valourisation, credit, the varieties of subsumption and the crises of capital, so as to sublimate the productive power of capital away from the exploitative production for profit of commodity wealth into a more plentiful abundance of life and creativity for all ...

What clinches this argument? The very wording of the opening sentence includes two visual references (‘at fist sight’). In the Penguin edition the German word *erscheint* is translated as ‘appearance’. The German reads:

Der Reichtum der Gesellschaften, in welchen kapitalistische Produktionsweise herrscht, erscheint als eine ‘ungeheure Warensammlung’, die einzelne Ware als seine Elementarform.

The term *erscheint* occurs just the once here, rendered as two instances of the word ‘appears’ in the English (as cited earlier). This is grammatically acceptable; translation is no pure calculus, but I think there is an important significance that is lost. In the International Press edition the translation is better: ‘The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, *presents itself* as “an immense accumulation of commodities”; its unit being a single commodity’.<sup>6</sup> Both editions then go on to say that our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. My point is that revealed in the gap between the two English translations of *erscheint* is the entire burden of Marx’s project—to expose the trick of the commodity as a way to teach the working class to see into the mechanics of industrial capital. *Erscheinung*, in German usage, has a double or even triple sense. It connotes ‘appearance’ both in terms of how something looks and in the theatrical sense of putting in an appearance, of staging something; in addition, it also has the sense of an apparition (which is what Derrida makes so much of in *Spectres of Marx*, although not actually from this sentence; it seems he prefers the *Manifesto* perhaps because it’s a shorter read (‘A spectre is haunting Europe’)). The ‘presents itself’ of the International edition gets closer to this sense, but does not capture the doubling, the trick that is perpetrated by the animated commodity—animated by the masses themselves, though they do not see it as such, yet.

Another point to be made here is that Marx, in that first sentence, quotes himself. Others have pointed to this curiosity (see Pepperell, this volume), but Marx had already said in the preface that he was ‘coquetting’ with the presentation style of Hegel in setting

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5 Spivak, Gayatri, ‘Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value’ (1985) in Spivak 1987, pp.154-75

6 Marx 1967, p.35—my italics.

out his rendering of *Capital*. This flirtation is itself a machine for seduction, for storytelling, repetition, and a gamble that starts with a kind of doubled disguise (self quotation from the start) as a tactic.

## Capital Theatre

Appearance is theatrical, yet also a machine of domination. The point is to see though this trick, to see through the plastic appearances. We are not only talking of how things are, but also of how they are made to seem, and how we put up with them, even smiling as we do so. This needs a storyteller's skill; so that rhetoric, metaphor, trope, coqueting; nothing escapes its role in the system. It might not even be impossible to imagine Marx as the system thinking itself in some contradictory, reflexive and critical manner (self quotation, doubling, haunting itself), but this is of course a fantastical deceit. Marx delivered a book that was itself a machine for narrative action (and still is, it gets inside your head and rewires thought, the tables dance). Now, the book could be read every time and for everyone as a potentially endlessly reorganised and renewed epic (it is hoped), still true to the project of teaching the implied reader to conjure with theory so as to unpack the real—to unpack the wealth of societies in which the capitalism mode of production prevails. Sure, it is a gamble to set out the analysis in a rhetorical style—inevitably part of the culture industry, the book itself still today engages with this gamble: *Capital* as a radical text sells more in times of crisis than not, and is sold as a commodity in bookshops for gain. It has its own commodity fetish format, precariously inserted into the DNA of the system of co-option and recuperation, even in the radical must-needs product. But the plastic will not remain forever—the reading of *Capital* is not merely system noise. We want people to read more than the first sentence, but also we want to read with care—and with a view to changing everything because, well—this is too quick, but we know the co-constitution of industry and exploitation cannot be merely described. The point is to change it. Books are also tools, plastic wealth is a trick, the screams of pain are real.



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## A Critique of the Critique of Religion: A Note on Marx *Alberto Toscano*

In the contemporary study of religion as a factor of social change and political mobilisation, Marx is treated as a marginal reference at best, a ‘dead dog’ at worst.<sup>1</sup> The global impasse, or even reversal, of a secularisation process that Marx appears to take for granted; the turbulent rise of explicitly religious forms of political subjectivity; the persistence or resurgence of religion both as a principle of political authority and a structuring presence in everyday life—these current trends seem to militate for the relegation of Marx to a historical moment (that of the European nineteenth-century), a political subject (the workers’ movement), and a notion of temporality (the one encompassed by notions of progress, development and revolution) which have been inexorably surpassed in a globalised scenario (whether we grasp this scenario through the differential lens of postcolonial critiques, the hegemonic and homogeneous prism of neoliberalism, or the bellicose culturalism of the infamous ‘clash of civilisations’). To compound this state of affairs, which could also be read in terms of a revenge of the sociology of religions against a Marxian ‘master narrative’—and with all the apposite caveats regarding the discontinuities between Marx and historical Marxisms, practical and theoretical—we cannot ignore the significance of the religious question within the so-called ‘crisis of Marxism’ of the 1970s and onwards. When Michel Foucault, in his enduringly controversial reports on the Iranian revolution, stressed the irrelevance of Marx’s dictum on religion as the ‘opium of the people’ in accounting for the role of Islamic politics in the overthrow of the Shah,<sup>2</sup> he was expressing a commonly-held rejection of the supposed secular reductivism characteristic of Marxist theories of social change and prescriptions for revolutionary action. Alongside Iran, the complex entanglement of popular rebellions and religion in the Polish Solidarnosc movement

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1 Though works co-authored and co-ideated with Engels feature in this survey, I will focus specifically on the writings of Marx. From his writings on the German Peasants’ war to his later reflections on early Christianity Engels wrote much more extensively than Marx both on the politics of religious belief (for instance in his account of the conflict between Müntzer’s millenarian communism and Luther’s conformism to princely authority) and on the link between religion and modes of production. Bertrand 1979 admirably reconstructs the outlines of a theory of religion jointly produced by Marx and Engels, whilst also examining Engels’s contribution to this project (for example, his comparison between primitive Christianity and socialism, see pp. 176–85). McLellan 1987, pp. 35–57, provides an uncharitable but useful survey of Engels’s writings on religion, whilst Löwy 2005 presents a sympathetic sketch of Engels’s contribution to a Marxist theory of religion.

2 Foucault in Afary and Anderson 2005, p. 186. Michèle Bertrand argues that its common use as an analgesic at the time indicates that opium would have been a less pejorative comparator than it is today, and points out that its use with reference to religion originates in Kant. Bertrand 1979, p. 48. Löwy 2005 cites its use as a simile by the likes of Heine and Hess before Marx.

and Latin American liberation theology<sup>3</sup> wrong-footed a theory of revolutionary praxis which took the ‘practical atheism’ of the proletariat as a sociological datum.<sup>4</sup> This situation has been exacerbated today in a context where the ebb of projects of human emancipation is accompanied by the pauperisation and brutalisation of a ‘surplus humanity’ living in a ‘planet of slums’, the catalyst for a twenty-first-century ‘reenchantment of a catastrophic modernity’<sup>5</sup> in which ‘populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity (and in Bombay, the cult of Shivaji) occupy a social space analogous to that of early twentieth-century socialism and anarchism’.<sup>6</sup>

Can Marx’s thinking on religion survive the challenge posed by what appear to be the dramatic reversals in the secularising tendencies and revolutionary opportunities which he identified in the European nineteenth-century? And can a Marxian social theory withstand its ‘expatriation’ into a political scenario in which explicitly Marxist actors, whether states or movements, are weak or inexistent?<sup>7</sup> The most economical response, though perhaps a facile one too, would be to indicate the continuing vitality of historical materialism in the study of the socio-political dynamics behind the current religious resurgence, whether in the context of rampant planetary urbanisation (as in the writings of Mike Davis, quoted above), or through the analysis of the role of neo-liberalism and ‘accumulation by dispossession’ in fostering the conditions for religious militancy (as in the work of David Harvey, among others).<sup>8</sup> However, rather than merely engaging in a salutary restatement of the virtues of Marxism for a systemic and systematic understanding of the conditions for today’s refulgent religiosity, I want to take the aforementioned dismissals of Marx seriously and deal with what we might call the ‘subjective’ element of religious-political conviction, its mobilizing force, alongside the questions of the explanation of religious phenomena and the supposed secularisation of capitalist societies. The aim then is to restore some of the richness of the problems raised by Marx, and even to treat his seeming anachronism as a resource rather than a defect in displacing some of the numerous commonplaces about religion, society and politics that have come to dominate our public and academic discourse. Whilst endowed with their own complex reality and efficacy, appearances—including that of the contemporary centrality of religion to political life—are rarely the whole story. As Marx puts it, in a mordant description of his method: ‘the philistine’s and vulgar economist’s *way of looking at things* stems from ... the fact that it is only the direct *form of manifestation* of relations that is

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3 For an exemplary Marxist engagement with the question of liberation theology, see Löwy 1996.

4 Engels 1987, p. 143

5 Davis 2006, p. 195

6 Davis 2004, p. 30

7 Toscano 2008a

8 Harvey 2005, pp. 171–2, 186

reflected in their brains and not their *inner connection*. Incidentally, if the latter were the case what need would there be of *science*?<sup>9</sup>

We could add that it is such a philistine's myopia for the inner connections that has dominated much recent writing which has sought to explain and to counter the political return to religion by invoking the naturalist and atheist legacy of the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> What is striking about the vogueish defences of an unfinished Enlightenment project against the delusions and depredations of religious fanaticism is their blindness to the incorporation and radical transformation of Enlightenment preoccupations, especially in terms of religion, by the emancipatory and workers' movements of the nineteenth-century. The impression given by much of the popular literature in defence of atheism is that at an intellectual level—to put it in a nutshell—the 1840s still lie ahead of us. It is indeed to the early 1840s, the only period of sustained writing on the link between politics and religion in Marx's work, that I will turn. Understanding Marx's intellectual intervention into this critical moment in German and European history can provide a necessary orientation for examining the way in which the problem of religion, in its various guises, is both addressed and transformed in the further development of Marx's work.

Glossing over the formidable flowering of radical theory and intellectual activism in the context of which Marx makes his first interventions,<sup>11</sup> and emphasizing what is 'living' in it today, it is possible to summarise Marx's stance as a *critique of the critique of religion*. This might seem a very peculiar formulation with which to define a thinker who was not only a combative atheist<sup>12</sup> armed with an awesome arsenal of anti-religious invective, but a theorist who unequivocally ascribed to the Enlightenment conviction that 'man makes religion'.<sup>13</sup> But as we shall see, everything hinges on how this 'makes' is to be understood.

It is worth noting that Marx's intervention into the politics of religion initially takes place in the ambit of his 'philosophical journalism'.<sup>14</sup> In 'The Leading Article of No. 179 of *Kölnische Zeitung*', published in 1842 in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx, impelled by a republican and democratic *élan*, confronts the 'German papers [which] have been drumming against the religious trend in philosophy, calumniating, distorting

9 Marx to Engels, 27 June 1867, quoted in Marx 1990, p. 19n11

10 The popular anti-theistic writings of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and A.C. Grayling (among others) belong to this category.

11 See Kouvelakis 2003 and Breckman 1999 for immensely useful and detailed accounts of this crucial moment.

12 'The Curtain Raised', interview with Marx in the World, 18 July 1871, Marx 1974, p. 399

13 We might add that Marx never reneges on the rationalist credo set out in his doctoral dissertation: 'That which a particular country is for particular alien gods, the country of reason is for God in general, a region in which he ceases to exist'. Marx 1841, 'Appendix'.

14 Breckman 1999, p. 272



and bowdlerizing it'.<sup>15</sup> This 'religious trend', which comprises the works of 'Hegel and Schelling, Feuerbach and Bauer', is under attack in the press for the way it *rationaly* responds to the politicisation of religion in the form of the Christian state. As Marx judiciously notes, it is the very attempt by agencies of the state to religiously legitimate politics in a non-theocratic vein, which secularises religion and opens it to philosophical disputation:

If religion becomes a political quality, an object of politics, there seems to be hardly any need to mention that the newspapers not only may, but must, discuss political objects ... If you make religion a theory of state right, then you make religion itself a kind of philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Marx confronts the anti-philosophical and conformist opinion of his day with the fact that the moment one begins to speak of a Christian state, it becomes impossible to forestall a logic of full secularisation. For either the Christian state is equivalent to the reasonable state, in which case its Christianity is redundant and philosophy is fully adequate to thinking through the state-form; or rational freedom cannot be developed out of Christianity, and therefore religion is simply external to the state: 'Answer the dilemma as you like, you will have to concede that the state is not to be constituted from religion but from the reason of freedom'.<sup>17</sup> Though this radical democratic secularism can be registered, in a mutated form, in later pronouncements by Marx, it does not exhaust Marx's position.

Initially influenced both by Ludwig Feuerbach's reappropriation for humankind of a species-being which had been alienated into the deity, and by Bruno Bauer's unsparing anti-theistic criticism of the baleful effect of religious belief on universality and self-consciousness, Marx's early writings can be understood in terms of the progressive, if very rapid, realisation that the attack on religion—while a vital spur to undermining the religious legitimisation of state power—is always insufficient, or even a downright diversion, when it comes to attain its avowed ends. Repeatedly, atheistic criticism overestimates the centrality of Christianity to the state and treats the state's secularisation as an end in itself. The slogan encapsulating Marx's intervention into the

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15 Marx in Raines 2002, p. 39. I am grateful to Roland Boer for pointing out to me the importance of this article.

16 Raines 2002, p. 41. This brief, early phase of Marx's intellectual career has been portrayed by Breckman in terms of 'Marx's campaign against the transcendental personalism of the Christian state' (Breckman 1999, p. 277), a campaign which, picking up on arguments formulated by the Young Hegelians, focuses on the solidarity between the principle of sovereignty, on the one hand, and the atomisation and privatisation through law and property of the state's subjects, on the other.

17 Raines 2002, p. 43

fraught 1840s debate over religion and politics is: ‘from the criticism of Heaven to the criticism of Earth’. The outcome of Marx’s philosophical operation is to remove ‘the critique of civil society and the state from the broader Left Hegelian campaign against Christianity and [establish] socio-political critique as the object of an autonomous secular discourse of sociological and economic analysis’.<sup>18</sup> The clearest form of this redirection in the aims of ‘irreligious criticism’ is to be found in a letter to Arnold Ruge of 30 November 1842, where Marx declares that

religion should be criticised in the framework of political conditions [instead of criticising] political conditions ... in the framework of religion ... ; for religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the *theory*, it will collapse of itself.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the provocative and problematic declaration that religion is ‘without content’ of its own—which in turn introduces Marx’s belief in the ‘withering away’ of religion as a corollary of social revolution—it is important to note that, against the image of religion in a certain Enlightenment materialism as a mere delusion or conspiracy, Marx, while never reneging on his militant atheism, affirms what we might term the ‘social necessity’ of religion as a form of consciousness and an organising principle of collective life. When Marx writes of religion as a theory of the world, he is making a properly dialectical point: religion provides an inverted picture of the world because the world itself is inverted. Though there is an argument to be made for the idea that Marx draws this ‘transformative method’, which combines the ‘inversion of subject and predicate and exposure of the hypostasised form of both’,<sup>20</sup> from Feuerbach, it also the case that he explicitly refers to the limits of a materialist humanism vis-à-vis religion in order to specify his own position. As he sets out in the fourth of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’:

Feuerbach starts off from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world, and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction,

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18 Breckman 1999, p. 293

19 Quoted in Breckman 1999, p. 278

20 Breckman 1999, p. 286

revolutionised. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be annihilated theoretically and practically.<sup>21</sup>

To bring religious abstraction ‘down to earth’ by revealing it to be a distorted projection of human essence is thus insufficient. For Marx, religion possesses a social logic of separation and autonomisation (its establishment as an apparently ‘independent realm’),<sup>22</sup> whose bases in a really inverted world, so to speak, are the object of theoretical and practical criticism. Marx’s critique of the Young Hegelian’s critique of religion—and *a fortiori* his views on the insufficiency of the attack on religious delusion in French materialism and the Enlightenment—will persistently take this twofold form: an elaboration of the social logic of abstraction (as a result of the ‘inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of [the] secular basis’) and an elucidation of the necessity for revolution (‘the removal of the contradiction’) if the real grounds of abstract domination are to be removed.<sup>23</sup> Bluntly put, in order to tackle the endurance of religious abstractions we are to confront the social logic into which they are inscribed, and the dependence of these abstractions on given modes of production and social intercourse. As Marx writes in *The German Ideology*:

In religion people make their empirical world into an entity that is only conceived, imagined, that confronts them as something foreign. This again is by no means to be explained from other concepts, from ‘self-consciousness’ and similar nonsense, but from the entire hitherto existing mode of production and intercourse, which is just as independent of the pure concept as the invention of the self-acting mule and the use of railways are independent of Hegelian philosophy. If he wants to speak of an ‘essence’ of religion, i.e., of a material basis of this inessentiality, then he should look for it neither in the ‘essence of man’, nor in the predicate of God, but in the material world which each stage of religious development finds in existence.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1844 Introduction to the ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’, Marx had noted that the ‘abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their

21 Marx 1998, p. 570. See the commentary in Bertrand 1979, p. 29

22 As Derrida notes: ‘Marx advances that belief in the religious spectre, thus in the ghost in general, consists in autonomising a representation (*Vorstellung*) and in forgetting its genesis as well as its real grounding (*reale Grundlage*). To dissipate the factitious autonomy thus engendered in history, one must again take into account the modes of production and techno-economic exchange’. Derrida 1994.

23 In this regard, it is useful to keep the following assertion from the *Grundrisse* in mind: ‘individuals are now ruled by abstractions, whereas earlier they depended on one another’. Marx 1973, p. 164

24 Marx 1998, p. 172

illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo'. We might say that the early conviction whereby the struggle against religion is the 'embryo' of true revolutionary transformation, gives way, through Marx's deepening study of the system of exploitation and his own political engagement, to a belief that such an anti-religious struggle might even serve as a detour or a cloak for real political struggle, that is to the idea that the aims of atheism and Enlightenment cannot be accomplished through a bald affirmation of Godlessness and Reason as matters of consciousness or mere pedagogy. The criticisms of Max Stirner and Bruno Bauer in *The German Ideology* and *The Holy Family* elaborate on this conviction that it is necessary to step outside an obsessive confrontation with 'religious representations', precisely in order to examine and transform the very conditions of possibility for these representations, for their seemingly autonomous, 'spectral' existence. This is the 'Kantian' sense in which Marx provides us with a potent *critique* of the critique of religion, pointing out both the limitations and the conditions of efficacy of the latter. It would be difficult to underestimate the relevance of this gesture today, when we are confronted with anti-religious arguments, which, whatever the sincerity or nobility of their motivations, often rely on the idealist, asocial view that the sway of religious representations and ideologies over human affairs can be terminated by a mere change of consciousness. Marx indicates that consciousness always takes *social* forms and these forms are in turn affected by a certain quotient of necessity. His critique of the Young Hegelians asks what the conditions of production of religious representations are, in order to then ask how these conditions themselves might be transformed. The anti-theism of his contemporaries is an obstacle to a consequent political atheism inasmuch as it remains within the ambit of theological reasoning. Stirner in particular

shares the belief of all critical speculative philosophers of modern times that thoughts, which have become independent, objectified thoughts—ghosts—have ruled the world and continue to rule it, and that all history up to now was the history of theology, nothing could be easier for him than to transform history into a history of ghosts.<sup>25</sup>

The vision of the struggle against religious domination as a 'fight against [the] thoughts and ideas of the ideologist', where hierarchy is reduced to the 'domination of thought' and the political structure of rule in modern times can be reduced to a 'clericalism' that even includes the likes of Robespierre and Saint-Just, is for Marx

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25 Marx 1998, p. 173

emblematic of the dead end of a supposedly radical thought which not only takes religion on its own terms, but succumbs to a generic fight against transcendence, unable to grasp the real conditions for the production of (and domination by) abstraction.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the critique of the critique of religion can also be read as the prolegomenon to the identification of the real abstractions<sup>27</sup> and hypostases that concretely structure social domination—in other words, as the prolegomenon to the critique of political economy.



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26 Marx 1998, pp. 186–91. Likewise, in his criticism of Bauer in *The Holy Family*, Marx will declare that when 'we come to the political part of the Jewish question we shall see that in politics, too, Herr Bauer the theologian is not concerned with politics but with theology'. Marx and Engels 1975.

27 See Toscano 2008b



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## Cognition, Mediation and Transformation: On the Political and Cultural Implications of Financial Capital *Lee Wan-Gi*

The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait.  
It'll die. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size.

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

In a word, money—the circulation of money—is *the means for rendering the debt infinite* ... The infinite creditor and infinite credit have replaced the blocks of mobile and finite debts. There is always a monotheism on the horizon of despotism: the debt becomes *a debt of existence*, a debt of the existence of the subject themselves. A time will come when the creditor has not yet lent while the debtor never quits repaying, for repaying is a duty but lending is an option.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

### The Dialectical Measure of Quantity into Quality

The transformative and operative function of financial capital can be seen more clearly if we revisit the old law of the transformation of quality into quantity, as financial capital undergoes fundamental changes as a process and as a result of its quantitative accumulation and entanglement. As a result of its accumulation, monetary capital develops a momentum possessed of its own logic, which is radically different in quality to that of its previous forms. In order to grasp the transforming character of financial capital's *accumulated money*—a *store of value* that not only shapes economic behaviour geared towards its realisation, but even goes so far as to affect cognitive operations about the notion of value itself—it is important to reconsider Marx's concept of money, as his theory connotes that capital's quantity-quality paradigm is performed through accumulated capital's *value transcoding function*. In recapitulating the development of the concepts of quantity and quality formulated by Kant, Hegel and Marx, this article focuses on the mediating function that financial capital performs; a function that, if it does not determine, certainly conditions the possibilities of cognition and action as regards reorganising social relations. It then tries to indicate the cultural implications of financial capital by inquiring into the existential conditions of the subject within the context of financial domination.

Hegel's notion of the dialectical relation of quantity, quality and measure can be read as directly informing Marx's theoretical construction of the value form, in that Marx can be seen to transpose the quantity; quality; measure relation into that of general human labour; abstract labour; money as the general equivalent.

In the first section [of Hegel's *Science of Logic*] on quality one finds terms and developments parallel to Marx's elaboration of the value-form, which is constituted in and constitutes the development of *abstract labour* (quality), and ultimately appears in the universal equivalent money (measure). In the second section Hegel's quantity is introduced as the suspension of *quality* ... where particular equivalents are inadequate because they are fractured forms of 'general human labour,' an endless series of various commodity equivalents that deprives abstract labour of any unified appearance. Also in measure one has a '*qualitative Quantum*', and interestingly, although Marx's notes are in German, this phrase is in English. 'Measure is the qualitative quantum, in the first place as immediate—a quantum, to which a determinate being or a quality is attached ... Measure, where quality and quantity are in one, is thus the completion of being,' he continues, 'God, it has been said, is the measure of all things.'<sup>1</sup>

However, this significant passage might be further articulated by way of a consideration of the transformational mechanism that enables this 'leap' from abstract labour to money as the general equivalent. The theoretical conundrum is here stemmed by taking Hegel's methodology as the presupposition of analysis which lacks the relational aspect between the three processes in the dialectic. Hegel's concept of 'measure' signifies a point of unification imagined by the thinking subject, as opposed to taking place in reality though the dialectical transformation of theses and anti-theses, amongst which actual power relationships are constantly working. Therefore Hegel's 'measure', which is positioned as the (temporary) completion of the dialectic, lacks a mediating link, because it is fulfilled through a procedure of firstly quantitative and secondly qualitative development, giving rise to a synthesis that takes place as part of the 'completion of being'; a completion that corresponds to the absolute, such as Plato's ideal. As this schema was basically speculative, in part I of *Anti-Dühring* Frederick Engels criticised that Hegelian nodal line of measure relations, claiming that the manner in which quantitative change suddenly passes at certain points into qualitative transformation does not assume any relevant mediating working that formulates the qualitative leap.<sup>2</sup>

According to Kant, a cognition is perfect in terms of quantity if it is *universal*, and perfect in terms of quality if it is *distinct*. Viewed from this angle, cognition will be logically perfect when, in relation to quantity, it has objective universality (universality of the concept or rule), and in relation to quality, it has objective distinctness (distinctness in the concept).<sup>3</sup> When quantity is achieved as the universal position, quantity enters the sphere of epistemological operation while quality has its distinction

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1 Nelson 1999, p.177 (Emphasis in original)

2 Engels 1878

3 Kant 1988, p.43

in cognition. However, the metamorphosing relationship between the two is not suggested even if this explanation gives important clues as to the process of cognition of quantity as objective universality.

Although some theorists defend Hegel's assumption, claiming that 'quantity reveals qualitative meaning, or rather, a multiplicity of meanings within a finite determination,'<sup>4</sup> it is not clear how quantity has the momentum of 'multiplying' for signification of meanings. Quantity can be identified as the implicit quality, in that 'for quality, quantity is not simply any quality, not just one among many; rather, it is *the* quantity of quality. Here the qualitative-quantitative concept means that quality is a quantity ...'<sup>5</sup> The qualitative difference between quantity and quality is here being sutured. What should be asked here is, however, the actual mechanism which makes a qualitative transformation, and it is to this that Marx tries to apply his theory of value. As Hegel and Kant, along with other theorists, do not fully pay attention to the aspects of value formation with which quantity-quality is recomposed, attempts to understand quantity and quality often assume the relationship between the two to be static and constant, rather than as a variable that fluctuates with the socio-economic field of power in acquisition of value.

From the capitalist's standpoint, the bank functions as the source of quantity. However the source is not static. It also ceaselessly mediates to produce value, transforming the relationship between the operator and the actor. The bank as the mediator becomes 'measure,' performing qualitative difference. While it accumulates capital, it also metamorphoses itself as the value transcoding agent, for it has potential possibilities in action as the (re)organisational power. The accumulated capital operates its accumulated quantity as the condition of possible actions and cognition in producing and transferring legitimate value. Bank capital thus represents, as Marx puts it, the transformed social relationship as such, with the centralisation of the money capital of the lenders on the one hand, and the centralisation of the borrowers on the other.<sup>6</sup> Through the accumulation of quantity, the double function of capital is established since this progressive accumulation expands spheres of interest or both lender and borrower. The expansion, as Rosa Luxembour argues, becomes a pretext for the *valorisation* of the political as well as the economic in society.<sup>7</sup> The centralisation of money capital is then the point at which accumulated money capital operates with its own self-valorising logic, and by which capital acquires self-referential or self-validating mechanisms for the reconstitution of social relations. The eventual aim of this process

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4 Haas 2000, p.132

5 Haas 2000, p.132 (Emphasis in original)

6 Marx 1981, p.528

7 Luxembour 2003, p.424



is the reproduction of capital and the (re)production of the financial mode of social relationships. Consequently, as Ernest Mandel points out, monetary capital eventually functions as the ‘*mediating link in the process of cognition*’<sup>8</sup> by virtue of converging qualitatively different social rationales performed by social actors. It is at this stage that bank capital transforms itself as a meaningful signifier as well as a signified, since its symbolic distinction devalorises and, thus ironically, revalorises disparate values of the society in financial terms.

Bank capital eventually becomes the source of surplus value irrespective of the physical mediation of labour power, which grounds the fluid workings of the financial mode of production. ‘Capital’ at this stage ‘appears as a mysterious and self-creating source of interest, of its own increase.’<sup>9</sup> As Marx also explains, ‘in interest-bearing capital, the capital relationship reaches its most superficial and fetishised form.’<sup>10</sup> Mandel in this sense suggests that bank and banking system do not just function as ‘available money reserves,’<sup>11</sup> but also transform the reserves into ‘functional’ capital.

Through the capitalist banking system, all available money reserves (savings and non-invested surplus-value + idle money capital resulting from non-investment of part of surplus-value realised during previous cycles) are transformed into functioning capital, in other words lent to capitalist firms which are actually operating—i.e. employing wage-labour—be it in the sphere of production or in that of circulation. In this way, capitalists are able to operate with much more capital than they own personally. Capital accumulation can take place at a much quicker pace than would be the case if each capitalist firm could practise enlarged reproduction only on the basis of the profits it had itself realised.<sup>12</sup>

Here the new functioning capital, derived mainly from capital accumulation in the bank, does not just multiply itself as interest bearing capital, but also enters exchange itself in order to become ceaselessly lent. This becomes the means of activation for a doctrine of financial entanglement and contagion. The process of widespread expansion from lender to borrower by way of financial intermediaries implies the qualitatively changed role of bank capital in the process of accumulation, narrowing down the positions of social subjects into the roles of lenders (creditors) and borrowers (debtors). It can thus be argued that bank capital fills the gap of the mediating link that

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8 Mandel 1981, p.29, emphasis in original

9 Marx 1981, p.516

10 Ibid. p.515

11 Mandel 1981, p.53

12 Ibid. pp.53-54

was seemingly absent from Hegel's quantity-quality paradigm. While multiplying the money, bank capital transforms not just the character of the capital as surplus-value bearing financial capital, but also the social relationships of capitalist society through the insinuation of qualitatively different criteria of performance.

The rise and establishment of banking capital is the process through which the transformation of value in accordance with its role as an exchangeable commodity (i.e. as capital to be lent and invested) becomes materialised and established. At the same time, the money reserve abstracts from the individual, empirical and concrete qualities of small capitals. Thus, abstract quantity becomes materialised in concrete difference, whilst qualitative difference is abstracted into the quantitative equivalence of the money reserve. This tendency of abstraction, which Simmel calls the culture of anonymity in a money economy, is the essence of the capitalistic mode of production—for abstraction is a common, characteristic mechanism of the commodity, money and money capital. As the commodity and money are embodiments of abstract human labour, money capital is the (im)material expression of the general abstraction of the human labour relationship. Ironically enough, and as Marx cynically points out, in the regime of exchange value, equality is achieved due to the fact that the regime abstracts real inequality.

Equality in the full sense between different kinds of labour can be arrived at only if we abstract from their real inequality, if we reduce them to the characteristic they have in common, that of being the expenditure of human labour power, of human labour in the abstract.<sup>13</sup>

The abstraction can be the function and effect of measure, following Hegel, which leads to a qualitative leap for establishing the exchange relationship. Marx thus comments that 'the abstract relationship is value' itself; the 'qualification' does not just remain in the economic, but also grounds the exchange 'regime of formal standard' as a 'social norm.'<sup>14</sup> The expansion of banking guarantees 'pursuing a stable macroeconomic environment'<sup>15</sup> as a regulatory frame of reference for a new financial order in which the general managers of capital flows reconfigure any participatory functions as financial 'market transaction.'<sup>16</sup>

Banking culture, as the regulatory activity and universal measure of the mobilisation of individual money for the reserve of money capital, thus functions as a '*mediating*

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13 Marx 1990, p.166

14 Marx 1844

15 Brabant 1998

16 Mohan 2000, p.92

*link in the process of cognition*<sup>17</sup> from which Mandel suggests how quantitative accumulation acquires qualitative meaning in value realisation. This theoretical concern is related to how specific financial strategies become social cognitions, by way of which economic processes even obtain a position of socially necessary mediation, serving as the custom-built processes that shape the everyday.

## The Politics of Mediation in Bank Capital

The bank sets crucial *entry points* as suggested in three main categories in the case of the US central bank.

In the U.S. the central bank has three entry points: (1) it controls the amount of primary money available to the banking system; (2) it sets the discount rate; (3) it can exercise ‘moral suasion.’<sup>18</sup>

The central bank, through the establishing of the banking system’s primary money, is able to influence the terms on which monetisation of the pool of fluid capital proceeds.<sup>19</sup> In its second role, the central banks implement interest rate policy with which the banks manage the general amount of capital in fluctuation in accordance with the economic situations. However, the third role—that of ‘moral suasion’—does not just remain as a recommendation. It is a ‘preventive instrument’ possessed of an ethical dimension, as well as a ‘benevolent compulsion, or making others conform without enforcing rules directly.’<sup>20</sup> Although moral suasion can be carried out through bilateral or multilateral discussions, its fundamental aim is ‘to *influence expectations* through public statements or speeches by Board Members.’<sup>21</sup> The second function of moral suasion is also ‘to persuade financial intermediaries to *modify their behaviour* when it is deemed to be prejudicial to the sound development of markets.’<sup>22</sup> Although the refined mode of management does not seem to force the implementation of central bank policy in a direct way, it should be noted that the bank’s moral suasion is the symptomatic sign of a moral economy, signifying that the bank adopts moral leadership in order to effectively modify the cognition and action of the participants as the new meta-frame of value transference in valorisation.

With the much enhanced and effective methods of control that shape the climate of capital management, the bank reformulates social relationships as credit relationships.

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17 Mandel 1981, p.29

18 Taylor 2000, p.60

19 Ibid.

20 Masciandaro 2005, p.46

21 Ibid. (Emphasis added)

22 Ibid. (Emphases added)

The credit relation, the dominant mode of financial capitalism's activation, is driven by the centralisation of money into banks; for as the central bank manages capital flows as loans to commercial banks and sub-intermediaries as well as to individuals, the social relation of capital is turned into a relation between borrowers and lenders. With the interest policy that accompanies the loan system, the bank's influence is becoming pervasive; the criteria implemented are then not just 'preventive instruments,' but conditionalities for which the exchange value regime accompanies and appropriates political apparatuses, such as governments, for their effective activations. The imposition of conditionalities upon a borrowing party is based on credit supervision and surveillance—the politics of mediation operated by the bank.

When, for instance, the financial unrest was initially sensed in Korea in the early part of 1997, the Korean government originally decided not to take any aid from the IMF and the World Bank. However, with the strong pressure from the US and Japan, Korea had to accept the conditionalities of the international financial apparatuses.<sup>23</sup> The conditionalities are entailed with a loan making from the institutions, 'rigorous requirements' which set out 'the Bank's expectations.' The conditionalities of these loans involve 'prior actions' and 'performance criteria,'<sup>24</sup> which are much more distinctively conspicuous when accompanied by the structural adjustment loan case given to a borrowing country.

It is important to note that the introduction of structural adjustment lending by the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s was devised to address any economic crises in developing countries as 'endogenous,' thereby 'downplaying the exogenous factors and structural constraints emanating from the position of developing economies within the global economy.'<sup>25</sup> With the advent of structural adjustment lending, unlike the 'project-based loans' which were normally invested to construction programs or infrastructure projects, the aim was not to create a policy environment conducive to growth and development for a national economy hit by a financial crisis, but to ground the conditionalities attached to adjustment loans for pro-cycle policies for international financial flows in a manner that required the retrenchment and downsizing of the state.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, as many critics diagnose that the 1997 Asian financial crisis has its root in the '[World] Bank and the Washington consensus vindicating its development model including its legal framework.'<sup>27</sup>

The new conditionalities, through structural adjustment loans from the World

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23 Woods 2006, p.70

24 Ibid.

25 Tshuma 1999, p.77

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. p.84

Bank, function as the *transformational leverage* for global financial capitalism, in that the conditionalities among other things demand a far reaching liberalisation program that affects the whole society. The intervention and imposition of conditionalities by the international financial apparatuses are a new way of activation for subsuming a weak link into the financial regime, and of inscribing any financial problem as a local and 'endogenous' one that should thus be replaced with the global performative criteria. Therefore the programme of restructuring is focused upon adjusting the local, regardless of international capital flows that include hot money such as hedge funds, and which transform the relationship with the borrowing country into debt politics.

The framework of international solutions to local government debt problems has been changed into a market-base system. The Brady Plan, for example, represents this transformation in which international commercial and investment banks backed by the US government become the crucial mediators in international debt politics. When Korea was hit by the liquidity problem in 1997, the plan resurfaced as the legitimate framework for comprehending these events as it had been implemented during the Latin American financial crises in the 1980s. In New York, in the early part of 1998, and with the mediation of the IMF, thirteen major international banks agreed to extend \$24 billion of short-term loans to Korean private banks on the condition that 'Seoul will guarantee the new loans which will be publicly traded.' The deal included three key points:

1. Bad loans on which Korean banks might have defaulted were replaced by new bonds that can be publicly traded and sold by the original Japanese, German, and U.S. banks. Thus, the banks that made the original bad loans will not retain the bonds issued to replace those loans.
2. A bad private debt is being replaced by a new government-guaranteed debt.
3. The deal was made under heavy pressure from the IMF and the U.S. Treasury.<sup>28</sup>

Under these conditions, the Korean government is liable for the debt of private banks, as the clauses clearly indicate that it should be the sole risk taker involved in any potentially bad private loan. Along with endorsing a virtually risk-free loan condition to the international banks, the deal tacitly approved the illegitimate successor loan which was initially caused by the potential misconduct of the lenders. This is the most serious point Jochnick and Preston raise, due to the fact that 'a government guarantee of an illegitimate successor loan does not make the loan any less illegitimate. Furthermore, it strengthens the illegitimacy if international financial pressure has forced the

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28 Jochnick and Preston 2006, p.116

government to accept responsibility for a private debt.<sup>29</sup>

Consenting to the loan conditionality is the premise for the local subject to participate in the new regime of economic performance. By taking these restrictions as the conditions of new modes of economic performance, the object (Korea) is eventually becoming activated to perform as the new economic subject, retaining a relative and equivalent value in order to be legitimated in the new financial imperial regime. In this sense, the subjectivity that the local subject finally gains is, in essence, a limited subjectivity, for these conditions restrict full access to the dominant system. By taking the loans, the subject can only be 'bailed out' and thus allowed to re-enter the system. This form of subjectivity is ceaselessly being propagandised whenever and wherever it performs to its full economic ability, giving rise to its normalisation and acceptance as form of life.

The structural adjustment loan and its conditionalities for a country in financial difficulty are, when viewed from the perspective of the whole financial world system, 'healthy'—for the prescription's fundamental aim is to revalorise the whole system by appropriating the local into the dominant financial chain.

The effects of the crash, for the system as a whole, are healthy, however nasty they may be for individual capitalist. General devalorisation of capital is not accompanied by a proportional reduction in the mass of surplus-value produced. Or (which amounts to the same) an identical mass of surplus-value can now valorise a smaller total amount of capital. Hence the decline in the rate of profit can be stopped and even reversed. Large scale reconstitution of the reserve army of labour, occurring during the crisis and the depression, makes possible a vigorous increase in the rate of surplus-value, not only through speed-ups but even through a cut in real wages, which in turn leads to a further rise in the rate of profit. Raw material prices generally fall more than the prices of finished goods, so part of constant capital becomes cheaper. The rise in the organic composition of capital is thereby slowed down, again pushing up the average rate of profit on industrial capital.<sup>30</sup>

Mandel's analysis of a crisis of the capitalistic system as a whole gives an account of the valorisation mechanism. Although the theory is focused on the industrial mode of production, the fluctuation of devalorisation and valorisation is still effective in the financial system, for any financial crisis on a local level provides a room for intervention and for the reconstitution of a surplus-value producing system. Even in large scale crises such as the ongoing 'credit crunch,' the role of the bank becomes even more

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29 Jochnick and Preston 2006, p.117

30 Mandel, in Marx 1981, pp.50-51

influential by systematically involving the public sector. The systematic contradiction of the financial mode of production, caused by its entanglement and contagion through excessive lending and speculation, is—contrary to the mainstream views that emphasise the narrative of crisis—the process of financial self-valorisation, but also a contradiction capable of giving rise to a new mode of production. Marx grasps this irony in that this universal mechanism potentially becomes ‘the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-abolishing contradiction, which present itself *prima facie* as a point of transition to a new form of production.’<sup>31</sup> Drastic measures such as government interventions aimed at guaranteeing commercial banks can thus be considered as an important step towards transforming the entanglement of financial capital into an even more ubiquitous structure, in which all taxpayers are eventually interpellated as the performers of financial reconstitutions. As a meaningful signifier as well as a signified in actualisation and realisation of dominant value, financial capital, measuring qualitative differences, as symbolic distinction in mediating social links devalorises and, thus ironically, revalorises disparate values of the society in financial terms.



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## Marx, Mathematically *Nick Salazar*

I. My aim in this paper is to suggest that Marx's critique of capital relies on scientific results, and that the precision and analytical rigour of this work is grounded on a firm understanding of mathematics. This leads me to a general analysis of the Marxist method of political economy as the construction of what on occasion Marx called a 'scientifically correct method'.<sup>1</sup> As Dirk J. Struik points out in his article *Marx and Mathematics* (1997), Marx belongs to a school of thinkers who insist on utmost clarity of thought in interpreting a formal apparatus, a position that led him to think that significant mathematics must reflect operations in the real world.<sup>2</sup> The analysis of the form of value and money, the composition of capital, the rate of surplus value, the rate of profit, the process of transformation of capital, the rate of surplus value, the rate of profit, the circulation of capital and its turnover, its accumulation and reproduction, loan capital and credit, differential rents: 'Marx accomplished all this by employing mathematics'.<sup>3</sup>

In his Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx explains that it is necessary for the analysis of political economy to move in a very specific direction, namely from abstract concepts (value, labour, price, etc) to a reproduction of the concrete.<sup>4</sup> In other words, rather than starting from a series of concrete notions like 'population', 'ethnicity', 'natural resources', as the economists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century did, Marx removes himself from concrete reality and from what he calls 'real preconditions'<sup>5</sup> in order to present his theory at the level of 'general preconditions', which are nothing more than 'the abstract moments without which no real historical stage of production can be grasped'.<sup>6</sup> It appears that Marx wants to lead his readers into an understanding of capital from what he perceives to be general or natural laws. The concrete is no longer the preferred point of departure, because in this way we avoid the imprecision of everyday observation (*Anschauung*). Marx is not pulling these concepts out of thin air: they are embedded in his understanding of concrete reality. What is crucial is that they have been finely broken down into abstractions in order to be resolved into a complex totality, a 'philosophical consciousness'—for which conceptual thinking is the only reality.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Marx 1993, p.101

2 Struik 1997, p.186

3 Kol'man 1983, p. 218

4 Marx 1993, p.100

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid. p. 88

7 Ibid. p.101

On the basis of the foregoing, Marx's critique rests largely on the abstraction of the real world. This is a move that orbits around Marx's general theory of totalising quantitativeness, where there is no longer a need to appeal to a physical sense of production, but where the discovery of a few decisive abstract relations such as division of labour, surplus value, etc, have transformed society into an environment where reality is always quantitatively (and thus mathematically) conceived. This marks a move away from a Ricardo-style labour theory of value toward a theory of socially necessary, average labour.

2. Marx and Engels denounced capitalism in their *Communist Manifesto* for submerging modern life under the 'icy water of egotistical calculation'.<sup>8</sup> They claim that in place of 'numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms', the only freedom left in a capitalist world is Free Trade.<sup>9</sup> For the young authors of the *Manifesto*, freedom is associated with a sense of 'numberlessness', which suggests that the eternal laws of nature and of reason, which are conceived as the 'icy consecration'<sup>10</sup> of social mathematics, and which according to the *Manifesto* are selfish conceptions induced to validate the social forms springing from capitalism,<sup>11</sup> have led to an abolition of personal freedom through what one might call the 'tyranny of number'.<sup>12</sup>

I will contend in this paper that whilst the denunciation of number and 'icy calculation' contains the somewhat humanist notion that social mathematics abolishes individual and personal freedom, Marx's mature works are characterised by a more scientific approach and the welcoming of mathematical logic into his theory of capitalist economy. In other words, Marx turned to mathematics in order to be able to understand the fabric of capitalist production following the 'correct scientific method'.<sup>13</sup> Marx came to recognise that in order to overthrow society we need to understand it, and that in order to understand a world built around quantitative equivalence we need to deal with mathematics. At the same time, Marx vigorously opposed the mathematical fetishism characteristic of the bourgeois money-mentality, maintaining that the mathematical methods could never over-reach the 'boundary of the underlying, *qualitative* theory on which it was based'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Marx made the same distinction made by Plato in the Republic between pure mathematics used for the enhancement of knowledge, and the mathematics applied for the purpose of commercial gain.

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8 Marx and Engels 1998, p.5

9 Ibid.

10 Badiou 2006, p.12

11 Marx and Engels 1998, p.21

12 Badiou 2008, p.214

13 Marx 1993, p.101

14 Blunden 1983

Insofar as Marx considered the application of mathematics not only possible but indeed necessary for the investigation of the general laws of economics, Marx proceeded to study analytical algebra and calculus in his spare time. Marx paid special attention to the conversion of calculus into algebraic form, an idea he picked up from Lagrange, and which became increasingly useful as he began his work on *Capital* in earnest in the late 1850s. Marx was driven by the necessity to understand contemporary commercial and economic literature, and by drawbacks in his own technical explanations of political economy. In a letter to Engels dated January 11, 1858, Marx wrote:

I am so damnably held up by errors in calculation in the working out of the economic principles that out of despair I intend to master algebra promptly. Arithmetic remains foreign to me. But I am again shooting my way rapidly along the algebraic route.<sup>15</sup>

It was not only for practical reasons, however, that Marx turned to mathematics. Increasingly, Marx realised that the understanding of mathematical analysis pried open possibilities for the development of his political and philosophical thought beyond mere algebraic technicalities. Marx understood that a scientific approach to economics was based on fundamental mathematical concepts, and that mathematics was not only a technical detail, but the logic of a highly rationalised and technological system of production such as industrial capitalism. Marx understood the necessity of giving mathematical expression to the fundamental laws of value in capitalist society and developing the interconnection of these laws. The denunciation of calculative rationality found in the *Manifesto* not only abated; furthermore Marx was won over by this calculative rationality, applied not toward material gain, naturally, but a fuller understanding of economics. Likewise, Marx saw the fruitful relationship that mathematics and philosophy have had in the Western rationalist tradition from Plato, to Descartes, to Leibniz, to Kant, and of course, Hegel, whose dialectical method and philosophy of mathematics were no doubt crucial to the construction of a scientific critique of capital.

3. In a letter dated March 29, 1865, Engels commented that Hegel 'knew so much about mathematics that none of his pupils were in a position to publish the numerous mathematical manuscripts among his papers, except Marx'.<sup>16</sup> This said, Hegel ranked mathematics as a form of Understanding (*Verstand*), inferior to philosophical Reason (*Vernunft*), not least because mathematics in the Hegelian sense is restricted to an

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15 Marx 1858

16 Engels, 1865

abstract realm *qua quantitative*. In his Preface to the first edition of *The Science of Logic*, Hegel claims that philosophy cannot borrow its method from a 'subordinate science like mathematics',<sup>17</sup> whose elementary figures 'are a subordinate and poor expression for thought'.<sup>18</sup> The Hegelian science of logic must surpass mathematics<sup>19</sup> and the 'notion-less quantity' which mathematics is alone in considering. Even disregarding the question of mathematics as absolute determinateness of quantity, there remains the problem that mathematics is incapable of producing, according to Hegel, full conceptual representations of nature, because mathematical determinations are employed in a 'notionless and often meaningless way', which 'await their justification from philosophy'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, for Hegel it is not possible to conceive nature through numbers and theorems since, on account of their notionlessness, numbers and other mathematical symbols possess no inner, intrinsic relationships, which is why Hegel describes a Pythagorean philosophy derived from numbers as a 'perversity'. The rivalry Hegel conceives between mathematics and philosophy, and the need to distinguish the realm of the mathematical from the logico-philosophical, allows Hegel to revalorise logic against mathematics, such that mathematics amounts only to a moment in logic, the moment of the category of quantity.

In their article *Hegel and Mathematics* (1931) Ernst Kolman and Sonia Yanovskaya give plenty of credit to Hegel for coming out against the fetishisation of quantity, which the authors describe as a reflection of the abstract money-trading relations of the bourgeois order.<sup>21</sup> So despite a rather disparaging view of mathematics vis-à-vis philosophy, Hegel was capable of offering valuable insights into mathematical discipline by insisting on the historical and dialectical nature of mathematics. Moreover, Kolman and Yanovskaya see Hegel's mathematics as actually bursting apart the framework of bourgeois philosophy. According to this reading, Hegel's theory of quantum in the *Science of Logic* paved the way for a more penetrating critique of the quantitative determination of capitalist production. A rigorous and mathematically consistent critique of quantitative determinateness was open to dialecticians like Marx, who felt obliged to show how to reconcile the materialist dialectic not only with the social sciences, but also with the natural sciences and mathematics. For this reason, mathematics was the starting point of a line of inquiry whose aim was not purely theoretical, but whose purpose was a synthesis of mathematics and political ontology. As a new analytical source determined by both historical and logical aspects, mathematics was no longer

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17 Hegel 2004a, p.27

18 Hegel 2004b, p.9

19 Hegel 2004a, p.40

20 Hegel 2004b, p.9

21 Kol'man and Yanovskaya, p.236-7

in competition with other sciences, nor was it an unrelated field of notionless and meaningless symbols, but an important aspect of Marx's dialectics. In sum, Marx and Engels found in mathematics a whole new inspiration for dialectical philosophy, particularly in the development of the calculus out of elementary algebra, and the splitting of calculus into differential and integral functions.

4. Marx's point of departure in his analysis of capitalism is what he calls the 'elementary unit'; i.e. the commodity. The opening of *Capital* Volume One is the exposition of a theory that unfolds, structurally at least, following the same logic as the axiomatic method of a mathematical theorem. In other words, in order to prove the systematic practice of capitalist behaviour in modern industrial society, *Capital* begins, like any theorem, by postulating self-evident truths. From these core truths, or Marxian axioms, *Capital* unfolds like a monumental political and philosophical theorem. Thus, according to the Marxian thesis, any society characterised by capitalist production is dependent upon an elementary unit, namely the commodity. Marx makes the claim that commodities can appear as external objects capable of satisfying human wants, and that they possess a twofold outlook, that of quality and quantity. Next, Marx explains that insofar as 'elementary units' differ quantitatively and qualitatively, it follows that they must confront one another: 'coats are not exchanged for coats'.<sup>22</sup> Here, Marx introduces the second self-fulfilling rule of capital. The dual nature of the elementary unit means that elementary units must confront one another in a continuous and determinant law. Marx's thesis thus boils down to a mathematical law that exists when different commodities are exchanged. Marx explains this in a straightforward algebraic equation:

We write  $x$  commodity A =  $y$  commodity B ... In the concrete, we write 20 yards of linen = 1 coat.<sup>23</sup>

Marx is not concerned to know *how* objects satisfy human needs. He does not want to describe the way in which commodities derive from real preconditions, but abstract or general preconditions, which ascend from simple relations such as division of labour, accumulation of capital and so on. He does not explain what a commodity does in the concrete life of human beings, but how it functions within an abstract system of production. The procedure, according to Marx's logic, functions by way of a mathematical exchange between two equalised units. Marx is using empirical knowledge (yards of

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<sup>22</sup> Marx 2003, p.11

<sup>23</sup> Marx 2003, p.18

linen and coats) as mere examples that enable him to abstract capital into a formulaic composition. Capital is thus conveyed by Marx as a mathematical reality, where mathematics is applied for the purpose of quantitative gain and material wealth. Marx's deductive approach seeks to strip the phenomena under investigation to its very bones, to lay bare the genetic code of capitalism, thus unravelling its *modus operandi*.

Take, for example, Marx's claim that 'the total productivity of capital = the duration of one production phase multiplied by the number of times it is repeated in a certain period of time: the number is thus determined by circulation'.<sup>24</sup> The appeal to mathematical language in order to expose a capitalist composition increases as the rhythm of *Capital* gains momentum, to the point where Marx's compound ratio between the number of labour powers exploited simultaneously by the same capitalist and the degree of exploitation of each individual labour power<sup>25</sup> becomes an exercise in differential calculus, one of Marx's favourite mathematical problems. Ultimately, Marx's fascination for mathematics is made manifest not only by the perfect mathematical structure of *Capital* or the proficiency of the mathematical formulas devised in this work, but by the fact that the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow obtained photographic copies of over 900 pages of Marx's work on pure mathematics. These pages were subsequently compiled into book form and published under the title of *The Mathematical Manuscripts*. The 1983 English edition of Marx's *Mathematical Manuscripts* include two works on the differential calculus, plus drafts and supplements on the work 'On the Differential', as well as a piece on the history of calculus, and a reworking of the theory of function and of series according to Taylor's and McLaurin's Theorems.

5. Having made the case for an abstract unit underlying capitalist production, namely the commodity, and having abstracted the notion of a commodity from a real object to a mathematical concept, Marx further realises that for commodities to grow into the more complex equations of surplus value, a universal equivalence must be established beforehand. In other words, the whole structure of capital must be sustained by an invariable law of equivalence. Thus, the self-evident truths exposed in the first chapters of *Capital* Volume One lead to the necessity of law. Here, Marx reaches the teleological aim of any mathematical logic: to produce a result in the form of a mathematical rule. Marx has constructed a scientific and axiomatic framework whose step-by-step method leads us from hypothesis to proof, from statement to general law.

The reason why Marx introduces the simple equivalence 20 yards of linen = 1 coat is in order to reveal his law of equivalence. According to Marx, the magnitude of different

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24 Marx 1993, p.630

25 Marx 2003, p.288

commodities cannot be quantitatively compared until they have been expressed in terms of the same 'substance'. This means that 'only as expressions of the same substance do they become quantities which bear the same name, and are therefore commensurable'.<sup>26</sup> Marx is presenting the problem as a mathematical one. Effectively, what he is saying is that there is an illogical mathematical equivalence in the ratio  $1=20$ . So he resolves this inconsistency by digging deeper into analytical algebra. In doing so, he concludes that the commodity is only a product of an even more abstract substance that is equivalent for all commodities. So although in concrete terms 1 coat and 20 yards of linen appear as a mathematically illogical equivalence, what makes this equation possible is a substance that enables all commodities to be mathematically comparable.

The Marxian theorem is thus revealed: capitalism has the power to link different objects through ratios of equivalence. Commodities can be made equivalent because they can be quantified, abstracted and transformed into numbers, or more specifically, into exchange-value. Insofar as everything can be abstracted in this way, and so long as the valid exchange-value of a commodity are equal one to another, exchange-value must be the mode of expression of something contained in the commodity but distinguishable from it.<sup>27</sup> Marx goes on to make an important clarification. In becoming an exchange value, he says, a product (or activity) is not only transformed into a definite quantitative-relation, a relative number, but it must also be transformed at the same time qualitatively, so that commodities become magnitudes of the same kind. This is a crucial point, because it seems to suggest that a culture of commensurability must result in a system whereby all things can be converted into manifestations of the same measurable substance, and that this convertibility factor will fundamentally change the qualitative nature of life itself. 'Whatever the ratio of this exchange may be', adds Marx, 'it may be represented by a mathematical equation'. But what does this equation tell us? Marx: 'that in two different things there exists in equal quantities something common to both'.<sup>28</sup>

At this point, Marx is forced to ask himself: what is this substance that reduces all entities, including individuals, to a law of mathematical equivalence? What name does Marx give to his grand theorem of capitalist production? The answer, we know, is labour. Different kinds of labour embodied in different commodities can be equalised as that which is common to them all, says Marx: 'human labour in the abstract'.<sup>29</sup> For Marx, nothing but the expression of equivalence between different kinds of

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26 Marx 2003, p.19

27 Marx 2003, p.5

28 Marx 2003, p.20

29 Marx 2003, p.21

mathematised commodities can disclose the specific character of value-creating labour.<sup>30</sup> Abstract labour is therefore the single mathematical object that determines common standards by virtue of which all things can be compared. In sum, what creates universality between qualitatively different commodities such as linen or coats is that all of them are valued because abstract human labour has been embodied and materialised in them.

6. Marx goes further, and suggests that the need to name reality, to conceive of reality in terms of nominal concepts, is displaced by the abstract composition of capital, to the point that commodities as well as living things become meaningful only in terms of the amount they represent in a capitalist exchange. Marx is re-stating the point made many years earlier in his *Communist Manifesto* that capitalism turns life itself into ‘cash-payment’. Only this time round, his theory is scientifically defined as a fetishistic application of mathematics for the sake of capitalist accumulation. Marx:

[T]he prices of commodities express nothing but the relations in which they are exchangeable for one another, the *proportions* in which they exchange for one another. These proportions given, I can call the unit any name whatever, because the undenominated abstract number would suffice, and instead of saying that this commodity = 6 stivers, the other = 3 etc., I could say this one = 6 ones, the other = 3; I would not have to give the unit any name at all. ... their relations become simple numerical relations.<sup>31</sup>

The transformation of ‘real preconditions’ into abstract measurements (i.e. prices, labour time, money), is conditioned by total numericalisation. Rather than using numbers quantitatively and instrumentally, as a means of counting or measuring, numbers become qualitative: they describe things. Number undergoes a ‘thingification’. Number is an object, an activity, a worker. I am reminded of Frederick W Taylor’s proposal, when testing his theories at the Bethlehem Steel Factory in Pennsylvania, that all workers should bear a number and a card indicating the history of their previous day’s work and the implements he should get from the tool room. Marx explains:

Objectified labour contained in the price of labour is always ... arithmetically expressed as a fraction; *always a relation between numbers*, never a simple number.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, the critique of capital is to some extent a critique of the fetishisation of

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30 Ibid.

31 Marx 1993, p.794

32 Marx 1993, p.337 (my emphasis)



ratio, that is, the relationship between numbers that enable all things to be equalised and exchanged following a common denominator. The number, as quantum, demands the count, the accumulation, the aggregation, the system of relations through division, multiplication, addition, and subtraction. By the actualisation of social units as numbers, social interrelation takes place necessarily by means of mathematical operations such as division or subtraction (of labour), or addition and multiplication (of capital). By making all things equatable as numerical sums within mathematical categories and mathematical relations, things can be transformed into labour time, or price, or money. If all things are considered numerical and part of a ratio, then there is a discrete continuity in everything that makes up a capitalist society. But whilst in the Hegelian sense this theory of quantum is nothing more than a notionless abstraction, for Marx it is pure knowledge that reveals the natural laws that govern economics. At the same time, mathematics is applied for the sake of profit at such a profound level that human beings, like objects, can become numbers, like Taylor's factory workers.



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## Who Are These Lunatics?—An Overview of Reclaim The Streets *Sam Meaden*

‘We are not going to demand anything. We are not going to ask for anything. We are going to take. We are going to occupy.’<sup>1</sup>

Reclaim The Streets (RTS) was originally formed in London in 1991 around the time of the Twyford Down anti-road protest. It had the strapline ‘we are for walking, cycling and cheap or free public transport, and AGAINST cars, roads and the system that pushes them.’<sup>2</sup> It reformed in the summer of 1995 after temporarily being subsumed into the No M11 campaign (an anti-road campaign in East London). Its heyday lasted for about 5 years, and was characterised by actions that blocked off major thoroughfares using staged car crashes and erecting tripods to seal off roads so that revellers could party. Its largest street party took place in 1996, occupying the M41 motorway in west London. Eight thousand protesters partied for nine hours and jack hammers dug up the road. Later that year, RTS took a different direction and adopted a more overtly anti-capitalist stance. We teamed up with the Liverpool Dockers, closing down the docks to support their fight against casualisation. Two years later, in 1998, there was the Birmingham Global street party against the G8 summit and worldwide street parties started taking place from New York to Australia. In 1999, fifteen thousand demonstrators took to the city as a part of an international day of action under the banner of anti-capitalism.

At the beginning, the new RTS activists were largely politicised during the No M11 campaign; a period in which survival depended mainly on pooling dole cheques, theft and benefit gigs. Actions involved disrupting the road construction sites and squatting and barricading houses (interestingly, security guards at times paid activists money to continue occupying sites so that they could remain in employment). The eviction of Claremont road—a street that had been occupied as part of the M11 protest—had a tremendous effect on those involved, and cost the state half a million pounds and four days. This highly publicised eviction certainly influenced the government’s decision to abandon its road building programme. At the time of the No M11 campaign, the Criminal Justice Bill was also being introduced. This was an attempt to criminalise anti-road activists, hunts sabs, squatters and the free party scene. The immediate criminalisation of alternative scenes and marginalised lifestyles encouraged those affected to understand themselves as political subjects whom the state was trying to eradicate; as a so called ‘enemy within’. It was the combination of the illegal dance culture of the

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1 Quoted from an RTS flyer

2 Quoted from an RTS leaflet

early 90s, party drugs such as MDMA, direct action experience of anti-road protesters and the introduction of the Criminal Justice Bill that created the ideal conditions for RTS to flourish.

In the early days, RTS, having just re-established itself after the M11 campaign, adopted an anti-car stance. The audaciousness of the actions and the use of sound systems secured its popularity and notoriety, and most importantly attracted enough people to occupy and hold a street. The actions inevitably peaked the interest of the police, and in consequence RTS was forced to think carefully about how it organised. At the start, ideas for actions were generally developed in pre-meeting meetings and then presented to the participants at open public meetings. This ensured that there were always a number of individuals who were committed to making the action happen, and that only a small number of people knew any critical information. In this way, RTS operated on trust as opposed to democratic decision making. The latter fetishised the form of decision making over the very real demands of organizing a successful action. To have been completely open would have compromised security and could have resulted in unsuccessful actions. Having said that, RTS strived to conflate form and content, means and ends as much as possible so that we did not end up reproducing the social relations we were opposed to. To this end, RTS had no membership, no manifesto or ideology, no leaders and no hierarchies. The extent to which it achieved this aim has come under criticism (indeed as already stated it was not always possible).<sup>3</sup>

## Ideas

Although our agitprop certainly focused on the environmental and social costs of the car, we always had a broader anti capitalist message. The M41 agit-prop was largely a collection of all the anti-car stuff that best described the effect of the car in terms of the kinds of capitalist social relations it created and reproduced. At the time we were reading Marx, Foucault, Chomsky, R. Sennet, Hakim Bey and his ideas of Temporary Autonomous Zones, E.P. Thompson, Jane Jacobs, Arendt, Murray Bookchin, Andre Gorz and Situationist texts.

Since for many of us the ultimate goal of destroying capitalism was not a demand that could be granted by capitalism, many of our banners were deliberately obscure.

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<sup>3</sup> The opinions of those who called the first open meeting in 1995, who articulated what RTS was about and had direct action experience, tended to carry more weight in the open meetings; perhaps rightly so, since they may have been best placed to develop an effective strategy. However, this also created resentment. Indeed, I noticed that men were often listened to more than women. But this informal hierarchy is different to having self-appointed leaders; leaders which the police, media and the public are conditioned to look for in an effort to destroy or recuperate a movement (consciously or otherwise). Many of those activists who write or talk about RTS (including myself on this occasion) know very well that they do not speak for the movement, and that it remains strong for this reason.

We resisted being both categorised in the familiar political forms of the left, such as the Party and the march, as well as being reduced to a simple soundbite suited to easy digestion and recuperation.<sup>4</sup> RTS thus had little desire to write ‘recipes for the cook-shops of the future.’<sup>5</sup> Rather than having the answers, we tried to create situations where alternative ways of being could be explored; ones that were not determined by the logic of capital. This meant opening up the possibility of authentic social interaction to replace the primary forms of interaction that characterise our society as buyers and sellers of commodities. We also wanted to challenge the associated cultural and political forms of engagement that sustain such an interaction.

An idea that particularly appealed to RTS at the time was the notion of a commons. Rather than focusing purely on the environmental effects of the car, the idea of the commons invites us to look at how we relate to each other in a physical space. It also arises in part from Marx’s historical account of the imposition of the capitalist mode of production, as set out in the final sections of *Capital* Volume 1; a process of enclosure that transformed common land into private property, thus generating a proletariat class forced to work in order to maintain its own existence. To quote an RTS flyer:

We are basically about taking back public space from the enclosed private arena. At its simplest it is an attack on cars as a principle agent of enclosure. It’s about reclaiming the streets as public inclusive space from the private exclusive use of the car. But we believe in this as a broader principle, taking back those things that have been enclosed within a capitalist circulation and returning them to collective use as a commons.<sup>6</sup>

The use of public space directly informs our understanding of community and the political. Our aim in reclaiming the streets and the commons was not just a physical act but also an attempt to free ourselves, as opposed to merely defending or fighting for institutionalised freedoms. We wanted a politics that sought to answer the limit of the political; a limit where, as Jean Luc Nancy puts it, ‘all politics stops and begins.’<sup>7</sup> To this end, RTS grandly attempted to re-define the nature of the political as a means of

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4 Recuperation is the disarming ‘of a potentially threatening situation by shifting ground, creating alternatives or by embracing the threat, making it safe and selling it back to us’. Law 2001

5 ‘... the Paris Revue Positiviste reproaches me for ... confining myself merely to the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes (Comtist ones?) for the cook-shops of the future.’ Marx 1990, p.99

6 Quoted from M41 RTS agitprop.

7 Nancy 1991, p. 80. Nancy attempts to expound an understanding of human community that does not invoke ‘man’ considered as an essence, i.e. a regulative idea, implying that the job of the revolutionary is to bring about an authentic community that is lost in capitalism). He argues that community is not something that has been lost and must be rediscovered, and neither does he argue that the community is to be produced. Rather, it is a task and a struggle against totalitarianism. Community is thus resistance itself, resistance to immanence, and therefore a task that is always unfinished.

opening the community to itself rather than to a prescribed destiny or future.

Consequently, within a year RTS had pretty much dropped the car as a metaphor for capitalist social relations; largely because we felt it had got boring, and because it seemed to limit the kinds of actions that we could do next. Having organised the M41 street party, we had moved beyond just taking over roads for a few hours, and were looking to widen the movement and to make allies. Several questions remained, however; what were we about, what should our focus be, and who did we want to work with?

## How to Choose Actions and Allies

In 1995, 430 Liverpool dockers were sacked for refusing to cross a picket line protesting the casualisation of labour. Despite having international support, their plight was not well known in the UK. In 1996, just after the M41 street party, RTS was approached by the dockers to help get their plight onto the front page of the papers, and to thus reinvigorate their struggle. Although RTS always had strong links with Earth First (EF) and other road protest movements, we came from an essentially working class urban protest movement where social issues such as the loss of our homes and community fragmentation were as important as saving beautiful areas of countryside. Association with the dockers therefore seemed like an obvious link up. After all, we had previously supported the RMT during the tube workers strike<sup>8</sup>.

We saw the dockers' struggle as an opportunity to try and get across the message that the environmental was the social, and that our oppression came from the same source—namely, capital—without relying on propaganda to do the job for us. By getting involved in the dockers' struggle we were attempting to respond to charges of environmental single issue politics, and indeed our possible recuperation into a kind of green capitalism. We wanted to grow as a movement and to see where it went; to embark on a shared investigation with the dockers.

On the face of it, it perhaps seems odd that we would support people trying to get their jobs back when many activists did not want to work. But the idea was that our common struggle against a system that puts profit before people had the potential to transcend immediate and limited demands through working and discovering alternatives together. There were other reasons for the link too; the most obvious being that they had asked us to help, and seemed genuine and nice people. They were not going to denounce us for some of our 'unfluffy'<sup>9</sup> tactics, and we had common ground in that

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8 On the 8th August 1996, RTS activists stormed the headquarters of London Underground, and Critical Mass slowed traffic in the centre of London. Only 5 trains out of 450 were operating on the underground. Activists were supporting the RMT's struggle for better wages and no compulsory redundancies.

9 The term 'fluffy' and its counterpart 'spikey' were a common shorthand for positions on the use of violence in direct action. 'Spikey' or 'unfluffy' was generally taken to mean violence against private

both the dockers and ourselves had been kept at arms length by our supposed peers: the union did not fully recognise the dockers, just as most green groups were dismissive or at least uncomfortable with RTS and Earth First! (EF).

As it turned out, the action itself was considered a success. As well as having a parade, we closed down the docks for a day. Many of the activists thought the dockers were wonderful people and highly supportive. The dockers were also happy, as for once someone had delivered on their promises and got their plight into the papers. Furthermore, the later 'March for Social Justice' in London was attended by many of the dockers whom we had helped.

Despite all this, a fair number of people in RTS were critical of the temporary alliance. They felt it had damaged the group because the dockers were not particularly strong allies; they were only a group of 430 people, and thus not exactly the basis for a mass social movement. Then of course some felt that the alliance was a sign that we were beginning to lose confidence in ourselves, and to look for direction and theoretical guidance in the wrong place—namely, the left. By fighting old workplace struggles they felt that we were going down a route that had failed before. Many of those involved were not interested in workers' struggles, thinking them to be regressive, and were concerned that we were losing our ability to appeal to 'normal people'—which of course begs the question as to what 'normal' is. They felt that our strength derived from our ability to mobilise those concerned with the negative environmental impacts of capitalism, not from linking up with workers who appeared to simply want better pay and conditions.

Since the M41 street party some people in RTS had been thinking of leaving on a high, and we had a number of discussions deciding if it was possible to kill off the group. However, the problem was that if there were still people drunk on the success then inevitably they would commit to doing another action.

## **The Beginning of the End**

Although there were generally mixed responses in the group to the Dockers link up and to subsequent actions including the March For Social Justice, the Global Street Party and the occupation of the City of London on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999 (J18), such events were still, on the whole, considered to be successes—if for no other reason than that they were bigger! Twenty thousand people turned up to party in Trafalgar Square for the Reclaim the Ballots / March for Social Justice event, and fifteen thousand took to the city under the banner of anti-capitalism at J18. The latter resulted in £2 million pounds worth of damage, the closing down of trading for one day at the LIFFE building, and relatively

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property and/or physically defending a group from attack by police. RTS would not or perhaps could not impose any conditions of engagement on its actions, and as a result were seen as 'unfluffy', edgy and irresponsible.

few arrests. In some respects what happened at J18 was a logical consequence of all the actions that had gone before it. It was a culmination of all the organisational skills of the anti-roads activists, an opportunity for us all to get together and let rip; and it was an overt recognition that what united our struggles was the fight against capital. As the flyer said:

J18 is a recognition that the global capitalist system is based on the exploitation of people and the planet for the profit of a few and is at the very root of our social and ecological troubles.<sup>10</sup>

Although some participants were aware that capitalism is not a collection of financial institutions, and that to treat it as such is exactly the fetishisation that capitalism fosters, nevertheless, in the climate of the anti-globalisation protests, it seemed appropriate to take our struggle to the centre of the financial district and to go on the attack.

The death knell for RTS came in the form of the 'Guerilla Gardening' project that followed J18. The idea was to get people to plant flowers in Parliament Square, in order to show in deeds that we can be *for* something positive rather than just having parties. It was also perhaps some kind of attempt to appease the press and the powers that be following the riot of J18. Unfortunately, the action ended in a higher number of arrests, Parliament Square ended up looking like a dogs dinner—a quagmire of mud and dying flowers—and there was no sound system, so no party; which is, after all, what most people expect of an RTS action.

So why did it go wrong? Well, on the whole, it was because it was mainly a symbolic action that was poorly organised. The communication with the crowd was appalling and resulted in the crowd being split in two, abandoning those who were planting flowers. There are lessons to be learned from the guerilla gardening action. From the outset it was perhaps naïve to think it to be possible to organise a mass action in two months, and that it wouldn't kick off with the police after the J18 event. RTS also attempted to control the crowd by deciding beforehand that there would be no violence, which left the crowd unsupported. Through poor communication, part of the crowd were led down to Trafalgar Square where they were penned in by police and attacked. But perhaps most importantly, RTS should not have had its hand forced by other organisations who wanted an action on Mayday<sup>11</sup>.

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10 J18 flyer distributed on the day.

11 Most of the activists involved in J18 were exhausted after spending the best part of a year organising it. They largely wanted to drop off the radar in order to avoid the inevitable police backlash—signs of which had already appeared in the N30 rally outside Euston station only a few months after J18. Unfortunately, most people in the RTS open meeting thought the Mayday event was a good idea; yet only a smattering of activists were committed to making it happen, and those that were had very little time to

## Successes and Failures

All social movements tend to create frames of reference that go beyond specific concrete demands. In other words, for a movement to grow it has to see itself in larger terms. To give an example: although on the face of it we were obviously anti-car, we were not all that interested in traffic calming measures and pollution. In our actions and our theoretical reflections, we tried to transcend these limits in order to become something much bigger. The problem with this is that in doing so we risked being about everything and nothing. Hence there was a constant tension between having very specific concrete demands that could be easily quantified and understood, and wider social demands which were difficult to realise; and which indeed could never be concretised or finished, because of their very nature. This makes it difficult to judge RTS' successes and failures. However, we can identify the following:

### Failures:

1. Firstly, we did not know when we had passed our sell by date; but this is difficult to gauge, and it was difficult to kill ourselves off due to the way in which RTS was structured. Generally, by being forced to keep producing even bigger and more spectacular actions we became trapped by the hype and expectations that we ourselves had created. Any attempts to break from this formula merely ended up in disappointing street parties. Certainly, people were already becoming aware of our limitations at the M41 street party, yet RTS ended up continuing to organise more of the same.
2. We didn't really achieve anything concrete and no laws were changed. In fact, new laws—the Criminal Justice Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act—were brought in. The latter could have criminalised RTS and isolated it from the rest of the population. Furthermore, our actions probably contributed to the development of police tactics in crowd control such as 'kettling'.
3. The charge of utopianism. Well yes, it's true that we wanted to replace capitalism with something nicer. We were not aiming for determinate improvements since our aims were deliberately unlimited, excessive and explosive, and were characterised by the naïve assumption that of course it will all be really great! We appealed to an infinite number of concrete things, and in that sense held utopian views. Having said that, if it's a whole social system that you are trying to change, then any concrete and achievable demands are going to be isolated and reformist unless you actually

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come up with the goods. Many people felt that RTS's hand was being forced by anarchist groups from the 80s (e.g. ex members of Class War, the Haringey Solidarity group and the Anarchist Federation) that missed out on organising J18. Some of those in RTS felt that they were being pushed into producing an action on demand so that the anarchists could provide the theoretical perspectives—a true division of labour. For activist comments on the day, see Anon 2001b..



bring about a revolution. A future that simply hasn't happened yet cannot serve as a blueprint for a future society, simply because the things we want are themselves determined by and arise from the struggle towards that future. In this sense, its fairer to say we were experimentalists, i.e. adherents to the belief that answers come out of the mere fact of stirring things up, and that doing so is in itself a worthwhile end.

4. The nature of 'spectacular' actions<sup>12</sup>. Some of our critics thought that large spectacular actions had a negative effect on the movement as a whole. As a result of the success of J18, less focus went into smaller actions such as economic sabotage and strike work, which were seen as having less value than big actions.

### Successes:

1. The street party idea really took off. The March for Social Justice in 1997 was regarded as 'the best illegal rave or dance music party in history.'<sup>13</sup> It seems that good ideas spread like wildfire. The street party became an exportable product. We had never envisaged that within 4 years the formula would be copied worldwide. Such events were unimaginable and illegal 13 years ago.
2. I guess we also reinforced the fact that great things can be done by ordinary people, and that it is possible to outwit the police. We were not trained specialists. What we had was passion and enthusiasm, and we were open to new ideas and to new ways of working. We lived in the moment, and the way we organised ourselves allowed us to adapt quickly to new situations.
3. We contributed to the momentum towards raising awareness of the social and environmental costs of car culture. We may have thus paved the way for the Congestion Charge in London, and for more support and engagement with other environmental campaigns such as the anti G8 actions and Climate Camp. There was also the experiential and educational value of being involved in direct action<sup>14</sup>. For example, people who took part in the streets parties thought they were amazing and empowering

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12 The word 'spectacular' when used in this context means the creation of a fake reality—such as a party—which masks the reality of capitalist exploitation; in other words, precisely that which the street party was supposed to highlight.

13 Mixmag #73, June 1997, author unknown.

14 Direct action, as conceived by RTS, meant that taking action was the preferred method of doing things rather than a last resort. Within activist and academic circles we have often been accused of eco-fascism through our rejection of institutional and (so-called) democratic decision making processes. However, this misses the point that decisions are not made in a vacuum of social power where everyone confronts each other as equals with equal power. We exist within a capitalist social system which has very clear distinctions between those that have power and those that do not. To fetishise the form of decision making over that which is to be decided upon underestimates the degree to which the choice between democracy and fascism is thrust upon us as if they were the only positions to take. These choices do not exist in some unknown 'outside' external to our present social system. They are given only within this system, a system which we want to destroy.

because anyone could come along and get involved. People were participants rather than observers, and its success or failure largely depended on them. There was an excitement about the party's illegality and unpredictable nature. In effect, we were collectively asserting power over the police.

4. Another success was our tactical development between the M41 and J18. Whereas the M41 saw an attempt to tightly control the crowd, as we had to get it onto a street at a particular time with seconds to spare, J18 used the crowd as the cover for targeted actions. Rather than trying to control the crowd, such activists were supported by it. On a practical level, we chose strategically appropriate terrain so that if anything kicked off it would be difficult for the police to respond. In addition, masks were handed out (though no changes of shoes!) which made it harder for the police to identify and arrest activists. Maps were also given out, showing potential targets. The use of these tactics resulted in few arrests.
5. RTS certainly managed to help publicise the perhaps obscure and unintelligible notion of anti-capitalism. It seems that today both journalists and the public recognise that it is an exploitative system, even if there is an ultimate cynicism about the possibility of an alternative.

Although there are many practical lessons to be learnt concerning logistics, security and passing on of skills, the whole idea of learning lessons is a tricky one as the terrain of struggle constantly shifts. It's easy to say that to avoid marginalisation and repression we need to choose allies carefully, broaden our base of support and create sustainable structures of organisation; but this assumes there is such a thing as a 'social movement', and that it is helpful to talk in terms of a movement's challenge to capital. If capital is a social relation between people mediated by things,<sup>15</sup> then exactly how did RTS challenge this relation and how would it be possible for a movement to finally abolish the capital relation?

The fact that the street parties were free undermines the wage relation, but it failed to adequately challenge capital at the point of production, i.e. the factories where commodities are made. Even the idea of a commons fails to ask what and whom we are returning space to. Nevertheless, by turning space over to unusual and unexpected uses, collectively asserting control and making decisions without the mediation of politicians and bureaucrats, RTS did *attempt* to mobilise a resistance that transcended

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15 Capitalism is essentially a set of social relations regulated by things; but the very nature of these particular social relations, which are themselves historically contingent, make it appear that things are independent of the very people who produce them. As Marx states: 'Capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things ... It is a historical relation of production.' (Marx 1990, p.932) To give an example: a man is a man; only in certain relations does he become a slave.

traditional and ultimately recuperable forms of political engagement. Having said that, the effectiveness of our form of activism has been brought into question. One can see the beginnings of the readily adopted identity of a self-styled activist and the consequent fetishisation of that role as the ‘midwife of the revolution’. A very good article entitled ‘Give Up Activism’ which was shortly published after J18 discusses these issues, and is well worth a read.<sup>16</sup>

It is imperative that we develop a critical awareness of how the actions we take could reproduce the very social relations we are opposed to. Not charging money for goods would undermine the wage relation, and so too would abolishing the distinction between work and leisure. It would *not* simply be about liberating labour, goods and technology from the capitalist mode of production and circulation, for this fails to recognise the extent to which these things have themselves become determined by capitalist social relations. Rather, we need to recognise that how we think about the world is itself determined by what we see around us, and vice versa. Capitalism is not a thing that faces us, something that we stand on the outside of whilst devising ways in which we can attack it; rather, capitalism is a relationship that *holds* us. We are always already in it. The only way out of this catch 22 situation, I believe, is to struggle against our own objectification (being treated as things to be managed), and only through this struggle will we find how it is that we want to live. For this reason there will always be new, creative ways of challenging existing capitalist social relations. Where they will come from next cannot be predicted.<sup>17</sup>



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(For all RTS agitprop see: [www.rts.gn.apc.org](http://www.rts.gn.apc.org))

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<sup>16</sup> Anon. 2001a

<sup>17</sup> I would like to have pursued a deeper investigation into this, but unfortunately such a project is far beyond the remit of this paper.



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## Radical Philosophy? Tom Bunyard

As mentioned in the preface, this collection of essays grew from a series of papers delivered at an event held at Goldsmiths College last year, entitled ‘Marx and Philosophy’. The poster used to advertise the event employed one of Blake’s illustrations to the *Divine Comedy* (which now serves as our contents page), showing Dante and Virgil at the gates of Hell. The intention was to reference Marx’s own allusion to this scene in *Capital*, where we are led from the ‘sphere of circulation’ to ‘the hidden abode of production’,<sup>1</sup> and to thereby imply an engagement with the purportedly material basis of metaphysics, theology, and other such ‘ideal’ constructions. Consequently, and in addition to its admitted obscurity, the poster employed a rather crude conception of the relation between Marxism and philosophy, and of that between the material and the ideal—and so with a view towards remedying this, my own contribution to this publication constitutes a few notes towards a different formulation of that relation.

For the sake of continuity, this might be introduced by way of another of Marx’s references to Dante. The preface to the first edition of *Capital* concludes with the following: ‘I welcome every opinion based on scientific criticism. As to the prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now, as ever, my maxim is that of the great Florentine: “*Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti* [Go on your way, and let the people talk].”<sup>2</sup> This line is taken from a reprimand given to Dante by Virgil during the ascent of Mount Purgatory.<sup>3</sup> When climbing past the ‘souls of the indolent’, Dante pauses and listens as they marvel at his corporeal body; and in thus arresting his upward climb and exhibiting a concern with the worldly, he mirrors—as he does throughout the *Comedy*<sup>4</sup>—the nature of the circle itself. These successive circles and their reflection of context in mentality perhaps strike a certain chord with Hegelian and Marxist notions of history,<sup>5</sup> allowing one to read Marx’s further literary flourishes in this preface—which are largely given over to emphasising the ‘iron necessity’ of the

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1 Marx 1990, p.279

2 Marx 1990, p.93

3 Virgil’s rebuke can be found in Canto V, line 13 of the Purgatorio. It reads as follows: ‘Keep up with me and let the people talk! ... the man who lets his thoughts be turned aside/ by one thing or another, will lose sight/ of his true goal, his mind sapped of its strength.’ Alighieri 1985, p.49

4 As Dorothy Sayers writes in her commentary on the Inferno, ‘the soul [in the afterlife] is fixed eternally in that which it has chosen ... Therefore the reaction it calls forth in Dante can be no more than the reflection of what it has in itself.’ Sayers (trans.), in Alighieri 2001, p.50.

5 The *Divine Comedy*, with its ascension through a series of circles, even features a dialectical reversal of sorts: Dante and Virgil descend through Hell, travel past the Devil (who, pleasingly, resides at the centre of Earth’s gravity), and emerge in the Southern hemisphere at the foot of Mount Purgatory—the allegory being that the confrontation and acknowledgement of the very worst of sin is the path towards redemption.

‘natural laws of capitalist production’<sup>6</sup>—with a certain degree of irony: for just as Dante mirrors the idle souls’ preoccupation with the present, so too, according to some, can Marx’s implicit economic determinism be seen to reflect his own era.<sup>7</sup>

An example of this view can be found in Debord, for whom the essential core of Marx’s work is an attempt to understand ‘the *struggle*—and by no means the *law* [of history]’.<sup>8</sup> Debord however holds that the defeats suffered by that struggle during Marx’s lifetime prompted his attempts to understand the laws and tendencies that informed it—and in doing so, Debord claims, Marx was thus ‘... drawn onto the ground of the dominant forms of thought’.<sup>9</sup> From such a perspective, and insofar as this position implied the abdication of revolutionary agency to economic determinants<sup>10</sup> Marx’s ‘economism’ can be read as suffering from the very fetishism that it had identified: ‘upward’ progress was hampered by a preoccupation with the manner in which, within the present ‘circle’, human history really is shaped ‘by the products of men’s hands’<sup>11</sup> rather than by the producers themselves.<sup>12</sup> Yet, needless to say, to abandon Marx’s later economic works in favour of his earlier ‘humanism’ is to err, as what is required is an advance.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, and in the absence of any recourse to the comforting absolute of a Virgil (an issue to which I will return), the problem at hand would seem to be the manner in which thought is to traverse a terrain that affects it. In this regard philosophy’s ability to transform its own intellectual landscape may perhaps be of service.

Now, this is clearly a problematic suggestion. Bearing in mind that Marx himself called for the supersession of philosophy, it might seem to lead towards highly dubious ground; perhaps, in keeping with the earlier analogy, back through the ‘door’ of production and into the ‘sphere of circulation’.<sup>14</sup> Yet to reject all philosophy after Marx is not only dogmatic, but fails to address its efficacy as regards thinking through and learning

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6 Marx 1990, p.91

7 I hasten to add that this is a rather one-sided reading of Marx, whose commitment to developing and reformulating his own ideas renders it problematic to view them as pseudo-transcendental laws.

8 Debord 1995, p.52

9 Debord 1995, p.55

10 ... thus opening the way for Lenin’s critiques of ‘spontaneity’ (see Lenin 1989, pp.96-120), and leading—more pertinently for Debord and his contemporaries—to instances such as the PCF’s condemnation of the May 1968 uprisings (for an account of which see Ross 2002).

11 Marx 1990, p.165

12 ‘... the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves’ (Marx 1990, pp164-5).

13 See Shortall (1994), who also employs Debord to make this point: ‘[The] deterministic “scientism” and “objectivism” of Capital becomes clear once it is contrasted with Marx’s more “humanistic” early works, such as the *1844 Manuscripts*. But these early works are themselves insufficient; they all point towards Capital. We cannot simply tear out and discard Capital and Marx’s later critique of political economy, as writers such as Debord are wont to do. It is ... necessary to determine how the Marxian theoretical project points both through and beyond Capital.’

14 ... thereby retreating into all that ‘provides the “free trader vulgaris” with his views, his concepts and the standards by which he judges the society of capital and wage labour’ (Marx 1990, p.280).

from past failures. So, how might this suggestion be substantiated? Or rather, how might we conceive the relation of a militant philosophy to a concrete political project, and what are the issues that affect and inform this relation? Anticipating my closing remarks to some extent, I will admit at the outset that my guiding thread throughout the following response is as follows: I hold that any assumption that consciousness can accurately reflect or embody the historical or the material is flawed, and politically untenable; yet I also contend that this by no means prohibits conscious thought from taking an active part in making its own history. Consequently, much of what follows will gravitate around themes peculiar to Hegelian Marxism and existentialism.

With a nod towards Althusser, we might begin by suggesting that such a philosophy would constitute a practice<sup>15</sup> geared towards the realisation of a political goal. We might also suggest that the task of this practice would be the interrogation and reformulation of its own discourse<sup>16</sup> through the critical evaluation of its relation to the objects of which it speaks (e.g. present society, the movement itself, its goals and objectives, etc.) However, if this is the case, then the merits of any new knowledge would seem to be determined by its correspondence with the real; and yet at the same time, the need for its evaluation and development must be prompted by the absence of such a correlation. Now, if we keep this notion of a troubled correspondence in mind, several further, and (to my mind) pertinent problems can be seen to fall under its rubric. It clearly informs issues relating to praxis (what, and how tenable are the grounds for action?); it also brings with it a politics of representation (who does this discourse claim to speak for, and how does it relate to the object under enquiry?); and to make matters worse, it is complicated further by questions of dogma (are there grounds for challenging knowledge?), ideology (to what extent is thought determined by any correspondence with the real, and what role does it play in justifying a given order?), and by the pertinence of Marx's rejections of empiricism and of society's immediate 'appearances' (for a discussion of which see John Hutnyk's essay in this volume). Perhaps, in short, we can say that the question that seems to bear upon any such philosophical practice is that of legitimacy and politics in the relationship between a process of thought and its objects of enquiry. In addition, a further corollary should properly be added: insofar as this is to constitute an active, socially engaged project, this question should itself fall under the rubric of ethics.

Althusser has already been mentioned, so we might use his work as an illustration of some of these issues. Viewing society's ideological appearances as a block between reality

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15 For Badiou, 'Althusser explains perfectly ... that Marx and Lenin did not inaugurate a new philosophy, but a new practice of philosophy, which is a different thing entirely and relates to politics.' (Badiou 2005, p.59)

16 For the sake of clarity, it's perhaps worth stating that I am using the word 'discourse' in a rather more mundane and limited fashion than its Foucauldian variant.

and thought, Althusser devised an ingenious system by which immediate knowledge would become purified through theoretical practice in such a way that it would correspond to the real. This was to be a practice that formed an essential part of a perpetual drive towards the actualisation of communism. He thus coupled a notion of contextually specific knowledge to a process of perpetual reformulation, and did so that bears relation to the suggestions sketched above; and yet his work is problematic, in that this sensitivity to thought's contingency upon processes within the real jars with the sense in which his work views truth to be derived from processes internal to thought.<sup>17</sup> As E.P. Thompson pointed out in his famous polemic against Althusser,<sup>18</sup> the assumptions that any 'truth' able to accurately reflect reality might arise 'by means of [reason's] own theoretical self-extrapolation',<sup>19</sup> and indeed that theory could constitute an avatar of social 'structure', perhaps exemplify the ideology that this model was set against. One might then follow the comments above as to the contingency of Marx's 'economism' upon the 'landscape' of its era by suggesting that structuralism's concern with the determinations suffered by subjectivity goes so far as to deny that self-conscious individuals construct history at all—and that, in consequence, it thus mistakes a historically contingent state of affairs for an eternal truth.<sup>20</sup> One could also contend that its denigration of subjective autonomy renders it ill-suited to the ethical dimension noted above (and in this respect we might also note that Althusser's work implies the need for a scientist of ideology, tasked with steering the masses through illusion).

The templates for Thompson's critique are of course Marx's objections to Hegel's 'absolute idealism'—yet the difference, as well as the similarity between the Althusserian and Hegelian models of conceptual process might be signalled by way of Althusser's view that 'proof' could be derived from 'criteria purely internal to [theory]' in a manner similar to that of 'mathematical scientificity'.<sup>21</sup> Such a claim perhaps recalls the self-legitimizing and immanent operation of Hegelian dialectical thought; yet as Hegel pointed out when explaining his rejection of mathematics as a model for philosophical discourse,<sup>22</sup> the objects and results of mathematics are able to subsist independently of

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17 This is Althusser's theory of 'generalities': immediate knowledge (G1) is worked on by theory (G2) to produce valid knowledge (G3) corresponding to the real. Validity thus derived from the 'scientific' operation of reason within theoretical discourse; as he states in a typically convoluted sentence (also quoted by Thompson), 'the mechanism of production of the knowledge effect lies in the mechanism which underlies the action of the forms of order in the scientific discourse of the proof.' (Althusser 1997, p.67; Thompson 1979, p.198)

18 'The Poverty of Theory' in Thompson 1979, pp. 193-397

19 Thompson 1979, p.208

20 See Debord once more, for whom 'the chill dream of structuralism' is 'completely anchored in an awestruck celebration of the existing system.' Debord 1995, p.142

21 Althusser 1997, p.59; Thompson 1979, p.208

22 In comments aimed against the view that mathematics (supposedly the epitome of reason) should serve as template for philosophical exposition (e.g. as in Spinoza's Ethics), Hegel wrote that as

its proof, entailing that it cannot express any necessity and process internal to them. Althusser's account can thus be seen to express a necessity purely internal to theoretical 'criteria', rendering the practice of theory a mere practice *within* theory, and resulting in a detachment from change, conflict and struggle within the real.<sup>23</sup>

With this in mind, it seems that the question posed above (as to the issues implicated in the relation between a thought process and its objects) should then be reformulated slightly: what appears to be at issue is not only the manner in which thought reflects its objects, but in addition its relation to processes internal to them. Insofar as this thought is to be conceived as a practice—entailing the historical contextuality of its particular moments—we seem to be faced with the problem of relating the factors noted above to the task of grasping the movement of history within thought.

Those factors render it inadmissible to argue for the Lukácsian, identical subject-object of history that this reformulated question might now seem to invite; for just as the question of thought's relation to the real informs the legitimacy of this practice's concepts and actions, so too does it ground the possibility of dogma, ideology and representation. One might in fact argue that assuming an identity between thought and real is simply untenable in this respect, as might be illustrated by the failings of Soviet 'dialectical materialism' (or 'diamat'): reading Marx through Engels's later work on 'dialectics',<sup>24</sup> the Soviets unified the natural and social sciences under a single model,<sup>25</sup> thereby granting the ascendancy of the party a legitimacy equal to that of the movement of the stars. The party and its leader could thus be located at the very prow of human history. Clearly, founding the legitimacy of thought on its identity to the movement of history resulted in ideology, a dogma resistant to critique, and a 'spectacular'<sup>26</sup> politics that contradicts any ethics of moral autonomy and individual judgement. The question of binding ethics to historicism without relying on privileged access to an absolute (e.g. to 'History') will be revisited below, as will the contention that to impose any *a priori* framework onto the relation between thought and real is to invite dogma and an unacceptable politics. Suffice it to say here that basing the validity of radical thought in

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'[mathematical] proof does not have the significance and nature of being a moment of the result,' and is thus merely 'an activity external to the matter in hand,' (Hegel 1977, p.24) it was inadequate for his project of voicing the life and movement of being.

23 Thus Thompson: 'Althusser's conceptual universe has no adequate categories to explain contradiction or change—or class struggle.' (Thompson 1979, p.197)

24 E.g. Anti-Duhring, The Dialectics of Nature, and Ludwig Feuerbach. There is now a great deal of literature on the distinction between Marx's and Engels's understanding and use of Hegelian dialectics. See Levine 1984 for a useful overview (albeit one that is characterised by the antipathy towards Engels that such work often exhibits).

25 According to Stalin, dialectics meant that 'the science of the history of society ... can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology ... Hence, socialism is converted from a dream of a better future for humanity into a science.' (Stalin 1938)

26 See Debord 1995, chapter 4.



the presupposed legitimacy of a present order is to mire it (to keep with the landscape metaphor employed above) within that present, by virtue of contradicting its ostensible alignment with historical change.

It's perhaps interesting in this respect to note that from a strictly Hegelian perspective such 'dialectics' and their resultant dogmas are strictly prohibited. On this view, the application of Hegel's method to political and economic data is as inadmissible as its transposition into a philosophy of praxis.<sup>27</sup> If taken on his own terms, Hegel has no 'method',<sup>28</sup> no *a priori* procedural rules that can be brought to bear on objects external to them.<sup>29</sup> Rather, the 'true method' of logic is its own self-determination,<sup>30</sup> which requires that all 'presuppositions or assumptions must ... be given up'<sup>31</sup>—which in turn entails that applying the dialectic of Hegelian logic to any data that is *given* to thought, as opposed to that which might be derived from its own operation, is simply inadmissible. Although this disavows direct application to the empirical and the given, its corollary is that Hegel's approach is, by its very nature, opposed to any formulaic schematism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, just as it is an error to speak of any *a priori* formula of thesis, antithesis and synthesis,<sup>33</sup> so too is it inadmissible to refer to such a thing as *the* Hegelian dialectic.<sup>34</sup> Hegel's approach can therefore claim an inherent anti-dogmatism alongside its capacity for self-critique and its ability to think change, process and interrelation; and yet, lest we forget, its conclusions are inherently absolutist, as it purports to be a complete expression of the universal reason underlying existence itself. Thus, whilst it prohibits justifying a particular state of affairs by viewing it through a convenient *a priori* framework, it nonetheless served to 'transfigure and glorify what exists'<sup>35</sup> insofar

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27 Maker writes that this 'would necessarily involve bringing into the system merely given and not systematically and autonomously generated determinacies', thereby 'invalidat[ing] the system's claims to being self-grounding and hence its claim to being philosophical science.' (Maker 1994, p.169)

28 'Insofar as method is that which can—even if only in principle—be justified, formulated or learned in abstraction from the subject matter to which it is to be applied, Hegel does not have a method.' (Maker 1994, p.99)

29 'The antithesis between an independent immediacy of the content or of knowing, and, on the other side, an equally independent mediation that is irreconcilable with it, must be put aside, first of all, because it is a mere presupposition and an arbitrary assurance.' (Hegel 1991, p.124)

30 '... the true method of philosophical science ... is the consciousness of the form of the inner self-movement of the content of logic.' (Hegel 1998, p.53)

31 Hegel 1991, p.124

32 '... the triadic form must not be regarded as scientific when it is reduced to a lifeless schema, a mere shadow, and when scientific organisation is degraded into a table of terms.' (Hegel 1977, p.29)

33 As is well known, Hegel never used this phrase. Its prominence is perhaps largely due to Marx's attempts to summarise the Hegelian method in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: '... reason ... is forced to turn head over heels, in posing itself, opposing itself, and composing itself' resulting in 'thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.' (Marx 2005, p.217)

34 The Logic is a dialectic of pure thought, the Phenomenology the dialectic of an immanently critical consciousness, *The Philosophy of Right* is the dialectic of will; all unfold differently, and claim their legitimacy from the true nature of reason.

35 Marx 1990, p.102

as its deductions supposedly uncovered a truth both actualised within and rendered accessible by its present age. As Hyppolite puts it, Hegel was thus ‘trapped in a particular moment of history that he could not truly transcend’.<sup>36</sup>

We might then ask whether one can adapt the ‘openness’ and the self-grounding, self-critical nature of presuppositionless thought to materialism. Yet—and I will return to this—to crudely ‘invert’ this method’s starting point, i.e. to replace its initial concept with empirical data, would simply lead to the empty idealism of contemplative extrapolation from the merely given (all notions of history being bracketed out as presuppositions). This is clearly untenable for any mode of thought charged with navigating its way past such a given context. So, if thought is to be neither a self-identical expression of the material nor its simple reflection<sup>37</sup> it must be somehow *opposed* to it; and yet as we’ve also seen, to deduce truth from an entirely separate mode of thought is to engage in idealism. The solution, then, would seem to be something rather more akin to a dialogue between the two.

As Thompson puts it, the relation of critical thought to reality ‘may not take place on any terms which thought prescribes but in ways which are determined by the properties of the real object’;<sup>38</sup> properties that do not determine what can, but rather what *cannot* be derived from them.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as the ‘openness’ of thought thus operates within certain parameters, or upon a given field, we can perhaps begin to conceive of a manner in which one might view the intellectual ‘terrain’ spoken of above as historically contextual and yet also as a landscape across which one might freely traverse.

Yet how might any knowledges thus produced be validated, and how might they be superseded? Any such ‘dialogue’ with the real cannot take place solely along the synchronic axis of enquiring into the present,<sup>40</sup> but must also—by virtue of the fact that it is to form part of a historical practice—operate along a diachronic axis that

36 Hyppolite 1969, p.83

37 As Lefebvre puts it, to talk solely of ‘things’ and their conceptual ‘reflections’ is ‘philosophically puerile’. (Lefebvre 2008, p.92)

38 Thompson 1979, p.209

39 In Thompson’s view, thought can ‘only represent what is appropriate to the determined properties of its real object, and must operate within this field.’ To derive ‘truth’ from one’s preconceived conceptions is to perpetuate dogma, whilst to extract it from thought itself is to engage in ‘freakish speculative botching’. (Thompson 1979, p.210)

40 A classic example of this synchronic dialogue can be discerned in Marx’s own method of analysis: taking modern society as his starting point, Marx reduced it to ‘ever thinner abstractions’ (e.g. population, class, wage labour, etc.) until he had ‘arrived at its simplest determinations,’ (Marx 1973, p.100) before retracing his steps back to the surface ‘appearances’ (Cf. Marx 1991, p.118) that he had started out from, demonstrating the interrelation of these factors along the way, and thus arriving at a conception of the tendencies for change within a society now conceived as a totality. For Marx, the diachronic thus emerged from the synchronic; yet to base the validation of the former upon the latter is to invite dogmatism. Hence the need—as will be outlined shortly—to ground validity and the need for subsequent enquiries within practice.

traverses many such moments. Although its implication in the crimes of ‘grand narratives’ and teleology are of course pertinent, this historical dimension seems fundamental to the requirements sketched above; and this means that our enquiry into the nature and role of a radical philosophy becomes entwined with that of imputing a satisfactory form of ethics into a ‘historicist’ approach to philosophy and politics.

This would seem to invite reference to Negri’s Spinozist ontology, which holds that ‘being and knowledge are formed by collective ethics, by the set of physical and moral forces that shape the human horizon.’<sup>41</sup> However, Negri’s rejection of a transcendent dialectical ‘becoming’ in favour of an immanent ‘being’ makes the process by which (to use a rather clumsy phrase) ‘being comes to be’ an abstract immediacy; and in thus stressing being’s eternal, infinite ‘plenitude’, he denigrates the finitude, particularity and temporal contextuality of consciousness, and thus the critical distance and otherness required by the ‘dialogue’ sketched here. One might also add that this model is, perhaps, also politically ineffective: its anti-dialectical stance renders its focus on class struggle superficial, as the absence of a notion of alienation reduces the capital relation to an abstract (and thus, ironically enough, perhaps a transcendent) opposition. In addition, its fetishisation of technology and the production of ‘affect’ perhaps recalls the ‘awe-struck celebration’ of the present attributed to structuralism above, insofar as the social relations informing that production remain beyond its conceptual grasp (see Ben Polhill’s essay in this volume for a detailed critique of Negri).

In what follows I’d like to offer some suggestions towards such a formulation, whilst also presuming to address some of the requirements and issues outlined above. In doing so I will also attempt to accommodate some of the self-grounding and self-legislating aspects of Hegel’s presuppositionless approach. As noted at the outset, my contention is that the assumption that consciousness might reflect history is fundamentally flawed, and that it leads to ideological and political error; but that this by no means denies that consciousness might nonetheless make its own history. Its model is provided by *The German Ideology*’s assertion that

[c]ommunism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement that abolishes the existing state of things.<sup>42</sup>

Firstly, it entails recasting Hegel’s presuppositionless thought as a relation *to* the

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41 Negri 2004, p.94

42 Marx 2005, p.187

real, after the fashion of the ‘dialogue’ spoken of above. ‘Presuppositions’ would thus become arbitrary assumptions and dogma, opposed to immanently derived goals and knowledges; and this would also be taken to preclude the presupposition of presuming to know the real in its entirety, or of standing in an identity to it.<sup>43</sup> There could thus be no claim to think being in-itself, nor any recourse to the ‘absolute’, closure, or to ultimate telos; and if there can be no identity between thought and real, there can be no universal, general conceptions of reality that are not open to scepticism. All such universals could only ever be contingent, questionable, and never necessary in any metaphysical sense. In fact, thought itself would be not so much a self-determining as a self-undermining activity.

Yet whilst any purely monistic notion of thought’s self-determination would be thus precluded, its relation to the real would nonetheless be a process of actualisation; and it is here that the issue of ethics comes to the fore. This might be introduced by way of the following: I have, in effect, imported a Kantian split between consciousness and the ‘in-itself’ into a dialectic of praxis. In doing so, I may be inviting objections akin to Lukács’ view that such Kantian duality essentialises the contradictions of bourgeois society as eternal and insurmountable aporias of thought.<sup>44</sup> However, none of the above seriously undermines Lukács’ central claim that consciousness knows itself through making its own history. What it does undermine, however, is any sense in which it can *fully* know itself or its world, and I would argue that this precludes the view recounted in Adorno’s following anecdote:

Lukács ... told me that his Party was—with regard to him—in the right, even though he was, in his thoughts and arguments, against the Party, since the Party after all embodied the objective historical situation, whereas his own advanced position (based only on himself and the mere logic of thought) had trailed behind this objective situation.<sup>45</sup>

If the ‘objective historical situation’ cannot be fully grasped in thought, as in the model sketched here, then the Party and its decrees cannot take on the role of a dogmatic absolute, and remain open to question. My concerns here with existentialist themes and ethics warrants reference to De Beauvoir’s attempt to incorporate the collectivity

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43 This may seem perverse, given that for Hegel the presupposition that thought is not the same as being is a cardinal and originary error. See Houlgate 2006 for a detailed discussion of this and related issues.

44 For Lukács, the seemingly mysterious in-itself of being is in fact a becoming that consciousness itself is to bring about; a realisation that only the proletariat, as the self-conscious subject-object of history, can attain. See section two of ‘Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat’ (Lukács 1971, pp.110-49).

45 See Adorno 1965

entailed by the latter into the apparent individualism entailed by a Sartrean version of the former. In doing so she makes a similar point to the above: arguing against that which ‘makes historical materialism so reassuring a doctrine,’<sup>46</sup> she writes that ‘if the chief considers that he does not simply reflect the given situation but that he is interpreting it,’ he ‘becomes a prey to anguish: who am I to believe in myself?’. Whilst such a reflective ‘chief’ is, arguably, a little hard to imagine, her second example, in which ‘the soldier asks: who is he to command me?’<sup>47</sup> may be less so. Lukács,<sup>48</sup> however, seemed to view such questions as unethical; ‘the Party,’ he wrote, ‘is ... the conscience of the historical vocation’.<sup>49</sup> This is obviously absurd, and recalls Rousseau’s argument that any individual in disagreement with the general will must not only be wrong, but wrong in a fundamental sense—for it is the general will that defines the just.<sup>50</sup> Here, however, we might begin to get a sense of the manner in which the self-legislating aspects of Hegel’s presuppositionless dialectics may prove useful.

Following Wolff, and as sketched above: to be moral I must be responsible for my actions; which entails that I must be free; which in turn means that I must be ‘the author of the rules to which I submit’,<sup>51</sup> or—as a bare minimum—I must retain autonomous choice as regards submission to commands issued by others. The implication of this view is, to quote Wolff once more, that all states must therefore be seen as ‘non-legitimate bodies whose commands must be judged and evaluated in each instance before they are obeyed’<sup>52</sup> (although I would add that it is perhaps not merely state authority, but rather political representation in a far broader sense that is to be contested). This, I hope, stands in marked contrast to the implications of Lukács’ claim that ‘*Freedom must serve the rule of the proletariat, not the other way round.*’<sup>53</sup>

What we are thus positing here is the role of an essentially anarchistic form of ethics in historical practice, and the question that this gives rise to is as to how this might be validated if all recourse to the absolute (be that God, History, reason, or more simple and immediate powers) is prohibited. It may well seem that we now faced with an unresolved opposition between individualism and communist, collective practice; and

46 De Beauvoir 1976, p.109

47 De Beauvoir 1976, p.109

48 It should be noted here that Lukács changed his positions throughout his intellectual career, partly through the strategic concerns of negotiating the Party line, and partly through self-evaluation and critique.

49 Lukács 1971, p.41

50 ‘When ... the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so. If my particular opinion had carried the day I should have achieved the opposite of what was my will; and it is in that case that I should not have been free.’ (Rousseau 2009, Book 4, Section 2)

51 Wolff 1976, p.29

52 Wolff 1976, p.71

53 Lukács 1971, p.292

that I may have thus stumbled back through the ‘door of production’ into the realms of a naïvely superficial ‘Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.’<sup>54</sup> I do not by any means pretend to have fully resolved that opposition;<sup>55</sup> but a preliminary response might be offered by turning once more to De Beauvoir, and to her existentialist ethics.<sup>56</sup> She contends that ‘freedom wills itself genuinely only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the movement of others’,<sup>57</sup> and this, as Hallward has suggested,<sup>58</sup> can be related to a notion of general will. The constant opposition of thought and real, present and history, self and others provided by the existentialist model can perhaps be used to deny any claims to final justice and right; and if we relate this to the question of evaluating political and philosophical discourse, validation would then not be derived from majority rule in any strong, Rousseauian sense, but rather solely from efficacy in actualising a project that exists only insofar as its constituents will it to do so, and which is perpetually redefined by that will.<sup>59</sup> This would then be a will that wills itself<sup>60</sup> through a self-grounding, self-legitimizing and circular process—albeit circular solely in the sense of its perpetuity, and never in that of the validity of any one prescription. On the basis of this notion of self-determinacy and legitimacy the role of philosophy and theory becomes equivalent to that of an ethics of contextually specific choice (as opposed to that of an *a priori* law).<sup>61</sup> Through recourse to the general will this forms the basis for the reformulation of the project’s discourse, guides the analysis of its objects, and forms the principle by which the relation between the two might be evaluated.

To conclude, how then does this relate to my earlier comment about philosophy transforming an intellectual terrain? To answer we might return briefly to Althusser, and to his own use of this notion. Althusser claimed that the refinement and development of conceptual objects results in new forms of discourse; new ‘problematics’ upon which previously unknowable objects could be located. Frequently employing the

54 Marx 1990, p.280

55 Thanks are due to Bea Fazi, for pointing out to me that a full resolution of this problem would contradict this essay’s concern with open-ended reformulation and development. However, I would reject a position akin to Adorno’s view that any attempt to define an anti-dogmatic philosophy or programme is a contradiction in terms. This seems to be rendered invalid by the positive, rather than negative conception of freedom employed here.

56 It’s perhaps interesting, in relation to both De Beauvoir’s concerns and to those of this essay, to compare our respective assertions and solutions to Lukács’ verdict in his ‘Existentialism’ essay (Lukács 1949): ‘existentialism is the philosophy ... of abstract freedom’ (my emphasis).

57 De Beauvoir 1976, p.90

58 Hallward 2009

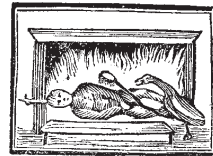
59 A truly ‘general will can neither err nor betray.’ (Hallward 2009, p.22)

60 Cf. Hegel 2005

61 Cf. Badiou (2005): ‘I maintain that there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation.’ (p.lvi) For Badiou, who is concerned to tie such ‘truths’ to a political project, ‘ethics ... regulates subjective consistency, inasmuch as its maxim is: “Keep going!”’ (p.53)

metaphor of a landscape, he described this as ‘a change of terrain and a corresponding change of horizon’,<sup>62</sup> and even went so far as to speak of a ‘battle’ conducted upon it between ‘philosophical ideology’ and ‘Theory’.<sup>63</sup> In the model proposed here, the role of thought and theory could be seen to be similar to that of military strategy; not simply because of its actualisation as part of a militant project, but as it involves decisions made on the basis of limited, finite and contextual knowledge.<sup>64</sup> This is however a campaign fought on two fronts: that of analysis and prescription, and that of its concrete instantiation—and yet as the results of the latter determine the former in a cyclical manner, we may indeed say that philosophy constitutes the terrain of thought insofar as it operates on that of the real.

To close, I’ll offer a few comments on the relation between this proposal and the notions of finitude and infinity that seem to be in common parlance at the moment. It has been argued that the infinite and the absolute, long viewed as illusory and as the sole preserve of idealism, ought to be reclaimed for materialism.<sup>65</sup> Bosteels,<sup>66</sup> for example, seems to argue that thinking consciousness in relation to finitude precludes any sense of the material’s infinite contingency, or of the ‘plenitude’ afforded by thinking it *sub specie aeternitatis*. However, when the classical strategist Clausewitz writes that the theory of war ‘cannot attain the absolute’<sup>67</sup> he does so not to deny contingency, chance and the event, but rather to affirm them; after all, ‘no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance’<sup>68</sup> as war. Indeed, there seem few modes of thought as attuned as that of strategy to the manner in which the contingency of reality imposes itself, disregards the plans and rules foisted upon it, and demands formulations dictated by the exigencies of particular situations.<sup>69</sup> On the basis of the model sketched above one might thus counter that consciousness is indeed tied to finitude and to a specific, restricted temporal context—but that this is the basis for self-determination within an eternity of finite moments.



62 Althusser 1997, p.24

63 Althusser 1997, p.31 (Althusser’s capitalisation of ‘Theory’ denotes the true operation of knowledge.)

64 It is by virtue of the finitude and contextuality of strategic thought that Clausewitz rejected any static, formulaic theory of warfare: ‘the conduct of war branches out in almost all directions and has no definite limits; while any [closed, absolute] system, any model, has the finite nature of a synthesis. An irreconcilable conflict exists between this type of theory and actual practice.’ (p.155) Consequently, military theory could never be ‘a positive doctrine, a sort of manual for action.’ (p.162)

65 See Meillassoux’s book, mentioned above, for a prime example of this move.

66 Bosteels 2009, p.46

67 Clausewitz 1993, p.97

68 Clausewitz 1993, p.96

69 ... hence the interest in incorporating chaos theory and complex systems theory into strategic thought. Clausewitz’s work seems to be particularly suited to this, as detailed here: <http://www.clausewitz.com/Complex/CWZcomplex.htm>

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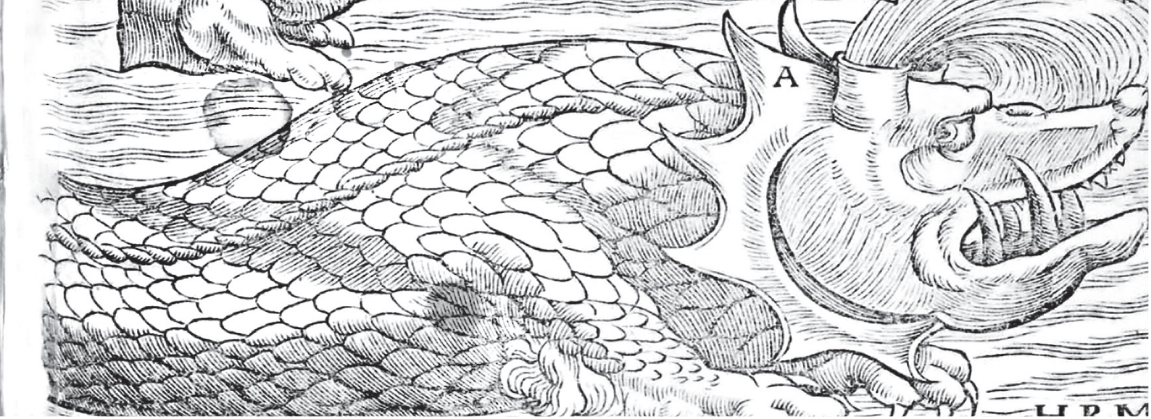
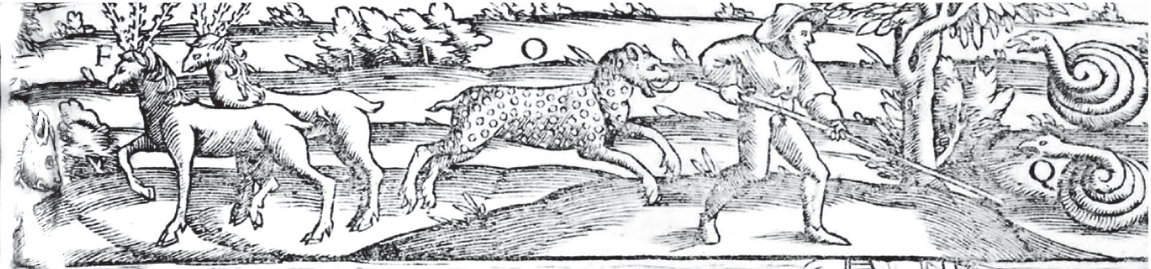


**'The Cony hunts the Dogge, the Rat the Cat,  
The Horse doth whip the Cart, (I pray marke that)  
The Wheelbarrow doth drive the man (oh base)  
And Eeles and Gudgeons flie a mighty pace.'**

*Anon., The World Turned Upside Down*







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