

Mute Compulsion

A Theory of the **Economic Power of Capital**

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CONTENTS

<i>A Note on Translations and References</i>	7
Introduction	9
PART ONE: CONDITIONS	
I. Conceptualising Power	37
II. The Social Ontology of Economic Power	73
PART TWO: RELATIONS	
III. Vertical Power	117
IV. Horizontal Power	153
PART THREE: DYNAMICS	
V. The Production of Power	195
VI. The Accumulation of Power	253
Conclusion	273
<i>Bibliography</i>	283
<i>Appendix A: Cited Volumes of MECW</i>	321
<i>Appendix B: Detailed List of Contents</i>	325
<i>English Summary</i>	329
<i>Dansk resumé</i>	333
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	337

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND REFERENCES

Whenever possible, I have used official English translations of Marx's writings. When deemed necessary, I have modified these and added a footnote in case of substantial modification. All translations from German texts which are not available in English are mine. References to Marx and Engels's *Collected Works* (MECW) look like this: (32: 421), which means volume 32, page 421. References to the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²) look like this: (II.3.4: 1453); this refers to section (*Abteilung*) two, volume 3.4, page 1453. Other references to Marx's writings follow this system of abbreviations:

<i>Capital: Volume One</i> , Penguin.	C1
<i>Capital: Volume Two</i> . Penguin.	C2
<i>Economic Manuscript of 1864-65</i> . Brill.	M
<i>Grundrisse</i> . Penguin.	G
Chapter one of the first edition of <i>Capital</i> , in Dragstedt, Albert (ed.): <i>Value: Studies by Karl Marx</i> .	V
Appendix to the first edition of <i>Capital</i> , in <i>Capital & Class</i> , no. 4 (1978).	A
<i>Results of the Immediate Process of Production</i> , appendix to C1.	R

See the bibliography for more information on the editions used. See also the list of cited volumes of MECW in Appendix A. Different references within the same parenthesis are separated by a semicolon: (G: 234, 536; 33: 324; IV.1: 43, 56; M: 788) thus means *Grundrisse*, page 234 and 536, MECW volume 33, page 324, MEGA² section four, volume 1, page 43 and 56, and *Economic Manuscript of 1864-65* page 788.

INTRODUCTION

Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society.
—Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (G: 107)

If there is one word which sums up the last decade, it must be *crisis*. Eleven years ago the global economy was struck by one of the most violent crises in its history. The financial system, which is supposed to ensure a seamless circulation of money, suddenly choked; profits plunged, companies folded, panic abounded. All over the world, governments rushed to the rescue by socialising the costs through bailouts and austerity. Waves of protests questioned the legitimacy of an economic system which systematically makes life precarious in order to concentrate all wealth in the hands of an ever-smaller global elite. In 2017, the *eight* richest men owned the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the global population (Oxfam, 2017). 780 million people live in chronic hunger, and more than a billion struggle to survive in the ever-growing slums of the Global South (M. Davis, 2017; Smolski, 2017). According to a global poll from 2013, only 13 percent of employees like their job. In 2017, more than half of European citizens between the age of 18 and 34 said that they were ready to ‘join a large-scale uprising against the government’ (Mohdin, 2017). A sense of impending collapse is omnipresent. ‘Something has ended, or should have ended; everyone can feel it,’ as Joshua Clover (2016, p. 31) recently put it.

Yet capitalism persists. In certain respects, it even seems stronger and more far-reaching than ever before. The neoliberal era has been an era of intense capitalist expansion. China and the former socialist countries of the Eastern bloc became fully integrated in the global capitalist economy, the

structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s made many low-income countries considerably more dependent upon global markets, and in the ‘old’ capitalist countries, neoliberal restructuring has handed over ever larger parts of social life to the vagaries of the market. Global supply chains and financialisation have accelerated the circulation of commodities and money and created a tightly integrated system subjecting every corner of the earth to the logic of capital.

So, despite crisis and resistance, capital somehow manages to sustain its grip on the life of society. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of why this is so, or *how capitalism reproduces itself*. This thesis is not, however, a study of the reproduction of capitalism in a specific context. In what follows, I will rather be concerned with what Karl Marx referred to as the ‘core structure’ or the ‘ideal average’ (M: 376, 898)¹ of the capitalist mode of production, i.e., the logics, structures and dynamics that constitute the *essence* of capitalism across its historical and geographical variations. This is the level of abstraction on which I want to pose the question of the persistence of capitalism. To pose this question, I will argue, is essentially to pose the question of the *power of capital*, i.e., to ask how capital sustains its ability to shape social life. In chapter one, I will explain in detail why I believe it makes sense to speak of ‘the power of capital’. For now, the important thing is to clarify the concept of capital in order to be able to pose this question in a precise manner. In mainstream economics, capital is a transhistorical and rather vague concept which refers to a so-called factor of production, alongside labour and land. Marx subjected this ‘trinity formula’, which originates in classical political economy, to a scathing critique by demonstrating how the juxtaposition of land, labour and capital naturalised what is in fact ‘a definite *social* relation of production pertaining to a particular historical formation of society’ (M: 888). In opposition to the vague and apologetic concept of capital in political economy, Marx grasped capital as a determinate *social logic*—a logic in the sense that it refers not to a specific *class of things* but rather to a certain way of *using* things. Analogously to the discipline of philosophical logic, which (in its non-Hegelian sense) is concerned with *forms* of thought rather than their *content*, capital is a concept which refers to the social *form* of wealth, not its content. This social form is captured in Marx’s so-called general formula of capital, M-C-M', where M stands for money and C for commodity, and the mark (') next to the second M indicates that the

¹ In the English edition of Marx’s *1864-65 Manuscript*, the German ‘Kernstruktur’ is translated as ‘basic inner structure.’

second sum of money is larger than the first. The formula represents a ‘process’ or a ‘movement’ in which value—in its incarnations as money and commodities—is valorised (30: 11, 12, 17; 32, 490). Capital can, as Marx emphasises, ‘only be grasped as a movement, and not as a static thing’ (C2: 185). Everything that is capable of assuming the commodity form—be it coats, fantasies, humans, promises, land or abilities—can be integrated into this movement and thereby be transformed into the ‘body’ of the ‘processing value’ [*prozessierende Werth*] (II.11: 57).

Capital, in the simple sense of a process of exchange undertaken with the aim of pocketing a profit, has existed for thousands of years prior to the advent of capitalism. Aristotle called it *chrematistics* and condemned it as unnatural, Saint Paul warned that the ‘love of money is the root of all evil’ (I Timothy 6:10), and throughout the middle ages the church consistently looked upon profit-seeking activities with suspicion. What distinguishes capitalism from pre-capitalist societies is not the existence of capital as such, but rather its social function. In pre-capitalist societies, the processes and social activities governed by the logic of capital were always marginal; they were never the basis of social reproduction on a wide scale. From the 16th century onwards, a fundamental transformation took place: the logic of capital began to weave itself into the fabric of social life to the point where people became dependent upon it for their survival. Capital became the ‘the all-dominating economic power’ (G: 107), or put differently: society became *capitalist*. From its origin in early modern English agriculture, this process has relentlessly engulfed the world in the circuits of valorisation. Contrary to a common assumption, the emergence of capitalism was not the outcome of an inherently expansive commercial drive and did not follow automatically from the removal of barriers to trade (R. Brenner, 1987a, 1987b, 2007; Dimmock, 2014; Wood, 2002). Capital’s move from the periphery to the centre of social life was premised on profound changes in social property relations, established with the help of the state. This required the dispossession of peasants, the enclosure of the commons, colonial subjugation, draconian punishment of vagabonds and beggars and similar violent excesses. ‘[C]onquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, violence, play[ed] the greatest part’, as Marx puts it (C1: 874). Here, I want to introduce the important distinction between the forms of power required for the *creation* of capitalism and those required for its *reproduction*. There is no necessary relation between these two forms, and in this thesis, I am exclusively concerned with the *reproduction* of capitalism. The history of the origin of capitalism is a

history of *violence*, emanating mostly from state authorities. This does not, however, necessarily tell us anything about how the rule of capital is *reproduced* once it has been established.

Previous attempts to answer the question of how capitalism reproduces itself have tended to remain within the boundaries of what Nicos Poulantzas (2014, p. 78) once called ‘the couplet violence-consent or repression-ideology’ (see also Foucault, 1991, p. 28). The (often implicit) assumption at work in this conceptual scheme is that there are two fundamental forms of power to which all exercise of power can be reduced: on the one hand, *violence* or the direct, physical coercion of the body, and, on the other hand, *ideology* or the formation of systems of representations, pictures, concepts, symbols and forms of thought that shape the ways in which people perceive social reality, including themselves. Alternative versions of this duality include coercion and consent, hard and soft power, dominance and hegemony, and repression and discourse. One of the clearest examples of this tendency to think of power in terms of such couplets can be found in Louis Althusser’s analysis of the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. According to him, this reproduction ‘*is ensured by the superstructure, by the legal-political superstructure and the ideological superstructure*’. Capitalism is, in other words, reproduced by the state-apparatuses, which are divided into two sets according to the form of power they primarily rely on: the *repressive* state-apparatuses (violence) and the *ideological* state-apparatuses (ideology) (Althusser, 2014, pp. 140, 244).

The perhaps most fundamental claim of this thesis is that *the couplet violence-ideology leaves an important form of power unexamined*, namely what I will refer to as *economic power*. This form of power has its roots in *the ability to re-organise the material conditions of social reproduction*. By *social reproduction*, I mean the processes and activities involved in securing the continuous existence of a given society. Whereas violence and ideology directly address the subject, economic power addresses it only indirectly through the manipulation of its socio-material environment. Economic power thus has to do with *the way in which social relations of domination reproduce themselves by being inscribed in the environment of the subject*.

Another equally important claim of this thesis is that Marx’s critique of political economy contains an indispensable basis for a theory of the economic power of capital, and that it is impossible to explain the paradoxical persistence of capitalism without such a theory. In a decisive passage in the

first volume of *Capital* from which this thesis derives its title, Marx argues that once capitalism has been established,

the mute compulsion of economic relations seals the domination of the capitalist over the worker [*der stumme Zwang der ökonomischen Verhältnisse besiegelt die Herrschaft des Kapitalisten über den Arbeiter*]. Extra-economic, immediate violence [*Außerökonomische, unmittelbare Gewalt*] is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the “natural laws of production,” i.e., it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them. (C1: 899)

What Marx points to in this passage is that capitalism has a unique ability to reproduce itself by means of a form of impersonal, anonymous and abstract power embedded in the economic processes themselves. The social relations of domination involved in the economy is thus not sustained only by processes ‘external’ to the economy, as in Althusser’s theory where the *reproduction* of the property relations in the economic ‘base’ occurs ‘outside’ of this base. The characteristic thing about the power of capital is precisely that it has an ability to reproduce itself through economic processes, or, put differently, that the organisation of social reproduction on the basis of capital gives rise to a set of powerful structural mechanisms which ensure its reproduction all by itself, as it were. Here, we see the significance of the distinction between the original *creation* of capitalist relations of production and their *reproduction*. Marx’s claim is that, while the historical creation of capitalism was premised on massive amounts of violence, the reproduction of those relations also—though not exclusively—relies on the ‘mute compulsion of economic relations’, or what I referred to as economic power.²

ECONOMY AND POWER

Marx’s critique of political economy is not an alternative or a critical political economy, but a critique of the entire theoretical (or rather ideological) field of political economy (Heinrich, 1999a, pts 1, 2, 2012a, p. 32ff). Economists are engaged in the business of transforming social relations into

² In some (especially older) translations, Marx’s *stumme Zwang* is rendered as ‘dull compulsion’.

abstract, quantifiable units which can be inserted as variables into idealised (mathematical) models. Marx's critical theory does the opposite: it unravels the social relations hidden in economic categories (Bonefeld, 2014). Marx's theory is a critical theory of social relations in capitalist society—and those social relations are *relations of domination*. This means that from Marx's perspective the capitalist economy is essentially a *system of power* (Palermo, 2007). This absolutely central point has unfortunately been lost in the work of many of Marx's followers. I will return to this later on. It is also a perspective radically at odds with classical political economy as well as contemporary economics; for Marx, the economy is not a separate ontological domain or a separate sphere of society governed by its own economic rationality, principles, rules or logic. There is no such thing as a transhistorical economic logic, and the logic which governs the capitalist economy has nothing to do with the allocation of scarce resources, fulfilment of human needs or the rational and effective organisation of production, distribution and consumption. The economy is a set of *social relations*, and, in a *capitalist* economy, those relations are *social relations of domination*. This is arguably the most important insight in Marx's critique of political economy, and this is what all the accusations of 'economism' levelled at Marx do not get.

Economics is an academic discipline premised on 'the failure to recognize power relationships in society', as Robert Chernomas and Ian Hudson has recently put it (2017, p. 7). Economists tend to depict the capitalist economy as the outcome of voluntary agreements between free and equal individuals; as a sphere in which domination is excluded a priori. The economy is *defined* from the outset by the *absence* of power. For economists, the expression 'free market' is a pleonasm, whereas for Marx, it is a contradiction in terms. This denial of power is the result of a twofold intellectual operation. *First*, the *market* is presented as the determining moment of the economic totality, which means that a *part* of the economy is abstracted from the totality and represented as the *whole*. This primacy of exchange was already visible in classical political economy, despite its emphasis on production, but it only really came to the fore with the so-called marginal revolution in the 1870s (Perelman, 2011, p. 11; Clarke, 1991a, Chapter 6,7). In neoclassical economics, market exchange is presented as 'the central organizing principle of capitalist society', reducing production to 'a means of indirect exchange between the present and the future' (Shaik, 2016, p. 120; see also Henning, 2015, p. 123). And, not only is the market presented as the essential feature of the economy as a whole, in some strands of modern economics—most

notably in the work of Gary Becker—the voluntary exchange of goods between rational and utility-maximising agents is elevated into a prism through which all social phenomena, including crime, discrimination and politics, can and ought to be understood (Chernomas & Hudson, 2017, p. 78ff).

The *second* intellectual operation underpinning the disappearance of power relationships in economics, is the introduction of a set of assumptions and abstractions resulting in a conception of the market which excludes the very possibility of domination. The agents who engage in transactions on the market are assumed to be isolated, hyper-rational and utility-maximising individuals with infinite and infallible information and expectations. Such rational individuals comprises the Archimedean point of the social ontology of economics, a kind of *sui generis* substance which accounts for everything else. Assuming this transhistorical economic rationality, the need to explain the existence of capitalism conveniently disappears. From such a perspective, the capitalist economy is simply what appears spontaneously if human nature is allowed to unfold itself. This is why ‘[i]n most accounts of capitalism and its origin, there really *is* no origin’, as Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002, p. 4) notes. The *market* is perceived as the place where these rational individuals meet and enter into contractual relations with each other. In a competitive market, there are barriers to entry, and hence no monopolies, apart from the regrettably necessary so-called natural monopolies. The absence of monopolies means that a market agent is never forced to do business with a particular agent, which is why every act of exchange can be regarded as *voluntary*. Furthermore, when individuals show up on the market, they do so as *owners of commodities*, and as such they are completely equal. What and who these individuals are *outside* of the market relation is seen as irrelevant for economic theory, and the question of *why* they show up on the market to begin with is equally absent—generally, economics simply assume that people show up on the market to sell their commodities after having carefully weighed the possibilities open to them and reached the conclusion that this was in fact the most rational thing to do, i.e., the most efficient way to satisfy their needs. This is why it is possible for Milton Friedman (2002, p. 13) to present ‘the technique of the market place’ as a way of ‘co-ordinating the economic activities of millions’ by means of ‘voluntary co-operation of individuals’:

Since the household always has the alternative of producing directly for itself, it need not enter into any exchange unless it benefits from it. Hence, no exchange will take place unless both parties do benefit from it. Co-operation is thereby achieved without coercion.

This passage is noteworthy because it explicates what is usually hidden as an implicit assumption in economics, namely that people have the possibility of reproducing themselves outside of the market. This is the assumption which makes the market appear as a sphere of freedom: not only are agents free to choose *who* they want to exchange their goods with, they are also free to choose whether they want to engage in exchange *at all*. This is why the market is usually understood as an institution providing individuals with *opportunities*, a concept ‘absolutely critical to the conventional understanding of the capitalist system’ (Wood, 2002, p. 6).

These assumptions and abstractions form the basis of the highly idealised mathematical models so characteristic of contemporary economics. The transformation of economics into a discipline fixated on the development of formalised mathematical models has allowed it to present itself as ‘a non-ideological discipline, aimed at providing positive, scientific answers to the policy questions’ (Chernomas & Hudson, 2017, p. 19; see also Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018, p. 12ff). Economics has thus been able to live under the auspices of the natural sciences and present the economy as something regulated by transhistorical laws similar to the laws discovered by the natural sciences.

Most economists recognise that reality does not always fit their idealised models. They admit that so-called market failures exist, that we have to introduce the possibility of imperfections in order to analyse the real economic movements, and that some goods or services can be difficult or even impossible to regulate through the mechanisms of competitive markets, resulting in natural monopolies. Market failures disturb the equality of market agents and thereby make it possible for an agent to dominate other agents—it is only in this way, through the concept of market *failure*, that power can enter into economics. On this view, power signals a *deviation* from the norm, a *failure* or *imperfection* of a system otherwise free from such disturbances: ‘Power relations emerge only when contracts are not correctly executed,’ as Giulio Palermo (2014, p. 188) sums up this idea in his critique of economics.

Although the effort to conceal relations of domination in the economy achieves its most glaring expression in modern economics, it is also

widespread in other social sciences. Barring Marxist traditions, to which I will return later, there is strong tendency in political science and sociology to simply leave the economy to the economists. Historically, the academic division of labour between political science, sociology and economics is to a large extent the result of developments within economics (Clarke, 1991a, Chapter 8). For classical thinkers such as Hobbes, Petty, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Smith, Mill and Marx, there were no clear boundaries between what is now regarded as economics, political science, sociology and political philosophy. The gradual specialisation of economics created a cleavage between itself, political science (as the study of the state) and sociology, which became, in the words of Simon Clarke (1991a, p. 10) ‘the discipline that studies the consequences of non-rational action and of action oriented to other than economic goals’. Political science primarily concerns itself with the state and tends to have a state-centric notion of power. Put briefly, political science assumes that power emanates from the state. This was what Michel Foucault reacted to when he noted that in the field of ‘political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king’ (Foucault, 1998, p. 88f); a diagnosis which remains true today. However, Foucault is himself among the representatives of another way of avoiding the question of economic power. Like so many before as well as after him, Foucault often draws a non-sensical distinction between the economic and the social and claims, against what he perceives as Marxist economism, that ‘while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations’—as if relations of production are not also power relations (Foucault, 2002d, p. 327; see Poulantzas, 2014, pp. 36, 68f). Foucault shares this view of Marxism with other influential thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Bruno Latour, Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck, Niklas Luhmann, Axel Honneth, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.³ One could even claim that the dominant trends in social theory in the last four decades can be seen as a reaction to what was perceived as Marxist economism. The common assumption shared by these scholars and traditions is that Marxism takes the economy, understood as a distinct social sphere with a distinct technical or economic rationality, to be the determining moment of the social totality, thereby reducing the multifaceted nature of the social to this one factor. Bourdieu reacted to this by developing his

³ For Marxist criticisms of Bourdieu, Giddens, Latour, Habermas, Luhmann, Honneth and Laclau and Mouffe, see Callinicos (2004), Desan (2013), Henning (2015), Malm (2018c), Postone (2003), Reichelt (2013), Wood (1999).

theory of forms of capital, according to which *cultural* and *social* capital cannot be reduced to *economic* capital (Desan, 2013). Habermas abandoned Marx's critique of political economy in favour of a Kantian-pragmatist theory of communication (Postone, 2003, Chapter 6). Laclau and Mouffe's (2014, p. 107) post-Marxist theory of discourse broke with the economism of 'classical Marxism' by rejecting 'the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices' and affirming 'that every object is constituted as an object of discourse', leading them straight into idealist constructionism. Broadly speaking, what has been called the cultural turn of social theory following the crisis of Marxism in the 1970s resulted in a tendency to exclude the economy from discussions about power in contemporary society, or to approach the economy through a post-structuralist lens in which the materiality of social reproduction dissolves itself into an economy of signifiers. As Christoph Henning (2015, p. 18) puts it: 'Neoclassical economics' desociologisation of economic theory was paralleled by a deeconomisation of sociology'.⁴

A similar tendency to misunderstand Marx's conception of the economic is found in theories of Weberian lineage, such as Michael Mann's 'not very convincing attempts to knock down a Marxist straw man' (Callinicos, 2004, p. xxxix; see also Wood, 2016, p. 146). Mann repeats the worn-out critique of 'the Marxian scheme' that allegedly attributes 'ultimate primacy' to the economy (M. Mann, 1997, p. 12). He relies on a deeply problematic concept of the economy, in which 'production' and 'exchange' are regarded as transhistorical moments of every historically specific economic system. According to him, Marxists err in their focus on the mode of *production*, since this leads them to neglect *exchange*—a critique that not only fails to see how the Marxist concept of 'mode of production' includes exchange relations but also universalises and hence naturalises the historically unique function exchange has in capitalist societies (M. Mann, 1997, p. 24).

A characteristic feature of many of these post-, non- or anti-Marxist social theories is their failure to distinguish between Marx and *Marxism*. Their criticism is often levelled against 'Marxism' in general, and although there is a misguided tendency to treat the Marxist tradition as one homogenous

⁴ A notable exception is the work of Karl Polanyi, whose emphasis on the *social* essence of 'the economic' and the historically unique separation of politics and economy in capitalism (or 'market society') has many similarities to Marx's perspective, even though this is apparently lost on Polanyi, who takes Marx to be a Ricardian political economist. See Polanyi (1977, 2001, pp. 49, 79, 131, 204).

bloc, the critique is—as I will come back to—actually often justified; there is indeed a deeply problematic economic tendency in the Marxist tradition. The problem with the thinkers just mentioned, however, is that their rejection of ‘Marxism’ leads them to a wholesale rejection of *Marx* and his critique of political economy. Such a rejection implicitly claims that Marx also had an economic conception of the economy—an assumption which lies at the root of the innumerable straw-man criticisms of Marx. Rather than reducing the social to the economic, Marx did the exact opposite; as Wood (2002, p. 21) explains, he ‘treats the economy itself not as a network of disembodied forces but, like the political sphere, as a set of social relations’.

What about Marxism, then? Have Marxist thinkers not picked up on Marx’s distinctive analysis of the economy as a system of abstract and impersonal domination? While the Marxist tradition is definitely the best place to look if one wants to understand how the power of capital works, no systematic and satisfactory theory of the economic power of capital can be found there. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will provide a survey of how various Marxist traditions have grappled with the issue of power. So, instead of plunging into a detailed discussion here, let me just briefly indicate why I have found it necessary—despite the enormous amount of Marxist literature on capitalism and power—to write this thesis. Broadly speaking, classical Marxists such as Kautsky, Hilferding, Lenin and Plekhanov were unable to understand or even see what Marx called ‘the mute compulsion of economic relations’ because their theoretical outlook was hampered by at least one—though usually more than one—of the following problems: economic and technicist (mis)understandings of the economy, class-reductionist and state-centric conceptions of power, and false conclusions about the historical trends of capitalist development. Western Marxists such as Karl Korsch, Georgy Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor W. Adorno and Guy Debord overcame many of these limitations, but their tendency to focus on *ideological power* led them to remain firmly within the boundaries of the violence-ideology couplet. The reinvigoration of Marxism in the 1960s changed this. Since then, and especially in the last two decades, a number of Marxist scholars—among them Harry Braverman, Moishe Postone, Michael Heinrich, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Robert Brenner, Andreas Malm and William Clare Roberts—have produced important studies which have uncovered many crucial aspects of the economic power of capital. However, none of them have, for reasons I will discuss in detail as we go along,

succeeded in putting together a systematic and satisfactory theory of the historically unique form of power which characterises capitalist society.

AIM, METHOD, SCOPE

The aim of this thesis is to develop a theory of the economic power of capital, i.e., to explain why the power of capital takes the form of a ‘mute compulsion’, identify the sources of this power and develop concepts that make it possible to understand the mechanisms through which the subsumption of social life under the logic of valorisation is reproduced. I will do so by means of a detailed and critical interpretation of Marx’s writings and the relevant scholarly literature. Although Marx’s writings contain all of the basic elements for a theory of the economic power of capital, they do not contain such a theory in anything like a finished form. Marx left his critique of political economy unfinished in more than one sense. First, he only managed to publish one of the four books that were supposed to make up *Capital* (not to mention his plan to complement it with studies of the state, the world market, etc.). He left behind a massive number of notebooks and manuscripts,⁵ some of which still have not been published. Second, this enormous research project is also unfinished in the sense that it contains unresolved theoretical problems (see Heinrich, 1999a). Marx’s thinking constantly developed until the very end of his life, but this development was not always consistent. To cite an example, Marx defends a rather unambiguous productive force determinist philosophy of history in some of his writings from the 1840s and 1850s such as *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Later on, especially while working on the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, he abandoned this conception, but as Andreas Malm (2018b) has demonstrated, some of the basic assumptions connected to productive force determinism nevertheless crop up here and there in later writings. For this as well as other reasons, Marx’s writings do not contain anything like a complete or finished theory of the economic power of capital. The valuable insights for the construction of such a theory are scattered all over Marx’s numerous manuscripts, entwined not only with discussions and treatments of other theoretical issues or concrete, empirical analyses, but also with patterns of thought belonging to different and

⁵ The *Grundrisse*, the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, the *1864-65 Manuscript*, the *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* and the first volume of *Capital* alone—likely the five most important texts in this thesis—amount to more than 5000 printed pages.

sometimes incompatible stages of the development of Marx's theories. In order to extract and make use of Marx's insights, it is therefore necessary to locate them, reconstruct their logical interrelations, critically examine and systematise them. That project constitutes a large part of the present thesis. The conditions of such a critical and careful reading of Marx are better today than they have ever been. The ongoing publication of a scholarly edition of Marx's writings in the second *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²) has made clear just how much the critique of political economy was a work in progress when Marx died in 1883 (see Heinrich, 2011).⁶ The publication of the *1861-63 Manuscripts* in the 1970s and 1980s, the original drafts for the second and third book of *Capital* in the 1990s and 2000s and the manuscripts known as *The German Ideology* as late as 2017 has finally made it possible to read these manuscripts free from the sometimes very questionable editing by Engels, Kautsky and David Ryazanov. The publication of Marx's notebooks in the fourth section of the MEGA² has led to a series of important studies responding to many of the criticisms levelled against Marx by various intellectual trends which established themselves from the 1970s onwards: Marx cannot simply be rejected as determinist, euro-centric, orientalist or promethean (K. B. Anderson, 2016; Burkett, 2014; Foster, 2000; Pradella, 2015; Saito, 2017). Marx's writings are increasingly treated as an unfinished research project which has to be developed further, rather than a finished theory which simply has to be applied to concrete situations. The tendency to treat Marx as an infallible oracle largely died out with Marxism-Leninism, and this has contributed to the creation of a more open-minded, intellectually curious and serious atmosphere of debate about Marx's thought.

I want to emphasise, however, that this thesis is not a marxological exercise aiming to reconstruct the inner logic of Marx's thought. My aim is not to determine *what Marx meant*, but to develop a theory of how capital reproduces itself by means of economic power. In order to do this, I have often found it necessary to engage in detailed analyses and discussions of Marx's writings and his intellectual development—but when I do so, it is always because I believe it can ultimately help us understand the economic power of capital. And although Marx's writings play a key role in my analysis, they are far from the only important interlocutors and sources concepts, inspiration, information and ideas; I will draw on all sorts of relevant literature, Marxist as well as non-Marxist.

⁶ For a good overview of the different editions of Marx's writings, see the appendix to K. B. Anderson (2016, pp. 247–252).

As previously mentioned, this thesis deals with capitalism in its ideal average, which means that it endeavours to say something about the *essence* of capitalism, irrespective of its many particular variations. The easiest way to explain what this entails is to consider what takes place in the first volume of *Capital*. Marx begins with a historical fact, namely that in capitalist societies *the products of labour generally take on the form of commodities*. This is a simple empirical finding that singles out a characteristic trait of the capitalist mode of production, thus setting it apart from non-capitalist modes of production, where only a marginal share of the products of labour is produced for exchange. Then, Marx goes on to ask: what must be the case if the commodity is the general social form of the products of labour? What kind of social relations must be in place in order for this to be possible? From this starting point, he then derives the fundamental concepts and structure of his theory, such as the distinctions exchange value, use value and value as well as concrete and abstract labour, the necessity and functions of money, the concept of capital, the theory of surplus value and exploitation, the class relation underlying this, the distinction between absolute and relative surplus value, and certain dynamics of capitalist production. This series of derivations is the execution of ‘the method of rising from the abstract to concrete’, which Marx announces in the 1857 *Introduction* (G: 101). As Alex Callinicos (2014, p. 132) notes, this method is not simply a matter of gradually approaching the empirically observable reality (see also Bidet, 2007, p. 174). Approaching the concrete refers rather to the gradual increase in conceptual complexity as a result of introducing more and more concepts and specifying their interrelations; by being situated within a more and more elaborate theoretical structure, the methodological abstractions of the earlier stages of the theoretical progression is gradually sublated.

Marx essentially derives all of the basic concepts of his critique of political economy from the assumption of generalised commodity exchange. What many commentators fail to notice is that Marx also relies on certain socio-ontological presuppositions when dialectically constructing his system. Consider, for example, the role of the ‘natural’ length of the working day (i.e., the fact that humans need to sleep) or the ‘natural’ basis of surplus value (i.e., the human ability to produce more than what is necessary for the reproduction of the individual). These are two quite significant facts, and both play an important role in the conceptual progression of *Capital*. Neither of them can, however, be derived from the historically specific structures of capitalist society. They are rather characteristics of human societies as such,

independently of their historical variations; they form a part of the ontology of the social (which also includes facts of nature, as the examples make clear). This demonstrates that there are two independent theoretical presuppositions of Marx's critique of political economy: on the one hand, socio-ontological presuppositions concerning what must be the case in *any* form of society, and, on the other hand, a historical fact, i.e., the generalisation of the commodity form. The dialectical reconstruction of the essential structures and dynamics of the capitalist mode of production proceeds, then, from certain assumptions about the *transhistorical* features of human societies on the one hand and a *historically specific* fact about the capitalist mode of production on the other. From these two kinds of presuppositions, Marx builds the fundamental concepts of his theory.

This does not, however, mean that Marx's critique of political economy can be reduced to a pure analysis of the dialectics of economic form-determinations, as some scholars tend to do (e.g. Arthur, 2004b; Projektgruppe zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie, 1973; Reichelt, 1973). The critique of political economy *is* an analysis of the core structure of capitalism by means of a dialectical analysis of social forms, but it is *also* an analysis of the history of capitalism as well as, more specifically, 19th century British capitalism. The empirical and historical parts of *Capital* and related manuscripts are not simply illustrations of concepts. Not only do they often contain substantial historical and empirical analyses in their own right, at certain points they also enter into the conceptual development, as the example of the natural length of the working day demonstrates.⁷ The 'dialectical form of presentation is right', Marx notes, 'only when it knows its limits' (29: 505). What prevents the empirical and historical parts of Marx's critique from collapsing into a chaotic collection of data, however, is precisely that they are presented within a systematic theoretical structure constructed by means of a

⁷ One of the indicators of Marx's commitment to the collection, analysis and presentation of empirical material is the fact that he updated the data used in the first volume of *Capital* for the second edition. For a good account of Marx's method, see Heinrich (1999a, Chapter 5). In their critique of value form theory, Callinicos (2014, p. 180) and William Clare Roberts (2017, p. 11) both take Heinrich to account for what Callinicos calls 'etherealism'. Heinrich is quite clear, however, that empirical and historical material play an important role in Marx's project, and it is unnuanced to put him in the same category as Chris Arthur. See Heinrich (1999a, p. 177f).

dialectical development of concepts—it is this method which ‘indicates the points where historical considerations must enter’ (G: 460).

In my analysis of the economic power of capital, I will attempt to follow Marx’s procedure. The advantage of such an analysis is that it makes it possible to grasp the logical relation between different social phenomena, instead of merely registering an empirical relationship. To give an example, Marx criticised the Proudhonian ideal of a market economy without capital by demonstrating how the universalisation of the commodity form in fact presupposes capitalist property relations—an argument which has strategic implications, since it concerns what is and what is not an *essential* part of a capitalist economy (see Mau, 2018b). This is precisely what an empirical description cannot provide; experience might tell us ‘what is, but never that it must necessarily be thus and not otherwise’, as Kant (1998, p. 127) puts it. Rather than beginning with the commodity form, however, I build on Marx’s analysis and proceed from what I take to be the simplest definition of capitalism: a society in which social reproduction is governed by the logic of capital to a significant degree. This is a rather vague definition; what exactly is ‘a significant degree’? Such vagueness, however, is neither possible nor desirable to avoid if we wish to study historical social formations. There are no absolute historical boundaries between pre-capitalist societies and capitalism; the question of whether a society is capitalist or not is always a question of more or less. Yet, this does not pose a problem for my analysis, since I am not concerned with the historical emergence of capitalism. In other words, my analysis *presupposes* that social reproduction is governed by the logic of capital to a significant degree. I will thus attempt to construct a theory which discloses the forms of power implied by the essential determinations of the capitalist mode of production. In contrast to Marx’s procedure in *Capital*, I make no attempts to provide substantial empirical or historical analyses. Although I will occasionally integrate empirical and historical data and studies into my presentation, these will have the status of examples and illustrations rather than exhaustive analyses.

The object of this thesis is the *economic power* of capital, and for this reason I will largely disregard the role played by *ideology* as well as *violence* in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. I want to stress that this does *not* mean that I consider ideology and violence to be merely secondary or unimportant. Numerous critics of ideology—from Reich through Gramsci and Althusser to Žižek—have convincingly demonstrated that capitalism is unable to reproduce itself without the exercise of ideological power. The

same is true of *violence*, a form of power which has primarily been discussed in the context of Marxist theories of the state. In the late 1970s, Poulantzas (2014, pp. 78, 80) pointed out that, contrary to the popular idea that ‘modern power is grounded not on organized physical violence, but on ideological-symbolic *manipulation*, the organisation of consent, and the internalization of repression,’ state violence still ‘occupies a *determining* position’. The organised violence of the state was not only necessary for the historical *creation* of capitalism, it also *continues* to play a crucial role in the *reproduction* of capitalism. Without a social institution with ‘the privilege and will to force the totality’ (G: 531), as Marx puts it, it is simply not possible to organise social reproduction on a capitalist basis. This insight received a particularly acute and theoretically sophisticated articulation in the so-called state derivation debate of the 1970s, which generated a lot of important insights into the nature of the capitalist state and the ways in which the immanent contradictions of capitalist production make certain state functions necessary (see Elbe, 2008, pt. 2; Holloway & Picciotto, 1978b). The necessity of the state and its capacity to employ violence in order to enforce private property, manage class relations, regulate monetary policy, appropriate a share of surplus value in order to build infrastructure, etc., does not, however, change the fact that the relations of domination involved in social reproduction are to a large extent reproduced by means of the mute compulsion of capital. The characteristic thing about the separation between ‘the political’ and ‘the economic’ in capitalism is, in the words of Wood (2016, p. 31), that it implies ‘a complete separation of private appropriation from public duties’ and hence ‘the development of a new sphere of power devoted completely to private rather than social purposes’. In this new sphere of power, social life is subjected to the logic of valorisation primarily through mute compulsion. The choice to focus on the *economic* power of capital means that this thesis will only aim at a *partial* understanding of the power of capital. In order to construct a full theory of the power of capital, it would be necessary to integrate the theory of the *economic* power of capital with theories of *ideology* and (state) *violence*. Such a task is, however, beyond the scope of the present study.

A theory of the power of capital constructed at the level of abstraction of the ideal average of the capitalist mode of production traces the social relationships and mechanisms of power and domination *necessarily implied by the capital form itself*. These, however, are not the only relations and mechanism which contribute to the reproduction of capitalism. The sources of the

power of capital are not limited to mechanisms and relations springing more or less directly from capital itself; they also include a virtually endless number of social norms, hierarchies and practices, which do not *originate* in the capital form. In this thesis, the object of study is not simply the mechanisms which reproduce the power of capital but rather a *subset* of these mechanisms, namely those that can be shown to have a necessary connection to the capital form itself. In order to make this a bit clearer, let us take the example of racism. Marx noted that racist attitudes towards the Irish among British workers were ‘the secret of maintenance of power by the capitalist class’ (43: 475).⁸ This is an example of how racism contributes to the reproduction of the power of capital; racist ideology is a *source* of capital’s power. This does not mean, however, that we can deduce the necessity of racist attitudes towards Irish workers from the capital form. We can *empirically* establish the connection between capital and racism towards the Irish, and I think we can also go a bit further than this and claim that capital generally tends to strengthen social hierarchies among workers wherever it finds them, as this will usually allow employers to pit workers against each other and thereby weaken their ability to resist. What we *cannot* do, however, is to account for the existence of *particular* social hierarchies *solely* on the basis of the capital form.

In so far as we are concerned with the construction of a theory of capitalism in its ideal average, we thus have to ask: what kinds of socially significant classification of human beings are necessary in order for social reproduction to be governed by the logic of capital? Does this logic presuppose specific forms of social difference? In chapter three, I will argue that capitalism necessarily requires a specific class structure in which some people control the access to the conditions of social reproduction, while others are excluded from the direct access to them. This is a difference presupposed by the very essence of capital. I do not believe, however, that it is possible to derive other forms of social difference from the capital form. Most arguments about the necessary connection between capitalism and racism or sexism, or other forms of oppression, proceed from *the fact* that systems of racial and gender difference exist, and then goes on to analyse the relation between those

⁸ Similarly, commenting on the US, Marx remarked in *Capital* that ‘[l]abour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin’ (C1: 414). For a discussion of this dimension of Marx’s thought, see K. B. Anderson (2016).

differences and the imperatives of capital.⁹ In other words, racism and sexism enter into the theoretical structure as an *empirical fact*, from which the analysis can then proceed. This is obviously a reasonable assumption; racism and sexism has indeed permeated all capitalist societies. And in so far as the aim is to say something about the *actual*—as opposed to the *necessary*—relation between capitalism and racism or sexism, I see no problems in such a procedure. However, empirical convergence can never disclose a necessary relation. If the aim is to identify the essence of capitalism in its ideal average, we cannot rest content with such a procedure.

The argument advanced here is not that capitalism is colour-blind or indifferent to gender differences. I agree with Michael Lebowitz (2006, p. 39) when he argues that ‘the tendency to divide workers by turning their differences into antagonism and hostility’ is ‘an essential aspect of the aspect of the logic of capital’.¹⁰ The point I am making is that, on the level of capitalism in its ideal average, all we can say is that capital has a structural propensity to reproduce social differences. What we cannot do on this level of abstraction, however, is to determine the concrete character of these differences, i.e., whether capital will gamble on differences and hierarchies which have to do with ‘race’, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, language, body form, disabilities or any other kind of social difference we can think of. For these reasons, I will make no attempt to provide a systematic analysis of the role played by the (re)production of difference in the maintenance of the power of capital. I will occasionally discuss examples of how the imperatives of capital are entwined with other forms of oppression, but a satisfactory analysis of these inter-relations would require a more comprehensive theoretical framework and can only be conducted a different level of abstraction.

The claim that it is possible to *theoretically* isolate and identify the core structures that makes capitalism capitalist does not imply that there exists a

⁹ This is the case, to cite just a few examples, with Bhattacharya (2017a), A. Y. Davis (1983), Federici (2012) and Lewis (2016). ‘The existence of women’s oppression in class-societies is, it must be emphasised, a historical phenomenon. It can be analysed, as here, with the guidance of a theoretical framework, but it is not itself deducible theoretically’ (Vogel, 2014, p. 154). ‘One cannot know such things [i.e., whether racism is necessary to capitalism or not] in advance, on the basis of principles abstracted from concrete historical life. What we can say is that the actual historical process by which capitalism emerged in our world integrally involved social relations of race and racial domination’ (McNally, 2017, p. 107).

¹⁰ see also Chen (2013), Roediger (2017, p. 25f), Chibber (2013, p. 140ff).

logic of capital which operates independently of the production of social difference. Capitalism in its ideal average does not exist as anything other than a theoretical abstraction. There is nothing mysterious about this; the construction of such abstractions is a standard scientific procedure. In ‘the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance’, as Marx writes in the preface to *Capital*: ‘[t]he power of abstraction must replace both’ (C1: 90). In its actual existence, the logic of capital is entangled in complicated webs of social difference, and a study of the power of capital in a geographically and historically specific situation would have to take that into account. But this thesis is not such a study, and for this reason, I generally abstract from the relation between those mechanisms of power which emanate from the capital form itself and those that do not.

Before I move on to an outline of the chapters that follow, I also want to emphasise that the position defended here with regards to the relation between the logic of capital and ‘the production of difference’ does not imply ascribing *political* primacy to any specific emancipatory struggle. The claim that we cannot derive racism or sexism solely from the logic of capital, for example, does not imply the view that struggles against racism and sexism are less important, urgent or fundamental than explicitly anti-capitalist struggles. Neither does it imply that these are or should be *separate* struggles. The claim that the logic of capital does not necessarily imply a specific form of social differentiation does not rule out that the rule of capital might, in *a concrete configuration* of the capitalist mode of production, be inextricable from misogyny, islamophobia, nationalism, heterosexism or any other form of oppression. What it *does* imply is that the *reasons* for this inextricability are not to be found solely in the logic of capital, but rather in the manner in which this logic interacts with other concrete aspects of the situation in question. For this reason, the argument defended here does not rule out that, in some concrete situation, the struggle against sexism or racism might be *eo ipso* anti-capitalist.¹¹

¹¹ An example of a failure to acknowledge this can be found in Wood’s (2016, p. 264) discussion of the relationship between class struggle and what she calls ‘*extra-economic* goods,’ such as ‘gender-emancipation, racial equality, peace, ecological health, democratic citizenship’. Citing the example of sexism, she argues that ‘there is no specific structural necessity for, nor even a strong systemic disposition to, gender oppression in capitalism’. From this, she attempts to derive the ‘strategic implication’ that ‘struggles conceived in purely extra-economic terms— as purely against racism or gender oppression, for example—are not in themselves

To sum up, the aim of this thesis is to build a theory of *the ideal average of a specific subset of a specific form of power of a specific social logic in a specific form of society*, namely those mechanisms of the economic power of capital which can be identified on the level of abstraction of the core structure of capitalism. The amount of delimitations outlined in this section might lead one to wonder what the utility of such a narrowly defined undertaking could possibly be. In the course of the thesis, I hope to demonstrate that the mute compulsion of capital is in fact a social force which has tremendous influence on the life of everyone in the contemporary world.

OVERVIEW

The thesis is divided into three parts, with two chapters in each. The first part is about *conditions* in a two-fold sense: on the one hand, the *theoretical* conditions of the rest of the thesis, and on the other hand, the *real* conditions of the economic power of capital. The main task of chapter one is to clarify what it means to speak of ‘the power of capital’ and to identify the strengths and the shortcomings of conceptions of power in the Marxist tradition. After a brief examination of the terminology employed by Marx in his discussions of power and domination, I confront the question of what notion of *power* we need in order to understand capital’s influence on social life. I demonstrate that mainstream theories of power in sociology and political theory tend to rely on a number of assumptions which obliterate and obscure the workings of capital, and that they also tend to reproduce an economic conception of the economy. I then move on to a discussion of what *capital* is. Contrary to scholars such as Moishe Postone and Chris Arthur, I argue that capital is *not a subject*. Instead, I argue that capital is a social logic which involves a specific set of social relations among human beings, *as well as* the *emergent properties* of those relations. At first sight, this seems to imply that we cannot speak of capital as something which is capable of exercising power, since most theories of power agree that it presupposes agency or subjectivity.

fatally dangerous to capitalism’, which means that ‘they are probably unlikely to succeed if they remain detached from an anti-capitalist struggle’ (Wood, 2016, p. 270). The crucial words here are *purely* and *in themselves*. Struggles are always concrete struggles undertaken in situations where they inevitably interact with various social hierarchies, tensions and struggles in the specific conjuncture—in other words, struggles are never *pure*, and for this reason, the question of what struggles are *in themselves* is always an analytical abstraction. Put differently, *one never fights racism ‘in itself’*.

In opposition to this assumption, I argue that it does make sense to speak of power as something that can be exercised by emergent properties of social relations among human agents or subjects. This makes it become possible to clarify the notion of the power of capital; *power* refers to a particular kind of social relation between human subjects, as well as the emergent properties of such relations, and *the power of capital* refers to capital's ability to subsume social life under its logic. After having clarified this notion, I move on to a critical survey of the way in which power has been thought of in the Marxist tradition. Finally, I end the chapter with a discussion of Foucault's conception of power and its possible usefulness for my purposes.

The theme of chapter two is the *social ontology* of economic power. The aim here is to understand why such a thing as 'mute compulsion' is possible at all. What is it about human societies that allows them to weave an abstract and impersonal form of domination into the material fabric of their own reproduction? Why is it possible for them to get entangled in webs of real abstractions? In order to answer these questions, I propose to reconsider Marx's widely neglected analysis of what he and Engels refer to as the 'corporeal organisation' of the human being. I argue that Marx's analysis of the human body contains a foundation for a social ontology capable of overcoming an abstract dualism of nature and society while also avoiding the equally misguided collapse of this distinction in discursive idealism as well as in new materialism. Marx's analysis of human dependence upon extra-somatic tools reveals the ontological precarity inherent in the human metabolism. Humans are dependent upon other humans as well as nature, but their natural being does not entail a specific way of organising this metabolism. The relation between the human being and the rest of nature is uniquely flexible and underdetermined, and for this reason, relations of domination can seize hold of the life of these animals in a manner unavailable to other species. In short, I demonstrate that we can explain the possibility of economic power on the basis of a reconstruction of Marx's analysis of the specificities of the human metabolism. This also allows me to revisit the debate on (anti-)humanism in Marx and demonstrate how both sides in this debate tend to rely on a false assumption, namely that the concept of human being has the same role in the theory of history and in the critique of capitalism. Against this, I will argue that the concept of human being does indeed play an important role in Marx's *social ontology*, but that the very same concept explains why it can never serve as the basis of a critique of capitalism.

The title of part two is *relations*. This part is concerned with a major source of the economic power of capital: the relations of production. Following Robert Brenner, I distinguish between two fundamental sets of social relations, the unity of which constitutes the capitalist relations of production: on the one hand, a particular set of *horizontal* relations among units of production as well as among immediate producers, and, on the other hand, a particular set of *vertical* (class) relations between the immediate producers and those who control the conditions of social reproduction.

Chapter three examines the *vertical* relations, i.e., the form of class domination presupposed by capitalist production. I argue that in order to understand the full extent of this domination, it is important to broaden the notion of class and define it as the relation of a group of people to the means of social reproduction. Such a notion of class allows us to avoid the common tendency to think of class antagonism in capitalism as a relation between capitalists and wage-labourers at the point of production and see that this particular aspect of class antagonism is the result of a much more encompassing form of class domination in which the subordinate part includes everyone who is dependent upon the circulation of capital for their survival, regardless of whether they are wage labourers or not. Following Marx, I analyse the proletariat as a historically specific subject: an ontologically poor and transcendently indebted life cut off from its conditions and reduced to a pure possibility of labour compelled to surrender itself to the mediations of capital in order to be translated into actuality and thereby reconnected to its conditions. Building on the analysis of the human corporeal organisation in chapter two, I explain how capital inserts itself as the mediator between life and its conditions, thereby allowing it to appropriate surplus labour from proletarian bodies without having to resort to the use of violence. This is a form of class domination which operates on the level of the conditions of possibility of social life, and for this reason I propose to conceptualise it by means of a modified version of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of *transcendental power*. Another related topic I address in this chapter is the question of whether capitalist production presupposes a specific organisation of the reproduction of labour-power, and what we can say about the (gender) identity of those who perform this reproductive labour. I argue that capitalism is very flexible with regards to how labour-power is reproduced, and that we cannot derive the identity of those who are forced to do reproductive labour from the scission between a productive and reproductive sphere. In the final section of the chapter, I address the

notion of biopolitics in the works of two of the most influential thinkers of power in recent decades: Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. I argue that their lack of understanding of capitalism leads both of them to misunderstand the origins and meaning of modern biopolitics, and that Marx's analysis of the proletarian condition provides us with a superior framework for understanding why the modern state had to assume the task of administering the life of the population.

Chapter four examines the *horizontal* relations of production. The central concepts here are *value* and *competition*. I begin the chapter with an interpretation of Marx's theory of value as a theory of the abstract and impersonal domination which arises when social reproduction is organised by means of the exchange of products of labour as commodities. The generalisation of the commodity-form results in a peculiar kind of socialisation in which social relations are transformed into real abstractions imposing themselves on the social totality through the anonymous pressure of the market. The market should accordingly be understood as a mechanism of domination that cuts across class distinctions in the sense that *everyone* is subjected to its movements. On the basis of this analysis it becomes possible to determine the precise relation between the *horizontal* relations among units of production and the *vertical* class relation examined in chapter three—a task which has been widely neglected in the literature. I argue that neither of them can be reduced to the other: value is not just an effect of class, nor is class domination merely a derived form of the domination of everyone by value. At the same time, however, they relate differently to each other: while *value* presupposes *class domination*, the opposite is not the case. Class domination is thus a necessary yet not sufficient condition of value. The main conclusion of this analysis is that the economic power of capital *involves the domination of one class by another as well as the domination of everyone by capital*, and that while these two dimensions of the economic power of capital mutually mediate each other, they originate in two irreducible sets of social relations. The last section of chapter four is devoted to *competition*, the mechanism which 'executes' the laws of capital, as Marx puts it. I argue that the concepts of competition and value refer to the same set of relations but on different levels of abstraction. Like value, competition is a form of domination which subjects *everyone* to the imperatives of capital.

The social relations examined in part two give rise to certain *dynamics* which are simultaneously a *result* and a *source* of the economic power of capital. Put differently: the economic power of capital turns out to be partly *the*

result of its own exercise—it posits its own presuppositions, to put it in Marx’s Hegelian language. These dynamics are the subject of part three.

In chapter five, I examine capital’s continuous remoulding of the production process. I begin with an analysis of how the power of capital appears within the workplace, namely as the despotic authority of the capitalist. At first sight, this authority seems to contradict the description of economic power as impersonal and anonymous—in fact, the power of the capitalist seems to resemble that of pre-capitalist rulers. I will argue, however, that the authority of the capitalist is fundamentally different, since capitalists only hold power as personifications of capital and are themselves subjected to the impersonal and abstract imperatives of competition. I then go on to examine what Marx calls the real subsumption of labour, i.e., the material restructuring of the labour process. Through the introduction of new technologies, new divisions of labour, deskilling and disciplinary measures, capital tends to create a production apparatus in which the logic of capital becomes the condition of possibility for production to take place—a process in which capital also subjects *nature* to real subsumption. In the last two sections of chapter five, I examine two examples of how the material reconfiguration of production strengthens the power of capital: first, the industrialisation and globalisation of agriculture since the 1940s and second, the so-called logistics revolution of the last four to five decades.

Chapter six considers the relation between the power of capital and the dynamics of accumulation. First, I argue that the constant generation of a relative surplus population should be regarded as one of the mechanisms of the economic power of capital. By securing a certain level of unemployment, capital increases competition among workers, thereby making it easier for capitalists to discipline them and keep down wages. However, I also argue that Marx’s predictions about the absolute growth of the surplus population cannot be defended on the level of abstraction on which this thesis operates, even if it can be demonstrated to hold empirically. In the remainder of the chapter, I discuss the effects of crises on the power of capital. Contrary to most contemporary Marxist scholars, I do not think that the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall can be substantiated as a law in the sense in which Marx claims it to be in the manuscripts for the third book of *Capital*. No absolute tendency to meltdown can be deduced from the logic of capital. Capitalist crises arise from the fact that capitalists produce without regard for the size of the market. In contrast to most debates in Marxist crisis theory, however, my primary concern is not the *causes* of crises, but rather their

effects. I argue that crises should be understood as a cyclical phenomenon, in which capital sacrifices a part of itself in order to save itself. A crisis is a result of the immanent contradictions of capitalist production, but it also generates certain mechanisms which re-establish the conditions of a new round of accumulation. For this reason, I argue that crises should be included in the list of mechanisms by means of which the logic of valorisation imposes itself on society.

These six chapters will provide a conceptual apparatus allowing us to understand the mute compulsion of capital: to locate its sources, identify its mechanisms, explain its forms, distinguish between its different levels and determine the exact relation between them—in other words, they will provide us with a theory of the economic power of capital.

PART ONE: CONDITIONS

I. CONCEPTUALISING POWER

The power of capital vis-à-vis labour grows, or, and this is the same thing, the worker's chance of appropriating the conditions of labour is lessened.

—Karl Marx, *1861-63 Manuscripts* (33: 151)

The overall aim of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of how social life is subjected to the imperatives of valorisation. I have referred to this as a question of *the power of capital*. In this chapter I want to clarify what this phrase means—a task which requires a specification of what capital is and in what sense it can be said to have or exercise power. In order to do so, I will begin by taking a look at some of the assumptions shared by most theories of power in mainstream political theory and sociology. Following this, I will discuss and criticise the idea that capital should be regarded as a *subject* and suggest that we think of it instead as an emergent property of relations among human subjects or agents. This will allow us to insist that it makes sense to speak of ‘the power of capital’ while still avoiding two equally untenable positions: on the one hand, the hyperbolic conception of capital as a self-creating subject, on the other hand, the watering down of the concept of agency in variants of so-called New Materialism. Following this analysis of the relation between power and capital, I go on to examine how the Marxist tradition has theoretically grappled with the power of capital. Finally, the chapter will end with an evaluation of the relevance of Foucault's concept of power for a theory of the economic power of capital. Before I do all this, however, I want to provide a brief survey of the terms employed by Marx in his examination of relations of power and domination.

TERMINOLOGY

The two most important concepts in Marx's analyses of the power of capital are *Macht* (power) and *Herrschaft* (domination or rule). In addition to this, there is also a cluster of related words, such as *Subsumtion* (subsumption), *Disziplin* (discipline), *Kommando* (command), *Gewalt* (violence or power), *Despotismus* (despotism), *Zwang* (compulsion), *Autokratie* (autocracy), *Unterjochung* (subjugation), *Direktion* (directing or conducting), *Leitung* (management), *Aufsicht* (supervision or surveillance), *Autorität* (authority), *Kontrolle* (control), *Oberbefehl* (leadership), *Abhängigkeit* (dependency) and *Beaufsichtigung* (surveillance). Although it is possible to discern a pattern in Marx's choice of terms, his terminology is neither systematic nor unequivocal.

Macht or *power* has several meanings in Marx's texts. He talks about the power of capital, of money, of the relation of exchange, of the general equivalent, of the state, of machinery and of dead labour, just to cite some examples. He frequently uses the expression *alien power* to refer to social relations confronting humans as something external. In general, Marx employs the concept of power in quite a broad sense, as referring to the influence of social forms on the life of society. This is the case, for example, when he argues that with 'the extension of commodity circulation the power of money [*die Macht des Geldes*] increases' (C1: 229). When he speaks of *the power of capital*, it similarly refers to the degree to which the logic of capital shapes social life. The closest to something like a definition of the power of capital to be found in Marx's writings is the quote used as an epigraph for this chapter, where Marx argues that it is equivalent to the lessening of 'the worker's chance of appropriating the conditions of labour' (33: 151). This definition, if we can call it that, highlights that the power of capital is always a form of *domination*, since it relies—as I will explain in detail in chapter three—a severing of the bond between the ability to work and the conditions of realisation of this ability. It also highlights the basis of Marx's critique of capitalism, namely that it deprives people of control over their lives. Another advantage of this definition is that it poses the question of the power of capital in terms of *degree* rather than an *either-or*. As we will see in chapter five, this is important for avoiding the widespread tendency in Marxist theory to reduce the power of capital to a matter of *property*, i.e., to be a question only of whether or not capitalists have monopoly control over the means of production. The definition of the power of capital as the lessening of the worker's chance of appropriating the conditions of labour is, however, ultimately too narrow. There are three reasons for this. First, it fails to reflect the fact that the power

of capital is something not only *workers*, in the narrow sense of wage-labourers, are subjected to (more on this in chapter three). Second, it excludes an important aspect of the power of capital, which I will discuss in chapter four, namely mechanisms of domination which *everyone*, including the capitalists, are subjected to. Third, this definition is not representative of Marx's use of the expression 'the power of capital', since he often uses it in a sense which cannot be reduced to a question of who owns or controls the conditions of labour. In other words, there is more to the power of capital than its ability to prevent workers from appropriating the conditions of social reproduction.

One of the significant characteristics of Marx's use of the concept of power is that he attributes it to things and social forms such as value, money, capital and machinery, and not only to *individuals* and *classes*. To be sure, he does sometimes use the concept to refer to the ability of individuals to control the actions of other individuals, as when he explains that 'the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of *exchange values*, of *money*' (G: 157). As this quote makes clear, Marx always considers the power of individuals as something they are endowed with by a certain social structure. One of the important features of a monetised economy is precisely that 'social power becomes the private power of private persons' (C1: 230; G: 157).

In a few places, Marx also employs the concept of power in the broad sense of an *ability* or a *potential*, as when he speaks of 'the social powers of labour [*der gesellschaftlichen Mächte der Arbeit*]' (G: 832) or the power of money to act as exchange value (30: 18). Finally, he also uses the concept to refer to powerful agents or institutions, such as 'the great powers of Europe' (12: 21). This is also the meaning at play when he refers to capital as 'the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society' (G: 107).

Herrschaft—usually translated as *domination* or *rule* but sometimes also as *predominance* or *dominion*—is, together with *power*, the concept used most frequently by Marx to refer to the way in which capital shapes social life. Thus, he often uses the expression 'the rule of capital' [*der Herrschaft des Kapitals*] (G: 651) in the general sense of the influence of capital on society. He describes the genesis of capitalism as the establishment of the 'general domination of capital over the countryside' (G: 279), and capital is often described as 'domination of objectified labour over living labour' (G: 346). Marx also speaks of the domination by humans over nature, the domination of towns over the countryside, the dominion of the bourgeoisie, the rule of dead labour, free competition, things, products and conditions of labour, the twelve-hour bill

and the British rule in East India. *Domination* or *rule* is often used synonymously with *power*, as when Marx describes how people rebel against ‘the power which a physical matter, a thing, acquires with respect to men, against the domination of the accursed metal’ (29: 487), or when he describes capital first as *power* over labour and then as *domination* of labour on the same page (32: 494). *Domination* is also the concept Marx primarily relies on in order to describe social relations of production in *pre-capitalist* societies, often with the addition of the adjectives *immediate*, *personal* and *direct* and in connection with the expression ‘relations of dominance and servitude’ [*Herrschafts- und Knechtschaftsverhältnissen*] (C1: 173). The capitalist class is usually described as ‘the ruling class’ [*die herrschende Klasse*], and Marx also uses the concept of *Herrschaft* when referring not only to the general class structure of capitalist society, but also to the more specific relation between the worker and the capitalist within the workplace, as well as the relation between colonial powers and colonised peoples.

When he refers to the general subsumption of social life under capital, Marx tends to use the concepts of power and domination, but occasionally he also describes it as the ‘dependency’ (*Abhängigkeit*) upon, ‘subjugation’ (*Unterjochung*) to or ‘compulsion’ (*Zwang*) of capital.

Depending on the context, *Gewalt* can mean both *violence* and *power*, and is often related to the state. Thus Marx speaks of ‘legislative power [*gesetzgebende Gewalt*]’ (1: 241), the ‘various powers’ of the state (3: 73), the ‘division of powers’ [*Teilung der Gewalten*] (C1: 551),¹ and in *Capital* he describes the state (*die Staatsmacht*) as ‘the concentrated and organized violence/power of society’ [*die konzentrierte und organisierte Gewalt der Gesellschaft*] (C1: 915). Marx often uses this concept in order to point out the difference between the economic power of capital and the forms of power on which pre-capitalist relations of production rested. This is the case in the passage from *Capital* quoted in the introduction, where the ‘mute compulsion’ of capital is contrasted to ‘[e]xtra-economic, immediate violence’ (C1: 899), or when Marx emphasises that in the sphere of circulation, people appropriate the products of other people ‘not by violence’ [*nicht mit Gewalt*] but through mutual recognition of their status as proprietors (G: 243). In the *Grundrisse*, we likewise read that ‘[u]nder capital, the *association* of workers is not compelled through direct physical violence, forced labour, statute labour, slave labour; it is compelled by the fact that the conditions of production are alien property and are themselves present as *objective association*’ (G: 590; see also 769).

¹ Mistakenly translated as ‘division of responsibility’ in Penguin edition of *Capital*.

When dealing with the power of the capitalist within the workplace, Marx resorts to an array of concepts, many of which bear strong connotations to the military or the absolutist state (or both): *autocracy*, *subsumption*, *direction*, *management*, *command*, *discipline*, *authority*, *surveillance*, *supervision* and *despotism*. I will discuss the meaning of this vocabulary in chapter five, where we will consider how the power of capital works within the workplace.

POWER

If capital is a social *form* or *logic*, to speak of the *power* of capital seems to immediately contradict a premise common to most theories of power, namely that it ‘presupposes human agency’, as Steven Lukes (1977, p. 6) puts it. Some Marxists argue that capital does in fact possess agency, but since their conception of agency (or subjectivity) is quite different from that of mainstream sociology and political theory, I will set this idea aside for a moment and return to it later in this chapter. Mainstream theories of power tend to rely on an individualist social ontology in which the wills, wishes, thoughts and intentions of individual human beings constitute the ultimate basis of every social phenomenon. While they do acknowledge the existence of collective agency, they often understand it as an aggregate of individual agents. Almost all definitions of power in sociology and political theory are formulated in terms of ‘persons’ or human ‘individuals’ or ‘agents’ and their wills, desires and intentions.² A good example is Max Weber’s (1978, p. 926) influential conception of power as ‘the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action’. Most of these theories make the common idealist mistake of assuming that the active, transformative relation of the subject to its environment resides in its intellectual capacities. In other words, they abstract from the way in which these intellectual capacities are embedded in material, corporeal and social practice. In short, they rely on a conception of the human being similar to the kind of idealist humanism that Marx subjected to a scathing critique from 1845 onwards. I will discuss this in detail in the next chapter.

² e.g. Bachrach & Baratz (1962, 1963), Blau (1964, p. 15), Dahl (1957, 1961), Isaac (1987, p. 9), Lukes (2004, pp. 72, 76), Russell (1975, p. 25), J. Scott (2001, p. 1ff), Wartenberg (1990, pp. 65, 76), Weber (1978, pp. 53, 926, 942), Wrong (2009, p. 2). See Poulantzas’s (1978, p. 106) critique of the ‘inter-individual’ conception of power.

There are at least five problems in the mainstream literature on power which impair its usefulness for a theory of economic power. The first is the individualist social ontology just mentioned. The second is the tendency to assume that power has a *dyadic* form, as Thomas E. Wartenberg formulates it in his clear-sighted critique of mainstream theories of power. This means that power ‘is “located” within a dyad consisting of a dominant agent and a subordinate agent over whom he wields power’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 141). The problem with this conception—epitomised in the definition of power as a relation between an *A* and a *B*—is that it ignores how ‘the power dyad is itself *situated* in the context of other social relations through which it is actually constituted as a power relationship’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 142; see also Adams, 1975, p. 9ff; Malm, 2016, p. 314). If there is such a thing as an economic power which has its source in the ability to control the *material conditions of social reproduction*, we can immediately see how a dyadic conception of power would make such a form of power invisible.

Third, mainstream theories of power generally share the assumption that power is ‘something that is exercised in discrete interactions between social agents’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 65). This ‘interventional model’, as Wartenberg calls it, is often the result of an empiricist methodology where power can only be an observable causal event (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 66; Isaac, 1987, Chapter 1). Such an empiricism remains trapped in the dyadic model and fails to acknowledge that ‘a particular type of social context can constitute a power relationship between two social agents’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 49; see also Isaac, 1987, pp. 33–40; Layder, 1985).

Fourth, most theories of power assume that the *identity* of the *A*’s and *B*’s involved in a power relationship is entirely unrelated to this relation. Again, it is Wartenberg who puts it succinctly: ‘power is conceptualized as something that exists only within specific events that take place between two *independently constituted* agents’ (1990, p. 69. *Emphasis added*). The possibility that the very *A*-ness of *A* might be at least partly the result of a power relationship is precluded from the beginning, and, as will become clear in chapter three, this is a deeply inadequate assumption.

The fifth problem has to do with the *locus* of power. Mainstream theories of power tend to accept the familiar division of society into the state, the economy and the social, and this leaves a clear mark on their conceptions of power. Political scientists generally take the state to be the paradigmatic locus of power, and the more sociologically orientated scholars tend to form their understanding of power on the model of inter-subjective relations or

non-economic social action. The result is that the economy as a sphere of power is systematically occluded.

Given these five problematic tendencies in mainstream theories of power, it is not surprising that their attempts to conceptualise economic power leaves much to be desired. Following the emerging orthodoxy in economics, Weber (1978, p. 943) understood ‘economic power’ as a deviation from the logic of the market, i.e., as a result of monopoly. John Scott (2001, p. 71ff) follows Weber in regarding economic power as simply a question of the *amount* of financial resources owned or controlled by a social agent. Dennis H. Wrong (2009, p. 44) argues that economic power is ‘authority based on inducement, or the offering of *rewards* for compliance with a command rather threatening deprivations’. With reference to Marx, he argues that a situation where ‘one party controls the means of subsistence necessary for the very survival of the other party’ is not a case of ‘authority based on inducement’; it is rather an example of ‘coercive authority’ based on the threat of violence (Wrong, 2009, pp. 44f, 41). In Wrong’s terminology, coercive authority is the characteristic form of *state* power, and so his conceptual constructions completely blur the difference between state power and the privatised power of capital within the economic sphere. In order for this peculiar conceptual matrix to make sense, Wrong must assume that the power of capital as described by Marx is an ‘extreme’ case. He claims that ‘[a]uthority by inducement [i.e., economic power] falls between two poles on a continuum: the classical relationship of economic exchange between equals in the market on the one hand, and coercive authority based on ‘wage slavery’ on the other’ (Wrong, 2009, p. 44). Wrong thus reproduces the ideological representation of the market as a sphere free of domination. In chapter three we will see why ‘the classical relationship of economic exchange between equals in the market’ is nothing but the form of appearance of ‘wage slavery’; rather than extremes at different ends of a continuum, they are two sides of the same coin.

It is not uncommon to come across references to Marx in debates on power in social sciences. Some scholars completely dismiss him, usually on very dubious grounds; Talcott Parsons, for example, regards Marx’s critique of capitalism simply as a piece of outdated, empiricist political economy (Parsons, 1994, pp. 108ff, 489). Others are more sympathetic. Most of them share two misunderstandings about Marx’s conception of power. First, they project an economistic conception of economy onto Marx. The most well-known example is Weber’s rejection of Marx’s allegedly economic

reductionism.³ Another example is Richard W. Miller's self-professed Marxist analysis of power, which begins from the assumption that 'power' has to do with 'politics'—an assumption which then leads Miller to look for Marx's understanding of power in the so-called 'political writings', while completely ignoring the critique of political economy (1984, Chapters 3, 4). The second misunderstanding prevalent in this literature is the reduction of Marx's analysis of relations of power and domination in capitalism to a question of *class domination*. Steven Lukes claims that for Marxists, power is 'at root, class power' (Lukes, 2004, p. 144). Wartenberg (1990, p. 120) likewise reduces 'Marx's view of domination' to question of class domination, as do Miller (1984) and Wrong (2009, pp. 90, 254). Although Jeffrey C. Isaac's attempt to construct a Marxist theory of power contains many valuable insights, he ultimately commits the same mistake; according to him, 'the primary object of explanation' for a Marxist theory of power is 'class relations under capitalism', and, in accordance with this, he argues that the most important concepts of such a theory are 'class, class domination, class struggle, capitalist state' (Isaac, 1987, p. 109f). The same is true of the work of Nicos Poulantzas (1978, p. 99), Bob Jessop (2012) and countless other Marxist attempts to intervene in the debates about the concept of power. Marx's analysis of power in capitalism is thus reduced to a question of the existence of a social elite with the ability to dominate workers in the workplace and influence the actions of the state, and there are no attempts to engage with Marx's analysis of how class structure is connected with the underlying logic of capital. What is worse, however, is that these authors ignore one of the most crucial aspects of Marx's analysis, namely that there exists forms of power which derives from *intra-class relations* and therefore cannot be reduced to forms of class domination. These I will examine in chapter four.

CAPITAL

The fact that many theories of power rely on a poor notion of agency does not, however, exclude the possibility that power does presupposes agency. Perhaps we just need a better concept of agency, one that would allow us to regard capital as a social agent? We could, for example, look to Latourian Actor-Network Theory, Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology or

³ See also Wrong (2009, p. 90). Weber's straw man critique is repeated by Michael Mann (1997, pp. 12, 24; see also Callinicos, 2004, p. xxxix). For critiques of Weber, see Clarke (1991a, Chapter 8) and Wood (2016, Chapter 5).

other strands of so-called New Materialism and their insistence that ‘non-human objects are crucial political actors’ (Harman, 2018, p. 146). Despite Harman’s and Latour’s animosity towards Marxism, a concept of agency as broad as theirs could easily accommodate capital. The problem with this deflation of the concept of agency, however, is that it obscures the difference between the natural and the social—a distinction which is, as Andreas Malm (2018c) has convincingly argued in his critique of New Materialism, absolutely crucial to hold on to. The Latourian concept of agency as ‘making a difference’ is, in other words, *too broad* (Latour quoted in Malm, 2018c, p. 89).

What about the idea that capital is a *subject* in a Hegelian sense, then? Is this what we need in order to forge a conceptual link between *power* and *capital*? Marx often refers to value circulating in the form of capital as a ‘subject’.⁴ His description of capital as an ‘automatic subject’ is often accepted at face value, for example by Werner Bonefeld (2014, p. 43), Michael Heinrich (1999a, p. 252, 2012a, p. 89), Helmut Reichelt (1973, p. 76), Anselm Jappe (2005, p. 83), Robert Kurz (2012, p. 33), Jacques Cammatte (2011, p. 379ff), Moishe Postone (2003, p. 75) and Chris Arthur (2004b, p. 117). As several scholars have demonstrated, however, Marx’s use of the phrase ‘automatic subject’ is intended to point out the *fetishistic appearance* of capital on the surface of the capitalist economy and *not* its inner nature.⁵ When Marx employs this expression, he is always referring to either capital ‘as it immediately appears in the sphere of circulation’ (C1: 257) or to interest-bearing capital, i.e., the ‘most estranged and peculiar form’ of capital (M: 896). What is characteristic about both of these forms is that they obscure the origin of surplus value, which is why the valorisation of value ‘appears to derive from occult qualities that are inherent in capital itself’ (M: 98).⁶ When Marx refers to capital as an ‘automatic subject’, ‘*self-moving substance*’ or ‘*self-valorising value*’, he is describing a *fetishistic* inversion, not the actual functioning of capital (C1: 256; M: 492; emphasis added).⁷

⁴ See, for example, G: 266, 311, 470, 585, 620, 745f; 30: 12f, 17; 33: 91; M: 494; II.6: 53; C1: 255.

⁵ See Brentel (1989, p. 267f), Elbe (2008), Harvey (2010, p. 90), Rakowitz & Behre (2001) and Reitter (2015c, p. 15).

⁶ See also 33: 71, 74; M: 492, 500, 896; C1: 256. Marx deleted the word ‘subject’ from chapter four of *Capital* in the French edition (II.7: 123f).

⁷ This touches upon the question of the meaning of *appearance* in Marx’s writings. As has been pointed out many times, Marx often employs this concept in the

Of course, Marx might have been wrong when he rejected the idea that capital is a subject. There is indeed, as several commentators have noted, a strong similarity between the logic of capital and Hegel's concept of subjectivity—a similarity which goes beyond fetishistic appearances.⁸ For Hegel, subjectivity is *self-relating negativity* or 'the 'I's pure reflection into itself', which is tantamount to the ability 'to abstract from everything [...] to extinguish all particularity, all determinacy' (Hegel, 2003, p. 38f; Henrich, 2008, p. 290). The subject posits itself by externalising itself, only in order to sublimate this difference—it is 'the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its anti-thesis [*Gegensatzes*]' (Hegel, 1977, p. 10). Gaining status as a subject in this sense is precisely what is at stake in the struggle of life and death in the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; each consciousness must demonstrate that it is 'the pure negation of its objective mode' (Hegel, 1977, p. 113). Marx was deeply influenced by this concept of subjectivity. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, he lauded Hegel's 'dialectic of negativity', which 'conceives the self-creation of the human being as a process, conceives objectification as de-objectification, as externalisation and sublation of this externalisation' (3: 332f).⁹ At the same time, Marx of course also criticises Hegel's idealist understanding of this dialectic of negativity, which equals labour with *intellectual* labour (3: 333). In the theses on Feuerbach, Marx radicalises the critique of idealism, but he holds on to the idealist emphasis on 'the *active* side' of human existence which 'all previous materialism' had neglected (5: 3; Balibar, 2014, p. 25ff). To cut a long story short: Rather than rejecting Hegel's notion of subjectivity *in toto*, Marx extracts its essential core and detaches it from its idealist shell by reconceptualising it as a social, material and productive practice (Power, 2007, p. 67f).

Hegelian sense of a *real* and *necessary*—though potentially obscuring—reflection of essence. This is the case, for example, when he refers to profit as 'the form of appearance of surplus value' (M: 98). In other cases, however, it simply signals an *ideological mystification*, as when he writes that social relations 'appear as eternal natural relations' (33: 71). I have written about the meaning of 'appearance' in Marx's writings elsewhere (Mau, 2018a, p. 106f). In the descriptions of capital quoted in this paragraph, Marx uses 'appearance' in the sense of ideological mystification.

⁸ See Murray (1990, p. 216f), Postone (2003, p. 75), Reichelt (1973, p. 76), Žižek (2009, p. 28f). For a discussion of this analogy, see Engster (2014, p. 95ff).

⁹ The translation of this passage in the MECW is very unfortunate.

The resemblance between capital and the subject in this Hegelian sense comes out very clearly in Marx's analysis of capital. Capital is fundamentally a *movement*, or 'value-in-process' (30: 12). The beginning and the end of this movement are qualitatively identical: value 'enters into a private relationship with itself' (C1: 256), and the being of value is thereby elevated from being-for-others—i.e., being-for-consumption in the case of simple circulation (C-M-C)—to 'being-for-itself' (G: 452). In contradistinction to the 'concept-less form' [*begriffslose Form*]¹⁰ of interest-bearing capital (M-M'), capital proper establishes its 'identity with itself' by relating itself to *an other* in the form of the mediating C in the middle (M: 493; C1: 255). In so far as the doubling of the commodity into commodity and money is an externalisation of the dual nature of the commodity (C1: 153), capital posits a difference *as well as* sublimate it: the universalisation of the commodity form necessarily leads to the 'autonomisation' of value in money, and it is precisely this doubling which makes it possible for commodities and money to circulate in the form of capital. When they *do* circulate in the form M-C-M', however, their difference and the change of forms [*Formwechsel*] are reduced to subordinate moments of the process through which value affirms itself as 'the essence which remains equal to itself' [*das sich gleichbleibende Wesen*] (G: 312). Capital sustains itself by means of its constant change of form and its continuous movement through the spheres of circulation and production. With capital, the entry of money into the sphere of circulation – that is, the act of *buying*, or *giving up* the money for a commodity – is merely 'a moment of its staying-with-itself' [*Beisichbleiben*] (G: 234). It *stays with itself by renouncing itself*. By performing this deeply tautological movement, capital constantly re-establishes the conditions of its own repetition: it contains what Marx calls 'the principle of self-renewal' (29: 480), or, in Hegelian terms, it 'posits' its own presuppositions (G: 542). By transforming the circulation of commodities and money into this spiral-like form, capital transcends the 'bad infinite process' (G: 197) of simple circulation (C-M-C) into a self-referential infinity (C1: 253). As a social *form*, capital is completely indifferent to its *content*; the only thing that counts, is whether value can be valorised or not (G: 452). In this sense, the self-relating movement of capital is truly a self-relating *negativity*: it negates any particular content by transforming it into real abstractions in order to absorb it into the vortex of value.

¹⁰ Mistakenly translated as 'irrational' in the English translation of the 1864-65 *Manuscript*. For Marx's own explanation of what 'concept-less' mean, see II.11: 582.

On the basis of this structural similarity, Moishe Postone (2003, p. 75) proclaims capital to be a ‘historical Subject in the Hegelian sense’. In contrast to Hegel’s subject, however, capital is ‘historically determinate and blind’. While it is ‘self-reflexive’, it ‘does not possess self-consciousness’ (Postone, 2003, p. 77). Chris Arthur argues that the crux of the matter is capital’s ability to transform heterogeneous commodities into bearers of surplus value; it is this ‘capacity to range things under their universal concept’ which justifies the categorisation of capital as a subject (Arthur, 2004a, p. 95f, 2004b, Chapter 8; see also Bellofiore, 2009, p. 180ff). *Contra* Postone, Arthur (2004a, p. 96) also attributes *consciousness* to capital in the form of its *personifications*, i.e., as capitalists. Stavros Tombazos (2014, p. 80) goes even further and claims that ‘capital must be understood as a living organism endowed with a body (use-value) and a soul (value), its own will and logic (profit, expanded reproduction, and so on)’. Similar interpretations of capital as an absolute and omnipotent subject are defended by Robert Kurz (2012), Anselm Jappe (2005) and Jacques Cammatte (2011).

I do not find these attempts to conceptualise capital as a subject convincing. One reason is that capital is *bound to do certain things* in a way that a subject—at least in the Hegelian sense—is *not*. For Hegel, subjectivity involves the potential suspension of *all* determinacy. This is why natural consciousness must engage in a struggle of life and death; it must show ‘that it is not attached to any determinate *being-there* [*Dasein*]’, not even to *life* (Hegel, 1977, p. 113). Capital is not like that; even though it does exhibit a dynamic very similar to the self-relating negativity of the subject, it is always bound to pursue the same action: to valorise value. Capital does not possess the kind of irreducible freedom implied by Hegel’s conception of subjectivity—if it ceases to do what it does, it ceases to *be*. It cannot veer off course, even when it *partially* negates itself in order to preserve itself as a totality, which is what happens in crises (more on this in chapter six). Another reason why I think we should discard the notion of capital as a subject is the inextricable tie between capital and its underlying social relations and practices. Capital is *value* in motion, and *value* is a *social relation* which gains an *autonomous form* in money, thereby making it possible for it to circulate in the form of capital. Capital is a ‘fixation of social activity’ or a ‘consolidation of what we ourselves produce into a material power above us’ (5: 47; I.5: 37). The ‘power of money’, Marx and Engels explain in *The German Ideology*, reveals ‘the autonomisation of relations of production’ (5: 396; I.5: 453; see also G: 471; 34: 128). Capital is a process consisting of a purchase and a sale, and as

Marx observes, '[c]ommodities cannot themselves go to the market and perform exchanges', which is why 'their guardians' must be mobilised if value is to be valorised (C1: 178). Capital *is* labour and can never free itself from the subjective praxis that undergird it.

My disagreement with Postone and Arthur is partly—though not only—a matter of emphasis and terminological preferences. Arthur (2004a, p. 99) acknowledges that capital 'presupposes both labour and nature as conditions of its existence'. Postone (2003, p. 76) also admits that capital 'consists of objectified relations', which leads Callinicos (2014, p. 219) to conclude that with Postone, 'subject' is simply 'reinterpreted as structure'. Similar considerations lead Tony Smith (2009b, p. 124) to call capital a 'pseudo-subject', and Helmut Brentel (1989, p. 268) to call it a 'quasi-subject'. Another way to conceptualise this 'autonomisation' of social relations is by means of the concept of *emergence*. An emergent property is, as Malm (2018c, p. 67) explains, 'a property of the system *resulting from the organisation of its parts*'. Emergent properties are irreducible to their parts and 'exert causal powers in their own right' (Malm, 2018c, p. 163; see also Bhaskar, 2008, p. 373). This seems to me to capture Marx's apt description of capital as 'the existence of social labour [...] as itself existing independently opposite its real moments—hence itself a *particular* existence apart from them' (G: 471). Conceptualising capital as an emergent property of social relations thus allows us to avoid the hyperbolic and ultimately unconvincing conception of capital as a living subject endowed with consciousness, will and intentionality, while still holding on to the crucial insight that it does indeed exert causal power in its own right.

So, capital is neither a social agent in the sense in which mainstream theories of power would require it to be nor a subject in a materialist-Hegelian sense. Does that mean that we are forced to relinquish the notion of 'the power of capital'? I do not think so; what we should do is rather to question the assumption that power presupposes agency or subjectivity. In other words, we need to broaden the concept of power—but how much exactly? In its most general sense, power is simply 'the production of causal effects' (J. Scott, 2001, p. 1). In this broad sense, power also refers to natural processes; we speak of the power of gravity, of horse power or of electric power, to give just a few examples. Scholars writing about power usually mention this in order to specify that they are exclusively concerned with *social* power, and then proceed to define the latter in terms of relations between social agents (Lukes, 2004, p. 61f; J. Scott, 2001, p. 1; Wartenberg, 1990, p. 3;

Wrong, 2009, p. 1). This is the point where we should intervene—not in order to obliterate the difference between *natural* and *social* power, which is indeed crucial to hold on to, but rather in order to question the arbitrary constriction of the concept of power to refer exclusively to relations among social agents. The problem with such a constricted use is that it creates an artificial conceptual cleavage between social relations and their emergent properties. In order to avoid this, I will use the concept of power to refer to relations among social agents *as well as* the emergent properties of these relations. These emergent properties are purely social, but they cannot be grasped as relations among social *agents*, even though the latter are necessary conditions of their existence. The *power of capital* thus refers to *capital's ability to subsume social life under its logic*. This power *includes* and ultimately *relies upon* relations among social agents in a traditional sense, such as the relation between the capitalist class and the proletariat or the relation between an employer and an employee, but it not *reducible* to these relations. As I will explain in detail in later chapters, capitalist social relations give rise to distinctive mechanisms by which the logic of capital imposes itself on *all* social agents.

Before I move on to a consideration of how the Marxist tradition has handled the issue of power, I would like to add a terminological clarification. In the literature on power, one often comes across distinctions between *power* and *domination*. In this scheme, which goes back to Weber, *power* is understood either in a very broad sense as the capacity of an agent to influence its environment (regardless of whether it involves the subjection of other agents) or in a sense that also encompasses forms of power acknowledged as *legitimate* (sometimes called *authority*). *Domination*, on the other hand, is taken to be a more specific form of power which involves some kind of conflict between the principal and the subaltern, to use Scott's (2001, p. 2) terms. This distinction sometimes overlaps with another common distinction: that of *power to*, i.e., the capacity to do something, and *power over*, i.e., the capacity to subjugate someone. While these distinctions might be useful in some contexts, they are irrelevant for my purposes for the simple reason that the *power* of capital always involves and relies on *domination*. Put differently, the 'power to' of capital is always a 'power over'.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

No other intellectual tradition has posed the question of the power of capital as persistently as Marxism. Marxists have always understood capitalism as an oppressive system based on the exploitation and domination of the working class. Despite this point of departure, the Marxist attempts to explain how capital holds on to its power generally leaves much to be desired, at least in the literature prior to the 1960s, where the proliferation of Marxist theory produced several new tendencies and perspectives which overcame some of the crucial weaknesses of traditional Marxism. I will come back to these more recent trends in Marxist scholarship later in this chapter, but for now I want to take a look at how traditional Marxists (mis)understood the power of capital.

The so-called ‘materialist conception of history’ was without a doubt one of the most impairing complex of idea in the Marxism of the Second International era. Developed by Engels and consorts (especially Karl Kautsky) in the decades following Marx’s death, it offered a philosophy of history solidly grounded in a technicist conception of the economy. Its founding document was Marx’s 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which was lauded as a ‘brilliant and monumental’ (Bukharin, 1933) exposition of ‘the fundamental principles of materialism as applied to human society and its history’ (Lenin, 1914).¹¹ In this text, Marx explains how ‘the economic structure of society’ forms the basis of ‘a legal and political superstructure’ as well as corresponding ‘forms of social consciousness’. He also claims that at some point in the history of a mode of production, ‘the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production’, thereby inaugurating ‘an era of social revolution’ (29: 263). Another *locus classicus* routinely cited by classical Marxists was a remark from *The Poverty of Philosophy* according to which the ‘hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist’ (6: 166). In influential writings such as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), Engels codified this materialist conception of history, according to which ‘the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought,

¹¹ Antonio Labriola, Eduard Bernstein and Franz Mehring agreed that it contained ‘the directing principles of the materialistic interpretation of history’ (Labriola, 2005), ‘the Marxist philosophy of history’ (Bernstein, 1961, p. 3) and ‘the law of motion of human history’ (Mehring, 1975). It was later canonised by Stalin as an exposition of ‘the essence of historical materialism’ (Stalin, 1938).

not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange' (24: 306).¹²

The doctrine of historical materialism was further developed by influential Marxists such as Karl Kautsky, Franz Mehring and Georgi Plekhanov. The economy, conceived as a distinct social sphere, was proclaimed to be the basis or infrastructure and thus primary in relation to the ideological, political and legal superstructures. This basis was a 'mode of production', a totality made up of the (unstable) unity of two moments: the productive forces and the relations of production. Historical development was then conceived as a succession of modes of production driven forward by a dialectic of productive forces and relations of production. The contradiction between these arises because of the immanent and necessary progress of technology, conceived as a transhistorical force necessarily colliding with the historically specific social relations attempting to contain it. Historical materialism was thus a determinist philosophy of history in which historically specific social formations were, in the last instance, reduced to a stage in the unfolding of a transhistorical technological rationality. 'The productive forces at man's disposal determine all his social relations', as Plekhanov put it (1971, p. 115). Kautsky likewise held the '*development of technology*' to be 'the motor of social development', providing a scientific basis for proletarian struggle: 'with the progress of technology not only the material means are born that make socialism possible but also the driving forces that bring it about. This driving force is the proletarian class struggle [...] It must finally be victorious due to the continuous progress of technology' (Kautsky, 1929).

The determinism of historical materialism was exacerbated by scientific positivism. In the preface to *A Contribution*, Marx had claimed that economic analysis could be conducted with 'the precision of natural science'. In the preface to *Capital* he had written about the 'iron necessity' of 'the natural laws of capitalist production' (C1: 91). Marx's understanding of nature was shaped in a context influenced by German Idealism which saw no

¹² Recall that many of Marx's writings were unavailable to the first generation of Marxists—not only because many of them had not been published at all, but also because many of those published in Marx's own lifetime were not reprinted until well into the 20th century (Leopold, 2007, pp. 1–5). In addition to this, Marx 'was read mainly by movement intellectuals' (Eley, 2002, p. 43). Among the most widely read works in the era of the Second International were Engels's *Socialism: Scientific and Utopian*, August Bebel's *Woman under Socialism* and Kautsky's *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* (Eley, 2002, Chapter 2; Vogel, 2014, p. 100).

opposition between speculative philosophy and natural science (Foster & Burkett, 2000). By the time these remarks were taken up by the early Marxists, the intellectual milieu had changed. Speculative *Naturphilosophie* had been replaced with empirical science, and nature had come to mean an ‘objective’ world outside of human thought ruled by transhistorical laws. At Marx’s funeral, Engels famously likened Marx to Darwin. While the latter had ‘discovered the law of development of organic nature on our planet’, Marx was cast as ‘the discoverer of the fundamental law according to which history moves’ (24: 463). This was picked up by Kautsky, who pushed historical materialism further in the direction of an evolutionist philosophy of history. In this context, Marx’s remarks about the ‘natural laws’ of capitalism was taken as a justification of the introduction of a positivist paradigm for social science (Elbe, 2008, p. 14ff; Eley, 2002, p. 45; Foster, 2000, p. 231; Kolakowski, 1990, p. 32).¹³

THE STATE

Productive force determinism precluded the development of an understanding of the economic power of capital for the simple reason that economic relations were seen as the result of a transhistorical technological drive rather than struggles about power and domination.¹⁴ This does not mean that classical Marxists considered the capitalist economy to be free of domination; even if they regarded the rule of the bourgeoisie as the outcome of a necessary development of the productive forces, they still saw the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as a relation of domination. In their attempts to come to grips with this domination they tended to regard the state and its means of violent oppression as the ultimate locus of capitalist power. Even those who rejected orthodox productive force determinism accepted the reified opposition between *politics* and *economy*, in which the latter was emptied of social content (Clarke, 1991a, p. 309; Henning, 2015, p. 42ff). Power was thus understood as something that had to do with *the state*, understood as an ‘instrument’ of the bourgeoisie—a critique limited to the

¹³ Labriola is a partial exception. A professional philosopher and well versed in Hegel, he rejected the orthodox version of historical materialism, including its scientism and its determinism (see Kolakowski, 1990, Chapter VIII).

¹⁴ For critical discussions of the shortcomings of traditional historical materialism, see Bensaïd (2009, Chapters 1–2), Callinicos (2004), Colletti (1973, pt. 1), Elbe (2013), Foster (2000, p. 226ff), Gunn (1992), Malm (2016), Rigby (1998), Schmidt (1983) and Wood (2016, pt. 1).

content of policy and state-action rather than the *form* of the state (Elbe, 2013; Holloway & Picciotto, 1978a, p. 1).

The tendency to ignore mechanisms of power embedded in the economy and take the control over the state to be the primary means of capitalist class domination was also a result of the idea—almost universally accepted amongst classical Marxists—that capitalism had entered a *monopoly* stage distinct from the *competitive* capitalism of Marx’s time. According to Rudolf Hilferding (1981) and Lenin (2010), the capitalist economies of the early 20th century had become dominated by large monopolies engaged in imperialist exploitation through a fusion of finance capital and the state. The rule of the bourgeoisie was now ensured by a ‘capitalist oligarchy’ controlling the state (Henning, 2015, p. 109ff). Lenin detected a ‘personal union’ between the banks, the monopolies and the state, resulting in a ‘sort of division of labour amongst some hundreds kings of finance who reign over modern capitalist society’ (Lenin, 2010, p. 47). The concentration and centralisation of capital, and the pressure to expand it, had, so Hilferding and Lenin argued, led to an amalgamation of finance-controlled monopolies and of the state, in order to secure new outlets for capital through imperialism. In other words, state monopoly capitalism had become the order of the day. The ‘blatant seizure of the state by the capitalist class’ had led to a replacement of the anarchy of competition with the planned production of the monopolies (Hilferding, 1981, p. 368). Marx’s analysis of capitalism—or at least parts of it, and especially the theory of value—was consequently considered obsolete, as it described a supposedly bygone form of capitalism. This kind of analysis had tremendous consequences as to how the power of capital was understood. First, capital’s ability to reproduce its sway over society was now seen as a result of the *absence* of competition, and second, it was primarily guaranteed by the ability of the state to employ violence in order to subjugate subaltern nations and secure profitable outlets for the export of capital. In addition to this, the power of capital was reduced to the power of financial oligarchs. Here is Lenin in *State and Revolution*:

Imperialism in particular—the era of banking capital, the era of gigantic capitalist monopolies, the era of the transformation of monopoly capitalism into state monopoly-capitalism—shows an unprecedented strengthening of the “state machinery” and an unprecedented growth of its bureaucratic and military apparatuses, side by side with the

increase of repressive measures against the proletariat, alike in the monarchical and the freest republican countries. (Lenin, 2012, p. 29)

In short, the picture of capitalist power painted by Lenin and Hilferding is dominated by militarism, violence and corruption. This is certainly a reflection of their historical context, but this does not change the fact that it made them incapable of grasping the mute compulsion of economic relations which reproduce the power of capital, even in the *absence* of corruption and violence.

In 1966, Paul A. Baran and Paul Sweezy published their immensely influential *Monopoly Capital*. Although they departed from Lenin and Hilferding in many respects, their analysis was basically an updated version of the same idea: capitalism had undergone a transformation from a competitive to a monopolistic form. Marx had based his analysis of capitalism on a competitive model, and for this reason, it was now obsolete. The theory of monopoly capital has—in its older as well as its more recent versions—been criticised from various points of view on both conceptual and empirical grounds. Several commentators have pointed out that the analysis relies on a conflation of Marx’s concept of competition with that of neoclassical economics and a projection of the latter onto the capitalist economy of the 19th century (Harvey, 2006, p. 142ff; Shaik, 2016, p. 355; Zeluck, 1980; Zoninsein, 1990, p. 20). This led to an all too abstract opposition between competition and monopoly, which ignored that capitalism is characterised by the ‘dynamic interaction’ between the ‘constant struggle for monopoly position and the constant *loss* of that monopoly position through competition’, as Steve Zeluck (1980, p. 45) puts it. Furthermore, the elimination of *intra*-branch competition does not mean that *inter*-branch competition thereby also disappears. David Harvey has also criticised the monopoly capital analysis on the basis of an important observation regarding changes in structures of management in large, monopolistic corporations. As he explains with reference to Alfred Chandler’s (2002) classic study of the history of American firms, ‘what appears on the outside as a steady and seemingly irreversible movement towards centralisation has been accompanied by a progressive, controlled decentralization in the structure of management’ (Harvey, 2006, p. 148). This means that the formation of monopolies is actually compatible with a kind of ‘internalization of competition’ (Harvey, 2006, p. 148) through decentralisation of management. For this reason, monopoly is not equivalent to a lessening of competition—it can also signal a

change in the *form* of competition. In addition to these theoretical problems, critics have also pointed out that the theory of monopoly capitalism stands on shaky empirical grounds. According to Christoph Henning (2015, p. 109) and Michael Heinrich (2012a, p. 215f), Lenin and Hilferding's analysis rested on insufficient data, and Robert Brenner (2006, p. 54) argues that Baran and Sweezy generalised some 'quite *temporary* and specific aspects of the economy of the US in the 1950s'. Baran and Sweezy's book was written in the 1950s and published in 1966, just as the *intensification* of competition on the world market was beginning to unravel the post-war boom and usher in the neoliberal era of crisis. The loss of popularity that the concept of monopoly capitalism has experienced in the last four decades is most likely not unrelated to the advent of neoliberalism which has consistently led to an intensification of competitive pressures. The deregulation of international trade and finance as well as the development of new communication technologies and the revolution in logistics have all contributed to the globalisation and intensification of competition. The collapse of the Eastern bloc, the integration of China into the capitalist world market and the wave of structural adjustments in the Global South have opened up vast new fields for capital to enmesh itself into. The transition from the vertically integrated corporations, characteristic of the Fordist era, to the horizontally integrated networks of lean production has also contributed to the intensification of competition, as has the consistent waves of privatisation and outsourcing of state functions in what was once called welfare states. In short, there are many good reasons for the idea of monopoly capitalism to seem so unconvincing in the current conjuncture.¹⁵

The shortcomings of the theory of monopoly capitalism inhibited the acknowledgement of the economic power of capital and led to a one-sided focus on the state and a simplistic model of class domination. In brief, the theory replaced the mute compulsion of capital with the violent regime of a 'personal union' in control of the state.

Productive force determinism and the base-superstructure model continued to haunt Marxist debates about the state until the 1970s, where scholars such as Nicos Poulantzas (1978, 2014), Ellen Meiksins Wood (2016, Chapter 1), members of the Conference on Socialist Economics (see Clarke, 1991b) and participants in the German state derivation debate (see Holloway &

¹⁵ For attempts to uphold the question, see the work of John Bellamy Foster and other members of the Monthly Review school (e.g. Foster & McChesney, 2012; Foster, McChesney, & Jonna, 2011).

Picciotto, 1978b; Elbe, 2008, Chapter 2) parted ways with orthodox Marxism and opened up new theoretical perspectives. They all attempted to carve out a path between the crude instrumentalism of classical Marxism and the social democratic view of the state as a neutral arena, and many of them did so by moving beyond the exclusive occupation with the *content* of state policy, i.e., the question of who benefits from this policy. Instead, they posed the more fundamental question of the very *form* of the state, a question which was aptly formulated by Evgeny B. Pashukanis (1983, p. 139) as early as 1924:

[w]hy does class rule not remain what it is, the factual subjugation of one section of the population by the other? Why does it assume the form of official state rule, or—which is the same thing—why does the machinery of state coercion not come into being as the private machinery of the ruling class; why does it detach itself from the ruling class and take on the form of an impersonal apparatus of public power, separate from society?

Such an approach allows us to circumvent the artificial conceptual gulf between the *economic* and the *political* taken for granted in both classical Marxism and Poulantzas's Althusserian social ontology, in which the base-superstructure-model and the distinction between an economic and a political 'level' or 'instance' was supposed to be a feature of *all* modes of production (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 13). In an important contribution to these debates, Wood demonstrated the inadequacy of the base-superstructure-model and suggested to conceptualise the separation of the political and the economic in capitalism as 'the differentiation of political functions themselves and their separate allocation to the private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state' (Wood, 2016, p. 31). Bernhard Blanke, Ulrich Jürgens and Hans Kastendiek likewise rejected 'the commonplace (scientific) notion of the relation between politics and economics [that] contains the assumption that only politics has to do with domination, that economics on the other hand has to do with "material laws"' (Blanke, Jürgens, & Kastendiek, 1978, p. 121f). In general, the participants in the state-derivation debate proceeded from 'an interpretation of Marx's *Capital* not as a theory of the 'economic' but as a theory of the social relations of capitalist society', in the words of Simon Clarke (1991c, p. 9). This acknowledgement of the *social* nature of

the political *and* the economic is a fundamental prerequisite not only of a theory of economic power but also of a theory of the state.

The most sophisticated attempts to come up with an answer to Pashukanis's question were developed in German state-derivation debates, where a number of scholars carefully demonstrated how capitalist relations of production presuppose the existence of an institution not directly involved in the organisation of social reproduction and endowed with the ability to 'force the totality', as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse* (G: 531). For example, it can be shown that the universalisation of the 'cell-form' of capitalism (C1: 90), i.e., the commodity, presupposes an institution with the ability to guarantee property rights. Furthermore, the separation of the units of production into competing capitals makes it impossible for these capitals individually to secure the *general conditions* of production as a totality, and for this reason capitalist production presupposes an institution with the ability to secure these conditions (such as infrastructure, currency, education, research etc.) by imposing certain rules on *all* capitals.¹⁶ Joachim Hirsch (1978, p. 97f) phrases it well: 'The bourgeois state is in its specific historical shape a social form which capital must necessarily create for its own reproduction, and, just as necessarily, the state apparatus must assume an existence formally separated from the ruling class, the bourgeoisie'.

For our purposes, the decisive lesson from these debates is that the organisation of social reproduction on the basis of the valorisation of value presupposes an institution formally separated from the immediate processes of social production endowed with the capacity to enforce rules upon everyone by means of coercive force. I agree with Max Weber, Nicos Poulantzas, Joachim Hirsch and others that *violence* is the distinctive form of power pertaining to the state (Hirsch, 1978, pp. 62, 65; Poulantzas, 1978, p. 225ff, 2014, p. 80; Blanke et al., 1978, p. 124; Wood, 2016, p. 32). This is important for the theory of the economic power of capital since it reveals how the mute compulsion of capital presupposes the coercive force of the state. State violence is not only one of the means by which the conditions of capital-accumulation were originally established, it also continues to be a necessary moment of the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production. Despite this necessity, it remains the case that social production under capitalism is organised by means of the mute compulsion of capital. 'The

¹⁶ See Braunnühl, Funken, Cogoy & Hirsch (1973), Clarke (1991c), Elbe (2008, Chapter 2), Heinrich (2012a, p. 203ff), Holloway & Picciotto (1978b), Läßle (1973).

movement of value as material-economic nexus represents’, in the words of Blanke, Jürgens and Kastendiek, ‘a type of societization free from personal, physical force’ (Blanke et al., 1978, p. 122). In capitalism, the social regulation of economic activity is, as Wood puts it, ‘privatized’. This privatisation results in the emergence of ‘the development of a new sphere of power’, and in order to theorise this sphere of power, we need a theory of economic power alongside the theory of the state (Wood, 2016, pp. 29, 31).

IDEOLOGY

Apart from theories of the state, the most persistent preoccupation with the question of power in the Marxist tradition is found in theories of ideology.¹⁷ In the Marxism of the Second International era the term ‘ideology’ was often used in the broad sense of ‘any kind of socially determined thought’ (Eagleton, 1996, p. 89; Rehmann, 2013, Chapters 2, 3). Here, however, I am only interested in ideology in so far as it refers ‘not only to belief systems, but to questions of *power*’ (Eagleton, 1996, p. 5). Theories of ideology in this sense began to pop up in the 1920s in response to two problems. On a theoretical level, classical Marxism—which was in the process of degenerating into Marxism-Leninism—had, as we have just seen, focused excessively on the state and neglected the role of ideology. On a conjunctural level, the mobilisation of the working classes of Europe as soldiers in World War I, and the subsequent advent of fascism, called for the development of a theoretical apparatus capable of understanding what was referred to as the ‘subjective factor’, i.e., the question of how it was possible to mobilise proletarians against their ‘objective’ interests. ‘Anyone who underestimates the material power of ideology will never achieve anything’, Wilhelm Reich (1934, p. 28) wrote in 1934—and continued: ‘[i]n our historical period, it has shown itself to be stronger than the power of material distress: otherwise, the workers and the peasants, and not Hitler and Thyssen, would be in power’. In contrast to those who emphasised the coercive power of the state, Reich (1970, p. 25) insisted that ‘[i]t is only seldom that the owners of the social means of production resort to the means of brute violence in the domination of the oppressed classes; its main weapon is its ideological power’.

It was primarily Western Marxists such as Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno and Althusser who responded to the practical and theoretical need for a theory

¹⁷ For an overview of Marxist theories of ideology, see Eagleton (1996) and Rehmann (2013).

of ideology. Although this is a diverse group of thinkers, they shared the basic idea underlying all theories of ideology; that one of the means by which capitalism reproduces itself is through moulding the concepts, imageries, myths and narratives through which we (consciously or unconsciously) represent, interpret and understand social reality. Broadly speaking, ideology addresses how we *think*, and this is why Reich, Gramsci, Althusser and others distinguish it from *violence* or *coercion* which directly addresses the body.

Perry Anderson's category of 'Western Marxism' is often criticised for lumping together very diverse thinkers under a somewhat vague heading. Although I partly agree with this criticism, I nevertheless find the categorisation useful for one specific reason: the general lack of attention to economic power in the works of Western Marxists such as Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Lefebvre, Sartre, Debord and Althusser. It is certainly possible to find partial exceptions, but on the whole, Western Marxism has generally been occupied with other forms of power, especially *ideological power*. Anderson presents the emergence of Western Marxism as a turn to philosophy at the expense of economics, and though this description certainly captures something significant, it implies a problematic subdivision of Marxist theory: Anderson seems to regard Marx's critique of political economy as an economic theory rather than a critical theory of capitalist social relations (and thus a *critique* of economic theory), and this leads him to reproduce the familiar division of Marx's writings into the early 'philosophical' works and the later 'economic' works (P. Anderson, 1987, pp. 49ff, 99, 115f). As I hope will become clear in the course of this thesis, this is an impoverished reading of the critique of political economy, which cannot be opposed to Marx's philosophy. What *is* true in Anderson's account, however, is that Western Marxism failed to engage seriously with the critique of political economy—a failure that was to a large degree a result of their (often implicit) acceptance of the idea that Marx's later writings are concerned with 'economics' and thus only relevant to engage with systematically if one wants to do 'economic theory' or undertake an 'economic analysis' of a concrete situation (Elbe, 2013; Heinrich, 2012a, p. 26; Wood, 2016, p. 6).

The claim that Western Marxists failed to properly appreciate Marx's critique of political economy requires some qualifications. One of Lukács's strengths is his rejection of the interpretation of Marx's later works as a turn away from philosophy (Lukács, 1978, p. 11). His appreciation of the philosophical richness of *Capital* allowed him to develop a highly original reading

of Marx's analysis of the commodity and reach the conclusion that the section on fetishism in the first chapter of *Capital*—which had been virtually ignored until the publication of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923—'contains within itself the whole of historical materialism' (Lukács, 2010, p. 171). Lukács is unfortunately not particularly interested in questions of power; in so far as he discusses it, he is primarily concerned with 'reified consciousness', i.e., ideology.¹⁸ In addition to his preoccupation with aesthetics and methodology, he was chiefly occupied with a Weber-inspired romantic critique of how the 'capitalist process of rationalisation [...] disrupts every organically unified process of work and life and breaks it down into its components' (Lukács, 2010, p. 102f). Weber's influence is also visible in the connection Lukács draws between the critique of fetishism and Weber's 'rationalisation' thesis, according to which modern society is increasingly dominated by instrumental rationality (Clarke, 1991a, p. 315; See also Elbe, 2013). This led Lukács to paradoxically invert the critical insight of Marx's analysis of fetishism, namely that bourgeois society—which conceives of itself as enlightened and free from superstition—treats the products of labour as supernatural entities endowed with their own will; in other words, that capitalism is an *enchanted* rather than a *disenchanted* world.

Karl Korsch is probably the one thinker among the Western Marxists who undertook the most serious engagement with Marx's critique of political economy. In *Karl Marx*—written in German in 1935-36, but originally published in English in 1938—he recognised that Marx's theory of value is not a quantitative theory of prices but is rather intended to reveal 'the real social nature of the *fundamental human relations* underlying the so-called "value" of the classicists' (Korsch, 2017, p. 19). His critique of traditional Marxist orthodoxy in *Marxism and Philosophy* (2013) and his interpretation of the critique of political economy in *Karl Marx* definitely clear some ground for a theory of the economic power of capital, even if he did not himself venture down that road.

Antonio Gramsci is rightfully considered one of the great thinkers of power in the Marxist tradition. His fundamental insight was that the power of the bourgeoisie relied not only on *coercion*, but also—perhaps even primarily so in Western Europe—on the creation of *consent* on the part of the working classes; a consent produced in and through institutions of 'civil society' such as churches, schools and the media. This marks a decisive advance over the state-centric conceptions of power in classical Marxism.

¹⁸ For a good discussion of Lukács on ideology, see Eagleton (1996, pp. 94–106).

According to Anderson's (1976, p. 41) influential reading, Gramsci's main point was that 'the power of capital essentially or exclusively takes the form of cultural hegemony in the West'. In the most common reading of Gramsci, the theory of hegemony is intended as a theory of how the ruling classes maintain their position by means of culture and ideology. He is often charged with neglecting the economy, for example by Anderson (1987, p. 75), who claims that 'Gramsci's silence on economic problems was complete'. In recent years, several scholars have pointed out that Gramsci is more complex than that. Alex Callinicos (2017), Michael R. Krätke (2011) and Peter D. Thomas (2010) have all demonstrated that Gramsci was in fact very attentive to 'economic' questions, and that Gramsci's 'integral concept of civil society' does not, in Thomas's (2010, p. 175) words, exclude 'the economic' but rather insists that it must be 'theorised in *political* terms'; a crucial precondition for a theory of economic power. As Krätke's discussion of the engagement with political economy in the *Prison Notebooks* makes clear, however, Gramsci's knowledge of political economy as well as Marx's critique of it had very clear limits. The same is true of his attempts to analyse the economic structure and dynamics of capitalism. Although he clearly grasps the difference between Ricardo's ahistorical mode of thought and Marx's consistent historicisation of Ricardo's concepts (Gramsci, 2011, p. 308f), he is, as Krätke's (2011, p. 80) puts it, 'not clear about what constitutes the specific difference between Marx's "critical" economics and "classical" economics'. Gramsci seems to think that the theories of Ricardo and Marx are basically variants of the same type of theory, and there is nothing to suggest an awareness on the part of Gramsci of the fundamental difference between their concepts of value.

Similar points can be made about Adorno's critical theory, which is, as Chris O'Kane (2015, p. 191) argues, often misleadingly reduced to 'a totalizing one-dimensional cultural theory'. There is in fact a 'Marxian core of Adorno's late work' which consists in a consistent emphasis on the universal domination of the logic of *exchange* in bourgeois society (O'Kane, 2015, p. 191). This emphasis was an important point of departure for what eventually became the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, but it is also worth noticing that it was the *inadequacy* of Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) engagement with the critique of political economy that spurred his students to embark on the project of reconstructing Marx's critical theory.¹⁹ Adorno's understanding of exchange

¹⁹ See Backhaus (1997, p. 76), Endnotes (2010a, p. 83ff), Hoff (2017, p. 27ff), O'Kane (2015, p. 196f), Reichelt (1982, 2007).

value as a form of *domination* was a crucial step towards a theory of the economic power of capital, but the one-sided emphasis on the implementation of the logic of identity in the sphere of circulation, which he inherited from Alfred Sohn-Rethel, led him to ignore that the exchange of equivalences is only one side of the coin—the other being the appropriation of surplus labour *without* exchange of equivalents (see Hanloser & Reitter, 2008, p. 14f; Klauda, 2015; O’Kane, 2015; Reichelt, 2007). For this reason, Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002, p. 4) claim that ‘[b]ourgeois society is ruled by equivalence’ is quite misleading.

These considerations demonstrate that Western Marxism as a tradition is not completely devoid of attempts to draw on insights from Marx’s critique of political economy. Yet, they also make it clear that these attempts leave much to be desired. The primary contribution of Western Marxists as far as advancing our understanding of the power of capital goes is to be found in their theories and analyses of ideology. To be sure, this is a decisive step forward compared to the state-centric understanding of power in classical Marxism. The rich tradition of theories of ideology has convincingly shown that ideological power is necessary for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. However, it does not tell us much about the mute compulsion of economic relations.

ECONOMIC POWER

On the basis of the survey of Marxist traditions in the preceding pages, it seems fair to conclude that classical Marxism and Western Marxism largely remained within the confines of the violence-ideology couplet—or put differently, that neither of them managed to bring the *economic power* of capital to the fore. The resurgence of Marxist theory in the 1960s, however, saw the emergence of a number of theoretical currents which succeeded in breaking with this couplet, even though many of them did not articulate it in those terms. The theory of the economic power presented in this thesis does not, of course, start from scratch, and although I do think that I add some original contributions to the existing scholarship, this thesis is to a large extent a work of synthesis, or an attempt to stitch together insights from various sources into a coherent conceptual apparatus. I will draw on and discuss the advantages as well as the shortcomings of this scholarship in detail in the course of the following chapters, so rather than plunging into a thorough discussion of it here, I will limit myself to a brief overview of what I take to be the most significant contributions to the project this thesis is

intended to partake in: the uncovering of the workings of capital's mute compulsion.

One of the most important and original currents in the contemporary Marxist landscape is what often goes by the name of value-form theory.²⁰ As already mentioned, Hans-Georg Backhaus (1997) and Helmut Reichelt (1973) originally developed what eventually became the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, as a reaction to the lack of engagement with Marx's critique of political economy in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (Reichelt, 1982). The perhaps most fundamental contribution of value-form theory is the re-interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy as precisely that—not an *alternative* political economy but a *critique* of political economy; not an economic theory intended to produce quantifiable concepts which can be operationalised in empirical economic analysis but a qualitative theory of social forms aimed at uncovering and criticising the social relations underlying the capitalist mode of production. This opened up the possibility of rereading Marx's theory of value as a theory of the way in which social relations under capitalism are transformed into real abstractions imposing themselves on social life through an impersonal form of power—an interpretation that has been taken up with particular acuteness in the work of Michael Heinrich, who will be a central interlocutor in the following chapters. Another important work in this tradition is Moishe Postone's (2003, p. 3) reinterpretation of the critique of political economy as a theory of a historically unique 'abstract form of social domination'.

Another important strand of Marxist thought is the Political Marxism of Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood. In a seminal essay from 1981, Wood (2016, p. 23) forcefully argues that '*economic* categories express certain *social* relations'. Her firm rejection of the economism so often imputed to

²⁰ This somewhat broad term refers to the early representatives of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Backhaus, 1997; Krahl, 1971; Reichelt, 1973; Schmidt, 2013), as to later works within that strand (Brentel, 1989; Elbe, 2008; Ellmers, 2009; Engster, 2014; Heinrich, 1999a; Rakowitz, 2000), the 'critique of value' (Jappe, 2005; Kurz, 2012; Larsen, Nilges, Robinson, & Brown, 2014b; Lohoff & Trenkle, 2013), 'new' or 'systematic' dialectics (Arthur, 2004b; Murray, 1990; G. Reuten & Williams, 1989; T. Smith, 1990), predecessors such as (Pashukanis, 1983; Rosdolsky, 1977; Rubin, 2008) and associated scholars such as (Bellofiore, 2009; Bonefeld, 2014; Postone, 2003; PEM, 1973; Projektgruppe zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie, 1973; Starosta, 2016; Wolf, 2002). For overviews, see Elbe (2008), Hoff (2017), Jappe (2014) and Larsen, Nilges, Robinson & Brown (2014a).

Marx allows Wood to conceptualise the specificity of capitalism in terms of the forms of power employed by ruling classes in their effort to extract surplus labour from producers; whereas pre-capitalist rulers had to rely on personal relations of dependence upheld by extra-economic coercion, capitalists can, under normal circumstances, rely on a purely economic form of power. As in the case of value-form theory, the crucial advance made by Brenner and Wood had to do with the resolute break with the idea of the economy as an ontologically separate sphere governed by *sui generis*, transhistorical laws.

Breaking with economism in order to reveal the social constitution of the economy is a project which also sits at the core of Marxist-Feminist attempts to understand the relation between the formal economy and all of the life-making activities which take place outside of the immediate circuits of capital. In recent years, the insights gained during the domestic labour debates of the 1970s have been taken up, expanded and clarified by scholars working within social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017c; Arruzza, 2014). This important branch of Marxist theory takes up a crucial question almost completely ignored by Marx: ‘What kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day so that she can produce the wealth of society?’ (Bhattacharya, 2017b, p. 1). As Tithi Bhattacharya (2017a, p. 71) emphasises, such a perspective requires us to accept Marx’s invitation to ‘to see the “economic” as a social relation: one that involves domination and coercion, even if juridical forms and political institutions seek to obscure that’.

The once widespread caricature of Marx’s work as a promethean panegyric to the subjugation of nature has been effectively refuted by the Marxist Ecologists Paul Burkett (2014) and John Bellamy Foster (2000). One of the great merits of Marxist Ecology is to have emphasised the *materiality* of the capitalist economy, i.e., the fact that capitalist social relations are part of a natural world which is *not* a product of capitalism and which does not always obey its commands. The critique of political economy is not merely an analysis of economic form-determinations but is also a theory which ‘deals with the *interrelation between economic forms and the concrete material world*’, as Kohei Saito (2017, p. 16) has recently formulated it. Likewise, Andreas Malm (2016, 2018c, 2018b) has convincingly demonstrated that it is impossible to fully understand the power of capital without understanding its relations to nature, and in order to understand those relations, it is necessary to reject economistic and technicist obfuscations of what the economy is.

The tradition of labour process theory inaugurated by Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, is another important source of insights for the development of a theory of the economic power of capital. It involves a crucial shift from seeing technological development as the outcome of a transhistorical march forward of the productive forces—and hence as a potentially liberating force (recall Lenin's embrace of Taylorism)—to acknowledging the ways in which it works as a means of domination used by employers in order to break the power of the workers. Such a perspective on technology, which aligns well with the emphasis on materiality in Marxist Ecology, is the *conditio sine qua non* for understanding the power of capital as it manifests itself within the workplace.

Finally, I should also mention a number of important studies which do not fit neatly into any of the above mentioned traditions. Lucio Colletti's (1973, pt. 1) trenchant critique of traditional Marxism was one of the earliest successful attempts to reject Marxist economism on the basis of a methodologically careful interpretation of the critique of political economy, including the theory of value.²¹ David Harvey's oeuvre has provided many key insights to the present work about the spatiality of capitalist power, in addition to clarifying a number of issues related to Marx's methodology and his theory of accumulation and crisis. William Clare Roberts's recent interpretation of the first volume of *Capital* as a political theory provides several clear-sighted interventions into contemporary debates and underlines the 'novel form of domination' characteristic of capitalism (2017, p. 17). Jasper Bernes's writings on logistics (2013) and agriculture (2018) are both essential points of reference for understanding the contemporary bases of capital's power, as is Aaron Benanav's (2015) magisterial study of the global surplus population since 1950 and his work with other members of the Endnotes collective (Benanav & Clegg, 2018; Endnotes, 2015b; Endnotes & Benanav, 2010).

All of these scholars have contributed to the uncovering of the mute compulsion of capital in important ways. Some of them zoom in on specific aspects of this power, others have a more general scope. Some of them proceed from empirical analyses, others depart from a dialectical analysis of concepts. None of them provide a comprehensive account of the economic

²¹ Raya Dunayevskaya also made important headway with her interpretation of *Capital* as 'a critique of the very foundations of political economy'. More than two decades before Diane Elson (2015) she suggested that we should speak of the 'value theory of labour' rather than the 'labour theory of value' (Dunayevskaya, 1971, pp. 106, 138).

power of capital, and many of them reveal theoretical shortcomings of various kinds. In the course of the next five chapters, I will do my best to single out and integrate the most relevant parts of this scholarship into a systematic theory of the economic power of capital based on a close reading of Marx's critique of political economy.

FOUCAULT

Before I move on to examine the social ontology of economic power in the next chapter, I want to briefly consider an immensely influential theory of power which I have hitherto ignored: that of Michel Foucault. This requires a separate discussion since Foucault's theory of power is formulated in opposition to the Marxist tradition as well as mainstream social science theories of power. I will deal with Foucault's analysis of biopower and disciplinary power in later chapters, so here I will limit myself to a discussion of his general conception of power and its potential usefulness for a theory of the economic power of capital.

Foucault's theory of power is sometimes reduced to a theory of *discursive* power, an interpretation which has led critics of discourse analysis to put Foucault in the same category as Laclau and Mouffe, Norman Fairclough and (the early) Judith Butler and reject all of them as postmodern relativists and historicist idealists. Discursive power is certainly a theme which pervades Foucault's work, but it is an unproductive simplification to reduce his theory of power to a theory of discourse.²² It has much more to offer. Foucault's preoccupation with discursive power is strongest in his writings from the 1960s such as *The Order of Things* (2007), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002b) and *The Discourse of Language* (1982). In the writings of the 1970s he is more interested in non-discursive forms of power, even if he continues to insist that '[p]ower cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power' (Foucault, 2004, p. 24). I will not go into a discussion of his views on discursive power here, as they are not immediately relevant for my purposes; they should rather be regarded as a subsection of the theory of ideology.²³

²² Laclau and Mouffe (2014, p. 107) actually criticised Foucault for maintaining a distinction 'between discursive and non-discursive practices'.

²³ The same is true of other kinds of discourse analysis, such as those of Laclau and Mouffe, Norman Fairclough and Edward Said. For an account of the trajectory which led from Althusser's theory of ideology over Foucault to so-called 'post-modern' discourse theory, see Rehmann (2013, Chapter 7).

Foucault would probably object at this point and point out that he explicitly distanced himself from the concept of ideology. His dismissal of the concept of ideology is, however, not so much a critique as a superficial rejection and strategic positioning which most likely finds its rationale in his attempt to separate himself from Marxism in general and Althusser in particular. If the concept of ideology inevitably presupposes ‘a human subject on the lines of the model provided by classical philosophy, endowed with a consciousness which power is then thought to seize on’, as Foucault claims, or if it really is inextricably caught up in an opposition to ‘truth’ or science, it would indeed make sense to drop this concept (Foucault, 1980a, p. 58, 2002f, p. 119). But this is obviously not the case. Foucault’s rejection of the notion of ideology is simply a rejection of a crude Enlightenment notion of ideology or a vulgar Althusserian conception, neither of which can be identified with the concept of ideology *tout court*.

Foucault’s superficial dismissal of the notion of ideology is only one example of his well-known animosity towards Marxism—an attitude that has led many Marxists to reject his work as another example of postmodern anti-Marxism. Foucault is notoriously unclear about who precisely he is criticising; the reader is left with vague references to ‘a certain contemporary conception that passes for the Marxist conception’ or ‘a particular version of academic Marxism’ (Foucault, 2004, p. 13, 2012, 2002e, p. 15). Given the intellectual and political context of his writings, however, the most likely targets of his critique are the Althusserians and the orthodox Marxism-Leninism propagated by the French Communist Party (PCF) (Poulantzas, 2014, p. 146). Foucault wrote during, and in the aftermath of, 1968 and its ‘dispersed and discontinuous offensives’ and what he referred to as ‘the insurrection of subjugated knowledges’, i.e., the struggles in prisons and psychiatry (Foucault, 2004, p. 5ff). Some of the political forces that identified as Marxists—the Stalinist PCF and the Maoists—were unable or unwilling to acknowledge and engage in struggles which they could not control and which did not fit with their idea of what proper proletarian struggle was. This was of course especially true of the PCF, which was often a downright reactionary force (Eley, 2002, Chapters 21–23). Seen in this light and as a strategic gesture, Foucault’s attitude towards Marxism is not completely incomprehensible. This is also the light in which Foucault’s (1980a, p. 57) claim that ‘what has happened since 1968 [...] is something profoundly anti-Marxist’ must be understood. Furthermore, if we read his critique of Marxism as directed towards traditional Marxism and orthodox Marxism-

Leninism, it is actually rather to the point: in addition to being state-centric and economistic, Foucault accuses Marxism of reducing every concrete case of domination to examples of the universal domination of the working class by the bourgeoisie—and, as we saw earlier in this chapter, this critique is certainly not far off the mark.²⁴

What about *Marx*, then? Foucault is—perhaps intentionally—ambiguous. On the one hand, he dismisses Marx as an outdated political economist who belongs to the 19th century. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, for example, he claims that Marx’s theory was governed by the same ‘rules of formation’ as the political economy of Ricardo, something he later repeated several times (Foucault, 1980b, p. 76, 2002a, p. 269f, 2007, p. 194). This says more about Foucault’s lack of understanding of Marx’s project than it says about the relation between Marx and Ricardo. On the other hand, he is often careful to exempt Marx from the accusations he levels against Marxism (e.g. Foucault, 1980b, p. 72, 1980c, p. 208, 2012). Occasionally he also refers to Marx in a very positive manner, especially in the context of his analyses of disciplinary power, which has rather obvious points of intersection with Marx’s analysis of factory work.²⁵

Let us set aside Foucault’s polemical references to Marx(ism) and take a look at some more substantial issues. One of the great merits of Foucault’s theory of power is that it escapes the five pitfalls of mainstream theories of power examined earlier in this chapter. Foucault does obviously not rely on an individualist social ontology; rather than treating the individual ‘as a sort of elementary nucleus [or] a primitive atom’, he regards it as a ‘power-effect’ and a ‘relay’ through which power passes (Foucault, 2004, p. 29f). For this reason, he also avoids presupposing that the subjects involved in a relationship of power are constituted independently of that relationship. His theory

²⁴ See Foucault (1980a, p. 58f, 2002e, p. 1ff, 2002f, p. 117, 2004, pp. 13f, 29ff, 2012). In 1960 Sartre had aired similar opinions in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: he accused ‘contemporary Marxism’ for ‘neglecting the particular content of a cultural system and reducing it immediately to the universality of a class ideology’. His own Marxist existentialism ‘reacts by affirming the specificity of the historical event, which it refuses to conceive of as the absurd juxtaposition of a contingent residue and an a priori signification’ (Sartre, 1968, pp. 115, 126).

²⁵ See Foucault (1980a, p. 58, 1991, pp. 163, 175, 221, 2012); see also Harvey (2010, p. 148) and Macherey (2015). For a good discussion of the Marx-Foucault (dis)connection (in Danish), see Bolt (2016). See also Bidet’s (2016) recent contribution and Rehmann (2013, Chapters 7.4, 11).

likewise implies a rejection of the dyadic conception of power; rather than a relation between an *A* and a *B*, Foucault holds that power is a ‘conduct of conducts’, which means that it should be understood ‘as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions’ (Foucault, 2002d, pp. 341, 343). Furthermore, his emphasis on institutional structures and the myriad of practices through which relations of domination are produced on the micro-level of everyday life is clearly opposed to the ‘interventional model’, which assumes the exercise of power to take the form of discrete events delineated in time and space. Finally, Foucault’s resolute break with state-centric conceptions of power—summed up in his famous injunction to ‘cut off the head of the king’ in political thought—allowed him to avoid assuming the state to be the paradigmatic locus of power; ‘[p]ower relations are rooted in the whole network of the social’, as he puts it (Foucault, 1998, p. 89, 2002d, p. 345; see Flohr, 2016).

Another strength of Foucault’s conception of power is his critique of economism. In one of his jabs against Marxism—presumably Althusser—he insists that ‘there are not first of all relations of production, and then, in addition, alongside or on top of these relations, mechanisms of power that modify or disturb them, or make them more consistent, coherent, or stable’ (Foucault, 2009, p. 2). This does not only touch upon a weakness of Althusser’s theory, it also articulates an insight which is a fundamental premise for a theory of the economic power of capital, namely that relations of power do not somehow exist *outside* of economic relations—economic relations *are* relations of power. Foucault does not treat the economy as a separate sphere outside of the social field, and he saw clearly that the creation of capitalism required ‘a set of political techniques, techniques of power, by which man was tied to something like labor’ (Foucault, 2002e, p. 86).²⁶

In one of the many attempts to distance himself from Marxism, Foucault defends a ‘nominalistic’ theory of power (Foucault, 1998, p. 93). He usually presents this as a methodological principle; when we study power, we should avoid the kind of analysis which proceeds from social structures on the level of the totality such as classes and property relations and rather undertake ‘an ascending analysis of power, or in other words begin with its infinitesimal

²⁶ Foucault was not always consistent on this point, however. Occasionally he apparently forgets his important insight about power relations being embedded in economic relations, which leads him to re-erect the opposition between ‘relations of production’ and ‘power relations’ (Foucault, 2002e, p. 17, 2002d, p. 327; see also Poulantzas, 2014, p. 36).

mechanisms' (Foucault, 2004, p. 30). Instead of deducing every concrete instance of domination from the rule of the bourgeoisie, we ought to direct our attention to the micro-physics of power, the multiplicity of concrete techniques and mechanisms of power. This is perhaps the hallmark of Foucault's approach to power, and as we will see in chapter five, it is indeed impossible to understand the economic power of capital without paying close attention to capital's remoulding of the labour process on its most minute level (which is what Marx referred to as *real subsumption*). Without understanding the 'meticulous control of the operations of the body', which takes place in capitalist production, we will not be able to understand the economic power of capital as a whole (Foucault, 1991, p. 137).

Foucault's nominalism and his refusal to take questions of class and property into consideration came at a price, though. He generally simply ignores property relations, perhaps because it does not fit into his view of power as a process or as something that only exists in the concrete mechanisms and techniques employed in the subjection of bodies to rules and regulations. Power derived from property is not a process, and it cannot be grasped by examining concrete social practices. While it is certainly true to say that a 'web of microscopic, capillary political power had to be established at level of man's very existence, attaching men to the production apparatus, while making them into agents of production, into workers' (Foucault, 2002e, p. 86), it is also true that certain property relations—and thereby also a certain class structure—was also a necessary part of this process. The 'systematic division' of human beings into 'direct producers and exploiters that must relate to each other' is, in the words of Malm (2018c, p. 162), 'a property at the level of the whole', and this is a level which disappears from sight in Foucauldian nominalism. Foucault is therefore incapable of identifying the underlying social logic of the 'infinitesimal mechanisms' of power, which he is so eager to place under the microscope. The very preoccupation with the *concrete* turns out to be incredibly *abstract* because it isolates the micro-level from its wider social context. In his analysis of factory discipline, Foucault is therefore unable to answer the question of *why* workers show up at the factory gates in the first place. In order to answer that question, we would have to examine property relations and class structures—in other words, we would have to take into account social relations of domination which are precisely *not* a 'web of microscopic, capillary political power' but rather a set of totalising social structures permeating the entire social field. Foucault's insistence that power 'can never be appropriated in the way that wealth or

a commodity can be appropriated' allowed him to escape the dead-ends of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and mainstream political science and develop an original and fruitful approach to the study of power, but it also led to an abstract nominalism which is ultimately unable to account for the phenomena it wants to explain (Foucault, 2004, p. 29, see also 1998, p. 94, 1991, p. 26).

* * *

The aim of this chapter has been to set the stage for the analysis of the economic power of capital in the following chapter. We now know what 'the power of capital' means, and we know that in order to be able to see, analyse and theorise this power, we have to dispel with some common assumptions about the nature of power. Power does not presuppose agency but at the same time we should avoid making the concept so broad that it becomes useless. This is why the concept of emergent property is useful. Understanding capital as an emergent property acknowledges that it is inextricably tied to the social practices of human subjects and, at the same time, allows us to see how it achieves a certain degree of autonomy from these subjects, which is why it can turn into an alien power.

While the Marxist tradition is undoubtedly the intellectual trend in which the question of the power of capital has been most persistently pursued, large parts of it nevertheless suffer from a number of shortcomings. Classical Marxism was plagued by productive force determinism, fidelity to the idea of monopoly capitalism, an overemphasis on the state and a reduction of the power of capital to the power of the capitalist class. Subsequent, and more critical, Marxist traditions made important headway but as a whole, Marxist conceptions of power have tended to remain within the confines of the violence-ideology couplet. In the following chapters, I will attempt to break away from these confines. Yet, before we get to the examination of how the mute compulsion of capital works, we first have to explain why it is even possible for it to exist in the first place. This is the subject of chapter two.

II. THE SOCIAL ONTOLOGY OF ECONOMIC POWER

Thus the first fact to be established is the corporeal organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.
—Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (5: 31; I.5: 8)

What is it about human beings that makes it possible for them to organise their reproduction through hierarchies and logics imposing themselves on social life by means of mute compulsion? Why is it that they are capable of getting caught up in something like economic power? In order answer these question, it is necessary to outline what I will call the social ontology of economic power. If ontology is the study of being qua being, as the Aristotelean definition goes, *social* ontology is the study of a particular kind of being, namely that of *the social* or *society*. Its most basic question is thus: what is society? Social ontology is the examination of ‘the nature of social reality’, as Carol C. Gould (1980, p. xv) puts it, and therefore it is concerned with determinations common to *all* societies, regardless of their historical and geographical context.¹ To provide a social ontology of economic power, as I will do in the pages that follow, thus means to trace the possibility of economic power back to the nature of social reality. As we will see, this requires us to reconsider what Marx called the ‘corporeal organisation’ of the human being, i.e., the structure and *modus operandi* of the human body and its

¹ For an overview and discussion of different uses of the concept of social ontology, see Krier & Worrell (2017) and M. J. Thompson (2017).

‘consequent relation to the rest of nature’, as Marx and Engels put it in the quote used as an epigraph for this chapter (5: 31; I.5: 8). This reconsideration will in turn enable us to shed new light on a controversial issue in Marxist theory: the theoretical status of the concept of human nature.

In classical Marxism, social ontology went by the name of ‘the materialist conception of history’ or ‘historical materialism’. Within the subdivision of the Marxist doctrine, this was conceived as the general philosophy of dialectical materialism ‘as applied to the social life of mankind’, as Lenin (1914) puts it. As I explained in the last chapter, this was a social ontology in which the economy was taken to be an autonomous sphere within the social totality governed by a transhistorical tendency for the productive forces to develop. Although it might be possible to explain or perhaps even justify orthodox historical materialism as ‘a force of moral resistance, of cohesion, of patient perseverance’ for ‘those who do not have the initiative in the struggle’, as Gramsci (2011, p. 353) once claimed, it is clearly flawed on a theoretical level. This much was clear to early Western Marxists such as Korsch, Lukács, Gramsci, Marcuse and Adorno, who all firmly rejected the determinism and positivism of orthodox historical materialism (P. Anderson, 1987, p. 60; Elbe, 2008, p. 25f; Foster, 2000, p. 244f). Since the 1960s, there has been a broad consensus among Marxist scholars to reject productive force determinism in favour of an emphasis on the primacy of the relations of production.

The perhaps most resolute rejection of orthodox historical materialism in the contemporary Marxist landscape is found among scholars working within value-form theory. They have rightly pointed out that Marx was first of all engaged in a critical study of a historically specific mode of production and not in the construction of a philosophy of history. In accordance with this reading, most of them have endeavoured to ‘expel from Marx’s work everything that smells of an “unscientific” philosophy of history’ (Endnotes, 2010b, p. 100). Arthur thus opposes *historical* dialectics—the old idea of historical development as a dialectical process—to *systematic* dialectics, which is a method ‘concerned with the articulation of categories designed to conceptualise an existent concrete whole’ (Arthur, 2004b, p. 4). Dialectics is, from this perspective, neither a universal ontological structure (as is the case in dialectical materialism) nor a logic of history (as is the case in historical materialism), but a mode of presentation, i.e., a method for the construction of

a coherent conceptual apparatus.² Some of these scholars, such as Kurz (2012, p. 284) and Postone (2003, p. 18), accept the idea that there is a real dialectic of productive forces and relations of production, but rather than understanding this as a transhistorical dynamic they re-interpret it as a specifically capitalist phenomenon.

The resolute break with orthodox historical materialism was definitely necessary and important, but it is inadequate to simply insist that all the categories of the critique of political economy are only valid in relation to the capitalist mode of production.³ In their eagerness to emphasise the historicity of Marx's concepts, value-form theorists tend to neglect social ontology, but there is no way out; the very idea of something being historically specific presupposes a concept of that which is *not* historically specific, and for this reason, concepts which refer to historically specific social forms always carry certain assumptions about the ontology of the social. An absolute historicism, according to which the concepts through which we examine social reality are completely immanent to a specific historical situation, would paradoxically end up representing this historical situation into something *eternal*, since it would make it impossible to conceptualise other situations and compare them with the current one. The philosophical lesson here is that *difference* and *identity* presuppose each other, or as Hegel put it, 'comparing has meaning only on the assumption that there is a distinction, and conversely, likewise, [...] distinguishing has a meaning only on the assumption that there is some equality' (1991, p. 184, see also 2010, p. 368). In other words, the emphasis on the *specificity* of capitalism implies the identification of the *difference* between capitalist and non-capitalist societies, and this in turn implies the identification of elements *common to* capitalist and non-capitalist societies.⁴ If we insist on absolute difference, we inevitably lose sight of the specificity of capitalism and hence also its historicity.⁵

² See for example Bonefeld (2014, pp. 5f, 68), Heinrich (1999a, p. 171ff), Postone (2003, p. 142), T. Smith (2009a, p. 6ff).

³ Some scholars, like Postone (2003), Jappe (2005) and Kurz (2012), reject a transhistorical notion of labour. For an analysis of Marx's concepts of labour and a non-essentialist defence of a transhistorical concept of labour, see Mau (2017). Kurz (2012, pp. 37, 58, 86f) is even critical of using such concepts as 'economy' and 'relations of production' outside of a capitalist context.

⁴ See also Joseph Fracchia's (2004) critique of Postone.

⁵ When Marx began to write the *Grundrisse* in August 1857, he planned to begin with 'the general, abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of

RELATIONS AND RELATA

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx provides the following answer to the fundamental question of social ontology: ‘Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand’ (G: 265). While this statement clearly sets Marx apart from what David McNally (2017, p. 97f) calls the ‘social Newtonianism’ of classic liberalism, according to which ‘the social universe is composed of self-moving atomic parts’, it does not really specify the connection between ‘individuals’ and ‘relations’ (Gould, 1980, p. 31). At first sight it would seem that relations always presuppose *relata*. This is essentially the idea that leads Gould to conclude that for Marx, individuals are in the last instance ontologically primary (Gould, 1980, Chapter 1).⁶ But what if the opposite is also true? If humans are inherently social, as Marxists have always agreed, do individuals not also presuppose their social relations? Given its antagonistic relationship with social Newtonianism, it is not surprising that the dominant trend in Marxism has been to insist on what Callinicos (2014, p. 317) describes as ‘the ontological primacy of relations’ over subjects. Bertell Ollman argues that Marx’s theory relies on what he calls a ‘philosophy of internal relations’, according to which ‘relations are internal to each factor (they are ontological relations), so that when an important one alters, the factor itself alters; it becomes something else’ (Ollman, 1976, p. 15). In other words: *relations are constitutive of the relata*. A similar perspective has recently been formulated by David McNally in his attempt to conceptualise the relations between

society’ (G: 108), but he dropped this plan shortly thereafter, in October 1857 (see G: 227). In the preface to *Contribution*, he explains that he omitted the introduction of 1857 because it ‘seems confusing to anticipate results which still have to be substantiated’ (29: 261). The preface nevertheless proceeds to outline some of ‘the general, abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of society’. In the *1861-63 Manuscript*, Marx holds that ‘it is entirely certain that human production possesses definite *laws* or *relations* which remain the same in all forms of production’ (34: 236). In *Capital*, Marx sketches out some of the basic elements of a social ontology in chapter seven, where he examines ‘the labour process independently of any specific social formation’ (C1: 283).

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre also attempted to construct a kind of Marxism on the basis of the ontological primacy of the individual in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (2004). See P. Anderson (1980, p. 50ff) and Callinicos (2004, p. 70), who reads Sartre as a precursor for another form of individualist Marxism, namely Jon Elster’s analytical Marxism.

different forms of oppression through the lens of Hegel's 'dialectical organicism'. In his view, the 'distinct parts of a social whole [...] mediate each other and in so doing constitute each other' (McNally, 2017, p. 104). As McNally's phrasing of this point makes clear, this way of attributing primacy to relations is associated with the idea of the primacy of the *whole* or the *totality*, concepts which are crucial in most Hegelian readings of Marx, such as those of Lukács (2010, p. 9) and, more recently, Arthur. According to the latter, the object of Marx's theory is 'a *totality* where every part has to be complemented by others to be what it is; hence internal relations typify the whole. A thing is internally related to another if this other is a necessary condition of its nature' (Arthur, 2004b, p. 24f). While such a philosophy of internal relations obviously captures an essential aspect of Marx's social ontology, the mere declaration that things are internally related does not get us very far and is even misleading if not further developed. The claim that everything *is what it is* by virtue of its relation to *everything else* leads to absurd consequences; if I move the book in front me two centimetres, its (spatial) relation to everything else has changed, which then means that everything has become something new because of that change. If we begin from the assumption that change occurs, we would end up in a kind of Heraclitian ontology, where everything is in constant flux and identity does not exist, since we would have to conclude that everything changes all the time. If, on the other hand, we proceed from the assumption that there is such a thing as identity, we end up with a Parmenidean ontology where change is impossible. The way to avoid both positions is to allow for the existence of *different kinds of relations with different degrees of significance for their relata*. While we should hold on to the idea that moments or parts of a totality cannot be understood in abstraction from this totality, we also have to insist that not all aspects of that totality are equally constitutive of any given part. This is also, at least implicitly, acknowledged by Ollman in the passage quoted above, where the word 'important' implies that relations can be more or less constitutive of a given 'factor'. Likewise, this is implied by McNally, who does acknowledge the existence of 'partial totalities', and Lukács, who emphasises that 'the category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity' (McNally, 2017, p. 105; Lukács, 2010, p. 12; see also Žižek, 2012, p. 398).

We cannot, then, remain content with a social ontology which takes social relations to be ontologically primary on the basis of vague references to the immanent relationality of everything. In order to get a clearer idea of the

relation between individuals and their social relations, as well as the relative importance of the different kinds of relations those individuals find themselves in, I propose to begin with an examination of the theoretical status of the concept of the human being in Marx's writings. This has been the subject of endless debates in Marxist theory since the early 1930s, where the first publication of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* led to a wave of humanist readings of his critique of capitalism.⁷ The social democrat Siegfried Landshut (1932), who first published the manuscripts in 1932, declared that Marx's real aim was the 'realisation of Man' rather than the abolition of private property (Musto, 2015, p. 241f). This interpretation was followed up the same year by Marcuse (1972, pp. 1–48) and Henri de Man (1932), who claimed that the *1844 Manuscripts* revealed the 'ethical-humanist motives' of Marx's socialism (Musto, 2015, p. 242).⁸ The publication of an English translation of the manuscripts in 1956 likewise resulted in a surge of interpretations which 'discovered in Marx a champion of liberal values and of the dignity and freedom of the individual', as one commentator puts it (Hodges, 1965, p. 173).⁹ The heavy use in the *1844 Manuscripts* of concepts such as the human essence, the individual and alienation combined with the absence of so-called economic theory seemed to offer a Marxist and socialist escape route out of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. The French version of this Marxist humanism took a theological turn, emphasising the allegedly common ethical foundations of Marxism and Christianity—an interpretation which was also intended to support the Communist Party's attempt to appeal to Catholic voters (Goshgarian, 2003, p. xxivf).¹⁰

This was the conjuncture Althusser intervened in with his essay on 'Marxism and Humanism' in the early 1960s.¹¹ Althusser claimed that Marx's early writings (1842–44) were permeated by Feuerbach's humanism, and that Marx subsequently broke with this in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*. With this epistemological break, Marx opened up 'the

⁷ See Musto (2015) for an overview of the publication and different editions of the manuscripts as well as the reception of them. In MEGA² they are published in volumes I.2 and IV.2, which, according to some critics, reflect an unduly separation of what actually belongs together in the fourth section of the MEGA². See Rojahn (1985).

⁸ See also Hommes (1955), Popitz (1953) and Thier (1957).

⁹ See Fromm (1965, 2004) and Tucker (2001).

¹⁰ See Bigo (1953), Calvez (1956) and Garaudy (1967).

¹¹ See P. Anderson (1980, p. 106ff), Elliott (2006, p. 20ff) and Soper (1986, Ch. 4).

continent of history’ by constructing ‘a theory of history and politics based on radically new concepts: the concepts of social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc.’ (Althusser, 2005, p. 227). Althusser (2005, p. 228) concluded that ‘in respect to theory, therefore, one can and must speak openly of *Marx’s theoretical anti-humanism*’. Elsewhere he emphasised that ‘we should, in the strict sense, speak of Marx’s theoretical *a-humanism*’ (Althusser, 2003, p. 232; Althusser, Balibar, Establet, Macherey, & Rancière, 2015, p. 268) and clarified that the essence of his critique of theoretical humanism was ‘a refusal to root the explanation of social formations and their history in a concept of man with theoretical pretensions—that is, a concept of man as an *originating subject*’ (Althusser, 2011, p. 239; Althusser et al., 2015, p. 290). Although I will not go into a comprehensive discussion of the debates spurred by Althusser’s intervention, I want to briefly explain why I think Althusser was right in his claim that Marx broke with an untenable humanism in 1845.

THE HUMAN ESSENCE

The critique of bourgeois society and the modern state developed by Marx in 1843 and 1844 is firmly based on a concept of human nature. By this I mean that the concept of the essence of the human being is the basis of Marx’s critique; social reality is, as Heinrich (1999a, p. 103) puts it, ‘*measured and criticised with reference to an essence which is opposed to it*’. Marx’s critical apparatus is a complex theoretical constellation drawing on his fellow young Hegelians as well as Hegel and classical political economy. From Feuerbach, he inherits a humanist critique of religion and speculative philosophy, according to which the latter represents the alienation of the human species-being.¹² Although Marx praised Feuerbach throughout 1843 and 1844, he was critical of his work from the beginning, complaining to Arnold Ruge in March 1843 that Feuerbach ‘refers too much to nature and too little to politics’ (1: 400). In the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843), Marx borrowed heavily from Feuerbach in order to demystify Hegel’s ‘hypostatised

¹² Bruno Bauer was another important source of inspiration for Marx’s analysis of the inversion of the human essence (Rosen, 1977; Sass, 1976). Feuerbach’s influence on Marx dates from 1843, when he read Feuerbach’s *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy* and *Principles of Philosophy of the Future*, not from the publication of *The Essence of Christianity* in 1841, as Engels claimed many years later (26: 364; Heinrich, 1999a, p. 94; Kouvelakis, 2003, pp. 247, 260; McLellan, 1970, p. 93ff).

abstractions' (3: 15; see also 11, 23, 29). When he turned his attention to the critique of bourgeois society and its apologetics (the economists) in 1844, however, the tables had partly turned; now Marx replaces Feuerbach's abstract notions of love, reason and will with Hegel's notion of '*labour* as the *essence* of man' (3: 333), a move which allows Marx to integrate Hegel's emphasis on historicity into the concept of the essence of the human being (Heinrich, 1999a, p. 113; Soper, 1986, p. 34). This is not to deny that the *1844 Manuscripts* are deeply Feuerbachian; on the contrary, it is the most Feuerbachian text Marx ever wrote. But there are also other sources of inspiration—not only Hegel but also Engels's *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy* and especially Moses Hess's *The Essence of Money*, both from 1843.¹³ In the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx praises these texts as the 'only original German works of substance in this science' (3: 232).¹⁴ In *The Essence of Money*, Hess condemned money as 'the product of mutually alienated man, of externalised man' and argued, in a truly Feuerbachian manner, that '[w]hat God is to the theoretical life, money is to the practical life in this inverted world: the externalised capacity of men' (Hess, 1845). In a very similar fashion, Marx wrote in *On the Jewish Question* (1843) that 'under the domination of egoistic need [man] can be active practically, and produce objects in practice, only by putting his products, and his activity, under the domination of an alien being, and bestowing the significance of an alien entity—money—on them' (3: 174). As David McLellan demonstrates, the 'parallels between the two texts are more than enough to justify the claim that Marx copied Hess's ideas at this stage' (McLellan, 1970, p. 158; see also Kouvelakis, 2003, p. 180f).

With his emphasis on labour as the essence of the human being, Hegel had, so Marx argues, reached the 'standpoint' of modern political economy (3: 333). However, Marx also accuses Hegel of subscribing to an all too idealist notion of labour: '[t]he only labour which Hegel knows and recognises is *abstractly mental* labour' (3: 333). In order to remedy this, Marx reaches out for Feuerbach's 'real, corporeal *man*' (3: 336) as well as political economy with its prosaic understanding of labour, which both function as antidotes to Hegel's idealism.¹⁵

¹³ Hess's text was not published until 1845, but Marx read it as an editor in 1843.

¹⁴ See especially (3: 421, 427). In 1859, Marx still referred to Engels's *Outlines* as a 'brilliant sketch of a critique of economic categories' (29: 264).

¹⁵ It should be noted that Marx's reading of Hegel is not unproblematic. It is not obvious why the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should be read as a philosophical

This mixture of Hegel, political economy, Hess and Feuerbach under the auspices of the latter, constitutes the basis of Marx's critique of modern society in 1843 and 1844. His fundamental charge against it is that it *alienates human beings from their essence*. The essence of the human being is *labour*, which is conceived as the *self-creation* of the human being through objectification (3: 332f). Through 'work upon the objective world', man furthermore 'proves himself to be a *species-being*' (3: 277); he 'relates to himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being' (3: 275). There is a certain ambivalence in Marx's description of this 'species-being'. On the one hand, he constantly emphasises that the human being is a natural and corporeal being; like plants and animals, humans must engage in a 'continuous interchange' with other parts of nature in order to live (3: 337f, 276). On the other hand, he also argues that there is a fundamental scission between humans and animals; humans are *conscious* beings, and this is why they are species-beings:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being. Or it is only because he is a species-being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity. (3: 276)

Because of this crucial difference between humans and animals, it is degrading for humans to be treated as animals. Marx therefore condemns political economy on the grounds that it 'knows the worker only as a working animal' (3:243), and he likewise laments that in bourgeois society '[w]hat is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal' (3: 275).

Marx repeatedly stresses the *social* nature of the human being in the *1844 Manuscripts*. He praises Feuerbach for having established 'the social relationship of "man to man" [as] the basic principle of the theory' (3: 328; see also

anthropology, as Marx tends to do. In Hegel's own view, it is rather 'the Science of the *experience of consciousness*' (Hegel, 1977, p. 56). Hegel's theory of human being is found in his *anthropology* in the first section of the philosophy of spirit in the *Encyclopaedia*. Furthermore, labour is, as Althusser (2003, p. 250) notes, 'never declared to be the essence of Man' in Hegel's works.

206, 299). In relation to the question posed earlier in this chapter in connection with the definition of ‘society’ in the *Grundrisse*, it would thus seem that here, in 1844, Marx considers relations rather than individuals as ontologically primary. However, as Heinrich argues, Marx in fact remains on ‘Feuerbachian terrain’ here, inasmuch as he grasps society ‘as the objectification of an essence immanent in the individual’ (Heinrich, 1999a, pp. 114f, 118).¹⁶ In a certain sense, this is implied by the very notion of alienation. According to Marx, bourgeois society *alienates* the essence of the human being, it does not *abolish* it. This essence in other words *continues* to exist *despite* its realisation being thwarted by a certain set of social relations. Humans are treated *like* animals in this society, but they are not thereby *transformed into* animals—their humanity, their essence, *persists* underneath their animal-like conditions. What this simple analysis of the notion of alienation tells us is that it carries the idea of an *unrealised potential*; it implies a concept of the human essence as something which *continues* to exist even when a given set of social relations prevents it from unfolding.

The alienation of the human essence in bourgeois society is four-fold: humans are alienated from the *products* of their labour as well as the productive *activity* itself, and consequently they are also alienated from their *species-being* as well as *each other*.¹⁷ In bourgeois society, man has therefore ‘lost himself and is dehumanised’ (3: 212; see also 274, 284, 303; 4: 36). In this scheme, communism thus comes to represent the re-appropriation of the human essence: the ‘*social* revolution’, writes Marx, ‘represents man’s protest against a dehumanised life’ (3: 205). Communism will prevail when humans demand to be treated as *humans* rather than animals; it will consequently mark the restoration of *a natural order*, or as Marx puts it, it would be ‘the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence’ (3: 296). Communism is ‘the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man’, the ‘complete return of man to himself’ (3: 296) as well as the emancipation of labour, which will be transformed into ‘a *free manifestation of life*, hence an *enjoyment of life*’ (3: 308).

As we can see from these considerations, Marx’s early critique of bourgeois society is *humanist* and *romantic* through and through. It is humanist in

¹⁶ For this reason, Gould’s Aristotelian reading of *Grundrisse*, according to which Marx considered the ‘social individual’ to be ‘the primary ontological subject’ (Gould, 1980, p. 35), actually fits the *1844 Manuscripts* better.

¹⁷ See 3: 274ff, Heinrich (1999a, p. 107f), Leopold (2007, p. 230f), McLellan (1970, p. 133), Ollman (1976, Chapters 19–22).

the sense that the concept of the essence of the human being occupies a central role as the basis of critique.¹⁸ It is romantic in that it is founded upon an idea of an original, lost and natural unity which ought to be restored.¹⁹ This is a form of critique based on typical romantic ideals about immediacy, naturalness and wholeness. The political project which follows from such a critique necessarily takes the form of *the reconstitution of a natural order*, i.e., the emancipation of human nature or the abolition of capitalism in order to allow humans to *become what they are* underneath their alienated existence. This kind of romanticism can be found in most forms of humanist Marxism. Lukács, for example, denounced the division of labour on the grounds that it ‘disrupts every organic unified process of work and life and breaks it down into its components’ (Lukács, 2010, p. 103). In his view, capitalism brings ‘the essence of man into conflict with his existence’ and creates a ‘fragmented’ and ‘deformed and crippled’ human being (Lukács, 2010, pp. xxiv, 90). Stavros Tombazos (2014, p. 107) claims that ‘Marx’s revolutionary project is nothing other than that of the reconciliation of the individual with himself, who by his own initiatives must search for his own fragments, recover the lost time and return “home,” purified from slavery thanks to a long journey through the maze of alienation’. Bertell Ollman similarly accuses capitalism of reducing the human being to ‘a mere rump’ and conceives of communism as ‘a kind of reunification’ (Ollman, 1976, p. 134f). A contemporary Marxist humanist also formulates it as follows: ‘Liberation from capital requires that the proper relationship between subject and object be established’ (Roche, 2005, p. 346).²⁰ Such romantic criticisms rarely specify what it would mean to establish such a ‘proper’ relationship. As Kate Soper (1986, p. 103) puts it, quoting Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*: ‘To be told that “man himself should be the intermediary between men” or that “men should relate to each other as men” is not, in fact, to be told anything specific about the form their interaction should take’. John Mepham’s account of the pitfalls of romantic humanism is even more to the point:

¹⁸ In his account of Marx’s development—to which I refer extensively in the preceding paragraphs—Heinrich prefers to talk of ‘anthropologism’ rather than ‘humanism’ (Heinrich, 1999a, pp. 82, 111, 118). For a good overview of the different meanings of ‘humanism’ and ‘anti-humanism’ in discussions concerning these terms, see Soper (1986, Chapter 1).

¹⁹ For discussions of Marx and Romanticism, see Avineri (1980, p. 55f), Levin (1974) and Löwy (1987).

²⁰ See also Dunayevskaya (1971, pp. 93, 107), Saito (2017, p. 14).

The phrases ‘man himself’ and ‘as people’ trade on some *untheorised* ideal of the *really human*, some vision of *true humanity* being expressed in social life. They are functioning as metaphors in which idealised relations between *individuals* are illicitly mapped onto a utopian scheme of patterns of relations in general, relations in which social organisations (political organisations, institutions, collectivities of all kinds) have entirely disappeared. The disjunction between ‘the human’ and ‘the dehumanized’ as forms of social mediation, is empty of cognitive content, for the valorization of the former is based on nothing more than an implicit, essentialist individualist philosophical imperative. (quoted in Soper, 1986, p. 103)

Critiques of capitalism in the name of human nature rarely go beyond solemn invocations of an ideal of the truly human, and when they do they tend to depoliticise critique by conceiving the abolition of capitalism as the restoration of a natural harmony. Such inadequacies plagued Marx’s writings from 1843 up to and including *The Holy Family* (late 1844). But he changed his mind.

SETTLING ACCOUNTS

Engels seems to have developed a critical distance towards Feuerbach’s humanism before Marx did. After reading Max Stirner’s *The Ego and his Own* in November 1844, Engels wrote to Marx: ‘Stirner is right in rejecting Feuerbach’s “man,” or at least the “man” of *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach deduces his “man” from God, it is from God that he arrives at “man,” and hence “man” is crowned with a theological halo of abstraction’ (38: 12; see also Althusser, 2003, p. 258).²¹ In the period that followed, Marx and Engels

²¹ Marx’s reply to Engels has, unfortunately, not been preserved. In January 1845, Engels wrote to Marx: ‘As regards Stirner, I entirely agree with you. When I wrote to you, I was still too much under the immediate impression made upon me by the book’ (38: 16). This indicates that Marx was critical of Engels’s reading of Stirner. In the same letter, Engels reports that he presented Marx’s letter to Hess, who apparently agreed with Marx’s reading of Stirner and claimed that he had already written a similar critique of Stirner. Engels left Marx’s letter with Hess because ‘he [Hess] still wished to use some things out of it’, but Engels later got it back (38: 26). In 1845, Hess published the essay *The Last Philosophers*, in which he criticised Feuerbach in a manner somewhat similar to Marx’s critique in the sixth

developed this critique of Feuerbach further. Marx was, as we have seen, already critical of the *content* of Feuerbach's conception of the human essence in 1844; that was why he replaced the notions of love, reason and will with a materialist version of Hegel's conception of labour. In the course of 1845 and 1846, Marx not only abandoned this concept of labour; he also turned against the very structure of Feuerbach's critical model, i.e., the idea that the human being has an essence which can be alienated, re-appropriated and function as the basis of critique (Heinrich, 1999a, pp. 103, 119). In a draft for a critical review of Friedrich List's book *The National System of Political Economy* written in March 1845, Marx resolutely abandons the idea of labour as the essence of the human being. He now regards labour as a 'by its very nature [...] unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity' and argues that it is 'one of the greatest misapprehensions to speak of free, human, social labour' (4: 278f). This point is repeated in *The German Ideology*, where Marx and Engels insist that 'the communist revolution [...] does away with *labour*' (5: 52, 205; I.5: 44, 259).²² It is still, however, possible to find Feuerbachian motives in the critique of List, as when Marx accuses the bourgeois for seeing in the proletarian 'not a *human being*, but a *force* capable of creating wealth' (4: 286).

Marx confronts Feuerbachian humanism head on in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*. In the sixth thesis, the precise meaning of which has been the subject of countless discussions, Marx criticises Feuerbach for resolving 'the essence of religion into the essence of *man*. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' He then adds two corollaries: first, Feuerbach abstracts from 'the historical process' and presuppose 'an abstract—*isolated*—human individual'. This criticism of Feuerbach was already present in the *1844 Manuscripts*, where Marx stressed the *social* nature of the human being and integrated Hegel's emphasis on human *historicity* into his critical model. In the second corollary, Marx criticises Feuerbach for being unable to understand 'essence' as anything other than 'as "species," as an inner, mute, general character which unites the many individuals *in a natural way*'. This corresponds quite well to Marx's own notion of essence in 1844. Many

thesis on Feuerbach (Hess, 1983, p. 363; Heinrich, 1999a, p. 124). Unfortunately, the English translation of the relevant passage of Hess's essay is quite confusing. See also McLellan (1970, p. 121), Althusser (2003, p. 258).

²² Later, in 1857, Marx returned to a transhistorical concept of labour, but as we will see later in this chapter, it is radically different from the concept of labour in the *1844 Manuscripts*. See Mau (2017), Wendling (2009, Chapter 2).

commentators have pointed out that Marx does not, strictly speaking, deny the existence of a human essence in the sixth thesis, and that the second corollary can even be read as a call for a better concept of ‘essence’ (e.g. Geras, 2016; Hoffmann, 1982, p. 104; Tabak, 2012, p. 11f). While this is true, the interpretation of the sixth thesis as a call for an improved theory of the essence of the human being becomes decidedly less plausible when read in the light of *The German Ideology*.²³ Here, Marx and Engels repeatedly distance themselves from the concepts of alienation (5: 48; I.5: 37) and ‘the essence of man’ (5: 54, 160, 293; I.5: 46, 210, 348) and make fun of the ‘speculative-idealistic’ conception of revolution as ‘self-generation of the species’ (5: 52; I.5: 42)—a conception defended by Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts*. In line with the *Theses*, Feuerbach is accused of replacing ‘real’ human beings with the abstraction ‘man’ as such (5: 39, 41; I.5: 19, 25). Marx and Engels furthermore concede that the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* as well as *On the Jewish Question* were tainted by ‘philosophical phraseology [and] the traditionally occurring philosophical expressions such as ‘human essence’ [and] ‘species’ (5: 236; I.5: 291). It makes perfect sense, therefore, that Marx later, in 1859, described *The German Ideology* as a ‘self-clarification’ in which he and Engels ‘settled the account’ with their ‘former philosophical conscience’ (29: 264).²⁴

With regards to Marx’s changing views on these matters, it is also worth considering the part of the *Manifesto* concerned with the ‘true socialism’ of Karl Grün and Moses Hess, whose analysis of money as the alienation of the human essence had been such a powerful source of inspiration for Marx in 1843. Marx accuses their attempt to import French socialism of completely distorting the latter:

²³ The manuscripts known under this title did not comprise a *work*. They are, rather, an edited collection of separate manuscripts put together by David Riazanov, the editor of the first MEGA who originally published them in 1932. The original manuscripts have only recently (October 2017) been published in MEGA² I.5, although parts were published in *Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch 2003*. For the sake of convenience I will continue to refer to these manuscripts as *The German Ideology*. I have compared all quotes from MECW with MEGA² I.5. See Carver (2010) and Carver & Blank (2014).

²⁴ In 1867, Marx reread *The Holy Family* and wrote to Engels: ‘I was pleasantly surprised to find that we have no need to feel ashamed of the piece, although the Feuerbach cult now makes a most comical impression upon one’ (42: 360).

since it [French socialism] ceased in the hands of the German to express the struggle of one class with the other, he felt conscious of having overcome ‘French one-sidedness’ and of representing, not true requirements, but the requirements of Truth; not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy. (6: 511; see also 6: 330)

The true socialists are likewise charged with transforming ‘the French criticism of the economic functions of money’ into the ‘Alienation of Humanity’ (6: 511). It is indeed striking how this ridicule of Hess’s and Grün’s Feuerbach-inspired socialism is couched in terms very similar, if not identical, to the core concepts of the *1844 Manuscripts*.

Based on these considerations, I agree with Althusser and Heinrich that Marx did in fact break with a theoretically untenable humanism in 1845. From that point onwards, Marx no longer criticised capitalism in the name of the essence of the human being. To be sure, he held on to certain aspects of his Feuerbachian critical apparatus, and it is not convincing to simply dismiss these aspects as remnants of youthful aberrations. The perhaps clearest example of Feuerbach’s (and Bruno Bauer’s) continuing influence on Marx’s later writings is the theme of ‘inversion’. In the *Grundrisse* and the manuscripts of the 1860s, Marx constantly makes the point that under capitalist relations of production, the conditions of production confront the workers as an ‘alien power’. In *Capital*, he even draws a very Feuerbachian analogy between capitalism and religion: ‘Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand’ (C1: 772; compare with 3: 29, 274). His use of terms such as the ‘inverted’ or ‘topsy-turvy’ world and ‘mystification’ in the 1860s also testifies to the lasting influence of Feuerbach on his thought. Even the concept of alienation occasionally crops up here and there. After the break with romantic humanism, however, these terms and expressions no longer refer to *human nature*; it is rather *social relations* that confront proletarians as an alien power. Marx has retained a Feuerbachian understanding of inversion, but replaced human nature with social relations and thereby emptied it of romantic humanism.²⁵

²⁵ Several scholars have attempted to rescue the concept of alienation by detaching it from some of the core ideas of romanticist-essentialist humanism (e.g. Clarke, 1991a; Postone, 2003; Wendling, 2009). I agree that it is in principle possible to

While I think the core of the Althusserian thesis of a ‘break’ with humanism in 1845 is convincing, I do not find Althusser’s periodisation of Marx’s overall development convincing (see Althusser, 2005, p. 33ff). 1845 marks an important break with regards to the question of *humanism*, but if we look at the development of Marx’s thoughts on ecology, crisis, history, the state, technology, value, the division of labour or pre- and non-capitalist societies, for example, other years would stand out as more important.²⁶ Marx’s thinking was subject to constant development—an uneven and combined development, we might say—until the very end of his life, and rather than conducting a discussion about continuities and breaks in Marx’s thought as a discussion about his work as a whole, it is more fruitful to focus on specific problems and different aspects of his enormous research programme.²⁷

HUMAN ANIMALS

According to Althusser, Marx’s break with theoretical humanism allowed him to establish a science of history whose categories do not depend on a notion of human nature (Althusser, 2005, p. 227, 2003, p. 263f). In other words, the concept of human nature has a place *neither* in the theory of history *nor* in the analysis and critique of capitalism. Marxist humanists usually hold the opposite position, i.e., that historical materialism relies on or implies a notion of human nature which functions as the basis of the critique of capitalism. In this section, I will defend a position that cuts across both of these arguments. Against Althusser, I will argue that Marx’s social ontology does in fact rely on a theoretically powerful and fruitful notion of human nature—also in the writings after 1845. Against the humanists,²⁸ however,

use the concept of alienation without falling prey to the shortcomings of romantic humanism, but because the concept is so strongly associated with the latter, I prefer not to use it.

²⁶ For accounts of Marx’s development with regards to these topics, see K. B. Anderson (2016), Beamish (1992), Clarke (1994), Foster & Burkett (2016), Heinrich (1999a, 2013a), Malm (2018b), Rattansi (1982), Saito (2017), Thomas & Reuten (2014).

²⁷ Regarding the development of Marx’s thought in the last fifteen years of his life, see K. B. Anderson (2016), Endnotes (2015a, p. 186ff), Heinrich (2013a), Saito (2017).

²⁸ e.g. Avineri (1980), Braverman (1974), Brien (2011), Dunayevskaya (1971), Fox (2015), Geras (2016), Gould (1980), Harvey (2014), Lukács (2010), Mandel (2015),

I will argue that this notion of human nature cannot provide the basis of a critique of capitalism. What is more important for our purposes, however, is that this notion of human nature will allow us to explain what economic power is and why it is possible.

Few would deny that it is possible to speak of human beings in the same way as we speak of snails, mosquitoes, horses or killer whales. Even Althusser conceded that a ‘materialist, scientific theory of human palaeontology certainly does matter to historical materialism’ (Althusser, 2003, p. 291). In so far as we can single out a number of characteristic traits that distinguishes humans from other animals, it also seems unproblematic to say that there is such a thing as a human nature. The controversies arise when we begin to make claims about the potential role of this concept in social theory. So, before we enter into that discussion, let us begin by considering the human being as an animal on par with other animals and the rest of nature. The emphasis on the *naturalness* of the human being is one of the important continuities in Marx’s thought. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, he stresses that ‘man is a part of nature’ and departs from traditional philosophical anthropology in general, and that of Hegel in particular, with his emphasis on the corporeality and materiality of human existence (3: 276, see also 336).²⁹ Nature is, he explains, the ‘inorganic body’ of the human being ‘with which it must remain in continuous interchange if it is not to die’ (3: 276).³⁰ Later on, Marx re-conceptualised this ‘continuous interchange’ as a *metabolism* (*Stoffwechsel*) of humans and the rest of nature, which is ‘a natural condition’ common to ‘all particular social forms of human life’ (30: 63).³¹ Marx’s use of this concept is deeply influenced by the agricultural chemist Justus von Liebig, to

Ollman (1976), Roche (2005), Saito (2017), Tabak (2012), E. P. Thompson (1995), Tombazos (2014).

²⁹ In 1875, Marx confirms that human labour-power is ‘a force of nature’ (24: 81). See also Burkett (2014, pt. 1), Wendling (2009, Chapter 2).

³⁰ In Green thought, this notion has been accused of being Promethean. For a repudiation of this critique, see Foster & Burkett (2000).

³¹ See also G: 489, 640; 30: 40; M: 197, 885, 889; C1: 283, 290, 637. It was Alfred Schmidt (2013, p. 76ff) who first drew attention to the importance of this concept in 1962, but its significance for Marx’s thought and ecological critique was not fully appreciated until John Bellamy Foster’s *Marx’s Ecology* (2000, Chapter 5). For a more recent and detailed analysis, see Saito (2017). Jason W. Moore (2015, p. 75ff) has recently criticised this concept for being unable to break with Cartesian dualism, a claim which has been repudiated by Malm (2018c, p. 177ff).

whom it designated the ‘incessant process of organic exchange of old and new compounds through combinations, assimilations, and excretions’ without which living organisms would die (Saito, 2017, p. 69). The notion of *Stoffwechsel* thus highlights the materiality of human existence, i.e., the fact that the human being is a moment of a material totality, a natural organism indissolubly inscribed in a flow of matter, just like plants, bacteria, fungi or other animals (see Wendling, 2009, Chapter 2).

If the human being is a moment in a metabolic flow of matter, it means that it has certain *needs*; ‘inputs’ are required in order for this metabolism to continue to exist. The apparently obvious concept of need can be treacherous, however, and any talk of ‘natural needs’ risks slipping into reductive ideas about a hierarchy of needs, according to which a set of allegedly ‘basic’ needs (food, clothes, shelter, etc.) are accorded ‘primacy’ in relation to ‘socially produced’ needs, wants or desires. Indeed, Marx’s crucial insight with regards to the question of needs is precisely, in Kate Soper’s words, that ‘needs must be understood as historic and specific contents rather than as mere forms of a pre-given essence’ (Soper, 1981, p. 87; see also Heller, 2018). There is no such thing as a set of natural needs which inevitably override needs, wants and desires stemming from historically specific social relations. The mere fact that 780.000 people committed suicide in 2015 should make us think twice about postulating the existence of something like an irrepressible need for survival. Human beings regularly display their willingness to sacrifice themselves for all kinds of reasons, and they do dangerous things well aware of the dangers involved. As psychoanalysis has taught us, they even do dangerous, unhealthy, risky and hazardous things *because* they are dangerous, unhealthy, risky and hazardous. As Kate Soper (1981, p. 88) puts it, we must recognise that:

even our so-called basic biological needs for food, shelter and the like, must be seen as specific, socially mediated contents, the principle of whose explanation is not our common physiological nature but the social relations of production, distribution and exchange.

This conclusion is not, however, incompatible with a concept of some sort of fundamental biological needs. Despite the always socially mediated character of every human need, and despite the fact that people harm, kill, starve and sacrifice themselves, it remains the case that in order for there to be human beings at all, certain biological requirements have to be met. The

claim that human beings have certain biological needs does *not* imply that these needs will always and inevitably *override* social mediations, or even that they tend to do so. For this reason it is possible to retain a concept of natural needs, along the lines of what Agnes Heller (2018, p. 32) calls ‘a limit concept: a limit (different for different societies) beyond which human life is no longer reproducible as such, beyond which the limit of bare existence is passed’. Such a limit might be ‘extremely elastic,’ but it is nevertheless there—and to deny it would amount to an idealist denial of the corporeality of human existence (Soper, 1981, p. 59, 1995, p. 133f). Humans must, as Marx and Engels put it, ‘be in a position to live in order to “make history”’ (5: 41; I.5: 26).

CORPOREAL ORGANISATION

If being a natural organism in a metabolic totality is what humans share with other animals, what then sets them apart from the latter? What characterises the specifically *human* form of metabolism? As we have seen, Marx endorsed a quite traditional distinction between humans and animals in the *1844 Manuscripts*, one that sits uneasily with the emphasis on the corporeality of human nature in those very same manuscripts. Marx argues that the human being is a ‘species-being’, a ‘being for itself [*für sich selbst seiendes Wesen*]’ endowed with the capacity to relate to itself in a universal manner by virtue of its *consciousness* (3: 337). He is quite unequivocal on this point: ‘[c]onscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being’ (3: 276). In *The German Ideology*, he abandons this emphasis on consciousness, species-being and ‘being for itself’ while retaining the materialist emphasis on corporeality. In a crucial passage, Marx and Engels write that:

Humans can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their corporeal organisation [*körperliche Organisation*]. (5: 31; I.5: 8)

So instead of consciousness and species-beings, Marx and Engels now points to *production* as the specific trait of the human being. Humans *produce* rather than merely *consume* their means of subsistence. It is of course perfectly possible for individuals to consume without ever producing anything but only

in so far as *someone else* produce their means of subsistence. To be sure, ‘animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc.’ (3: 276), as Marx argues in the *1844 Manuscripts*. The distinction at play here is not an absolute distinction: human animals are not the only ones who produce, but they do so to a much higher degree than non-human animals.

The really crucial element in this passage from *The German Ideology*, however, is the notion of *corporeal organisation*.³² This is the condition, so we are told, of human production (see also G: 734). Marx and Engels also state that the corporeal organisation of human individuals ‘and their consequent relation to the rest of nature’ is the ‘first premise of all human history,’ but then they go on to say that ‘[o]f course, we cannot here go into either the actual physical nature of human beings [*die physische Beschaffenheit der Menschen selbst*], or into the natural conditions in which humans find themselves’ (5: 31; I.5: 8). This, they tell us, is a premise which ‘[a]ll historical investigation must set out from’ (5: 31; I.5: 8). It is remarkable that despite the canonical status of these passages from *The German Ideology*, the concept of corporeal organisation has been ‘almost universally neglected’, as Joseph Fracchia (2005, p. 39)—who is, as far as I know, the only one who has attempted to come up with an interpretation of this concept—puts it.³³ Most commentators seem to regard the features of the human body as a simple premise, i.e., as something that lies outside of the concerns of Marxist theory. Despite their emphasis on materiality and (re)production, Marxists have therefore been oddly silent on the issue of the body (Fracchia, 2005, p. 34f; Fox, 2015, Chapter 1). Not only have they thereby reproduced the problematic tendency so prevalent in philosophy and social theory to ignore the body, they have also overlooked what amounts to a ‘corporeal turn’ in Marx’s thought (Fracchia, 2017).

So how is the human body organised? On the basis of Marx’s other writings, Fracchia suggests that we think of the human body as involving, on the one hand, a ‘set of corporeal capabilities’ and, on the other hand, a ‘set of corporeal constraints’ (Fracchia, 2005, p. 43). The constraints set the limits

³² *Körperliche* is usually translated as ‘physical’, but ‘corporeal’ is more accurate (‘physical’ would be *physische*, a word also used by Marx in the same paragraph).

³³ Among those who quote the passage without providing an interpretation of this concept are Avineri (1980, p. 73), Burkett (2014, p. 269), Foster (2000, p. 115), Fox (2015, p. 156), Hoffmann (1982, pp. 79ff, 96, 106), McNally (2001, p. 77), Schmidt (2013, p. 91) and Tabak (2012, p. 38).

for the capacity of humans to ‘make history’ and refer to ‘bodily needs’ as well as ‘bodily limits and constraints’ such as mortality, terrestriality, diurnality and the limits of human sense organs (Fracchia, 2005, p. 51). Fracchia divides the *capabilities* into two subcategories: first, what he calls ‘bodily instruments’, i.e., organs which can be used as instruments, such as the hand, ‘the uniquely flexible supra-laryngeal tract which is the absolute prerequisite for all human languages and thus human cultures, [...] the human “perceptual systems,” and, of course, the unique human brain’ (Fracchia, 2005, p. 47). Second, the corporeal *dexterities* to which the flexibility of the bodily instruments give rise, such as bipedality (Fracchia, 2005, p. 48f).

Fracchia’s interpretation of the notion of ‘corporeal organisation’ highlights some important and interesting features of the human body, but it nevertheless fails to appreciate an absolutely crucial aspect of the specifically human metabolism: *the use of extra-somatic tools*—not the ‘bodily instruments’ Fracchia speaks of but those tools which are not immediately linked to the body.³⁴ This, I will argue, is *the* most essential aspect of the corporeal organisation of the human being. While it is widely acknowledged that Marx stressed the centrality of tools in human (re)production, the significance of tools for a Marxist social ontology in general and the social ontology of economic power in particular is widely ignored. Most accounts of Marx’s analysis of the human use of tools discuss it in connection with the analysis of the labour process in chapter seven of the first volume of *Capital*. In these discussions, the analysis of tools is for the most part completely overshadowed by interpretations of this famous passage:

We presuppose labour in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic. A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. (C1: 283f)

Many commentators lay great stress on this distinction between the instinctual actions of animals and the properly human form of ‘purposeful activity’

³⁴ The human use of tools is completely ignored by John G. Fox in *Marx, The Body and Human Nature* (2015).

governed by a prior mental conception (see also G: 298, 311; 29: 278). As a result of this focus, tools tend to fade into the background.³⁵ I do not intend to deny that the human capacity for intellectual anticipation of the labour process is not an important and distinctive feature of the human metabolism. It is, however, only part of the story, and for our purposes—i.e., for understanding the socio-ontological presuppositions of economic power—the use of tools is more important. Intellectual capacities and the use of tools are in fact closely connected, not only because they are a part of the same evolutionary development, but also because the complexity of human tool-making requires certain intellectual capacities, including communication of complex information (McNally, 2001, pp. 92, 88).³⁶

SOCIAL TOOL-MAKERS

The important thing about the human use of tools is that it is *necessary*. Humans do not simply use tools because it is convenient; they are *dependent* upon tools. As I have already noted, other animals use tools too, but they never come close to the complexity and scale of human tools. For these reason, the ‘use and construction of instruments of labour’ should, in Marx’s words, be regarded as ‘characteristic of the specifically human labour process’ (C1: 286; see also Malm, 2018c, p. 165; McNally, 2001, p. 100). The anatomy of homo sapiens sapiens is even partly a *result* of the ability of its predecessors to produce simple tools, such as the hand-axes of *homo erectus* (McNally, 2001, p. 92). Tools are thus an integral part of the human body, and it is this aspect of human corporeal organisation which makes it necessary for humans to *produce* their means of subsistence. The details of the evolutionary trajectory that led to this need not concern us here; they belong to the set of facts that ‘all historical investigation must set out from’.³⁷ Because of this dependency, Marx refers to tools as *organs*: ‘Thus nature becomes one of the organs of his [i.e., the worker’s] activity, which he annexes to his own bodily organs, extending his shape [*Gestalt*] in spite of the Bible’ (C1: 285, 493; see also 30:

³⁵ Examples of this include Avineri (1980, p. 81f), Braverman (1974, p. 46), Colletti (1973, p. 67), Gould (1980, p. 41f), Harvey (2010, p. 111ff), Heinrich (2013c, p. 153ff), Hoffmann (1982, p. 81ff), Lukács (1980, pp. 3, 105), McIvor (2009, p. 44), Ollman (1976, p. 110f), Saito (2017, p. 65) and Tabak (2012, p. 21).

³⁶ Alfred Schmidt (2013, p. 102) even holds that ‘[t]here can be hardly any doubt that the most basic and abstract concepts have arisen in the context of labour-processes, i.e. in the context of tool-making.’

³⁷ See Foster (2000, p. 200ff) and McNally (2001, Chapter 3) for overviews.

58). Tools are a *prolongation* of the body or, in the words of Lewis Mumford (2010, p. 10), an extension of ‘the powers of the otherwise unarmed organism.’ They are not, however, the kind of extension that one can simply decide not to use: ‘just as the human being requires lungs to breathe with, so it requires something that is the work of human hands in order to consume the forces of nature productively’ (C1: 508).³⁸ *Just as the lungs, tools are a part of the human body, a necessary part of the specifically human metabolism*, and for this reason, Marx approvingly quotes Benjamin Franklin’s definition of the human being as a ‘tool-making animal’ (30: 98; C1: 286). This obviously harks back to the idea of nature as the ‘inorganic body’ of the human being in the *1844 Manuscripts*.³⁹ There, Marx conceptualised *nature as such* as the body of the human being in order to highlight the corporeality of human existence against Hegel’s idealist notion of labour (3: 276). However, the analytical value of such an extremely broad notion of the human body, is somewhat doubtful. An echo of this idea can be found in *Capital*, where Marx holds that in ‘a wider sense we may include among the instruments of labour [...] all the objective conditions necessary for carrying on the labour process’ such as ‘the earth’ (C1: 286). In general, however, when Marx speaks of ‘tools’, it is not in this ‘wider sense’ but in the narrower sense of ‘things through which the impact of labour on its object is mediated’ (C1: 286).

Tools may be considered organs, but at the same time, they are much easier to separate from the rest of the body than other organs, such as the lungs, the liver or the skin. They occupy a peculiar position on the threshold between the material of labour on the one hand and those ‘bodily instruments’ of which Fracchia speaks on the other. Among the few Marxists to have appreciated this ambiguity is Plekhanov (1947, p. 146ff) and Kautsky (1989, p. 69), who argued that

[t]he artificial organs created by man are distinguished from animal organs in that they are not part of his body, but exist outside it. They are thus of an ambiguous nature. They belong to man as his organs and are yet at the same time part of his environment.

Kautsky’s and Plekhanov’s technicist conception of the relation between the human being and its tools prevented them from harvesting the potential of

³⁸ See also Foster (2000, p. 200f), Foster & Burkett (2000, p. 413), Malm (2016, p. 280), McNally (2001, p. 91), Schmidt (2013, p. 102).

³⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of this concept, see Foster & Burkett (2000).

this line of thought, but they did capture the essential thing, namely that human tools are at the same time *a part of the body—an organ—and separated from it* (see also Rigby, 1998, p. 63; Wendling, 2009, p. 31). They are a kind of partially free floating organs precariously connected to the bodies whose necessary metabolism with the rest of nature they mediate. Because of human dependence on tools, *the constitutive moments of the human metabolism are much easier to separate and temporarily dissolve* than those of other animals (and plants, for that matter)—a circumstance which is, as I will come back to later in this chapter, crucial for understanding how such a thing as economic power is possible.

At this point, we need to introduce yet another fact from which ‘all historical investigation must set out’: the *social* nature of human production. To begin with this merely means that humans are dependent upon other humans for their reproduction. ‘A human body cannot,’ as Malm puts it, ‘regulate her *Stoffwechsel* in solitude, any more than she could speak in a private tongue: she must do it as a communal being. Her relation to the rest of nature is therefore mediated through her relations to other human beings’ (Malm, 2016, p. 160; see also Burkett, 2014, p. 28f). Marx consistently treated the human being as ‘a social animal’ (C1: 444), which is to say that ‘human life has from the beginning rested on [...] *social production*’ (34: 329). In opposition to ‘the unimaginative conceits of the eighteen-century Robinsonades’, so dear to classical political economy as well as contemporary economics, Marx insists that ‘[a]ll production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society’ (G: 87; see also G: 83; C1: 269; 5: 35; 30: 98). Marx regarded this as a *fact* whose explanation is the business of empirical studies of human evolution rather than social theory. An explanation of this kind would have to account for such evolutionary processes as the origins and consequences of bipedality, which freed the hands for carrying and tool-making; the ways in which increased effectivity of hunting and gathering created new and complex forms of social interaction as well as freeing up time for social activities not directly related to the provision of food; how fire made it possible to externalise digestion, enormously increase energy efficiency and develop larger brains; and how larger brains in turn, combined with a narrow birth canal as a result of bipedality led to the peculiar phenomenon of prematurely born human animals demanding care for years.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See McNally (2001, Chapter 3), J. C. Scott (2017, Chapter 1).

We can now return to the question—posed in the beginning of this chapter—of whether the individual or the social relations in which individuals find themselves are ontologically primary. The preceding analysis of the human body reveals that already at the corporeal level human individuals are caught up in a web of social relations mediating their access to the conditions of their reproduction. Some of their organs even circulate as tools in their social environment. For this reason, it does not really make sense to ascribe primacy to *either* individuals *or* social relations. As Etienne Balibar puts it, Marx’s perspective ‘establishes a complete reciprocity between these two poles, which cannot exist without one another’ (Balibar, 2014, p. 32). This is what Balibar, borrowing a notion from Gilbert Simondon, calls transindividuality, and thus we might say that the notion of corporeal organisation reveals the corporeal roots of transindividuality. We can of course speak of individuals in a corporeal sense: it is certainly possible to identify human individuals as relatively tightly knit bundles of functionally coupled organs spatially separated from other similar bundles. But the boundaries of the body are blurry, and for this reason we should avoid positing the kind of absolute division between individuals and their social relations implied by claims about the ‘primacy’ of one or the other.⁴¹

The *double mediation* at the heart of the human metabolism—the mediation of tools and the mediation of social relations—explains why it can take infinitively many different forms. To be sure, the human corporeal organisation also implies certain limits, as emphasised by Fracchia, but within these limits, the possibilities are virtually endless. Humans are bound to mediate their metabolism through tools, but there is no *necessary* way to organise this mediation. There is no specific set of tools which every individual must necessarily use, and for this reason there is an infinity of ways in which a division of labour can be organised. Human corporeal organisation opens up an immense space of *possibility* founded on a *necessity*: a metabolism *must* be established, but its *social form* is never simply given. There is no *natural* form of human metabolism in the sense that the natural characteristics of the human animal do not entail a specific form of metabolism. The organisation of the human body implies, in Piotr Hoffmann’s (1982, p. 96) words, ‘that human life cannot flow in a ready-made channel.’

⁴¹ See also Luca Basso’s concept of singularity, which is likewise an attempt to conceptualise Marx’s overcoming of what Basso (2012, p. 2) refers to as ‘individualism’ and ‘holism’.

These considerations allow us to grasp the poverty of the romantic notion of an ‘original unity’ of humans and nature. This notion pervades Kohei Saito’s otherwise very interesting account of Marx’s ecosocialism. According to Saito’s reading, the core of Marx’s political project is the abolition of capitalist alienation and ‘the conscious rehabilitation of the unity of humanity and nature’ (Saito, 2017, p. 177). There are two possible ways in which a concept of the unity of humans and nature can be understood. First, it can be understood in the rather banal sense that humans are natural beings, i.e., a part of the totality we commonly refer to as nature. If this is what it means to speak of the unity of humans and nature, however, it makes no sense to say that it has been broken by capitalism. Sure, many people die of starvation because of capitalist relations of production, but it is hardly the general condition of existence (partly because capital needs people to stay alive so they can produce surplus value). The second possible meaning of the unity of humans and nature is a variant of the romantic ideal of an authentically human life, described earlier in this chapter. Such a notion relies on an implicit ideal of an authentic or immediate way for humans to relate to nature. This is the notion which runs through Saito’s book and through so many other romantic criticisms of the capitalist destruction of the biosphere (another example is Foster & Burkett, 2000, p. 416). In its worst forms, such a romanticism turns into New Age mysticism or reactionary *Schwärmerei* for rural life.

Marx’s analysis of the human body allows us to see how misguided it is to speak of an original unity of humans and nature. We should rather speak of an *original disunity or an original cleavage between humans and the rest of nature*. What really characterises the human animal is that it is ‘biologically underdetermined’ (Soper, 1995, p. 126). At the centre of its being is a ‘loss of immediacy’, which far from being the result of capitalist alienation is rather an ontological and constitutive feature of this peculiar animal (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 79). Living all of your life staring into a smartphone in a megacity and eating prepared food without ever knowing where it comes from and how it is produced does not mean that a holy bond between you and nature has been broken; it just means that your individual metabolism is mediated by a complex system of infrastructures, data, machines, financial flows and planetary supply chains.⁴² Marx’s critique of capitalism is, as Postone (2003,

⁴² In some passages, Marx does seem to slip into such a romanticism, as when he speaks of an ‘original unity between the worker and the conditions of labour’ (33: 340; see also G: 489; 32: 492; 20: 129). It is possible, however, to read these

p. 49) puts it, a critique ‘of forms of social mediation, not a critique of mediation from the standpoint of immediacy’. In this he is a true student of Hegel, for whom immediacy always reveals itself to be mediated (see e.g. Hegel, 1991, p. 115).

Here we immediately face the danger of slipping into another but equally untenable romanticism, namely a call for humans to be humble and come to terms with or appreciate their finitude. The acknowledgement of the inherent lack of unity in the metabolism of humans and the rest of nature should not lead us to conceive of humans as fragile, vulnerable and ontologically homeless creatures destined to remain caught in opaque mediations. Such a way of thinking amounts to a secularisation of the religious demand for humans to display their submissiveness and obedience to God. One finds examples of this in existentialist philosophies of the Heideggerian variant or in Arnold Gehlen’s (1988) conservative philosophical anthropology, according to which the natural incompleteness of human beings justify the call for stable social institutions (i.e., the shepherd-God is replaced with the shepherd-State).⁴³ The key to avoid such an ideology of finitude is to recall that it is the very fragility and porosity of the human metabolism which has made humans so evolutionarily successful. Human corporeal organisation is the source of an immense flexibility and has enabled this animal to ‘break out of a narrow ecological niche’ (Fracchia, 2005, p. 49; Hoffmann, 1982, p. 79f). Far from being the sign of an inherent finitude of the human being, the loss of immediacy at the centre of its being is rather a sign of its *infinity* in the sense that it enables humans to socially mediate their relation to the rest of nature in an infinite number of ways.

NATURAL AND SOCIAL

The ‘biologically under-determined’ nature of the human being makes it important to insist on a distinction which has been under sustained attack from various strands of critical theory in the last couple of decades: the distinction between the *social* and the *natural*. The conception of the human being defended in the preceding pages obviously entails that humans and

passages as a reference not to some authentic or natural bond, but rather to *socially constituted* and relatively stable pre-capitalist connections between labour and its conditions.

⁴³ In its secular version, this thought goes back at least to Johann Gottfried Herder, as Gehlen (1988, p. 73ff) himself points out. A similar idea is contained in Nietzsche’s famous quip about the human being as ‘the *not yet determined animal*’.

their social relations cannot be thought of as something existing *outside* of nature. Nevertheless, relations between human animals are significantly different from relations between other natural things and organisms, and we need a conceptual apparatus which is capable of reflecting that difference. In a ridicule of the economists in *Capital*, Marx writes that '[s]o far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond' (C1: 177). The *value form* is a 'purely social' property of a thing and has nothing to do with its 'natural qualities' such as its chemical composition (C1: 139; 20: 121).⁴⁴ Similarly, Marx insists that '[t]o be a slave, to be a citizen, are social determinations, relations between human beings A and B. Human being A, as such, is not a slave. He is a slave in and through society' (G: 265; see also G: 259; 9: 211; C1: 273). To say that having a value or being a slave is a *social* property is to say that these phenomena have their roots in relations between human beings (6: 321). The reason why Marx finds it important to underline the social nature of things such as value and slavery is, of course, that he wants to stress that they are *not necessary*, i.e., that they fall within the domain of what can be *changed* by human beings. This is the core meaning of the distinction between the natural and the social on which Marx's denaturalising critique of social forms rests: the *social* is what *can* be changed by humans, and the natural is what is *necessary*. As Soper puts it, nature is 'those material structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not human created product), and whose forces and causal powers are the necessary condition of every human practice, and determine the possible forms it can take' (Soper, 1995, p. 132f). Only by insisting on such a distinction is it possible to conceptualise the crucial and real difference—systematically obliterated by economists and other ideologues—between the value of a commodity and its chemical composition or the enslavement of a human being and the possibility of emancipation.

A distinction between the natural and social does not imply the claim that the boundaries between them are fixed. Social relations give rise to technologies which enable humans to control and manipulate natural processes previously outside their reach. The distinction between the natural and the

⁴⁴ See Patrick Murray and Jeanne Schuler's (2017) analysis of the meaning of the expression 'purely social' in Marx's text. They distinguish between two meanings. Here, I am concerned with what they refer to as the 'first' meaning of it, which is that value is '*strictly* a consequence of a specific social form of labor' (Murray & Schuler, 2017, p. 134).

social does not imply an *absolute* difference between them either. Malm has convincingly demonstrated that it is perfectly possible to insist on a ‘substance monism’ while acknowledging that human social relations have certain ‘emergent properties’ which cannot be found in the rest of nature. Drawing on contemporary philosophy of mind as a kind of template for conceptualising this, Malm dubs this position ‘substance monism property dualism’ (Malm, 2018c, Chapter 2). Another way to put it is that Marx conceives of the relation between the natural and the social as *dialectical*. The concept of dialectics is often used in a sloppy manner in Marxist (and non-Marxist) literature; more often than not, it simply means ‘that everything is dependent upon everything else and is in a state of interaction and that it’s all rather complicated,’ as Heinrich (2012a, p. 36f) aptly puts it. Dialectics is neither interaction, mutual presupposition, reciprocity or simply contradiction. Dialectics is rather the process in which a concrete totality reveals itself to contain its own negation as one of its moments.⁴⁵ This is the sense in which the relation between the natural and the social is dialectical: nature is the totality out of which emerges an animal whose corporeal organisation opens up a new field of possibility which sets these animals apart from the rest of nature.

MODES, RELATIONS, FORCES, HISTORY

A relatively stable way of organising the human metabolism is called a *mode of production*. Marx employs this term in at least two different senses. First, he uses it to refer to the specific social and technical structure of the labour process. Second, he also uses it in a broader sense where it refers not only to the labour process but to all the significant aspects of the economic structure of a given society—this is the sense in which we can speak of the feudal or the capitalist mode of production (Harvey, 2006, p. 25f; Rigby, 1998, p. 24). It is the latter sense with which I am concerned here. A mode of production involves a ‘specific combination of the forces and relations of production’ (Callinicos, 2004, p. 41; Althusser, 2014, p. 20). The *forces of production* refer to all the elements which enter into the production of a use value: means of production, raw materials, energy and labour, including knowledge and

⁴⁵ A paradigmatic example is Hegel’s account of the dialectic of sense certainty in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: sense certainty posits ‘this’ as the truth, but it turns out that one of the moments of ‘this’, namely ‘now’, in fact amounts to ‘not-this’ (Hegel, 1977, p. 59ff).

skills.⁴⁶ The *relations of production* refers to the social relations under which the forces of production are employed.

The primacy ascribed to productive forces in orthodox historical materialism is, as I have already mentioned, also possible to find in many of Marx's writings. In *The German Ideology*, he and Engels are quite unambiguous: '[i]n the development of productive forces there comes a stage when productive forces and means of intercourse are brought into being which, under the existing relations, only cause mischief, and are no longer productive but destructive forces' (5: 52; I.5: 43). In this familiar scheme, the relations of production are that variable which adapts to the immanently developing productive forces. This position is restated in writings such as *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the *Manifesto* and achieved its paradigmatic formulation in the preface to the *Contribution*, quoted in the previous chapter. As he delved into a detailed study of technology in the early 1860s, however, Marx began to change his views (Malm, 2016, p. 274ff, 2018b; Beamish, 1992). He now came to regard the development of the productive forces as a *result* of the relations of production. Despite this extremely important theoretical change, Marx apparently continued to hold on to some of the core ideas of productive force determinism in various writings from the 1860s.⁴⁷ The perhaps best example of this is the famous passage from chapter 32 of the first volume of *Capital* where Marx writes that 'capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation' (C1: 929). As Heinrich rightly points out, however, this passage is merely 'declamatory' and does not constitute a 'prerequisite for [the] essential arguments of the critique of political economy' (Heinrich, 1999b). Marx's productive force determinism relies on the unwarranted assumption of a transhistorically necessary tendency for the productive forces to develop, regardless of the specific relations of production under which they are put to use—an assumption which is essentially *external* to Marx's general theoretical framework. After the publication of the French edition of the first volume of *Capital* (1872-75), which was the last edition Marx prepared himself, productive force

⁴⁶ See Althusser (2014, p. 22ff), Callinicos (2004, p. 43ff), Harvey (2006, p. 98ff), Rigby (1998, p. 17ff), Therborn (1976).

⁴⁷ See Malm (2016, p. 276), Rigby (1998, p. 148), Shaw (1979, p. 158f), Wickham (2008, p. 6f).

determinism seems to disappear entirely from his writings.⁴⁸ Towards the end of his life, he even explicitly opposed determinist readings of his work. In his 1877 letter to the editors of the Russian journal *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*, Marx emphasised that the sections on so-called primitive accumulation in *Capital* was no more than a ‘historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe’ and not ‘a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed’ (24: 200). He restated this point in his letter to Vera Zasulich from 1881, where he underlined that his analysis of ‘the “historical inevitability” of this process is *expressly* limited to the *countries of Western Europe*’ (46: 71; see also K. B. Anderson, 2016, p. 224ff).

What drives history is not the immanent and necessary development of the productive forces, but human beings acting within a set of determinate social structures from which certain tendencies arise. Some modes of production thwart technological development, others—such as capitalism—accelerate it in particular ways. As Marx explains in an absolutely crucial passage from the *1861-63 Manuscripts*:

Natural laws of production! Here, it is true, it is a matter of the *natural laws of bourgeois production*, hence of the laws within which production occurs at a *particular historical stage* and under *particular historical conditions of production*. If there were no such laws, the *system of bourgeois production* would be altogether incomprehensible [*unbegreiflich*]. What is involved here, therefore, is the presentation of *the nature* of this particular mode of production, hence its *natural laws*. But just as it is itself *historical*, so are its *nature* and the *laws of that nature*. The natural laws of the Asiatic, the ancient, or the feudal mode of production were essentially different. (34: 236)

So, the ‘natural laws’ of a mode of production refer to its *essential* and *historically specific* determinations, and *not* to the way in which a transhistorical technological drive smashes through the fetters of historical particularities. Every mode of production has its own laws, and as we have seen, there is no *natural* mode of production. The historicity of the human being ‘is not superimposed upon man’s physical organisation but grows directly out of it,’

⁴⁸ See Kevin B. Anderson’s (2016, Chapter 6) important study on Marx’s preoccupation with non-Western and pre-capitalist societies in the last decade of his life and its impact on his understanding of history.

as Hoffman (1982, p. 81) puts it—not because a sequence of modes of production is inscribed in the essence of the human being but precisely because of the *absence* of such an inscription. Only because the corporeal organisation of the human being opens up an immense space of possibility is something like a succession of modes of production, i.e., *history*, possible. The translation of this *possibility* into *actuality*, i.e., the processes that decides on the specific social relations under which people live, is what we call *politics*.

MATERIALISM

One might object that my description of the human being in this chapter has so far been somewhat reductive, with its narrow focus on the reproduction of corporeal existence. Does a Marxist social ontology rest on a reductive conception of the human being according to which the sole or primary content of human life is to procure the means of subsistence? Is not human life so much more than that—what about thought, language, meaning, feelings, culture, art, religion, beauty? This would surely be a timely objection if what I have presented in this chapter claimed to be a full-fledged philosophical anthropology. But that is not my aim. The analysis of the human being presented in the preceding pages is only intended to help us get a better understanding of what economic power is and how it is possible.

At the same time, however, it must be stressed that the social ontology defended here does ascribe a special importance to the social relations of production in relation to other aspects of the social totality. It is a *materialist* social ontology. Orthodox historical materialism and widespread straw-man criticisms of Marx's alleged 'economism' have, unfortunately, obfuscated the meaning of Marx's materialism. In order to grasp this it is useful to consider the positions Marx tried to avoid. In the first place, he was of course preoccupied with overturning (German) idealism. The primary (though not exclusive) target of his criticism was not idealism as general ontology or a philosophical system, but more specifically the philosophical anthropology of the idealists and the (mis)understanding of society and history resulting from this philosophical anthropology (Murray, 1990, p. 64). As discussed earlier in relation to the critique of Hegel in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx accused idealist philosophers—including most of the Young Hegelians—of subscribing to 'a spiritualistic view of what it means to be human', as Murray (1990, p. 64) puts it. According to Marx, idealists tend to think of humans as 'ethereal beings [...] able to live on the ether of pure thought' (4: 53), a view which results in a conception of social and historical change as

something originating in thought, abstractly understood. This in turn leads—at least in Young Hegelian criticism—to a one-sided emphasis on *critique* as the driving force of social change (4: 53). Marx had himself defended such a position in 1843, where he declared that there was an urgent need for a ‘reform of consciousness’ through a ‘*ruthless criticism of all that exist*’ (3: 144, 142). As we have seen, Feuerbach’s humanism, with its emphasis on the naturalness and corporeality of human existence, helped Marx to transcend this idealism in 1844.

At the same time, however, the existing materialist philosophies were equally fraught with reductive abstractions. Post-Baconian British materialism was ‘*one-sided*’ because of its mechanical ontology which reduced ‘concepts, notions, and ideas’ to mere ‘phantoms of the real world’, as Marx writes in *The Holy Family* (4: 128). The materialism of the French enlightenment represented, as Murray (1990, p. 69; 4: 124ff) puts it, ‘only an abstract negation, a *mere* turning-upside-down, of the idealist position. That is, they retained the same logical dualism but altered the order of priority’.⁴⁹ Like Feuerbach’s, such a form of materialism is *ahistorical* and *asocial*. Marx’s social ontology is an attempt to sail safely between the Scylla of idealist anthropology and the Charybdis of ahistorical materialism; to avoid an *abstract dualism* of thought and being *as well as reducing* the one to the other; to insist, that is, on the identity-in-difference of thought and being. In order to do that, Marx mobilised elements of both traditions against each other. This is particularly clear in the *Theses on Feuerbach* where Marx attacked ‘all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included)’ for its failure to appreciate the significance of subjectivity and human practice. The ‘*active side*’ of human existence was thus ‘set forth abstractly by idealism’ (5: 3; Balibar, 2014, p. 23ff). Marx’s materialism is an attempt to hold on to the idealist emphasis on activity and subjectivity as well as the materialist insistence on the corporeality of human beings and the primacy of their *practical* rather than theoretical relationship to their surroundings.

Such a materialism does in no way amount to a reductive claim about consciousness being merely an immediate reflection of something called matter. To be sure, Marx does occasionally express himself in a manner

⁴⁹ Marx was well versed in the history of materialism, having written his doctoral dissertation on Epicurus and Democritus. See his outline of the history of modern materialism in *The Holy Family* (4: 124-134), from which I have just quoted, his critique of the ahistorical materialism of the physiocrats in the *1861-63 Manuscripts* (30: 353) and the ‘abstract materialism of natural science’ in *Capital* (C1: 494).

which suggests such a crude ‘reflection theory’ of knowledge and ideology. These passages are mostly found in highly polemical or programmatic texts such as *The German Ideology* and the preface to the *Contribution*, where he famously claims that ‘[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’ (29: 263).⁵⁰ In orthodox historical materialism, such passages and expressions became the canonical basis for what was effectively a regression to a pre-Marxian abstract materialism (Korsch, 2013, p. 81)—as with Lenin (1972, Chapter 6.2), who insisted that ‘consciousness is only the reflection of being, at best an approximately true (adequate, perfectly exact) reflection of it’. Such a view, and the one-sided quips by Marx on which they rely, does not, however, do justice to the inner logic of Marx’s materialist social ontology. The ‘point is not’, as Murray explains, ‘that consciousness is just an epiphenomenon of being (or life) but that it never exists apart from, as an independent entity detached from, being (or life). Consciousness is always the *consciousness-of* some determinate life practice’ (Murray, 1990, p. 70; see also Rigby, 1998, p. 275ff; Schmidt, 2013, p. 107ff). The whole thrust of Marx’s materialist view of human intellectual activity is to see it as an integrated part of human social practice. Human beings are ‘thinking bodies’ (Fracchia, 2005, p. 58); ‘[t]he “spirit” is from the outset infested with curse of being “burdened” with matter’, as Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology* (5: 43f; I.5: 30), and for this reason the ‘production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is from the beginning immediately interwoven [*verflochten*] with the material activity and the material intercourse of humans’ (5: 36; I.5: 135).⁵¹

⁵⁰ See also 5: 36 (I.5: 135), where Marx and Engels speak of ‘echoes’, ‘reflexes’ and ‘direct efflux [*Ausfluß*]’. Murray (1990, p. 69) notes—correctly, in my view—that these passages should be read as polemical jabs rather than well-considered theoretical concepts. See also Eagleton (1996, p. 73).

⁵¹ Marx’s hostility to idealist hypostatizations led him to adopt a somewhat empiricist attitude in *The German Ideology* and other writings from the mid-1840s. Later, however, he discovered that abstractions also occur in social reality itself. This development can be seen, for example, by comparing his ridicule in *The Holy Family* of the Hegelian idealist who thinks that *the fruit* as such really exists, with the passage from the first edition of *Capital* where he notes that with money, it is as if *the animal* as such exists right next to all of the particular animals. His changing views on methodology also led him to appreciate the value of theoretical abstractions. Whereas one of his earliest criticisms of Ricardo was that he was too abstract, he later accused him of not being abstract enough (see Althusser, Balibar,

One of the most fundamental claims of Marx's materialism, in addition to the emphasis on the socio-material embeddedness of intellectual activity, concerns the relative significance of different sets of social relations within the social totality. The centrality ascribed to relations of production by Marx derives from the simple fact that relations of production are nothing but the social relations through which people gain access to the necessary conditions of their life. Procuring means of subsistence is something most people tend to regard as rather important. Once certain social relations have established themselves at this level, they result in what Brenner (2007, p. 59) calls 'rules for reproduction', i.e., they set up certain limits for how people can gain access to life's necessities. As is hopefully clear by now, this in no way implies an economistic view of social life. The economy is not, as I have already stressed, a separate social sphere governed by an economic rationality. The economy in Marx's sense is the sum of activities and processes through which social reproduction is organised—and the logics which govern these processes are inherently social and historical: 'historical materialist approaches begin,' as Brenner (2007, p. 57) puts it, 'from a denial of any notion of trans-historical individual economic rationality' (see also 34: 329). It is this denaturalisation of the economy, which radically distinguishes Marx from political economy (as well as contemporary economics): Marx 'treats the economy itself not as a network of disembodied forces but, like the political sphere, as a set of social relations' (Wood, 2016, pp. 21, 24f). The relations of production are not something 'out there' in a separate economic sphere—they are the relations through which people reproduce their lives; relations which are an immediate part of people's daily lives. Or, as Karl Polanyi (2001, p. 79) puts it: 'the organization of labor is only another word for the forms of life of the common people'. What is characteristic about the economic sphere, if we want to call it that, is not the logics which governs it but the social function of the activities which constitute it, i.e., the fact that the very existence of society depends on them. *This* is the basic idea of Marx's materialism. It does not claim that the social relations which govern social reproduction also automatically govern other spheres of life, or that social forms of consciousness are mere reflections of it. What it does claim, however, is that relations of production exert a very powerful influence on

Establet, Macherey, & Rancière, 2015, p. 146; Callinicos, 2014, p. 47; Wendling, 2009, p. 67).

other aspects of social life by virtue of their absolutely fundamental role in the reproduction of the very existence of social life.⁵²

METABOLIC DOMINATION

At this point, in order to finally approach the question of *power*, we need to introduce another one of those facts on which social ontology is based: the fateful ability of human beings to produce more than what is necessary for their own survival. Without this ability, class societies could not exist:

If the worker needs to use all of his time to produce the necessary means of subsistence for himself and his family, he has no time left in which to perform unpaid labour for other people. Unless labour has attained a certain level of productivity, the worker will have no such free time at his disposal, and without superfluous time there can be no surplus labour, hence no capitalists, as also no slave-owners, no feudal barons, in a word no class of large-scale landed proprietors. (C1: 646f)

The mere possibility of surplus labour—which is dependent upon certain favourable natural conditions (C1: 649f)—can only explain the *possibility* of class domination, never its *actuality*. In order for this potential to be realised, some people have to succeed in extracting surplus labour from others. If we now consider the ways in which this can happen, the relation between human corporeal organisation and power becomes clear. One option is to force other people to do surplus labour by means of (the threat of) direct violence. Another possibility is to psychologically or ideologically manipulate people into doing it. These strategies can of course be, and have probably always been, combined. Given the precarious nature of the human

⁵² The doctrinaire codification of the so-called primacy of production took the form of the base-superstructure model, according to which the economic structure of a society unilaterally determined the forms taken by the state, law, culture, ideology and so on. Although there is certainly a rational kernel in this model, I agree with Wood (2016, p. 49) that it ‘has always been more trouble than it is worth’. The state and the law, for example, cannot simply be placed in as ‘superstructure’, as some of their functions are necessary for the structures of the economic ‘base’ (Wood, 2016, p. 27f; see also Rigby, 1998, Chapter 9). For this reason, she suggests replacing it with a conception of the social totality as ‘a continuous structure of social relations and forms with varying degrees of distance from the immediate processes of production and appropriation’ (Wood, 2016, p. 25f).

metabolism, however, there is also a third possibility, which is to exploit this ontological fragility and *insert oneself in the gap between life and its conditions*. This is what economic power is. Malm puts it well:

No other species can be so flexible, so universal, so omnivorous in relation to the rest of nature—but *for the very same reason, no other species can have its metabolism organised through such sharp internal divisions*. If a broad set of extra-somatic tools is a distinctive feature of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, it is also the point where that species ceases to be a unity. (...) A material, a machine, a prime mover can become private property. The individual might need them like she needs her own lungs, but they are outside of her body, caught by others in a net, versatile *and* off-limits, and so she may have no choice but to go via a master to access them: she is snared in property relations (Malm, 2016, p. 280)

The fact that parts of the human body can be concentrated as property in the hands of other humans has the consequence that *power can weave itself into the very fabric of the human metabolism*. Instead of attaching itself externally to the metabolism and violently pump out surplus labour like a leech, the dominant part in a power relation can inject itself into the heart of social reproduction. The use of violence thus becomes less necessary, since power is now relegated to *things*. The phenomenon of economic power thus reveals the ‘unique propensity’ of humans ‘to *actively order matter so that it solidifies their social relations*’ (Malm, 2018c, p. 143). Social relations are, as Alf Hornborg (2016, pp. 93, 104, 162) puts it, ‘embodied in artifacts, and the management of artifacts is tantamount to the management of relations.’ This is why property relations are such an important factor in human existence, and as we will see in the next chapter, one of the characteristic features of capitalism is that it is the only mode of production to have been able to fully exploit the possibility of this mode of domination. Elaine Scarry (1985, p. 250), who is one of the very few to have appreciated the intimate connection between power and the specific structure of the human body, explains the significance of property well:

It is the identification of the materials of earth as “a prolongation” of the worker’s body that leads Marx to designate “private property” as a key problem for civilization: through private property, the maker is separated from the materials of earth, from the inorganic prolongation

of his own activity, and therefore enters into the process of artifice as one who cannot sell what he makes (coats, bricks) but can only sell his own now truncated activity of making. [...] Thus the disturbingly graphic concept of the severing of the worker from his own extended body becomes central to *Capital*, though it usually occurs in the more abstract phrasing of “the separation of the worker from the means of production”⁵³

The porosity of the human being makes this peculiar animal extremely susceptible to property relations. It opens up the possibility of a new form of power defined by the ability of social logics such as capital to transform itself as the mediator between life and its condition.

In my account of human corporeal organisation, I have written a lot about ‘tools’—a term which might conjure up the image of such simple artefacts as axes, spears, spoons, hammers and the like. To be sure, even the simplest human tools are vastly more complex than those used by apes—not only because ‘apes do not use heat, adhesives, knots or weaving to permanently join two or more separate object,’ but also because of the social character of the production and use of tools (McNally, 2001, p. 100). Humans are able to join together tools, and to produce tools with the help of other tools. Because of the separability of the body and its tool-organs, the latter can also be coupled to motive forces other than the human body; ‘the unity of the motive force of labor and the labor itself is not inviolable,’ as Braverman (1974, p. 50) has pointed out. An important aspect of the human use of tools is thus what Malm (2016, p. 315) calls the ‘peculiar human capacity for energetic division.’ In one sense, even a simple task such as dropping a stone on a shell in order to it crack open is a utilisation of a force of nature, namely gravity. Humans can also use the bodies of each other as well as animals as sources of energy (30: 97; 33: 392; C1: 493). At a later point in human history came inventions such as mills, powered first by water and later by wind, and even later coal and oil became the energetic basis of social reproduction. Over time, tools developed into *machinery*. During his studies of technology in 1863, Marx broached the question of the distinction between tool and machine, a subject about which the ‘crude English

⁵³ The quote continues with the claim: ‘and as a difference between the capacity to “sell the products of labour” and to sell “labour power”.’ This is not very precise. A more appropriate difference would be that between selling labour-power and being independent of the market.

mechanics’ and the ‘German jackasses’ had created considerable confusion (41: 449; 33: 389; C1: 492f).⁵⁴ ‘Once the tool is itself driven by a mechanism, [..., i.e.] is converted into the tool of a mechanism,’ Marx explains, ‘the machine has replaced the tool’ (33: 423; C1: 495; see also Beamish, 1992, p. 102ff). This is so regardless of whether or not the motive force is human bodies (C1: 495). Taken together, the capacity for energetic division and the advent of the machine greatly enhanced the degree to which human bodies can get caught in vast material infrastructure imbued with social relations of domination. In chapter five we will see more concretely how this plays out in capitalist society. Power relations are embedded in the material structures of production in tools, machines and energy—not because these structures carry an immanent technical rationality imposing themselves on society, but because they are a part of the social relations of production (Sartre, 2004, p. 189ff).

* * *

At this point, the outline of the socio-ontological framework necessary for understanding the mute compulsion of economic relations is complete. What I have presented in this chapter is not a social ontology *tout court* but a social ontology of economic power, and in order to do that I proposed to begin from the disputed question of human nature. As we have seen, Marx did not simply dismiss the idea that there is such a thing as a human being (which even has a ‘nature’) when he turned away from the romantic humanism of his most Feuerbachian period (1844). Instead, he turned his attention to the human *body*, on the basis of which he crafted a new, materialist conception of human nature. I have argued that we should integrate Marx’s analysis of human use of tools into this notion of corporeal organisation. Doing so allows us to see how the structure of the human body implies a certain porosity and flexibility in its metabolism with the rest of nature: rather than an original unity of humans and nature, there is a natural *disunity*, since a part of the human body—the tool-organs—is only loosely connected to the rest of the body, allowing it to circulate in the social environment.

The interpretation of human corporeal organisation provided in this chapter implies that there is in fact such a thing as a human nature—it even

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that Marx begins his long and rich discussion of tools and machines in the *1861-63 Manuscripts* with a quote of Darwin on the ‘differentiation of organs’ (33: 387).

implies a *transhistorical* notion of human nature. On the face of it, this seems to place us firmly in the humanist camp against Althusserian anti-humanism. The position defended here does not, however, fit seamlessly into the usual categories of the debate. Contrary to Althusser's interpretation, the turn away from the humanism of the *1844 Manuscripts* is here not taken to lead Marx to discard the notion of the human being as such, and what is more important, the social ontology of Marx's later works is actually built on a notion of human nature. Despite this disagreement with Althusser, the conception of human nature presented in this chapter supports what I take to be one of the central elements of the spirit of Althusserian anti-humanism: the rejection of a romantic critique of capitalism in the name of a human essence. Capitalism does not contradict or repress the essence of the human being any more than any other mode of production, and communism will not be the realisation of that essence (see also Read, 2003, p. 23). Marx's social ontology rejects the idea of such an essence, which in fact amounts to a depoliticisation of critique, since it construes anti-capitalist politics as the restoration of a natural order. Instead, the social ontology presented in the preceding pages insists on *politics* by refusing the possibility of a transcendent anchor for the critique of capital. Human nature explains why it is possible for human beings to organise their social reproduction in so many different ways, but it can never serve as the normative basis for the rejection of a specific form of society, just as it can never explain why a specific form of society exists; in other words, the concept of human nature presented here rules out the possibility of assigning to it an explanatory or critical function with regards to historically specific social formations.

While the concept of human nature does not, then, have a place in the analysis of specific modes of production, it is a central component of Marxist social ontology. The corporeal organisation of the human being is a crucial part of the explanation as to why human social reproduction can take on so many different forms. It explains how the social emerges dialectically from nature, and thus how natural history itself gives rise to human history, without reducing the logic of the latter to that of the former. It reveals the poverty of economism by demonstrating that what we call 'the economy' is *social* through and through, and that there is no such thing as a natural mode of production. Furthermore, it explains why humans have the peculiar capacity to relegate the reproduction of the social relations through which they regulate their metabolism to their material environment. Coupled with the capacity for surplus labour, it also explains how social relations of *domination*

can reproduce themselves by becoming enmeshed in the reproduction of social life. It thus explains the *possibility* of economic power. In the chapters that follows, we shall see how the logic of capital has exploited this possibility.

PART TWO: RELATIONS

III. VERTICAL POWER

The fountains of your life are sealed by the hand of capital, that quaffs its golden goblet to the lees and gives the dregs to you. Why are you locked out of life when you are locked out of the factory? [...] What gives the capitalist this tremendous power?
—Ernest Jones (12: 462)

As I mentioned in the introduction, capital in the broadest sense—as the exchange of goods with the aim of making a profit—has existed for centuries. What distinguishes capitalism from other modes of production is not the mere existence of capital but its social significance; only in capitalism does the accumulation of abstract wealth constitute the basis of social reproduction. In order for this to be the case, certain social relations of production have to be in place. Following Brenner’s (2007, p. 58) useful distinction, we can divide these relations into two sets: *vertical* relations, between the immediate producers and the exploiters, and *horizontal* relations, among producers themselves and exploiters themselves (see also Callinicos, 2004, p. 51f, 2014, p. 175f). These distinct yet tightly interwoven relations form the basis of equally distinct yet tightly interwoven forms of domination, and taken together they explain why the power of capital takes the form of mute compulsion. In chapter four, I will examine the horizontal relations as well as the relation between the horizontal and the vertical relations. In this chapter I want to zoom in on the vertical class relations constitutive of the capitalist mode of production.

DEPENDENCY

In the second part of the first volume of *Capital* (chapters 4-6), Marx poses the question of how capital can be the dominant form of the circulation of money and commodities while avoiding systematically violating the law of exchange of equivalents, without which stable market relations cannot exist. The answer he comes up with is that this can only happen if it is possible to purchase a commodity ‘whose use value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labour’ (C1: 270). In other words: *labour-power* must be available on the market as a commodity in order for M-C-M' to be a dominant form of circulation. This ‘historical pre-condition comprises a world’s history’, parts of which Marx later examines in part eight of *Capital* (C1: 274). The commodification of labour-power is the condition of possibility of what Marx calls the *capital relation*, which is the relation between the proletarian who sells her labour-power and the capitalist who buys it (C1: 724). At first glance, this relation seems to be a voluntary market transaction, i.e., a simple relation between a buyer and a seller, and this is indeed how it is treated by mainstream economics. If we examine the conditions under which this relation exists, however, we will see that it is in fact a relation of domination. Since I am concerned with ‘bourgeois society as something that has already come into being, moving itself on its own basis’ (G: 253) rather than its historical emergence, the focus of this chapter will be on the conditions under which labour-power *continues* to be available on the market and not the conditions under which it *originally became* available. Nevertheless, a brief sketch of the historical emergence of the capital relation will help us understand the form of domination implied by it.

Mainstream economics treats the market as an institution providing individuals with *opportunities*; a view corresponding to what Wood and Brenner refer to as *the commercialisation model* of the historical origins of capitalism. According to this narrative, the emergence of capitalism appears as ‘a maturation of age-old commercial practices (together with technical advances) and their liberation from political and cultural constraints’, as Wood (2002, p. 12) puts it. Supposedly, if only people are allowed to exchange freely, a market economy will automatically arise. This is the view Marx resolutely breaks with in the sections on the ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ in *Capital*. Here Marx demonstrates—against ‘the tender annals of political economy, [where] the idyllic reigns from time immemorial’—that ‘in actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly,

violence [*Gewalt*], play the greatest part' (C1: 874). This violence was necessary in order to deprive peasants of the possibility to reproduce themselves outside of the market. In other words, market dependence had to be *created*, since peasants generally did what they could to avoid relying too much on the market. Rather than producing exclusively for the market, they preferred to produce for subsistence. Producing for the market required specialisation in order to remain competitive, and because of the unpredictable nature of agricultural production, amongst other factors, specialisation meant vulnerability. As Brenner (2007, p. 68) explains: '[g]iven the uncertainty of the harvest and the unacceptable cost of "business failure"—namely the possibility of starvation—peasants could not afford to adopt maximising exchange value via specialization as their rule of reproduction and adopted instead the rule of "safety first" or "produce for subsistence"'. Producing exclusively for the market also conflicted with the dominant family structures in the early modern period, where large families were necessary in order to 'secure insurance against illness and old age in a society in which there was no institution upon which they could rely outside the family' (R. Brenner, 2007, p. 68). Peasants thus had good reasons to resist becoming market dependent, and this was exactly what they did (R. Brenner, 1987a, 1987b, 2007; Wood, 2002). Even the dispossession of peasants was not enough, however, to secure a steady flow of exploitable labour-power into the market. Instead of selling their ability to work, the propertyless were, in Marx's words, 'more inclined to become vagabonds and robbers and beggars' (G: 736). 'In the 16th and 17th centuries, the hatred of wage-labor was', as Silvia Federici (2004, p. 136) explains, 'so intense that many proletarians preferred to risk the gallows'. The state therefore had to step in and introduce draconian punishment of beggars, vagabonds and others who refused to work. Here is Marx's summary: 'Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labour' (C1: 899). It was not only those needed for wage labour who were violently forced to adapt to capitalist production, however. A 'true war against women' also had to be undertaken in order to force them to accept the capitalist separation of the production of commodities and reproduction of labour-power, a separation in which women were assigned to the domestic sphere and the 'double dependence' upon capital through the male wage (Federici, 2004, pp. 88, 97).

The historical analysis of the origin of capitalism demonstrates that the latter was not a result of the voluntary acts of individuals. Capitalism did not emerge because human nature was finally allowed to unfold its ‘propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another’, as Adam Smith put it, but rather because some people violently forced other people to become dependent on markets. The analysis of the *reproduction* of capitalism demonstrates, as we will see, that once capitalism has been established, it systematically prevents individuals from opting out of it.

CLASS

In the dialectical progression of categories in *Capital*, classes only enter into the picture in chapter six, after the introduction of the concept of capital. Marx begins, in other words, with the analysis of the horizontal relations among units of production, expressed in the commodity form of the products of labour, before proceeding to the vertical class relations underlying the capital form. In the following chapter, we will see how this has led some Marxists to conclude that capitalist class domination is merely the form of appearance of a more primary form of social domination: the domination of *everyone* by the value form. In reality, however, class domination is already implied by the commodity form. As Marx repeatedly stresses: ‘[o]nly where wage-labour is its basis does commodity production impose itself upon society as a whole’ (C1: 733; see also 274, 557). This is what he demonstrates by conceptually deriving the necessity of the commodification of labour-power from the generalisation of the commodity form through a set of interconnected dialectical arguments (see Ellmers, 2009; Heinrich, 1999a, p. 263ff; Mau, 2018b).

The capitalist mode of production presupposes the ‘existence of a class which possesses nothing but its capacity to labour’ (9: 213); only then will the capitalist *in spe* be able to purchase labour-power on the market. But what exactly is the meaning of *class* here? Many scholars have noted that ‘Marx’s own discussion of the concept of class is’, in the words of Callinicos (2004, p. 52), ‘notoriously unsystematic’. In Marxist literature, it is common to distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* conceptions of class, or class *in itself* and class *for itself*, as Marx puts it in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (6: 211). As a subjective concept, ‘class’ refers to a group of people who identify as such on the basis of shared experiences and/or interests. As an objective concept, it refers to a position in the social order, regardless of whether people identify with the position they occupy or not. In addition to this distinction, it is

also common to distinguish between empirical and structural conceptions of class: whereas the former distinguishes between classes on the basis of purely empirical criteria such as income or wealth, the latter defines classes with reference to the social structure of a given society.¹ These concepts need not be mutually excluding, and rather than searching for *one* correct concept of class, we should let the precise meaning of it depend on *what* we want to study and *how* we want to study it. What I am interested in here is the form of class domination presupposed by the core structure of the capitalist mode of production and not, for example, classes as conscious political actors or a historically specific class composition—I am, in other words, concerned with class in an objective and structural sense. The kind of question I am interested in is therefore: if the power of capital presupposes a specific form of class domination, who is the dominant part, and who is dominated? What is the criterion for distinguishing between them? And how is this domination exercised?

Capital needs workers. A steady supply of labour-power presupposes that the people needed as wage labourers are deprived of the possibility of reproducing themselves outside of the market. This in turn presupposes the dispossession of everyone who could potentially support those needed by capitalists as wage-labourers. The set of *people dependent on the market* is, in other words, not necessarily identical with the set of *people capital needs as wage-labourers*; the latter is a subset of the former. If we want to grasp the fundamental class domination underlying the capitalist mode of production, we therefore have to avoid defining class in terms of *exploitation*. Wood, for example, consistently places the relation between the direct producers and the appropriators of their surplus labour at the centre of her analysis (Wood, 2016, p. 33). Taking her cue from an oft-quoted passage from volume three of *Capital* according to which the ‘specific *economic* form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the *direct producers* determines the relationship of domination and servitude’ (M: 778), she treats class as a relation between exploiters and exploited. This is obviously an enormously important aspect of class domination in capitalism, but it is also too narrow. The relation of exploitation is premised on a broader class domination rooted not in the extraction of surplus labour but in *the relation to the means of production*. This is not to deny

¹ For discussions of these distinctions and related issues in Marxist theories of class, see P. Anderson (1980), Callinicos (2004, p. 52ff), De Ste. Croix (1989), Ellmers (2009), Heinrich (1999a, p. 263ff, 2004), E. P. Thompson (2013, p. 8ff), Wood (2016, Chapter 3), Wright (1998).

the centrality of the relation of exploitation; this is, after all, the only thing which really matters to capital. In chapter five, I will examine the specific form of class domination involved in the relation of exploitation at the point of production. Here, however, I am concerned with the class structure presupposed by the relation of exploitation. In this context, class domination therefore refers to the relation between *those who control the conditions of social reproduction* and *those who are excluded from the direct access to the conditions of social reproduction*. ‘Class’ thus denotes *the relation of a group of people to the conditions of social reproduction*. Capitalism relies on a power relationship between the ‘possessors of the conditions of production, who rule, and on the other side the propertyless’ (30: 196), and the ruling class rules because it is the class ‘whose conditions are the conditions of the whole society’ (5: 413; I.5: 470).²

Defining class in terms of exploitation is not only inadequate for developing an understanding of the class domination presupposed by capitalism, it also risks reinforcing the tendency to regard the struggles of wage-labourers—and especially industrial workers—as the only real class struggle. Understanding class as a shared relation to the conditions of social reproduction, on the contrary, allows us to broaden our notion of class struggle and see how struggles across the entire social field can be a part of the same political project: wrenching the conditions of life free from the grip of capital. It thus allows us to see that the crisis of classical workers’ movements in the neoliberal era does not necessarily amount to the disappearance of class struggle, but rather signals a change in class composition and forms of class struggle.³

REPRODUCTION OF LABOUR-POWER

The subsumption of social reproduction under the logic of valorisation presupposes the subjection of those deprived of access to the means of production outside of the market to those who control these means of production or: the subjection of proletarians to the capitalist class. I prefer to speak of ‘proletarians’ and ‘the proletariat’ rather than ‘workers’ and ‘the working

² In MECW, ‘Besitzer’, which means ‘possessor’, is translated as ‘owners’, which obscures the fact that actual control rather than formal ownership is the crucial issue for the establishment of a relation of class domination. ‘Besitzlosen’ is likewise translated as ‘propertyless’.

³ See Bhattacharya (2017a), Clover (2016), McNally (2013). Regarding the primacy accorded to struggles at the point of production in the history of the Left, see Eley (2002) and Endnotes (2015a).

class' since not everyone who depends on capital for their survival *work* (or have the ability to work). What defines the proletarian condition is not work but the radical split between life and its conditions. The proletarian subject is, in Marx's words, a 'naked life' or a 'mere subject' cut off from its objective conditions (6: 499; 30: 38). Marx also refers to this as '*absolute poverty*', by which he means 'poverty not as shortage, but as total exclusion of objective wealth' (G: 296; 30: 39f). This is why it is misguided, at least from a certain perspective, to think of capitalism as a system of private property—it is rather the opposite: a social order based on the complete dispossession of the majority of the population. As Marx and Engels write to the defenders of bourgeois civilisation in the *Manifesto*: 'You are horrified at our intention to abolish [*aufheben*] private property. But in your existing society, private property is already abolished for nine-tenths of the population; it only exists because it does not exist for those nine-tenths' (6: 500). The notion of poverty involved here is not merely a matter of living standards in a straightforward quantitative sense. It is rather a *qualitative* concept of poverty which refers not to *how much* you have, but to *how* you have what you have. Capitalism is the institutionalisation of insecurity; even a relatively well-paid employee who lives in a social-democratic welfare state depends on an economic system which is systematically prone to violent convulsions, sudden crashes and protracted depressions. This is what absolute poverty means.

Proletarianisation is necessary in order to establish the capital relation, i.e., the relation between proletarians who sell their labour-power and the capitalists who purchase it. Not all proletarians sell their labour-power, however, and many of those who do also work outside of the wage relation. Throughout the history of capitalism proletarian women have been forced to perform unwaged domestic labour in order to reproduce labour-power on an inter-generational as well as on a daily basis—a form of labour which is *necessary for* yet *formally separated from* the immediate circuits of capital. Marx's failure to examine this kind of labour reflects an uncritical naturalisation of the unwaged domestic labour of proletarian women and is probably the most damaging blind spot in his critique of political economy.⁴ It was the great achievement of the domestic labour debates of the late 1960s and 1970s to highlight this much neglected but crucial aspect of how capitalism works. Marxist feminists have convincingly demonstrated that the

⁴ See Vogel's (2014, Chapters 4, 5) thorough examination of Marx's views. Cf. also Harvey (2006, p. 163). For other treatments of gender in Marx's writings, see Federici (2017), Lewis (2016, p. 110ff), Wendling (2014).

capitalist separation of the production of commodities and the reproduction of workers has acted and continues to act as an important source of women's oppression capitalism. The domestic labour debate was, however, hampered by a number of problems. Some participants, most notably Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1975), held that domestic labour was *productive* in Marx's sense, but after a decade of debate most eventually agreed that it is *not*—and that the categorisation of domestic labour as *unproductive* is a reflection of capital's oppression of women rather than a sexist conceptual apparatus. Another problem with the debate was its focus on the situation of white, heterosexual, cis-gendered women, who were often implicitly taken to represent women in general.⁵ Many participants in the debate also tended to rely on a rather reductive and potentially trans-exclusionary concept of women as humans with the capacity to bear children—a point I will come back to in a moment. From the early 1980s onwards, Marxist feminism was gradually pushed into the background by post-structuralist theories of gender, which replaced the materialist emphasis on labour and social reproduction with an idealist conception of discursive power (Ferguson & McNally, 2013, p. xxxiv; Arruzza, 2016). However, in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Marxist feminism. Under the rubric of *social reproduction theory*, a number of scholars have integrated the insights of earlier generations of Marxist feminists into a more comprehensive theoretical framework (see Bhattacharya, 2017c; Arruzza, 2014; Lewis, 2016). Social reproduction theory begins from a question similar to the question which animated the domestic labour debates, but with a broader scope: what is the relation between the formalised production of commodities and all of the activities which take place outside of the immediate circuit of capital yet are necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist totality? By framing the question of social reproduction in this way—i.e., by avoiding the presumption of a specific *site* of reproductive labour (the home) and a specific *identity* of those who perform it (women)—social reproduction theory has been able to overcome the limitations of earlier Marxist feminism and produce a framework within which the role of racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, heteronormativity and other forms of social oppression in the reproduction of capitalism can be examined.

It is unquestionable that throughout the history of capitalism, the tasks necessary for the reproduction of labour-power have primarily taken place

⁵ See e.g. Bannerji (1995), A. Y. Davis (1983, Chapter 13), Ferguson & McNally (2013), Joseph (1981), Lewis (2016, pp. 125, 155), Riddiough (1981).

outside of the immediate control of capital, and that they have been and still are conferred primarily upon women. But *why* is this so? How do we *explain* this? Is it a result of the interaction of mutually irreducible social forms, or can we logically derive it from the core structure of capitalism? Or, more precisely: is the separation of the reproduction of labour-power from the production of commodities *necessary* for capitalism, and if so, does this separation necessarily overlap with social identities such as gender?

Let us begin with the question of whether capitalist production implies that some of the activities required to reproduce labour-power are performed *outside* of the immediate circuit of capital. Following Vogel (2014, p. 188) and others, we can distinguish between the *daily* maintenance of proletarians and the *generational* replacement of the labour-force. It is almost impossible to pin down exactly what kind of activities and processes are necessary for the daily maintenance of the worker's ability to work. Workers obviously need something to eat, and a place to sleep and clothes to wear—so someone has to cook, do the dishes, clean the home, do the laundry and so on. Most workers also get ill once in a while, and will then need help from others. In addition to this, there are also the social and psychological needs: it seems clear that a certain degree of care and love is also needed in order to prevent workers from becoming so depressed that it will impair their ability to produce surplus value. But what exactly does that mean? Is it reproductive labour to go out for drinks with your friends if it helps them endure their shitty jobs? What about sex? Federici (2012, p. 19) once noted that the reproduction of the breadwinner's ability to work requires not only cooking but also smiling and fucking. The list of activities which have to be performed in order to make it possible for a worker to show up for work the next day can be extended almost indefinitely, and the concept of the daily reproduction of labour-power threatens to explode or simply merge with the category of life. Be that as it may, it is still possible to single out some essential physical and emotional needs which will have to be met in order for the ability to produce surplus value to be maintained on a daily basis, regardless of the concrete historical, geographical and cultural context. Many of the tasks necessary to meet these needs can be—and have been—transformed into commodities or welfare benefits and thus (partly) lifted out of the reproductive sphere: dishwashers, washing machines, refrigerators and robot vacuum cleaners diminish the time needed to keep the home clean; online supermarkets with delivery, takeaway food and ready meals can replace grocery shopping and cooking; sex has always been a

commodity; public health care can replace personal nursing. Is there a limit to the commercialisation and socialisation of reproductive tasks? The elasticity of the concept makes it impossible to give a conclusive answer, but judging from historical developments, it seems likely that most tasks can indeed be commodified or provided by the state. If it is possible to identify an exception, it would probably be some of the emotional and psychological aspects of reproduction. Although the mental health of workers can be partly commercialised or socialised through the use of professional therapists and psychologists, it nevertheless seems highly doubtful that this could replace all of the personal relations on which most people rely for psychological and emotional support.

Things stand a bit differently with regards to the *generational* reproduction of labour-power. Although it is perhaps in principle possible to imagine the establishment of private or public child-factories, it seems unlikely that pregnancy, childbirth and all aspects of child-rearing can be completely commercialised or transformed into a state task. Full commercialisation would amount to the establishment of universal slavery, since it would transform workers into commodities produced, owned and sold by capitalists—it would, in effect, no longer be a capitalist system (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 227). Another commercial model would be the universalisation of surrogate motherhood, which of course already exists. Other tasks connected to birth and child-rearing can be, and have been, transformed into commodified services, such as child-care and lactation (recall, for example, the widespread employment of wet nurses amongst the upper classes in 19th century Europe). What about socialisation, then—how would that look? In an extreme scenario, this would involve state-employees producing children who would eventually be released as free proletarians (if they were sold to capitalists, it would again amount to universal slavery). A less extreme model would be the partial socialisation of generational reproduction, something which exists in some welfare states such as Denmark, where parents have the right to one year paid parental leave, free hospitals and free day care (depending on income level).⁶

⁶ Danish women nevertheless still face certain disadvantages when having children. A recent study of wage inequality in Denmark—a country with extensive socialisation of childcare and one of the highest female labour force participation rates in the world (80%)—reports that ‘the arrival of children creates a gender gap of around 20% in the long run’ (Kleven, Landais, & Sogaard, 2018).

It is difficult to conceptually pin down the boundaries here—something which indicates that we are approaching the limits of what an analysis of the core structure of capitalism on a high level of abstraction can tell us. Nevertheless, it seems sound to conclude that there will always be an indivisible remainder of reproductive labour which will have to be performed outside of the immediate reach of capital or the state.⁷ *Someone* will have to do this—but who? In her classic essay on ‘the unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism’, Heidi Hartmann (1981, p. 10) argues that Marxist categories are ‘sex-blind’, by which she means that they identify ‘empty places’ in a structure but ‘do not explain why particular people fill particular places’. FTC Manning, on the other hand, proposes to close this ‘conceptual gap’ by *defining* gender with reference to the indivisible remainder of reproductive tasks: ‘the categories “women” and “men” are nothing other than the distinction between the spheres of activity’ (Manning, 2015; Valentine, 2012, p. 7). The same position is defended by the Endnotes collective (2013c, p. 78), who define gender as ‘the *anchoring* of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities’. However, rather than a solution to the problem—i.e., how to explain the overlap of a binary system of gender and the structural separation of the production of commodities and the reproduction of labour-power—this is just an attempt to eliminate the problem through definitions. The solution proposed by Manning and Endnotes implies that gender owes *its very existence* to the capitalist organisation of social reproduction. The explanatory weight put on the analysis of reproductive labour is thereby significantly increased. The concept of gender proposed

⁷ Roswitha Scholz (2011, 2014) holds that a sphere of ‘value dissociation’ is a necessary prerequisite for value, but she never really provides any arguments for this claim. The same is true of Endnotes (2013c, p. 62), who likewise—with reference to Scholz—claim that there ‘must be an exterior to value in order for value to exist’. FTC Manning (2015) also insist that ‘there will always remain a sphere of un-socialized work’. She cites the examples of ‘coercive relations of secretive sexual abuse’ and ‘control and psychic isolation and domination’. In another text (published under another name), Manning explains—and I think she is right in this—that sexual violence is a ‘necessary element’ of the appropriation of women and their confinement to the reproductive sphere (Valentine, 2012, p. 5). If sexual violence is a *means* for forcing women to perform reproductive labour, however, it makes no sense to argue for the necessity of the latter by demonstrating that sexual violence cannot be socialised; if reproductive tasks were socialised or commercialised, sexual violence would no longer have the function attributed to it by Manning.

by Manning and Endnotes essentially implies that it is, in the last instance, possible to trace all aspects of gender oppression back to the capitalist separation of spheres of labour—a claim which is not implied if we retain the ‘conceptual gap’, as most Marxist feminists do. Defining gender with reference to specifically capitalist relations of production also makes it difficult, if not impossible, to understand forms of gender in non-capitalist modes of production. While we should definitely avoid the ahistorical concept of patriarchy defended by some radical feminists, we should also avoid its negative: historicising gender to the point where it appears as something which exists only in capitalism. What Manning and Endnotes do is essentially to propose a new definition of gender quite different from what we usually mean by that concept, in daily language as well as in feminist theory. Perhaps this is why Manning (2015) notes that ‘it seems clear that the category woman is insufficient, and that a more dynamic concept such as “feminized people” may serve both to emphasize the fact that it is a process and a relationship, and that the people in question are not always women’. Here it becomes clear how Manning and Endnotes displace the question rather than provide an answer to it: if ‘the people in question are not always women’—i.e., if they can be men or gender non-conforming people—then what is the relation between these two levels? *Why do ‘feminized people’ tend to be ‘women’?*

We cannot simply define our way out of the question of the identity of those who perform the various kinds of labour required by capitalist (re)production. Many Marxist feminists regard the *capacity for child-bearing* as the crucial determinant here. By defining those who have the capacity to bear children as *women* and demonstrating the consequences of having this capacity in a capitalist mode of production, they conclude that the oppression of women is a necessary feature of capitalism. The most rigorous and precise version of this argument is presented by Lise Vogel.⁸ Her basic argument is that pregnancy, birth and lactation imply ‘several months of somewhat reduced capacity to work’, which means that women—defined as ‘the 51 percent of human beings who have the capacity to bear children’—are dependent upon others to provide them with means of subsistence in those periods (Vogel, 2014, pp. 151, 173). In addition to the dependence on capital shared by all proletarians, women are thus, because of their role in inter-generational reproduction, subjected to an extra level of dependence.

⁸ A similar argument is put forward by Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas (in J. Brenner, 2000, Chapter 1).

Although the reduced capacity to work due to pregnancy and birth requires mothers to rely on other people, it does not entail a specific identity of those who provide mothers with means of subsistence. Historically, that role has been filled by proletarian men, and therefore Vogel concludes that ‘the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the child-bearing period [...] forms the material basis for women’s subordination in class-society’ (p. 153). There is nothing about the mother’s reduced capacity to work which necessitates that their survival is guaranteed by *men*, however. We could imagine, for example, that task being taken care of by the state or a community of women. For this reason, Vogel (2014, p. 154) notes that ‘[t]he existence of women’s oppression in class-societies is, it must be emphasised, a historical phenomenon. It can be analysed, as here, with the guidance of a theoretical framework, but it is not itself deducible theoretically’. Given that only some people have the capacity to bear children and that pregnancy and child-birth imply relying on other people’s labour for several months, it is necessarily the case that people who have children are structurally made dependent upon others. But we cannot derive the necessity of the identity of those upon whom they rely.

Vogel’s analysis has a problem common to many Marxist feminists: the equation of *those who can have children* and *women*. As Vogel herself makes clear, her entire argument ‘hinges on the relationship of child-bearing to the appropriation of surplus-labour in class-society’ (p. 151). What she demonstrates is that *humans with the capacity to bear children* are necessarily oppressed in capitalism, not only because of their dependency upon others during the periods in which they are unable to work but also—in so far as they are wage-labourers—because their temporary absence from the labour-market gives rise to inequalities in this market (see also Endnotes, 2013c, p. 76). But this is not the same as claiming that *women* are necessarily oppressed. The category of ‘humans with the capacity to bear children’ also include trans-men and queers with a uterus, and it does not include many trans-women. Arguments like Vogel’s simply rely on a problematic and, at least potentially, trans- and queer-exclusionary naturalised concept of gender. If our aim is to analyse a historically specific situation in which the majority of people with the capacity to bear children identify as women, it might be justified to assume an overlap between these two categories—in that case, we would base our analysis on such an overlap as a precondition. But the case is different if we want to say something about how capitalism must *necessarily* function. Vogel is right to point out that people who have the capacity

to bear children occupy a special position in capitalist social relations. But we cannot assume that the difference between those who can have children and those who cannot correspond to a *gender distinction*. ‘We must insist’, in the words of Michèle Barrett (2014, p. 76), ‘that biological difference simply cannot explain the social arrangements of gender’. Furthermore, the generational replacement of the labour-force does not require everyone with a uterus to have children; it is possible, for example, to imagine a society in which a system of non-gender social distinctions and hierarchies would compel *some* of the proletarians equipped with uteri to have a lot of children, while others would be expected to produce surplus value all of their lives on a par with all of those who do not have an uterus.

The upshot of these considerations is that capitalist production is compatible with a wide array of different ways of organising the reproduction of labour-power—or, put differently, that the analysis of capitalism in its ideal average does not allow us to say much about the specific way in which the reproduction of labour-power has to be carried out. What we *can* conclude is that some of the activities required for the reproduction of labour-power will most likely remain outside the immediate circuits of capital, and that someone will have to do this work. We cannot, however, conclude anything about the identity of the people to which these reproductive tasks will be assigned, or the social effects of this differentiation. As Michèle Barrett (2014) has pointed out, the attempt to derive gender differences and explain all aspects of the oppression of women on the basis of the analysis of the necessary presupposition of capital accumulation almost inevitably slips into a functionalist and reductionist account of capital as an omnipotent subject creating the social differences it needs in order to function. In order to understand the relation between gender and capital, we have to take into account social forms which do not *arise* from the logic of capital. This position does *not* imply the claim that capital is indifferent to such differences nor does it imply the claim that the relation between capital and gender is purely contingent. I agree with Lebowitz (2006) and others that capital has a necessary tendency to exploit social differences, but I do not think that we can derive the specific forms of these differences from the concept of capital. As Cinzia Arruzza (2014) puts it in her clear-sighted discussion of this issue: ‘capitalist competition continually creates differences and inequalities, but these inequalities, from an abstract point of view, are not necessarily gender-related’. However, as she immediately goes on to add: ‘this does not prove that capitalism would not necessarily produce, as a result of its concrete

functioning, the constant reproduction of gender oppression’. In other words, the claim that we cannot derive the existence of gender from capital is fully compatible with the claim that capital tends to reproduce and strengthen gender oppression. As Iris Young (1981, p. 62) puts it: ‘I am not claiming that we cannot conceive of a capitalism in which the marginalization of women did not occur. I am claiming, rather, that *given an initial gender differentiation* [emphasis added] and a preexisting sexist ideology, a patriarchal capitalism in which women function as a secondary labor force is the only *historical* possibility’. It should also be emphasised that the rejection of attempts to discover a logically necessary interconnection between gender and capital is a methodological and analytical question, rather than a political one. The struggle against the oppression of women does not derive its importance or urgency from its logical connection to the capital form. We should, in other words, reject the tendency ‘to directly derive political conclusions or theses from theoretical arguments developed at a high level of abstraction’ (Arruzza, 2015).

WAGE LABOUR

Even though capitalist class domination extends far beyond those needed by capital as wage labourers, the relation between the capitalist and the proletarian who sells her labour-power—i.e., the capital relation—remains the core nexus of social reproduction in capitalism, since this is the relation through which the entire proletariat, including domestic workers, gain access to the means of subsistence. As mentioned earlier, mere dispossession is not enough to secure a steady flow of labour-power into the market. In a significant passage in the *Grundrisse*, which I have already quoted in parts, Marx explains that:

[t]he propertyless are more inclined to become vagabonds and robbers and beggars than workers. The last becomes normal only in the developed mode of capital’s production. In the prehistory of capital, state coercion to transform the propertyless into *workers* at conditions advantageous for capital, which are not yet here enforced upon the workers by competition among one another. (G: 736)

The important thing to notice here is the distinction between being *propertyless* and being a *worker*: the proletarian does not automatically become a

worker—she has to be *made into* a worker.⁹ Here we see why it is important to reject the assumption (discussed in chapter one) that the identity of the subjects involved in a power relationship is constituted independently of that relationship. If we examine the relationship between the worker and the capitalist without asking *why the worker is a worker* in the first place, we lose sight of an important aspect of the power of capital. The worker is not simply a negative remnant; it is rather a specific form of subjectivity, a positive result of capitalist relations of production: ‘The positing of the individual as *worker*, in this nakedness, is itself’, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, ‘a product of *history*’ (G: 472). So how does this transformation take place? In a certain sense, this thesis can be read as an answer to that question. In the following chapters, we will see that it is partly the result of mechanisms and processes such as the competitive pressures of the market (chapter four), real subsumption of the labour process (chapter five) and the threat of unemployment and crises (chapter six). Underlying all of these forms of power through which humans are transformed into workers, however, is the basic condition of the capitalist mode of production: *the radical separation between life and its conditions which allows capital to insert itself as the mediator between them*. The proletarian is a ‘mere possibility’ or a ‘bare *living labour capacity*’ (G: 454, 604) and by isolating *capacities* from the conditions of their realisation, *capital becomes the logic which governs the translation of possibility into actuality*. This is the most fundamental level of the economic power of capital: ‘the free worker can’, as Marx explains, ‘only satisfy his vital needs to the extent that he sells his labour;^[10] hence is *forced into this by his own interest, not by external compulsion*’ (30: 198. Emphasis added). The valorisation of value *injects itself into the human metabolism*, making the reproduction of capital the condition of the reproduction of life. This is why workers ‘are *compelled* to sell themselves *voluntarily*’, as Marx puts it in a formula which nicely captures the paradoxical and deceptive nature of capitalist power (C1: 899. Emphasis added). In 1786, the British physician and economist Joseph Townsend clearly grasped the utility of this mute compulsion:

Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection, to the most perverse. In general it is only

⁹ Another important element in this quote is the juxtaposition of *competition* and *violence* as two different mechanisms of domination. I will come back to this in the next chapter.

¹⁰ This should of course have been ‘labour-power’, and not ‘labour’.

hunger which can spur and goad them [the poor] onto labour; yet our laws have said they shall never hunger. The laws, it must be confessed, have likewise said, they shall be compelled to work. But then legal constraint is attended with much trouble, violence and noise: whereas hunger is not only peaceable, silent, unremitting pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labour, it calls forth the most powerful exertions; and, when satisfied by the free bounty of another, lays lasting and sure foundations for goodwill and gratitude.¹¹

We might speculate whether this quote from Townsend's *Dissertation on the Poor Laws*, with its opposition between 'violence and noise' on the one hand and 'silent, unremitting pressure' on the other, was the source of inspiration for the passage in *Capital* from which this thesis derives its title. Marx quotes it in several manuscripts spanning a period of almost two decades. In a notebook from 1851, he excerpted this passage and underlined the part where Townsend writes that 'hunger is not only peaceable, silent, unremitting pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labour, it calls forth the most powerful exertions' (IV.9: 215). He later used this 'thoroughly brutal' quote in the *Grundrisse*, the *1861-63 Manuscripts* and volume one of *Capital* (G: 845; 30: 205; C1: 800). In the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, it appears immediately following a paragraph in which Marx emphasises the specific nature of economic power:

The relation which compels the worker to do surplus labour is the fact that the conditions of his labour exist over against him as capital. He is not subjected to any external compulsion, but in order to live—in a world where commodities are determined by their value—he is compelled to sell his labour capacity as a commodity, whereas the valorisation of this labour capacity over and above its own value is the prerogative of capital. (30: 204)

This tells us two important things about power. First, it makes visible the inadequacy of assuming power to be an immediate relation between two social agents. In opposition to violence or ideology, the 'silent, unremitting pressure' of property relations does not directly address the worker; it rather addresses the material environment of the worker, or, more specifically, the

¹¹ See also Polanyi's comments on Townsend, from where this is quoted (Polanyi, 2001, p. 116ff).

material conditions of reproduction. It thus highlights that power can also be exercised through the control over anything which ‘*constitute[s] part of the meaningful environment of another actor*’, as Richard Adams (1975, p. 12) puts it (see also Wartenberg, 1990, p. 85). Second, it also demonstrates that power is, in the words of Foucault (2002d, p. 342), ‘exercised only over free subjects’. The power of capital does not just *prevent* the worker from following her will (although it also does that), it also facilitates a certain way in which she can actually follow that will. Mute compulsion only works because the worker *wants to live*—only because of this can capital succeed in demanding surplus labour in exchange for the means of life.

The worker exists as a mere possibility ‘*outside of the conditions of its existence*’. The worker ‘has his needs in *actuality*’, but ‘the activity of satisfying them is only possessed by him as a non-objective [*gegenstandslose*] capacity (a *possibility*) confined within his own subjectivity’ (30: 40. Emphasis added). This conjunction of *potentiality* and *actuality* allows capital to insert itself as ‘the *social mediation* as such, through which the individual gains access to the means of his reproduction’ (G: 609, 607). The worker is not merely a *nothing*, but, in a sense, she is *less than nothing*: not only is she excluded from the conditions of her existence (she is absolutely poor), she also owes her future to capital. The worker-subject is an *indebted* subject; under capitalism, life itself comes with an obligation to valorise value, and for this reason ‘the worker belongs [*gehört*] to capital *before* he has sold himself to the capitalist’ (C1: 723. Emphasis added). As Marx perceptively notes, the accumulation of capital is ‘a stockpiling of property titles to labour’ (G: 367), or, put differently:

a *draft on future labour*. As such, it is a matter of indifference whether this exists in the form of tokens of value, debt claims, etc. It may be replaced by any other title. Like the state creditor with his coupons, every capitalist possesses a draft on future labour in his newly acquired value, and by appropriating present labour he has already appropriated future labour. The accumulation of capital in the money form is by no means a material accumulation of the material conditions of labour. It is rather an *accumulation of property titles to labour* (34: 12)¹²

At the most basic level, then, capital engages not only with present, but also with *future* labour, and ‘by means of the appropriation of ongoing labour [it]

¹² This passage from the later parts of the *1861-63 Manuscripts* seems to be a further development of a passage from the *Grundrisse* (G: 367).

has already at the same time appropriated future labour' (G: 367). The debt incurred by the worker at birth is thus a kind of *transcendental* debt in the sense that it forms a part of the necessary conditions of possibility for social reproduction in a society ruled by the logic of capital. This debt is the continuing presence of the historical origins of capitalism; the existence of the past *in* the present. The historical creation of the capital relation was the original incurring of a debt inherited by every new generation of proletarians. As Maurizio Lazzarato (2012, p. 39) explains, debt is, at its basis, a 'promise of payment'. From this perspective, surplus labour is a kind of interest the worker has to pay in order to live: 'the wage-worker has permission [...] *to live* only insofar as he works for a certain time gratis for the capitalist', as Marx puts it (24: 92). This transcendental debt is the basis for interest-bearing capital, in which:

[a]ll wealth that can ever be produced belongs to capital [...], and everything that it has received up till now is only a first instalment for its 'all engrossing' appetite. By its own inherent laws, all surplus labour that the human race can ever supply belongs to it, *Moloch*. (M: 498)

At its root, capital is thus a debt relation, and debt is therefore not only 'a new technique of power' belonging to the financialised capitalism of the neoliberal era (Lazzarato, 2015, p. 69). It might be true that 'the indebted man' is 'the subjective figure of modern-day capitalism' (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 38), and it is certainly true that debt has taken on new forms and functions in the neoliberal era, but it is crucial to recognise that the transcendently indebted subject was a part of capitalist relations of production from the very beginning.

As a *promise* to pay, debt involves a certain configuration of temporality. Any debt relation is an attempt to 'neutralize time', i.e., to reduce 'the future and its possibilities to current power relations' (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 45f). A debt relation is thus a power relation in which the *future* is subjected to the present. In addition to this, however, we should bear in mind that capital is 'the rule of past, dead labour over the living', or as Marx puts it in the *Manifesto*: 'In bourgeois society, the past dominates the present' (R: 988; 6: 499; see also M: 500). *The power of capital is, in other words, based upon a temporal displacement in which the past appropriates the future in order to subjugate and neutralise the present.*

The transformation of people into absolutely poor and transcendently indebted workers binds them to *capital as such*, not to a particular capitalist.

This is why the power of capital is an *impersonal* form of power, in contradistinction to the personal relations of dependence in pre-capitalist modes of production; whereas the slave, for example, ‘is the property of a particular *master*; the worker must indeed sell himself to capital, but not to a particular capitalist’ (R: 1032; 6: 499). As Marx explains in *Wage Labour and Capital*:

The worker leaves the capitalist to whom he hires himself whenever he likes, and the capitalist discharges him whenever he thinks fit, as soon as he no longer gets any utility out of him, or not the anticipated utility. But the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour^[13] cannot leave the *whole class of purchasers*, that is, the *capitalist class*, without renouncing his existence. *He belongs not to this or that bourgeois, but to the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class*, and it is his business to dispose of himself, that is to find a purchaser within this bourgeois class. (9: 203)

Here we see how the *vertical* class relationship between the worker and the capitalist is mediated by the *horizontal* relations among the capitalists: since the ruling class is split into autonomous and competing units of production, the worker can choose who she wants to sell her labour-power to. I will analyse these horizontal relations in the next chapter; for now, the important thing to notice is that the impersonal character of capitalist *class* domination is partly the result of the intersection of the split between life and its conditions and the split between different units of production in a market system. This overlapping of two splits means that, in a certain sense, capitalism is a system of *class* domination in a stronger sense than pre-capitalist societies were; only with capitalism are workers subjected to *a class as such*, rather than the particular members of the capitalist class. The capital relation is, as Marx puts it, ‘a *relation of compulsion* [*Zwangsverhältnis*] not based on personal relations of domination and dependency, but simply on differing economic functions’ (R: 1021).

Capitalist class domination presupposes and reproduces a historically unique form of individuality; the proletarian is ‘an *abstraction* [...] stripped of all objectivity’ (G: 295f). This is a result not only of the split between life and its conditions and the impersonal relation to the ruling class but also of the centrifugal forces of competition and the booms and busts of business cycles. The atomism of bourgeois society is a recurrent theme in Marx’s

¹³ *Wage Labour and Capital* was written in 1847, when Marx did not yet distinguish between labour and labour-power.

writings—from the early critique of human rights as the rights of the ‘*abstract citizen*’ in *On the Jewish Question* to the analysis of the ‘purely atomistic’ relationships amongst market agents in *Capital* (3: 167; C1: 187). Marx always ridicules the Robinsonades populating the writings of political economists, but the point of this criticism is not to dismiss their individualist social ontology as simply false—the point is rather, first, that what they perceive as ‘posited by nature’ is a ‘historic result’, and second, that the individual created by ‘this society of free competition’ is just as embedded in social relations as people were in pre-capitalist societies (G: 83; see also G: 156; 5: 5, 78, 87). In a certain sense, one could even say that capitalism gives rise to a historically unique degree of social interconnectedness: the individual is not only embedded in personal relations, a local community, town, region or country—she is immediately integrated into a global and expansive economic system where things taking place on the other side of the globe might very well affect her life in a much more significant manner than what happens in her neighbour’s flat. Marx therefore emphasises that modern individuals are ‘abstract individuals, who are, however, by this very fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another *as individuals*’ (5: 87; I.5: 111). The individual is not a residue of the dissolution of pre-capitalist social bonds; it is a socially constituted form of subjectivity. ‘[A]tomism is not’, as Murray puts it, ‘the absence of sociality [...] but rather a seemingly asocial, abstract kind of sociality’ (2016, p. 37; see also Campbell, 2004, p. 80ff). Capital strives to dissolve any bond that inhibits its movement in order to re-connect the parts according to the logic of valorisation; it isolates the naked life of the proletarian in order to re-connect it to its conditions by means of money, which thereby becomes ‘the *procurer* [*Kuppler*] between the need and the object, between life and the means of life of the human being’ (3: 323). *The rule of capital is not the dissolution of community as such, but a historically novel form of community based on the amputated proletarian body cut off from its objective conditions as its smallest component; ‘[m]oney thereby directly and simultaneously becomes the real community* [*Gemeinwesen*], since it is the general substance of survival for all, and at the same time the social product of all’ (G: 225f; see also 509).¹⁴

¹⁴ Note that this does not entail the claim that capitalism implies a tendency to eradicate cultural differences and transform everyone into homogeneous proletarians. Capitalism is compatible with a wide array of different cultural forms, and as long as they do not interfere with the basic prerequisites of capital accumulation there is no reason to assume that capitalism contains an immanent drive to

Just as we should avoid understanding the bourgeois individual as a sign of the absence of sociality, we should also avoid understanding the difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist relations of production as a simple opposition between *separation* and *non-separation* or *unity* of the immediate producers and the means of production. The idea that capitalism is based on such a separation is one of the most universally accepted claims among Marxists. Sentences such as the following can be found all over Marx's writings: 'The capital-relation presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour' (C1: 874).¹⁵ This is usually contrasted to pre-capitalist modes of production, and especially feudalism, where there was a *unity* of producers and the means of production. While I do not intend to dispute this, it is crucial to be precise about the meaning of 'unity' and 'separation' involved in these claims. As we saw in the last chapter, human beings are, on an ontological level, constitutively separated from the conditions of their reproduction. There is no such thing as a *natural* unity of humans and the earth, and for this reason it is important to acknowledge that the relation between the producers and the means of production under feudalism was every bit as socially mediated as under capitalism. If there was a relatively stable connection between life and its conditions in feudalism, this was not due to the 'naturalness' of such a connection. Feudal peasant possession was, as Brenner (2007, p. 63) explains, made possible by 'villagers' self-organization [...]

dissolve them. In fact, capital will often find it advantageous to strengthen traditional social hierarchies and pre- or non-capitalist cultural forms. See also Vivek Chibber's (2013, Chapter 6) critique of the widespread misunderstanding of Marx's concept of 'abstract labour' in post-colonial theory, a topic I will briefly return to in chapter five. While Chibber makes a strong argument in this case, there are several problems with other elements of his *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, especially his methodological individualism, his rational-choice framework and his defence of an 'Enlightenment notion of universal interests' (p. 179).

¹⁵ Brenner (2007, p. 60) points out that the core of this argument is not so much about the access to the *means of production* as the access to the *means of subsistence*: the crucial thing for capital is that people are dependent on the market for their survival. This is a useful clarification in so far as we want to know how the *individual* is subjected to capital, but on the level of the social totality separation from the means of production and separation from the means of subsistence is the same thing, since production is necessary for obtaining means of subsistence (see 30: 40; C2: 116; II.11: 694).

in a conscious political community'. The connection between life and its conditions *was* much more stable and secure in feudalism than it is in capitalism, but rather than being a result of the natural and immediate character of such a connection, this was the outcome of *political* struggle. We should therefore avoid depicting the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a kind of economic version of Aristophanes' love myth in Plato's *Symposium*, i.e., as a dissolution of an original unity of man and earth. The way to avoid this is to see how the capitalist separation and the pre-capitalist non-separation are both different ways of organising the necessary *connection* between labour and its conditions. Marx puts it well in a manuscript for the second volume of *Capital*:

Whatever the social form of production, workers and means of production always remain its factors. But if they are in a state of mutual separation, they are only potentially factors of production. For any production to take place, they must be connected. The particular form and mode in which this connection is effected is what distinguishes the various economic epochs of the social structure. In the present case, the separation of the free worker from his means of production is the given starting point, and we have seen how and under what conditions the two come to be united in the hands of the capitalist—i.e., as his capital in its productive mode of existence. (C2: 120; II.11: 672)

This emphasis on the necessary and historically variable connections between labour and its conditions allows us to specify the difference between the mute compulsion of the capital relation and the mechanisms of power through which pre-capitalist class hierarchies were upheld. In the case of slavery, the power of the exploiter is based on the intimate and permanent *connection* between the producer (the slave) and the means of production; the slave is the immediate property of the slave-owner in the same way as the means of production are. The power of the feudal lord was likewise based on a stable *connection* between the peasants and the means of production; 'lords could not, as a rule, find it in their own interests to separate their peasants from the means of subsistence' (R. Brenner, 2007, p. 64). For this reason, they had to employ (the threat of) direct, physical coercion in order to make the peasants perform surplus labour. In distinction to these pre-capitalist modes of domination, the power of the capitalist class is based on the permanent *separation* of the producers from the means of production and

subsistence (as well as from each other). However, this separation is also the ‘starting point’ of their temporary and precarious re-connection through capital, as Marx makes clear in the passage just quoted. Capitalism is thus based on a ‘unity-in-separation’, to use the phrase of Endnotes (2015a, p. 180; Benanav & Clegg, 2018). In this mode of production, *proletarians are temporarily connected to the conditions of their life through the very same social relations that ensure their permanent separation from them*. Because of this peculiar unity of separation and unity, the ruling class no longer needs to employ violence in order to force workers to perform surplus labour:

the slave only works under the impulse of external fear, but not for *his own existence*, which does not belong to him, and yet it is *guaranteed*. The free worker, in contrast, is driven by his wants [...] The *continuity of the relation* between slave and slave holder is preserved by the direct compulsion exerted upon the slave. The free worker, on the other hand, must preserve it himself, since his existence and that of his family depend upon his constantly renewing the sale of his labour capacity to the capitalist. (34: 98f)¹⁶

So, whereas the ‘Roman slave was held by chains’, the ‘wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads’ (C1: 719; see also 30: 197). This is a kind of domination which operates on what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri calls *the transcendental plane of power*. According to them there is a tendency in ‘contemporary conceptions of power’—their primary target is Agamben, to whom I will return in the next section—to think of power in the way Foucault warned against: as something *transcendent*, governing society from above or from the outside (Hardt & Negri, 2011, p. 3). Instead of Foucault’s turn to the *immanence* of power, Hardt and Negri suggest to replace ‘the excessive focus on the concept of sovereignty’ with an analysis of the *transcendental* plane of power, by which they mean the social relations through which ‘the conditions of possibility of social life’ are structured (Hardt & Negri, 2011, pp. 4, 6). They explicitly understand this shift of perspective as analogous to Kant’s Copernican revolution. For Kant, the *transcendent* realm is what lies *beyond* the field of possible experiences, i.e., the metaphysical problems he criticises in the transcendental dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The *transcendental*, on the other hand, concerns *the conditions of possibility* of the field of possible experiences. Space and time, for example,

¹⁶ ‘Wants’ is in English in the original. The same passage appears in R: 1031.

are transcendental forms of intuition, which means that they are conditions of possibility of what can appear to us in experience. In other words, whereas the transcendent lies beyond the field of immanence, the transcendental is what is logically prior to this field. Hardt and Negri transpose this conceptual scheme to power-relationships, and argue that our primary focus should be on ‘the transcendental plane of power, where law and capital are the primary forces’ (Hardt & Negri, 2011, p. 6). It is by no means clear why they locate the *law* on this level—after all, it is merely ‘the juridical expression of class relations’ (5: 342; I.5: 397). Be that as it may, their utilisation of the Kantian scheme nevertheless captures something important about the economic power of capital. Whereas the power of the feudal lord was a *transcendent* power in the sense that it attached itself to production in an external manner without directly intervening in the labour process, the power of capital operates by cleaving up the human metabolism in order to govern the conditions of the re-connection of its moments—a mechanism of power which allows it to dispense with the use of immediate violence in the extraction of surplus value. ‘Such transcendental powers’, Hardt and Negri explain, ‘compel obedience not through the commandment of a sovereign or even primarily through force but rather by structuring the conditions of possibility of social life’ (Hardt & Negri, 2011, p. 6). The economic power of capital thus rests upon the ability of capital to seize life itself and entangle it in the logic of valorisation.¹⁷

Hardt and Negri seem to reduce all aspects of the power of capital to the transcendental level, but as we will see in chapter five and six, capital also operates on what we could call the immanent level. Capital not only structures the conditions of possibility of social reproduction, it also actively intervenes in the processes and activities that make up social reproduction, from the most minute level in the workplace to global restructurings of the entire capitalist system.

BIOPOLITICS

If one is familiar with the works of Foucault and Agamben, it is difficult not to think of the concepts of biopower and biopolitics when reading Marx’s descriptions of the proletariat as a ‘naked life’ cut off from its conditions. Is

¹⁷ See also Kurz (2012, pp. 142, 173), who likewise suggests to think of the logic of capital as a kind of ‘transcendental a priori’ setting the limits of what can take place in social reality.

this merely a terminological coincidence, or does it actually tell us something about the relationship between biopolitics and the capitalist mode of production?

In Foucault's analysis, biopower is one of the two forms of power characteristic of the modern world, the other being *discipline* (Foucault, 2004, p. 243ff). Both of them are opposed to *sovereign power*, the essence of which is 'the right to decide life and death' (Foucault, 1998, p. 135). Sovereign power corresponds *mutatis mutandis* to the power of the feudal lord as described by Marx; it is, in Foucault's word, a 'right to seizure' based on the law, which in turn is based on violence. 'The law always refers to the sword' (Foucault, 1998, pp. 136, 144). As I mentioned in chapter one, Foucault accuses the political theory of his own time of being trapped in a sovereign paradigm of power. In order to understand modern forms of power, we have—so he argues—to 'abandon the model of Leviathan' in favour of an analysis of the concrete 'techniques and tactics of domination' (Foucault, 2004, p. 34). If we do so, we will see that modernity is built upon forms of power which do not fit easily into the paradigm of sovereignty.

Disciplinary power is a set of techniques and methods 'which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility' (Foucault, 1991, p. 137). Discipline is *individualising* and targets the *body* (Foucault, 1991, p. 136, 1998, p. 139, 2004, p. 242, 2012). It emerged in the 16th century and was later, in the 18th century, supplemented with *biopower* or *biopolitics*, a technology of power which is not directed at the *individual* body, but rather at the *species* body. In contrast to the sovereign right to kill, biopolitics is concerned with the positive management, control and regulation of the life of the population (Foucault, 1998, p. 137). Biopolitics thus marks the historical juncture at which the life of the population became the target of political power through techniques and mechanisms connected to problems such as 'birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration' (Foucault, 1998, p. 140, 2004, p. 243ff, 2012).

One of the paradoxes of Foucault's analysis of biopolitics is that it tends to re-erect the kind of state-centred analysis the concept of discipline was meant to dispel with. To be sure, Foucault does make the point that biopolitical measures take place not only on the level of the state, but also 'at the sub-State level, in a whole series of sub-State institutions such as medical institutions, welfare funds, insurance, and so on' (Foucault, 2004, p. 250). However, in a fashion typical for him, he simply mentions this in the passing,

without specifying what institutions he has in mind, and how they are related to the state. The biopolitical techniques, measures and institutions most often mentioned, such as housing, public hygiene, statistics, migration, rate of reproduction, fertility, longevity (Foucault, 1998, p. 140, 2004, p. 243, 2012), are all issues which have traditionally belonged to the realm of the state. Seen in connection with Foucault's description of biopolitics as 'State control of the biological' and a form of 'governmental practice', I think it is fair to conclude that biopolitics in Foucault's sense refers to a form of *state* power (Foucault, 2004, p. 240, 2008, p. 317).

Foucault draws an explicit connection between discipline, biopower and capitalism. The connection between disciplinary power and industrial capital is quite obvious, and Foucault actually goes so far as to conclude that it was the 'growth of a capitalist system [which] gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1991, p. 221, 2002e, pp. 68f, 86, 2004, p. 36). He also holds that there is a close connection between biopower and capitalism:

This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. (Foucault, 1998, p. 140f, see also 2002f, p. 125, 2002c, p. 137)

The problem is that Foucault is very unclear about what he means by 'capitalism'. He occasionally refers to 'accumulation of capital' and 'profits', but generally it seems that he identifies capitalism with the industrial capitalism emerging in the late 18th century (Foucault, 2002d, p. 344, 2002e, p. 86f). The only place where the logic of capital really appears in Foucault's analyses is when he examines the factory as a disciplinary space. He seems, in other words, to identify capitalism with a specific work-regime defined by a certain technology and the concrete character of the corresponding labour process. What he misses is the *social logic* which governs these processes. Here we see the consequences of Foucault's refusal—discussed in chapter one—to take property relations into account in his analysis of modern forms of power. Because of this omission, he artificially separates the expressions of the power of capital in the factory (discipline) and the state (biopower) from their underlying cause: capitalist property relations. Federici (2004, p. 16)

appropriately notes that Foucault ‘offers no clues’ as to what led to the emergence of biopower, but that ‘if we place this shift in the context of the rise of capitalism the puzzle vanishes, for the promotion of life-forces turns out to be nothing more than the result of a new concern with the accumulation and reproduction of labour-power’. This is why it is fruitful to combine the insights of Foucault and Marx. What Marx’s analysis of capitalism tells us is *why* the life of the population had to become a central concern of state policy. In this light, biopolitics can be seen as an answer to the radical separation of life from its conditions at the root of the capitalist relations of production. Capitalism introduces a historically unique insecurity at the most fundamental level of social reproduction, and for this reason the state has to assume the task of administering the life of the population. Since the aim of capitalist production is the accumulation of wealth in its monetary form rather than the fulfilment of human needs, capitalist production frequently leads to the undermining of the life of the workers on whose lives it ultimately depends on. A good example is the struggle over the length of the working day in mid-19th century British industry, which Marx narrates in chapter ten of the first volume of *Capital*: the capitalists’ ‘voracious appetite for surplus labour’ threatened the reproduction of the labour force to such a degree that the state had to step in and impose legal limits on the length of the working day. Other historical examples could be given, for example the way in which public hygiene, housing, education, poor relief etc., had to become a concern of state authorities as a result of the rapid urbanisation brought about by the advent of capitalist industry.

In order to grasp the relation between capitalism and biopolitics more clearly, let us turn to Agamben’s influential analysis of Western biopolitics. Agamben presents his grandiose Homo Sacer project, consisting of nine books published from 1995 to 2014, as an ‘inquiry into the genealogy—or, as one used to say, the *nature*—of power in the West’ (Agamben, 2011, p. xi). In his own understanding, this project is essentially a continuation of Foucault’s work. According to Agamben, Foucault’s theory of power contains two parallel ‘directives for research’: on the one hand, the analysis of political techniques and, on the other hand, ‘the *technologies of the self*’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 5). Agamben argues that both of these parallel directives refer back to a hidden or unexamined ‘common center’ in Foucault’s writings (Agamben, 1998, p. 5). What Agamben discovers in this hidden centre is the problem of *sovereignty*, which he—following Carl Schmitt—defines as the ability to decide on the state of exception. Already at this point, it becomes

clear that Agamben's conception of biopolitics diverges quite dramatically from Foucault's. For Foucault, biopolitics is a distinctively *modern* form of power which historically succeeds sovereign power. For Agamben, however, biopolitics is inextricably tied to sovereign power: '*the production of a biopolitical body is*', as he puts it, '*the original activity of sovereign power*' (Agamben, 1998, p. 6). Rather than being a modern phenomenon, biopolitics is, according to Agamben, 'as old as the sovereign exception' itself (Agamben, 1998, p. 6). What *is* distinctive about modernity, nonetheless, is that 'the exception everywhere becomes the rule', as he writes with reference to Walter Benjamin's theses on the concept of history (Agamben, 1998, p. 9).¹⁸

What Agamben discovers in the logic of sovereignty is the apparatus through which life becomes entangled in power. In the state of exception—which is, according to Agamben, the essence of sovereignty—the subject is exposed to the law by being *abandoned* by it; it is included in the sphere of law by virtue of being excluded from it. This relation of inclusionary exclusion or abandonment is the mechanism through which life is integrated into the law: '*The originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment*' (Agamben, 1998, p. 29, 2005). Life that gets caught up in the mesh of the law through the sovereign exception is what Agamben refers to as a *naked* or *bare* life, by which he means a life separated from its form, reduced to the mere fact of being alive in a biological sense. This is paradigmatically captured in the *homo sacer*, a legal category of Roman law referring to people 'who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*' (Agamben, 1998, p. 8). The essence of sovereignty is thus the ability to institute the exception through which the subjects of the law are stripped naked and exposed to the sovereign violence.

This brief summary of Agamben's conception of biopolitics and sovereignty is enough to allow us to identify its fundamental problems and to see how we can avoid these by drawing on Marx's critique of political economy. Agamben correctly points out that the isolation of something like a bare life is an important element in the constitution of modern relations of power, but he fails to identify the causes and nature of modern biopolitics; rather than being the result of an ancient logic of sovereignty, the biopolitical

¹⁸ For discussions of the relation between Foucault's and Agamben's notions of biopower and biopolitics, see Genel (2006), Ojakangas (2005) and Patton (2007). A third influential use of these concepts is that of Hardt and Negri. For them 'biopolitics' is 'the power of life to resist', a use of the concept which is—contrary to what they claim—fundamentally in opposition to Foucault as well as Agamben, for whom biopolitics is always a form of domination (Hardt & Negri, 2011, p. 57).

isolation of bare life is a consequence of capitalist relations of production. The obstacle that prevents Agamben from seeing this is his abstract, essentialist and ahistorical conception of the sovereign power of the state. The criticism Marx levelled against the Gotha Programme of the German Social Democrats in 1875 is equally valid as a critique of Agamben's point: instead of examining the way in which the state in its very form is shaped by the relations of production, he 'treats the state rather as an independent entity' (24: 94). The relations of production are, as Marx explains, 'the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the specific form of the state' (M: 778). In contrast to such a historical and concrete perspective on the state, Agamben identifies the state with the logic of sovereignty which dates back at least to ancient Greece. History is thereby cleansed of ruptures and development and transformed into a history of the gradual and uninterrupted unfolding of the logic of sovereignty. But 'state power does not hover in mid air' (11: 186). The mere fact that Agamben subsumes ancient modes of production based on slavery together with feudalism and capitalism under the same logic of power bears witness to his lack of sensitivity towards the specificity of different modes of production. On this point, Foucault's understanding of biopower exhibits a much more nuanced awareness of the historical specificity of modern forms of power and their connection to capitalism. Agamben's concept of sovereignty is truly the night in which all cows are black, and this abstraction is only possible because his exclusive focus on the state and sovereignty makes him blind to the relations of production.¹⁹

Agamben's inadequate conception of sovereignty should not, however, lead us to discard his analysis of biopolitics in its entirety. Let us therefore attempt to leave aside his abstractions and consider what the analysis of capitalist class domination presented in this chapter might tell us about the relation between modern biopolitics and capitalism. I want to approach this question by beginning with an examination of Arne de Boever's (2009) attempt to make Agamben and Marx think together. Boever holds that the proletarian is a figure of bare life in Agamben's sense, and that the capital relation—he calls it the 'capitalist' relation—is a relation of sovereignty. He

¹⁹ See also Hardt and Negri's (2011, p. 3ff) critique of Agamben, which I referred to in the last section. Another problem with Agamben's notion of sovereignty is his denial of the possibility of a form of sovereignty which is not biopolitical. For a powerful defence of 'a political and democratic conception of sovereignty' against Agamben's 'extremely abstract' political strategy, see von Eggert (2015).

substantiates the first claim through an interesting observation about the word *vogelfrei* (literally ‘free as a bird’), which Marx frequently uses in his descriptions of the proletariat. In the Penguin edition of *Capital*, *vogelfrei* is translated as ‘free’, ‘rightless’, ‘unattached’ or ‘unprotected’, but Boever points out that it could also be translated as ‘outlaw’, since in Marx’s time, *vogelfrei* referred to people who were excluded from the protection of the law in a manner similar to *homo sacer* in Roman law (Boever, 2009, p. 263f). A mere terminological convergence might not be the strongest argument for the claim that the proletariat is a paradigmatic example of bare life on a par with the werewolf, the *Friedlos*, the *Muselmann*, the refugee and similar figures populating the Agambenian universe, but, as we have seen throughout this chapter, it is not difficult to find more substantial arguments for such a claim in Marx’s analysis of the proletarian subject. On this point, I agree with Boever, but the rest of his attempt to fuse Marx and Agamben is plagued by a number of serious misunderstandings. First, he fails to distinguish between the *creation* and the *reproduction* of the capital relation, a failure which leads him to implicitly assume that his discussion of so-called primitive accumulation also tells us something about the forms of power involved in the reproduction of capitalism. Second, his account of the historical emergence of capitalism is incredibly misleading. In order to support his claim that the sovereign exception is the operative logic of the capital relation, he claims that ‘capitalists actually acted like little sovereigns [...] side-stepping the legal and political order’ (Boever, 2009, p. 265). He bases this on Marx’s observation that ‘the landed and capitalist profit-grubbers’ who seized state lands in the period following the English revolution did so ‘without the slightest observance of legal etiquette’ (C1: 884). There are two problems with Boever’s interpretation: first, the circumvention of *parts* of the law is not a state of exception, i.e., the suspension of the law as such in its entirety; second, the seizure of English state lands in the late 17th century cannot be used as a general description of the transition to capitalism. The historical evidence presented by Marx in his examination of so-called primitive accumulation actually points in the opposite direction of Boever’s conclusions; the capital relation was not established by capitalists side-stepping the law, but rather by the active intervention of the state in support of the emerging capitalist class and the *intensification* of the legal regulation of the life of what was to become rural wage-labourers (enclosures, ‘bloody legislation’ against vagabonds and beggars, restriction of mobility etc.). It is thus misleading to claim that ‘the proletariat is a figure of a legal and political abandonment’

(Boever, 2009, p. 264)—not only because the *historical* creation of the worker-subject involved an intensification of legal regulation, but also because the *continuous* reproduction of capitalism is compatible with legal equality. An economic system based on the exchange of commodities presupposes that market agents—including the proletarian who sells her labour-power as a commodity—must ‘recognize each other as owners of private property’, as Marx puts it in *Capital* (C1: 178). The peculiar thing about capitalism is precisely that it does not require legal inequality in order to reproduce a system of class domination; by treating everyone as equal and free proprietors, the state contributes to the reproduction of the subjection of one class to another. In other words, Boever is right in his claim that the proletarian is a figure of abandonment, but this abandonment is *economic* rather than *legal*.²⁰

The upshot of these considerations is that we should follow Foucault and insist that the historical entrance of bare life on the scene of politics is not the result of the logic of sovereignty. The modern state can only relate to its subjects as a population whose biological life has to be administered, controlled and regulated because capitalist relations of production have already isolated the naked life of the proletarian subject in order for the accumulation of abstract wealth to take place. *Bare life is the result not of sovereign violence but of the mute compulsion of economic relations: the separation of life and its conditions is the original biopolitical fracture and the root of modern biopolitics*. This is not to suggest that we can immediately derive all of the concrete examples of modern biopolitics examined by Agamben (Nazi concentration camps, contemporary refugee camps etc.) from the capital relation. My argument is situated on a more general level; the isolation of bare life required by the subjection of social life to the imperative of valorisation is the background against which it becomes possible to understand the relation between law and life.²¹

²⁰ This is not to say that capitalism requires or has historically promoted legal equality. To give just one example, French and German women were not allowed to sell their labour-power without the authorisation of their husbands until the 1960s or 1970s (Endnotes, 2013c, p. 83).

²¹ If the capital relation is indeed the original biopolitical fracture, we should perhaps reconsider Agamben’s (1998, p. viii) claim that the camp is ‘the biopolitical paradigm of the modern’. Perhaps it is rather the mega-slums populated by surplus populations deemed useless for the valorisation of value? According to Foucault (1998, p. 138), the advent of biopolitics marked the point at which ‘the

* * *

Let me briefly recapitulate what we have examined in this chapter. The perhaps most fundamental conclusion is that the rule of capital presupposes a certain form of *class domination*, namely the domination of the absolutely poor proletarians by those who control the means of production. This class relation encompasses but is not reducible to the relation between wage-labourers and capitalists, even if this particular class relation is the immediate concern of capital. Proletarianisation is the necessary condition of the *capital relation*, which is the central nexus through which the proletariat gains access to the means of subsistence. Workers are thereby forced to produce surplus value in order to exist, as a kind of interest-payment on an infinite and transcendental loan inherited from earlier generations of proletarians. The characteristic thing about capitalist class domination is that the capitalist class is, as a rule, capable of forcing workers to produce surplus value without recourse to direct violence. Since the worker is a naked life or a pure possibility cut off from the conditions of its actuality, capital can rely on the worker's own will to live. The biopolitical fracture at the heart of capitalist relations of production allows the valorisation of value to become the condition of under which life can be reconnected with its conditions. The proletarian is thus transformed into a worker by means of the mute compulsion of economic relations; in order to live, she must sell her labour-power to the capitalist, who then sets in motion past as well as future labour in order to squeeze out as much surplus labour as possible. Since the relation between the worker and the capitalist is mediated by the market, however, the worker is subjected to *capital* rather than the specific capitalist she sells her labour-power to; capitalist class domination is, in other words, an impersonal form of domination, in contradistinction to the personal relations of dependence characteristic of pre-capitalist modes of production.

Throughout this chapter, I have treated capitalist class relations as a *condition* of capitalist production. In this perspective, class relations thus appear as the *cause* of the specific form of the production process, i.e., the production of surplus value by means of the exploitation of workers who sell their labour-power to the capitalist. In chapter five, however, we will see that class

ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death'. *A life disallowed to live*, is that not precisely the status of the millions of slumdweller of contemporary capitalism? (see Benanav, 2015; M. Davis, 2017; Endnotes, 2015b).

domination is also the *result* of the production process, i.e., that capitalism reproduces itself by *turning its conditions into the result of its own movement*. In a crucial passage in the *Grundrisse*, Marx explains this peculiar circularity of capitalist reproduction by distinguishing between *external* and *immanent* conditions:

While e.g. the flight of serfs to the cities is one of the *historic* conditions and presuppositions of urbanism, it is not a *condition*, not a moment of the reality of developed cities, but belongs rather to their *past* presuppositions, to the presuppositions of their becoming which are sublated in their being. The conditions and presuppositions of the *becoming*, of the *arising*, of capital presuppose precisely that it is not yet in being but merely in *becoming*; they therefore disappear as real capital arises, capital which itself, on the basis of its own reality, posits the conditions for its realization. Thus e.g. while the process in which money or value for-itself originally becomes capital presupposes on the part of the capitalist an accumulation—perhaps by means of savings garnered from products and values created by his own labour etc., which he has undertaken as a *not-capitalist*, i.e., while the presuppositions under which money becomes capital appear as given, external *presuppositions* for the arising of capital—[nevertheless,]²² as soon as capital has become capital as such, it creates its own presuppositions, i.e., the possession of the real conditions of the creation of new values *without exchange*—by means of its own production process. These presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming—and hence could not spring from its *action as capital*—now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as *posited by it—not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its existence*. It no longer proceeds from presuppositions in order to become, but rather it is itself presupposed, and proceeds from itself to create the conditions of its maintenance and growth. Therefore, the conditions [...] which express the becoming of capital, do not fall into the sphere of that mode of production for which capital serves as the presupposition; as the historic preludes of its becoming, they lie behind it, just as the processes by means of which the earth made the transition from a liquid sea of fire and vapour to its present form now lie beyond its life as finished earth. (G: 459f; see also G: 450)

²² Inserted by Martin Nicolaus, the translator of the Penguin edition of the *Grundrisse*.

The class structure analysed in this chapter is not merely an external condition of capitalist production—in order for capitalism to exist, it has to be continuously reproduced. The distinction between external and immanent conditions highlights that there is no reason to expect the mechanisms through which a relation of domination is reproduced to be identical with those through which it was originally created. Historically, the capital relation was brought about in a fury of violence in a non-capitalist context. In order to see how capitalist class domination reproduces itself through its own exercise, however, we have to look into the immanent dynamics of capitalist production. This we will do in chapter five and six, where we will take a look at the real subsumption of the production process and the structural tendencies of the accumulation process as a whole.

Before we get to that, however, we have to finish our examination of the relations of production. The capital relation is, as I have stressed several times already, a *market* relation. Between the worker and the capitalist ‘no other relation exists than that of buyer and seller, no other politically or socially fixed relation of domination and subordination’ (34: 95). This is the real basis of the ideological representation of this relation as a voluntary agreement between free and equal proprietors. The analysis of the class domination presupposed by the commodity form allows us to see how this apparently voluntary transaction is in reality ‘coloured in advance’, i.e., how ‘[t]heir relationship as *capitalist* and *worker* is the precondition of their relationship as *buyer* and *seller*’ (R: 1014f). The worker is, in other words, subjected to capital *before* she goes to the market to sell her labour-power. But labour-power is a peculiar commodity; it cannot be separated from its bearer (the worker), and therefore its buyer has to subjugate the worker in order to consume its use value. For this reason, the worker is not only subjected to capital *before* she goes to market; once she has sold her labour-power,

[t]here comes into being, outside the simple exchange process, a relation of domination and servitude, which is however distinguished from all other historical relations of this kind by the fact that it only follows from the specific nature of the commodity which is being sold by the seller; by the fact, therefore, that this relation only arises here from purchase and sale, from the position of both parties as commodity owners. (30: 106. See also C1: 280)

This ‘relation of domination and servitude’—i.e., the relation of the worker and the capitalist in the production process—is the subject of chapter five. But there is even more to the economic power of capital; not only is the worker subjected to capital *before* she enters the market and *after* she leaves it, she is also subjected to it *while* she is there. In other words, the market is not only a *result* as well as a *cause* of the power of capital, it is *itself* one of its mechanisms. This is the subject of the next chapter.

IV. HORIZONTAL POWER

It is not individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free.

—Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (G: 650)

The concept of relations of production is widely recognised to be one of the key analytical categories of Marxist theory. As we saw in chapter one, orthodox historical materialism held relations of production to be the result of the development of the productive forces. Later generations of Marxists turned this scheme on its head; a change which made the concept of relations of production even more central to Marxist theory. This concept is, however, often used in a too restricted sense. Althusser can serve as an example here. In his rendition of the fundamental concepts of the ‘science of history’, as inaugurated by Marx, ‘relations of production’ refers to ‘the one-sided *distribution* of the means of production between those holding them and those without them’; a relation which is the basis of ‘relations of exploitation’ (Althusser, 2014, p. 28f). In this conceptual configuration, the defining characteristic of a given set of relations of production is the relation of the immediate producers to the means of production and the relation between those who control the means of production and those who do not. This is what Brenner (2007, p. 58) calls the ‘*vertical* class, or surplus extraction, relations between exploiters and direct producers’. Such an understanding of the relations of production leads to the familiar definition of capitalist relations of production in terms of exploitation and class; in capitalism, the producers are separated from the means of production, which are centralised

in the hands of a capitalist class, thus placing it in a position to appropriate surplus value produced by workers.

What is wrong with such a description? Is it not perfectly in line with what we examined in chapter three? Indeed, it is, but it is also one-sided. What gets lost in this picture is *the relation among producers*, i.e., what Brenner (2007, p. 58) calls ‘the *horizontal* relationships among the exploiters themselves and the direct producers themselves’. As Callinicos (2004, p. 52) notes, ‘[n]o account of capitalist relations of production which does not take note of the division of the exploiting class into competing capitals will be adequate’.¹ Marx examines these horizontal relations on different levels of abstraction, which can be subsumed under two headlines: *value* and *competition*. In the theory of value, which serves as the point of departure in the systematic structure of *Capital*, Marx examines how labour is socially validated when production is organised privately and independently. In other words, he analyses the relation *between* the productive units rather than their *internal* structure. At a later point, we learn that the private and independent producers of which chapter one of *Capital* speaks are, more specifically, capitalist companies producing surplus value by exploiting labour. This insight allows us to revisit the relation between these units of production on a lower level of abstraction and reconceptualise the relations between them as relations of *competition*—an absolutely crucial mechanism to understand if we want to unravel the workings of the economic power of capital.

The relations among producers take the form of *market relations*. Capitalism is a mode of production in which the market occupies an absolutely crucial and historically unprecedented role as the mechanism through which social reproduction is organised. Market relations cannot be understood solely on the basis of vertical *class* relations, even though there is, as we will see in the course of this chapter, a very close connection between these two sets of relations. The horizontal market relations amongst proletarians as well as amongst capitalists give rise to certain forms of power which cannot be derived from or reduced to the class domination we examined in chapter three. These horizontal forms of power are the subject of

¹ Brenner prefers to speak of ‘social property relations’ rather than ‘relations of production’, partly because of the tendency to restrict the meaning of ‘relations of production’ to vertical class relations. Although Brenner is right in this criticism, I do not think we should avoid the concept. Instead, I follow Callinicos (2014, p. 175f) in viewing the horizontal and vertical relations as two constitutive elements of capitalist relations of production.

this chapter. I will begin with a discussion of Marx's theory of value, which demonstrates how the contradictory unity of *social* and *private* labour in capitalism results in a peculiar form of 'retroactive socialisation' (Heinrich) which subjects *everyone*, regardless of their class status, to the abstract and impersonal power of the law of value. On this basis, we will then be able to specify the frequently ignored and misunderstood relation between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of capitalist relations of production. In the last sections of the chapter, I will examine the role played by competition in capital's attempt to sustain the subjection of life to the logic of valorisation.

VALUE IS FORM

Marx presents his theory of value at the very outset of his analysis of the capitalist mode of production. A lot has been written about why Marx chose to begin with the analysis of the commodity, and although I will not delve into a detailed discussion about Marx's method here, a few points of clarification will be necessary.² First, I follow 'virtually every commentator on *Capital*' (Callinicos, 2014, p. 42) in rejecting the Engelsian reading of the *Capital*, according to which the object of analysis in part one (chapters 1-3) is a pre- or non-capitalist system of 'simple commodity production' (Elbe, 2013; Mau, 2018b; Rakowitz, 2000). *Capital* is about capitalism from the very first page. Second, it is important to keep in mind that even though Marx is concerned with capitalism from the very first page, the kind of capitalism we meet here is extremely different from the one we know through immediate experience. Marx makes a lot of significant abstractions in his analysis of the commodity form. For example, he abstracts from money until the end of chapter one, from capital until chapter four and from the existence of labour-power as a commodity until chapter five. In part one of *Capital*, he is only concerned with what he calls 'simple circulation', i.e., an interconnected whole of acts of exchange. On this level of abstraction, 'absolutely no relations of dependence between the participants in exchange are presupposed apart from those given by the process of circulation itself: the exchangers are distinguished solely as buyers and sellers' (30: 36f). In other words, Marx initially considers only the relation *between* the units of production and not their *internal* relations. For this reason, classes are completely

² Regarding the commodity as the point of departure, see Arthur (2004b, p. 27ff), Banaji (2015), Heinrich (1999a, p. 173f, 2009, p. 50ff), Hoff (2017, p. 241ff), Murray (1990, p. 141ff).

absent from the analysis of the commodity form. At first glance it might seem futile to construct such an extremely abstract model, but it is not: it is precisely this kind of abstraction that allows Marx to pin down the necessary relations between the different moments of the capitalist totality by dialectically deriving them from each other. And, as we will see later in this chapter, it is precisely such a procedure that allows us to determine the exact relation between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the capitalist relations of production.

Marx's theory of value was widely ignored or misunderstood until the 1960s, partly because it was deemed outdated by the theory of monopoly capitalism, partly because some of the important texts were unavailable (e.g. *Grundrisse*, the *Urtext*, *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* and the first edition of *Capital*) and partly because it was read as an economic theory in a traditional sense.³ One of the great merits of value-form theory is to have demonstrated that Marx's theory of value was never intended as a continuation of Ricardian political economy.⁴ Marx was not an economist, *Capital* is not a work of economic theory and the theory of value is not a refined version of the classical labour theory of value found in Smith and Ricardo. Marx's project was a *critique* of the entire field of political economy, and the theory of value is a critical analysis of social relations in a society in which social reproduction is mediated through the market (Heinrich, 1999a, p. 25). One of Marx's recurring objections to classical political economy in general and Ricardo in particular is that it has completely neglected the *qualitative* aspect of value:

Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within

³ See Backhaus (1997, p. 41ff), Clarke (1991a, p. 92ff), Colletti (1973, p. 76ff), Elbe (2008), Elson (2015, p. 116ff), Reichelt (2013, p. 11f).

⁴ Some value-form theorists tend to exaggerate the novelty of their reading of Marx. Backhaus (1997, p. 16) and Reichelt (2013, p. 11), for example, claim that no one had really understood *Capital* before they discovered the true essence of the theory of value in the 1960s, when they stumbled upon an old copy of the first edition of *Capital*. Although their reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy was undoubtedly highly original, some of their fundamental points had already been at least partly made by Marxists such as Colletti (1973), Dunayevskaya (1971), Grossman (2018), Korsch (2017), Pashukanis (1983), Rubin (2008) and Uno (1980).

these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. (C1: 173f; see also 31: 399; 32: 135, 318)

Marx is breaking new ground here; the question he asks is completely different from the one asked by political economy. To ask *why* labour takes the form of value-producing labour is to see value as a product of historically specific circumstances. Such a question is almost meaningless within the framework of the classical political economists, for whom the value form is simply presupposed as a unproblematic point of departure. From the point of view of political economy, what would have to be explained is not why social reproduction is organised by means of the exchange of commodities but rather why it has not always been like that.

These considerations about the aim of the theory of value allow us to see the hollowness of a common objection to Marx's analysis of the commodity: that he fails to *prove* that being a product of human labour is the 'third thing' shared by commodities, i.e., that the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labour time necessary for its production (C1: 127). The objection is premised on a failure to grasp the aim and meaning of the theory of value. As Marx explains in an oft-cited letter to Ludwig Kugelmann from July 1868, responding to a review of *Capital*:

The chatter about the necessity of proving the concept of value arises only from complete ignorance both of the subject under discussion and of the method of science. Every child knows that any nation that stopped working, not for a year, but let us say, just for a few weeks, would perish. And every child knows, too, that the amounts of products corresponding to the differing amounts of needs demand differing and quantitatively determined amounts of society's total labour. It is self-evident that this *necessity* of the *distribution* of social labour in specific proportions is certainly not abolished by the *specific form* of social production; it can only change *its form of manifestation*. Natural laws cannot be abolished at all. The only thing that can change, under historically differing conditions, is the *form* in which those laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour asserts itself in a state of society in which the interconnection of social labour

expresses itself as the *private exchange* of the individual products of labour, is precisely the *exchange value* of these products. (43: 68)

The theory of value is, in other words, intended not as an explanation of prices but as a qualitative analysis of the organisation of social reproduction in capitalist society. The concept of value is meant to capture a specific form of *socialisation* of labour, i.e., a historically specific way of coordinating production. The theory of value is from the very beginning a theory of the social form of labour, and the commodity is likewise defined as a product of labour from the very beginning; it is ‘the simplest social form in which the product of labour presents itself in contemporary society’ (24: 544). For this reason, it is, as Marx puts it, ‘a tautology to say that labour is the *only* source of exchange value’ (29: 276).⁵ But precisely what does it mean to say that the theory of value is a theory of *the social form of labour in capitalism*, as many contemporary interpretations of Marx do? In what sense is the theory of value about *labour*?⁶ Obviously not in the sense of an examination of work conditions, technological aspects of the labour process, the differences between labour in various branches or sectors and so on. The theory of value is not concerned with the concrete characteristics of the labour process, but rather with the social interconnection between the different parts of total social labour. To say that value is a concept that is meant to capture the social form of labour in capitalism thus means that it is intended to capture the specific manner in which individual acts of labour are socially validated and incorporated into a system of social production; the theory of value is, in other words, a theory of *the social interconnections between producers in the capitalist mode of production*.⁷

⁵ Marx did not systematically distinguish between value and exchange value until the second edition of *Capital* (1872). Strictly speaking, the right word in this quote from *A Contribution* (1859) would be value and not exchange value. The same goes for the letter to Kugelmann.

⁶ Diane Elson (2015) argues that we should speak of ‘the value theory of labour’ rather than ‘the labour theory of value’, an idea which has recently been defended by William Clare Roberts (2017, p. 78ff). Dunayevskaya (1971, p. 138) suggested the same terminological shift in 1958, although in a slightly different sense.

⁷ This is not to say that there is no relation between the interconnection between producers on the one hand and the labour process on the other—on the contrary, the subjection of social reproduction to the law of value has tremendous impacts on the concrete character of the labour process, as we will see in chapter five.

VALUE IS DOMINATION

The characteristic thing about the social form of labour in capitalism is that it is simultaneously *social* and *private* or *independent*. Its social character derives from the fact that it takes place within a division of labour, which means that producers produce for each other rather than for their own immediate consumption. As Marx emphasises in the letter to Kugelmann, a social division of labour presupposes a mechanism through which production is co-ordinated and organised in order to achieve its aim, regardless of whether this aim is to meet human needs or to valorise value.⁸ Production is, as we saw in chapter two, necessary for the reproduction of human life, and if society is to continue to exist, something has to be done in order to secure that at least the most basic needs of the producers will be met. Even when production is directed towards the valorisation of value, it has to secure the continuous existence of the producers in order to exist, which means that it has to secure the satisfaction of some human needs to a certain degree—otherwise it would simply perish. The immediate *aim* of capitalist production might be the valorisation of value, but the reproduction of the workers' ability to work remains a necessary *condition* of it. An economic system based on a division of labour is a system of mutual dependence: if a group of producers spend all of their time making boots, they are dependent upon someone else producing whatever they need in order to survive. And if social reproduction as a whole is to take place, some kind of mechanism is needed in order to secure that a society does not end up with a lot of boots and no food. In capitalist society, that mechanism is the exchange of products of labour as commodities. The reason *why* this is so is that production is planned and carried out *privately* and *independently* by the individual units of production *before* it is socially validated, i.e., before these units find out whether their product actually fulfils a social need. The products which end up as commodities on the market are 'the products of mutually independent acts of labour, performed in isolation' (C1: 132), and for this reason, 'the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total

⁸ The division of labour in question here is the overall social division of labour and not the division of labour within each unit of production—a distinction Marx missed in his early writings, where he also conflated the concepts of class and division of labour, leading him to conceive of communism as the abolition of the division of labour. He later gave up this idea and accepted the division of labour as a feature of human production as such. See Rattansi (1982, especially pp. 56, 85, 93f, 128f).

social labour only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers (C1: 165). Capitalist social reproduction is therefore organised by means of a kind of ‘retroactive socialisation [*nachträgliche Vergesellschaftung*]’, as Heinrich (2012b, p. 21) puts it.⁹

As previously mentioned, the point of departure of the theory of value is the commodity as the *dominant* social form of the products of labour; it is, then, ‘not isolated acts of exchange, but a circle of exchange, a totality of the same, in constant flux, proceeding more or less over the entire surface of society; a system of acts of exchange’ (G: 188). Such a situation, where social reproduction is mediated by commodity exchange, presupposes a certain regularity in the quantitative exchange relations between commodities. If it were possible for everyone to systematically accumulate wealth merely by repeating the same simple exchange over and over again—e.g. 1 chair = 50 eggs = 1 bicycle = 2 chairs = 100 eggs = 2 bicycle = 4 chairs, etc.), the market would break down, as nobody would want to engage in exchanges (Heinrich, 2012a, p. 41). Furthermore, if exchange relationships between different kinds of commodities fluctuated wildly in the short term (from exchange to exchange), it would be completely impossible to secure a living by producing for the market.¹⁰ What explains this regularity? What is its point of reference? This is where labour enters the picture, since it is the only thing commodities have in common when we abstract from their use value—an abstraction which is carried out in the act of exchange itself.¹¹ When

⁹ For further discussions of this contradictory unity of social and private labour, see Backhaus (1997, p. 51), Brentel (1989, p. 153ff), Clarke (1991a, p. 101f), Colletti (1973, p. 82f), Heinrich (1999a, p. 207ff), W. C. Roberts (2017, p. 80f), Rubin (2008, p. 7ff).

¹⁰ Of course, wild market fluctuations happen all the time: people starve to death because a sudden economic crisis deprives them of the possibility of selling their labour-power, and companies go bankrupt because demand for their product collapses. This is not, however, the normal condition in a capitalist economy, which is just another way of saying that so far, the generalisation of the commodity form has not led to the annihilation of humanity (although the looming biospheric catastrophe is threatening to realise such a scenario).

¹¹ For a detailed breakdown of Marx’s argument, see Heinrich (1999a, p. 200ff). Some commentators, including Projektgruppe zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (1973) and Arthur (2004b), hold that it is unnecessary or even a mistake to introduce the concept of labour at this stage in the dialectical presentation of categories. For a convincing critique of this position, see Lange (2016).

producers exchange their products, they thereby reduce their products—which are by definition always different use values (if not, why would they exchange at all?)—to expressions of the same substance, namely value. By doing so, they also reduce their own labour to the same kind of labour, namely *abstract*, value-producing labour. And, as Marx stresses, this ‘reduction of different concrete private acts of labour to this abstraction of equal human labour is only accomplished through exchange, in which products of different acts of labour are in fact posited as equal’ (II.6: 41).¹²

Abstract labour is ‘human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human labour in general’ (C1: 135). In several places Marx also defines abstract labour in a ‘physiological sense’ as the ‘expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.’ (C1: 137, 134). Many scholars find this physiological definition problematic on the grounds that it explains a historically specific social form of labour with reference to transhistorical features of human labour. As Postone (2003, p. 145) puts it: If ‘the category of abstract human labour is a social determination, it cannot be a physiological category’.¹³ However, as Saito (2017, pp. 107ff, 118f) has pointed out, this critique relies on an all too abstract opposition between the natural and the social. Defining abstract labour in terms of ‘expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.’ does not imply that human labour is value-producing *in virtue of* these transhistorical features; what Marx is getting at is that these transhistorical features of human labour acquire a historically unique social meaning in capitalism—a meaning that cannot, however, be explained by reference to those transhistorical features. Imagine a society in which a certain religious ritual was performed every time it snowed. In such a situation, a natural phenomenon (snow) would acquire a certain social meaning. This would obviously not be explicable with reference to the natural qualities of snow, but that does not change the fact that snow is a natural phenomenon. The same goes for abstract labour: in all human societies, labour is an ‘expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.’, but *only in capitalism* does temporal units of this expenditure of energy serve as

¹² This abstraction is thus, to use Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s (1978, p. 20) celebrated concept, a *real abstraction*. For more on this concept, see Jappe (2013). Although Marx never used the term real abstraction in exactly that form, the concept is clearly visible in several of his writings (see G: 303; 29: 272; 30: 55; R: 993; C2: 185).

¹³ See also Bidet (2007, p. 43), Bonefeld (2014, p. 121ff), Callinicos (2014, p. 173), Heinrich (1999a, p. 211ff, 2009, p. 102, 2012a, p. 50).

the immediate basis of the organisation of social reproduction. In other words: the point of the definition of abstract labour in the physiological sense is that, as a result of a set of historically specific social relations, a transhistorical and natural process acquires a historically unique social function in the organisation of production.

In order for the commodity to become the dominant social form of the products of labour, value has to acquire what Marx calls an ‘autonomous’ and ‘independent’ form, i.e., it must incarnate itself into a specific commodity which is thereby transformed into money (29; 488; M: 633; V: 27; C1: 159, 180f).¹⁴ After having demonstrated the necessity of this doubling of the commodity into commodity and money, Marx goes on to analyse the different functions of money and the necessity of the transition from simple circulation (C-M-C) to the circulation of money and commodities as capital (M-C-M'). I will come back to this—particularly the analysis of the necessary transition to capital—later in this chapter, but for now I will set it aside for a moment in order to consider what the basic elements of the theory of value tells us about power in capitalism.

The fundamental insight of Marx’s theory of value is that the peculiarity of social and private labour in capitalism transforms social relations among producers into a quasi-autonomous system of real abstractions imposing themselves on everyone by means of an impersonal and abstract form of domination. When social relations among market-dependent producers comes to be mediated by the exchange of commodities, it means that their access to their conditions of existence comes to be mediated by a market system in which the circulation of commodities and money generate compulsory standards and demands that producers must meet in order to survive. In the previous chapter, we saw that the very existence of the capitalist market is the result of class domination, and in the next chapter we will see how the market transactions between the worker and the capitalist give rise to another relation of domination within the workplace. What the theory of value teaches us, however, is that the market not only *mediates* (and conceals) relations of domination—‘it is’, in the words of William Clare Roberts (2017, p. 58), ‘itself the exercise of an arbitrary power’.

The movements of commodities and money on the market determine what the producers must produce as well as when, how and for how long

¹⁴ Regarding the necessity of money, see Backhaus (1997), Heinrich (1999a, p. 220ff, 2009, pp. 104–162), Mau (2018b, p. 72). See also Frank Engster’s (2014) impressive study.

they have to produce. In order to live, they will have to find a place in a pre-determined division of labour, a place which might suddenly disappear. In order to hold on to a market share allowing them to survive, they will have to live up to a certain level of productivity. In order to avoid spending more time than what is socially necessary for the production of a commodity, they are forced to adopt certain techniques, technologies, organisational forms etc. If a producer introduces labour saving technologies, other producers will have to follow suit, move to another branch, work more or perish. In other words, the equalising pressures of the inherently unstable market sets the conditions under which individuals gain access to what they need in order to live. Because mainstream economics treat the market as a system of voluntary transactions between free and equal individuals, it represents the equalising mechanisms of the market as a transmission of information needed by these individuals in order to make rational investment decisions. Marx's analysis allows to see that what is actually transmitted by the market is not *information* but rather compulsory commands communicated through the movements of things. As Heinrich explains:

The value of commodities is an expression of an overwhelming social interaction that cannot be controlled by individuals. In a commodity-producing society, people (all of them!) are under the control of things, and the decisive relations of domination are not personal but “objective” (*sachlich*). This impersonal, objective domination, submission to “inherent necessities,” does not exist because things themselves possess characteristics that generate such domination, or because social activity necessitates this mediation through things, but only because *people relate to things in a particular way – as commodities*. (Heinrich, 2012a, p. 75; see also Elbe, Ellmers, & Eufinger, Jan, 2012, p. 7)

Roberts (2017, p. 91) has recently criticised Heinrich as well as Postone for being ‘quite vague about where this domination comes from and why it counts as domination’. He claims that because Heinrich ‘understands objective domination as a relationship between people and things, he does not make it clear that the things in question only mediate relations with other people’ (W. C. Roberts, 2017, p. 91). This is, at least to a certain extent, convincing as a critique of Postone (whom I will come back to later in this chapter), but I do not think it adequately represents Heinrich's interpretation. He is quite clear that we are dealing with ‘relations between human

beings' hidden under what he (quoting Marx) calls a 'thing-like cover [*dinglicher Hülle*]' (Heinrich, 2009, p. 181, see also 2004).¹⁵ Be that as it may, Roberts's point is still valid: the domination of value is a domination of people by people mediated by the relationship between people and things.¹⁶ Another way to put this is that the market is an emergent property; although it is, in the last instance, nothing but a totality of relations among human beings, its movements nevertheless detach themselves to a certain degree from these human beings and come to oppose them as an 'alien power', to use one of Marx's favourite expressions.

Marx's description of the abstract and impersonal domination of everyone by value is clearly reminiscent of the Feuerbachian critique of inversion in the early writings examined in chapter two. In addition to the frequent use of the expression 'alien power', Marx also speaks of an 'inversion of subject and object' (R: 990; 30: 110) and explicitly compares religion and capital: 'Just as man is dominated, in religion, by the products [*Machwerk*] of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is dominated by the products of his own hand' (C1: 772. See also 32: 409). Passages like this, and the modes of expression just mentioned, are sometimes cited as indications or even proofs that Marx never abandoned the humanist critique of alienation known from the early writings. In reality, however, they demonstrate the opposite. In the writings of 1843 and 1844, the alienated workers are confronted with their own human essence in the form of money or God (or the money-God). According to the theory of value, in contrast, it is *social relations* that confronts members of bourgeois society as an alien power. The essence of the human being has, in other words, been replaced by social relations—precisely as the sixth thesis on Feuerbach announced. In addition to this, the social relations confronting commodity producers as an alien power is not something that one would want to re-appropriate and actualise. The political horizon of the critique of inversion has thus developed from the re-appropriation and realisation of an alienated essence to the abolition of autonomised social relations.

¹⁵ Roberts's critique could also be extended to Robert Kurz (2012), Ingo Elbe, Sven Ellmers and Jan Eufinger (2012) and Anselm Jappe (2005).

¹⁶ See also Gerhard Hanloser and Karl Reitter (2008, p. 17), who make the exact same point in their critique of Stefan Breuer.

FETISHISM

According to a reading of Marx's theory of value which has become increasingly popular in recent years, the impersonal and abstract domination of value is what Marx captures with the concept of *fetishism*.¹⁷ This reading diverges from the most common interpretation of the concept of fetishism, according to which it refers to the *ideological* naturalisation of a social forms.¹⁸ The earliest proponent of the former was Rubin (2008, p. 5f), who held that the 'theory of fetishism is, *per se*, the basis of Marx's entire economic system', and that the theory of fetishism is 'a general theory of production relations of the commodity economy'. More recently, Heinrich (2009, p. 175) has argued that 'commodity fetishism is no illusion, but a real phenomenon'. Anselm Jappe (2005, p. 30) likewise insists that '[f]or Marx, fetishism is not only an inverted representation of reality, but also an *inversion of reality itself*'.¹⁹ What these authors claim is that fetishism refers not to the *ideological naturalisation* of a social practice but rather to *that practice itself* or, with regards to commodity fetishism more specifically, not the ideological representation of value as a natural property of products of labour, but *the actual practice* of relating to each other through the exchange of products of labour.

If interpreters such as Rubin, Heinrich and Jappe are right, it means that the concept of fetishism ought to occupy a central place in a theory of the economic power of capital. However, as a reading of Marx, I think this interpretation of the concept of fetishism is wrong—it does not reflect Marx's use of the concept. As a suggestion for a new way of using this concept, I think it is confusing and unnecessary. But before I go on to substantiate this claims, let me briefly clarify what it means to say that fetishism is a form of *ideology*, as I will do in the following pages. One of the commonplaces in the literature on fetishism is to emphasise that it is not a matter of 'distorted perception', 'mere illusion', 'simple misrepresentation', or—God forbid—

¹⁷ In this section I rely heavily on Mau (2018a).

¹⁸ See for example Avineri (1980, p. 118), Balibar (2014, p. 60f), Bidet (2007, p. 260ff), Brentel (1989, p. 15), Bukharin (1928, p. 237ff), Callinicos (2014, p. 150f), Eagleton (1996, p. 84ff), Hanloser & Reitter (2008, p. 30), Harvey (2010, p. 41), Kautsky (1912, p. 14), Pashukanis (1983, p. 73), Postone, (2003, p. 70), Starosta (2016, p. 142), Wendling (2009, p. 54), Žižek (2009, p. 19).

¹⁹ Similar interpretations can be found in Backhaus (1997, p. 46), Bonefeld (2014, p. 54), Dunayevskaya (1971, p. 100), Gray (2012), Haug (1974, p. 166), Holloway (2010, p. 49), Korsch (2017, p. 93f), Kurz (2012, p. 33), Marxhausen (1988a, 1988b), Murray (2016, p. 39), W. C. Roberts (2017, p. 86).

‘false consciousness’.²⁰ These assurances display an understandable effort to indicate a distance towards a certain vulgar Marxist understanding of ideology as a manipulative tool of the capitalist class which can be brushed away by critique and has no real basis in social reality. However, this also has the effect of making it seem as if an interpretation of fetishism as ideology necessarily commits itself to such a sloppy notion of ideology. This is not the case, however; claiming that fetishism is a matter of ideology does not imply the claim that ideology is an arbitrary illusion or a false consciousness which can be eradicated by critical analysis.

Let us take a look at Marx’s use of the concept of fetishism. Since I am concerned with this in the context of the critique of political economy, I will only consider his use of it in the writings from the *Grundrisse* onwards.²¹ Here is Marx’s definition of fetishism in the second edition of volume one of *Capital*:

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 [*scheinen*] as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with humans. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of human 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. (C1: 165)²²

What is Marx saying here? For the religious mind, what is *in reality* a product of the human brain *appears* as autonomous figures with a life of their own—which they are *not*. It is similar with commodities: what is *in reality* a set of social relations amongst human beings *appears* as relations exclusively amongst commodities. Accordingly, Marx writes that ‘Bailey is a fetishist in that he conceives value [...] as a *relation of objects to one another*’ (32: 334). Value

²⁰ Eagleton (1996, p. 85), Harvey (2010, p. 41), Bensaïd (2009, p. 227), W. C. Roberts (2017, p. 86), Heinrich (2009, p. 174). For similar statements, see Adorno (2007, p. 190), Althusser et al. (2015, p. 347), Balibar (2014, p. 60), Bonefeld (2014, p. 54), Holloway (2010, p. 49), Jameson (2009, p. 331), Postone (2003, p. 62).

²¹ Marx already employed the notion of fetishism in 1842 (see I: 147; IV.1: 322). For discussions of the history of the concept and Marx’s sources, see Grigat (2007), Iacono (2016), McNally (2011b, p. 201ff), Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988).

²² An almost identical passage appears in the appendix to the first edition (A: 142f).

thus appears as a natural quality possessed by products of labour regardless of their social context—and *this is what fetishism is*. An interpretation of Marx's use of the concept of fetishism cannot, however, base itself solely on this passage. If we look at other occurrences of the term in Marx's writings, they can be divided into two groups: First, there are a couple of short and ambivalent passages where 'fetishism' could, in principle, refer both to the ideological naturalisation of a social form and this social form itself. Two examples: 'bourgeois production must crystallise wealth as a fetish in the form of a particular thing' (29: 387); '[i]n interest-bearing capital, the *capital relation* reaches its *most externalised* and *fetish-like* form' (M: 492; see also 32: 494; A: 142). If we read these passages in connection with the second group of examples, however, it becomes evident that the interpretation of fetishism as ideology is more convincing. The clearest examples are when Marx writes about 'the fetishism of the political economists' (R: 983): 'the fetishism peculiar to bourgeois economics [...] transform the social economic character that things achieve in the process of social production into a natural determination arising from the material nature of these things'; (C2: 303; II.11: 176).²³ Here, 'fetishism' obviously refers to an ideological form. It makes perfectly sense, then, that Marx ends the section on fetishism in chapter one of *Capital* with quotes from economists who presents value as 'a property of things' (C1: 177). The interpretation of fetishism as ideology is also supported by passages where Marx associates it with terms like representing (*vorstellen*), viewing, believing, considering or regarding (*anschauen*):

The fetishist view peculiar to and springing from the essence of the capitalist mode of production, which considers *economic* form-determinations, such as being a *commodity* or being *productive* labour, as a property belonging to the material bearers of these form-determinations or categories in and of themselves. (R: 1046)²⁴

²³ See also G: 687; 29: 277; 32: 316, 334, 400; 33: 344; V: 39; C1: 176.

²⁴ I have amended this translation quite heavily. The original reads: 'Die der kapitalistischen Produktionsweise eigenthümliche, und aus ihrem Wesen entspringende fetischistische Anschauung, welche *ökonomische* Formbestimmtheiten, wie *Waare* zu sein, *productive* Arbeit zu sein etc, als den stofflichen Trägern dieser Formbestimmtheiten oder Kategorien an und für sich zukommende Eigenschaft betrachtet' (II.4.1: 114f).

Here, it is again clear that fetishism is an ideological naturalisation of social forms. The ‘fetish-worshipper’, writes Marx, accepts the appearance (*Schein*) ‘as something real’ and ‘actually believes that the exchange value of things is determined by their properties as things, and is altogether a natural property of things’ (32: 317).

All of the passages just quoted quite unambiguously demonstrate that Marx uses the concept of fetishism in order to refer to ideological naturalisations. There is one important passage in *Capital*, however, which does support the interpretations of the aforementioned critics of the ideology reading, and it is almost always quoted in discussions of fetishism:

To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e., not as immediate social relations between persons in their work itself, but rather as thing-like [*sachliche*] relations between persons and social relations among things. (C1: 165f)²⁵

Two things should be noted about this passage. First, Marx writes that social relations appear as thing-like relations between *persons* or as *social* relations among things. This flatly contradicts the many passages where Marx describes fetishism as social relations appearing as *thing-like* relations or simply relations amongst *things*. In the passage just quoted, Marx includes in the *appearance* the *insight* that the relations among things are *in reality* relations between people—but in all of the other passages I have quoted in the preceding pages, it is precisely this insight which he claims to be occluded by fetishism. Second, it is remarkable that whereas Marx usually emphasises the *difference* between essence and appearance, here he holds them to be *identical*. Right at the beginning of the section on fetishism in *Capital*, for example, he underlines that we need to analyse the commodity in order to see that it is not as ‘extremely obvious’ as it initially appears to be (C1: 163). He likewise emphasises that the insight that exchange value (a relation between commodities) is nothing but the form of appearance of value (a social relation) is a ‘scientific discovery’—and, as he explains elsewhere, ‘all science

²⁵ Quoted by Backhaus (1997, p. 46), Balibar (2014, p. 61), Boer (2010, p. 104), Bonefeld (2014, p. 129), Carver (1975, p. 51), De Angelis (1996, p. 14), Gray (2012, p. 15), Harvey (2010, p. 41), Haug (1974, p. 168), Heinrich (2012a, p. 74), Holloway (2010, p. 49), Murray (2016, p. 37), O’Kane (2013), Postone (2003, p. 62), Rehmann (2013, p. 42), W. C. Roberts (2017, p. 86) and Schulz (2012, p. 27).

would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence' (C1: 167; M: 766).

But why, then, did Marx write that social relations 'appear as what they are'? It is definitely not simply an inadvertent mistake—not only because Marx re-wrote the analysis of the commodity so many times, but also because it appears in the French edition of *Capital* as well as in the first German edition, although in a slightly different version (II.7: 54; V: 37). My guess is that it is simply a rhetorical figure, employed in order to emphasise that fetishism is not just a matter of contingent and subjective confusion but is anchored in the everyday social practices of capitalist society.

Based on these considerations, I think it is fair to conclude that Marx regarded fetishism as an *ideological* form. That does not mean that he regarded it as a result of the manipulation of the ruling classes, or that he thought it would be possible to eradicate it by simply revealing its treacherous nature. On the contrary, Marx always makes sure to emphasise three important things about fetishism: first, *everyone*—capitalists, economists, proletarians etc.—are subjected to it. Second, scientific analysis 'by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity' (C1: 167). Third, fetishism 'springs from the peculiar social character of labour which produces commodities', and not from an evil plan of the ruling classes (C1: 165). Fetishism is thus an *ideological* inversion of a *real* inversion. In capitalist society, relations between people take the form of relations between things. This does not mean that they stop being relations between people—it means that social relations are *mediated* by relations amongst things. This is not an ideological phenomenon but a *practical* inversion which constitutes the basis upon which the *ideological* inversion of fetishism arises—the 'becoming-invisible of mediations', as Hanloser and Reitter (2008, p. 30) put it. In the section on fetishism in the first edition of *Capital*, Marx explains this double inversion: 'Firstly, their relationship exists practically. Secondly, however, because they are human beings, *their relationship exists as a relationship for them*. The way in which it exists for them or is reflected in their brain springs from the nature of the relationship itself' (V: 36).

The fact that Marx uses a term in a certain sense is hardly in itself an argument against other uses of it. We might of course choose to begin to use the concept of fetishism to refer to the practical inversion and invent a new term for its ideological representation. However, in order not to make the terminology unnecessarily complicated by having to deal with two different senses of fetishism, and in order to be able to distinguish between the

practical inversion of social relations and the ideological naturalisation of it, I prefer to follow Marx's use of the concept of fetishism.²⁶

POSTONE

Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination* is undoubtedly one of the most influential and original attempts to provide a detailed and systematic account of the impersonal and abstract form of domination characteristic of capitalist societies.²⁷ While I agree with his overall description of capitalist domination and find many of his arguments compelling and illuminating, I also think that his account of the power of capital suffers from a number of important shortcomings, the analysis of which will help to carry the analysis of the economic power of capital further.

On 'its most fundamental level', the capitalist form of domination identified by Marx does not, so Postone argues, 'consist in the domination of people by other people, but in the domination of people by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute' (31). In his view, *class* domination in capitalism is a secondary form of domination, an effect of an underlying structural compulsion to which *everyone* is subjected. Postone shares this idea with other value-form theorists, and I will go more into detail with it in the next section. For now, I want to examine Postone's interpretation of the concept of value, which he takes to express 'the very heart of capitalist society' (25). One of the many errors of what he calls traditional Marxism is to have conceived of value as a 'category of the market' or a 'mode of distribution' (24, 8). According to such an interpretation, value is a social form which has to do only with what happens after the production process, when the products of labour are distributed through market exchange. Against this, Postone points out that value 'is intrinsically related to a historically specific mode of production' (25). The organisation of social production on the basis of value has dramatic effects on 'the concrete form of the labor

²⁶ Thomas Marxhausen (1987, 1988b, 1988a), Hans G. Ehrbar (2010, p. 214ff), Riccardo Bellofiore (2014, p. 177f), Chris Arthur (2013, p. 117) and Guido Schulz (2012) all distinguish between *fetish-character* and *fetishism* or *fetish* and *fetishism* in order to conceptualise the practical and the ideological inversion. Some of them also claim that such a distinction can be found in Marx's text. I have demonstrated elsewhere that Marx does not make such a distinction, that it leads to contradictions or tautologies if applied to Marx's text, and that there are no good reasons for introducing it. See Mau (2018a, p. 112ff).

²⁷ In this section, parentheses with nothing but a number refer to Postone (2003).

process’, as it sets in motion an ‘abstract temporal compulsion’ which organises production ‘according to the most efficient possible use of human labor engaged in increasingly specialized and fragmented tasks for the end of greater productivity’ (353). This perspective allows Postone to undercut (what he perceives as) the traditional Marxist view of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism as ‘a transformation of the mode of distribution (private property, the market), but not of production’ (9). Against the ‘affirmative attitude towards industrial production’ in traditional Marxism (the forces bursting through the fetters), Postone emphasises that Marx’s ‘conception of emancipation includes the historical overcoming of the labor process molded by capital’ (9, 334).

Postone’s emphasis on the effects of value on the labour process is an important corrective to the techno-optimistic idea of capitalist production as the germ of communism. Value as a social form is not just a matter of the connection between the units of production and the distribution of wealth but also has to do with the concrete form of the labour process. His eagerness to avoid market-centred interpretations of value, however, leads him into a number of aporias and ambiguities. In his attempt to substantiate his claim that value is not a category of the market, he quotes the following passage from a ‘crucially important section of the *Grundrisse*’ (24): ‘The exchange of living labour for objectified labour—i.e., the positing of social labour in the form of the contradiction of capital and wage labour—is the ultimate development of the *value-relation* and of production resting on value’ (G: 704). He then offers this gloss:

We have seen that value, as a category of wealth, generally has been conceived of as a category of the market; yet when Marx refers to ‘exchange’ in the course of considering the ‘value relation’ in the passages quoted,^[28] he does so with regards to the capitalist process of production itself. The exchange to which he refers is not that of circulation, but of production—“the exchange of living labour for objectified labour.” (24)

This is a puzzling interpretation. Why should we read ‘the exchange of living labour for objectified labour’ as a reference to the production process?

²⁸ The other passage is the headline of the section from the *Grundrisse* that Postone refers to: ‘Contradictions between the *foundation* [Postone’s emphasis] of bourgeois production (*value as measure*) and its development’ (G: 704).

And what does ‘exchange of production’ mean? Postone seems to regard this reading as self-evident. Could it be that he interprets this ‘exchange’ as what Marx refers to as the metabolism between humans and nature? There are three reasons why this is unlikely: first, Marx almost never use the term exchange (*Austausch*) about production.²⁹ Second, metabolism is not a relation between living and objectified labour, but rather a relation between labour, the instruments of labour and the object of labour. Third, understanding ‘the exchange of living labour for objectified labour’ as metabolism would imply precisely the kind of transhistorical notion of labour Postone wants to avoid. Another and more likely possibility is that Postone takes ‘objectified labour’ to mean machinery. The exchange of living for objectified labour would then mean the interaction between labour and machinery in the sphere of production. But this is simply a misunderstanding of Marx’s text. Again, why would Marx refer to this as an *exchange*? This choice of words seems to suggest that Marx is talking about a *market* relation; an interpretation that is also supported by several passages in which Marx makes it clear that ‘objectified labour’ refers to *money*. Two examples suffice: ‘[i]f a given value is exchanged for the value-creating activity, if objectified labour is exchanged for living labour, in short if money is exchanged for labour’ (30: 35); ‘*money* as the general form of *objectified labour* becomes the *purchaser* of labour-power’ (R: 1015; see also C1: 676, 713, R: 1009; 30: 34). The passage quoted by Postone in support of his claim that value is not a category of the market thus actually says something entirely different, namely that the *market relation* between capital and labour is ‘the ultimate development of the *value-relation*’. The reason for this is, as Marx explains elsewhere, that only with the commodification of labour-power does it become possible for the commodity form to ‘impose itself upon society as a whole’ (C1: 733).

Postone not only wants to correct market-centred conceptions of value and remind us that value is *also* connected to a specific mode of producing, he goes so far as to claim that:

²⁹ As far as I know, Marx only employs ‘exchange’ in this sense once, in a highly specific context and with the intention of underlining the *difference* between the exchange of commodities and the sphere of production (30: 358). In the MECW it is possible to find several passages where Marx writes about ‘the exchange of matter between man and nature’ (24: 553; 35: 53, 194), but this is simply a bad translation of *Stoffwechsel*.

although the market mode of circulation may have been necessary for the historical genesis of the commodity as the totalizing social form, it need not remain essential to that form. It is conceivable that another mode of coordination and generalisation—an administrative one, for example—could serve a similar function for this contradictory social form. In other words, once established, the law of value could also be mediated politically. (291)

The theoretical consequences of this claim are overwhelming, and Postone does not really explain why such a scenario is ‘conceivable’. The idea seems to be that the subjection of the labour process to abstract temporality and compulsory productivity-increases could in principle be enforced by a state-like institution, even if it historically was the result of the market (i.e., the coordination of social production by means of exchange of the products of labour of private producers). This might very well be true, but would we still call such a society *capitalist*? In an economic system without markets, there would be no commodities, no sale and purchase of labour-power, no competition among private producers. If the law of value was mediated politically, as Postone claims it could be, how would producers be forced to live up to certain standards of productivity? Would that not mean that state coercion would come to replace the mute compulsion of the market? If so, in what sense would it still be a system of structural and impersonal domination, i.e., the kind of domination Postone holds to be an essential feature of capitalism?

What Postone does is essentially to re-define capitalism in a manner which bears little resemblance to Marx’s conception. For Marx, value is a social form that results from the organisation of social production through the market. That does not mean that he conceives of value as merely a category of the market. Value *arises* from the market-mediated relations *between* the units of production, but that does not prevent it from having immense *effects* on what goes on *inside* of these units, i.e., on the concrete character of the labour process. Changes within the sphere of production in turn act back on the market. Marx always emphasises that ‘the movement of capital is a unity of the process of production and the process of circulation’ (33: 69; M: 49). The causal relations between the sphere of circulation and the sphere of production run in both directions, and for that reason, we cannot reduce every aspect of capitalism to market relations. But the market still remains an *essential* feature of capitalism for Marx. In contrast to this, Postone’s

strong emphasis on the mode of producing leads him to completely detach the latter from the mode of distribution, which then leads him to identify capitalism with a specific mode of producing: large-scale industrial production governed by abstract time. This allows him to do what sometimes seems to be the true aim of his project: to construct a conceptual apparatus capable of providing a critique of so-called actually existing socialism in the same terms as the critique of capitalism (14). The price Postone pays for this, however, is a notion of capitalism which is simultaneously too broad and too narrow to have much analytical value: too broad because it detaches capitalism from the market and private property, and too narrow because it ends up identifying capitalism with large-scale industrial production, which is only one of the forms production can take on in capitalism.

VALUE AND CLASS

One of Postone's (2003, p. 7) recurring criticisms of traditional Marxism is that it conceives of relations of domination in capitalism 'primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation'. While we may not want to accept Postone's category of 'traditional Marxism'—a 'residual category in which Postone dumps virtually every variant of Marxism', as Callinicos (2014, p. 229) notes—it is true, as we saw in chapter one, that there has been a strong tendency within Marxist theory to reduce the power of capital to the power of the capitalist class. The theory of value, however, provides us with a rather different picture of relations of domination in the capitalist mode of production. Recall Marx's answer to the question which political economy never asked: *why* do the products of labour take the form of commodities endowed with value? *Why* does labour take the form of value-producing labour? Marx's answer is: because social production is organised on the basis of the exchange of the products of labour of private and independent producers. Value becomes the mechanism through which economic activity is organised because the units of production are *separated from each other while still remaining dependent upon each other*. This explanation proceeds from the horizontal relations among the units of production, and nowhere is class domination or exploitation mentioned. These horizontal relations give rise to an abstract and impersonal form of domination to which *everyone* is subjected, regardless of their class position. In chapter three, however, we learned that the rule of capital presupposes the domination of proletarians by those who own or control the means of production—i.e., that certain vertical class relations of domination are a constitutive feature of capitalist relations of

production. In the beginning of this chapter, I stressed that both of these sets of relations—the horizontal and the vertical—are constitutive of capitalist relations of production. The question I want to address now is: what is the precise relation between them? How is the universal domination of value related to class domination?

Marx's analysis of value as an expression of the horizontal relations among producers has led a number of scholars to downplay the significance of class domination and conclude that the domination of everyone by the value form is the most fundamental form of power in capitalism. One of the earliest examples of this disappearance of class can be found in the work of Adorno (1972, p. 14), according to whom 'everyone must subject themselves to the law of exchange if they do not want to perish, regardless of whether they are led by a "profit motive" or not'. Although he occasionally refers to class domination and emphasises that '[t]he exchange relation is, in reality, preformed [*präformiert*] by class relations', the dominant tendency in his work is to stress 'the universal domination of mankind by exchange value' (Adorno, 2018, p. 158, 2007, p. 178). This tendency to downplay the significance of class was taken over by Reichelt and Backhaus, who were both students of Adorno. However, this is partly due to the fact that they are more preoccupied with questions of method, dialectics, Marx's relation to Hegel and the critique of bourgeois economics than with analysing forms of domination.

The perhaps most aggressive attack on the concept of class domination can be found among the adherents of the criticism of value (*Wertkritik*). According to Robert Kurz and Ernst Lohoff (1989), '[t]he commodity form and the fetish incorporated in its productive core are the real essential categories [*die wirklichen Wesenskategorien*] of the capital relation—classes and class struggle are the surface appearances of this essence'. In their view, the relation between capitalist and worker is merely a market relation between commodity owners, and the working class is accordingly nothing but the character mask of variable capital (Kurz, 2012, pp. 77, 252, 289; Kurz & Lohoff, 1989). The same idea is defended by Stephan Grigat (2007, p. 208ff) and Anselm Jappe (2005, pp. 80ff, 95), who hold the contradiction between 'value and the concrete social activities and needs' to be the 'real, fundamental contradiction' of capitalism, of which class antagonism is merely a *derived* form. Jappe (2005, p. 76) also claims that 'considered logically it is value that leads to the creation of classes'. As mentioned earlier, Postone likewise regards class domination as 'a *function of* a superordinate, "abstract"

form of domination’ (Postone, 2003, pp. 126, 159. Emphasis added).³⁰ As Sven Ellmers (2009, p. 46) has noted, the attempt to reduce class domination to a secondary or derived form of the universal domination of value relies—at least in the case of Kurz, Lohoff and Jappe—on a peculiar misunderstanding of Marx’s dialectical mode of presentation.³¹ The fact that Marx proceeds from the analysis of the commodity and only introduces class later on, in part two of *Capital*, leads them to the conclusion that value is somehow more fundamental than class relations. What Marx’s dialectical analysis reveals, however, is that a certain class structure was in fact a *necessary presupposition* from the very beginning. By deriving the necessity of the commodification of labour-power from the commodity form through a series of intermediary steps, Marx demonstrates, in Ellmers’s (2009, p. 46) words, that ‘the existence of classes is just as necessary for the universalisation of commodity production as the existence of private producers who are independent of each other is’. I have analysed this series of dialectical derivations in detail elsewhere (Mau, 2018b), but in order for us to be able to specify the relationship between the horizontal and the vertical aspects of the power of capital, it is necessary with a brief recapitulation of the essentials of Marx’s argument.

As mentioned earlier, Marx’s analysis of the commodity form reveals that in order for the generalisation of that form to be possible, value must gain an independent and autonomous form of existence. This is what is apparently achieved with *money*. What Marx goes on to demonstrate, however, is that money is in fact *not* capable of fulfilling this task as long as it is confined to the functions ascribed to it within simple circulation. When money and commodities circulate in the form C-M-C, money is only a ‘vanishing mediation’ between use values, which means that value ‘is realized only in the moment of its disappearance’ (G: 269, 260). If money is withdrawn from circulation as a hoard in order to avoid this disappearance, however, it regresses to ‘its metallic being, with its economic being annihilated’ (29: 479). The upshot of this analysis of the contradiction of the money form is that value and commodities must circulate in the form M-C-M in order for value to obtain an ‘adequate existence’ (29: 488); ‘Its entry into circulation must itself be an element of its staying with itself [*Beisichbleiben*], and its staying with

³⁰ See also Marcel van der Linden (2008, p. 39) who refers to Kurz, Lohoff and Postone when he declares that he follows ‘those authors who give the *value form*, and not class contradictions, central place in their analysis of capitalism’.

³¹ See also Ingo Elbe’s (2008, p. 514ff) critique of Kurz, Lohoff and Postone.

itself must be an entry into circulation' (G: 234). This form of circulation only makes sense if the second sum of money is larger than the first: M-C-M'. We have thereby obtained the concept of capital, but still only in the sense of a *form of circulation*, i.e., as value '*maintaining and perpetuating itself in and through circulation*' (G: 262). Marx then poses the crucial question: how is this form of circulation possible as more than an occasional fraud, given that the generalisation of the commodity form presupposes that the exchange of equivalents is the normal situation on the market? The well-known answer to this question is that such a situation requires that a commodity exists whose very consumption is a source of value, i.e., that *labour-power* is available on the market (C1: 258ff). Since the consumption of labour-power is labour itself, Marx can thereby derive capitalist *production* from capital as a form of *circulation*. The availability of labour-power on the market presupposes, as we saw in the last chapter, the creation of the proletarian life cut off from its conditions. This carefully crafted dialectical analysis yields an important conclusion:

simple circulation is [...] an abstract sphere of the bourgeois process of production as a whole, which through its own determinations shows itself to be a moment, a mere form of appearance of some deeper process lying behind it, even resulting from it and producing it—industrial capital. (29: 482)

Put differently, the *external* relations *between* the units of production, from which the theory of value proceeds, presuppose a certain *internal* organisation of these units, namely the production of surplus value on the basis of the exploitation of wage labour. The separation between the units of production presupposes the separation between the immediate producers and the means of production, or, the horizontal relations presuppose the vertical relations analysed in the last chapter. Or, yet again, boiled down to the essentials: *value presupposes class*. Class domination is inscribed in the commodity form from the very first page of *Capital*.

While most value-form theorists acknowledge this necessary relation between value and class, many of them nevertheless continue to give priority to the universal domination of value in their accounts of capitalism. Elbe (2008, p. 516) and Ellmers (2009) both acknowledge the relation between value and class, and both of them criticise Kurz's reduction of class to a form of appearance of value—but in their introduction to a volume entitled

Anonymous Domination (co-authored with Jan Eufinger), the existence of capitalist class domination is only mentioned in a footnote, whereas they put great emphasis on ‘the domination of structures over all actors of bourgeois society’ (Elbe et al., 2012, p. 8). A similar tendency is visible in Heinrich’s work. He often stresses that ‘talk of class is not specific to Marx’, and in his magnum opus, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, classes are almost only mentioned in the four pages explicitly devoted to the subject (Heinrich, 2012a, p. 191, 1999a, pp. 263–267, see also 2004, 2012b). In response to the view that the core of Marx’s analysis of value, money and capital is to emphasise the class domination underlying these categories, he argues that ‘[i]n this way [...] only what a capitalist society has *in common* with all other class societies is accentuated. Marx is concerned with the *specificity* of social relations under capitalism, that is, what these relations do *not have in common* with relations in other societies: this specificity consists precisely in the fact that the economic relations between humans are “hidden under a thing-like cover”’ (Heinrich, 2009, p. 181). In Heinrich’s (2004) reply to Karl Reitter’s (2004) critique of his conception of class struggle, he seems to claim that class domination is a form derived from a more fundamental form of domination:

The critique of political economy as Marx understood it after 1857 is in any case not “substantially class analysis” [as Reitter claims], it consists rather in the analysis of economic form determinations, under which humans act, and which therefore also underlies the actions of classes [*die also auch den Aktionen der Klassen zugrunde liegen*].

The ‘form determinations’ of which Heinrich speaks here presumably refer to the structures of domination implied by the commodity form, and Heinrich goes on to emphasise that the ruling classes are also subjected to this domination of things. Heinrich’s claim that the universal domination of value ‘underlies’ the action of classes seems to imply that the former is somehow more fundamental than class domination—a claim that contradicts what Heinrich (2012a, p. 91f) writes elsewhere, namely that value is only possible on the basis of class domination.

Werner Bonefeld occupies a distinctive place in the value-form theoretical landscape with his insistence on the importance of the concept of class in Marx’s critique of capital. He explicitly refuses the ‘courageous but unsuccessful attempt to banish the class antagonism from the critique of political economy’ in the work of Postone and the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Bonefeld,

2004, 2014, p. 7). Bonefeld (2014, pp. 11, 79) also acknowledges that a ‘class of labourers with no independent access to the means of subsistence is the fundamental premise of the capitalist social relations’. The problem is, however, that Bonefeld has a rather peculiar understanding of what class is. He tends to simply subsume class relations under the fetishist inversions of social relations, as when he argues that that ‘[a]t its best, Marx’s critique of political economy does not amount to a social theory of class. It amounts, rather, to a critique of “capital” as a “social relationship between persons which is mediated through things”’ (Bonefeld, 2014, p. 101). His texts are soaked in a repetitive rhetoric of inversion, perversion, fetishism, reification, madness, absurdity, mystification, monstrosity, irrationality and the puzzling, occult, enchanted and topsy-turvy world of value—expressions and tropes that all refer to fetishism and the universal domination of value. Some of his statements about class are merely variations on these tropes, with ‘fetish’ or ‘inversion’ replaced with ‘class’: ‘A critical theory of class does not partake in the classification of people; it thinks in and through society to comprehend its existing untruth’; ‘Class [...] is a category of a perverse form of social objectification’ (Bonefeld, 2014, pp. 10, 114, 101f). Bonefeld pays lip service to the connection between value and class, but in the end his analysis first and foremost presents capitalism as a perverted system where the absurd movements of economic things dominate everyone.

In his recent interpretation of *Capital* as a political theory concerned with ‘the rule of capital as a complex and world-spanning system of domination’, William Clare Roberts agrees with Heinrich, Elbe and others that ‘the impersonal domination embodied in the market is not a form of class domination. Instead, the dominant class in modernity, the class of capitalists, is as subject to this impersonal domination as are the laboring classes’ (W. C. Roberts, 2017, pp. 1, 102). At the same time, however, he underlines—quoting Marx—that this form of domination ‘does not abolish class domination. Just as it encompasses and mediates a novel form of exploitation, the modern “domination of relationships” is also “transformed into certain personal relationships of dependence” within the workplace’ (W. C. Roberts, 2017, p. 102).³² This is indeed an important aspect of the relation between value and class, which I will come back to in a moment. However, there are two problems with Roberts’s conception of the connection between value and class: first, his description of class domination in terms of exploitation

³² The passage quoted by Roberts is from G: 164. Translation amended by Roberts.

taking place in the workplace overlooks the much more encompassing class domination presupposed by value—i.e., the form of class domination analysed in the last chapter. Second, the idea that class domination is a ‘transformed’ form of the universal domination of all by value seems to hold on to the claim that the latter is somehow *primary* in relation to the former.

It should of course be borne in mind that many of the authors discussed in the last couple of pages are—or at least have been until quite recently—swimming against the tide of the traditional Marxist reduction of the power of capital to the power of the capitalist class. Seen in that light, the strong emphasis on the mechanisms through which capital imposes itself on the social totality is a much-needed theoretical intervention. The tendency to posit class domination as the ultimate ground of the rule of capital—or the tendency to regard the horizontal relations as an effect of the vertical—is found in many kinds of Marxism apart from orthodox historical materialism and Marxism-Leninism. A sophisticated defence of it can even be found in a major work of value-form theory, namely Helmut Brentel’s *Soziale Form und Ökonomisches Objekt* (1989, p. 270):

Economic form should therefore be understood as the form of reflection and activity of a specific class opposition in relation to labour [*Ökonomische Form ist so als die Reflexions- und Betätigungsform eines spezifischen Klassens Gegensatzes an der Arbeit zu begreifen*] [...] The doubled categories of bourgeois economics—use value and exchange value, commodity and money, concrete and abstract labour—are adequate expressions, consistent forms of reflection and mediation of the oppositions and antagonisms of wage labour and capital, the opposition of two social classes.

This is the exact opposite position of the one taken by the authors discussed in the preceding pages, for whom class domination is a ‘function’ (Postone), a ‘form of appearance’ (Kurz, Lohoff), a ‘derived’ (Jappe) or a ‘transformed’ (Roberts) form of the deeper-lying domination embedded in value relations. This idea is also prevalent among autonomist Marxists, such as Harry Cleaver (2000, p. 84), who holds that ‘the commodity-form is the basic form of the class relation’ or Karl Reitter, whose critique of the disappearance of class in the works of Heinrich, Kurz, Postone and others leads him to seek

the opposite extreme.³³ On a lower level of abstraction—dealing with competition rather than value—John Weeks (1981, p. 151) likewise insists that ‘competition does not derive from the existence of many capitals (“companies”), but from the capital relation itself’.

Both of these positions are wrong: *class cannot be reduced to an effect of value relations nor can value be reduced to a result of class domination*. So, what is the relation between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the capitalist relations of production? We already know that *value presupposes class*; this is what Marx’s dialectical derivation of the concept of capital from the immanent contradictions of simple circulation taught us. The opposite, however, is not true: the separation between the producers and the means of production does not presuppose the existence of value. Put differently, it is perfectly possible to conceive of a situation in which the immediate producers are separated from the means of production but where there is no production for the market. Imagine a mode of production in which the immediate producers are separated from the means of production, and the ruling class is organised into several independent units. Rather than producing for the market, however, these units would produce for themselves (i.e., the consumption of the ruling classes as well as that of the workers). Workers would be paid in kind and provided with housing etc., by their employer. They would be free to choose their own employer, and depending on the supply of labour-power, the employers would compete for workers by offering them certain working conditions, working hours, quality of housing etc. What this thought experiment tells us is that a relation of exploitation based on the dispossession of the immediate producers does not necessarily imply that the ruling class is split into interdependent units of production relating to each other through a market. Value and class are therefore not ‘mutually implicated’, as Endnotes (2010a, p. 101) hold them to be; *value presupposes class, but not the other way around*.

This conclusion seems to support the emphasis on the primacy of class domination, but that is not the case. To say that class is a *presupposition* or a *condition* of value is not to claim that value is an immediate *effect* of class

³³ See Hanloser & Reitter (2008), Reitter (2004, 2015c, 2015a, 2015b). See also the contributions to the volume edited by Reitter, especially Albohn (2015), Brugger (2015), Exner (2015) and Klauda (2015, p. 110), who displays his lack of understanding of Marx’s theory of value when he claims that the commodity form is not ‘central’ to capitalism because it is a ‘genuine part of the most disparate modes of production, including the slave economy of antiquity’.

domination. As the thought experiment in the preceding paragraph demonstrated, value cannot be derived from the separation between the producers and the means of production. Class domination is, in other words, a *necessary* yet not *sufficient* condition of value. Although the relation between the horizontal and the vertical relations is not symmetrical, since the latter is the precondition of the former, they nevertheless retain a certain logical autonomy from each other in the sense that they are *irreducible*—neither of them can be said to be an effect of the other. The same goes for the mechanisms of domination which spring from them. *The horizontal and the vertical relations constitutive of the capitalist relations of production must, in other words, be recognised as two interrelated yet distinct sources of capital's power.*

In order to understand the economic power of capital it is not enough, however, to point out the logical irreducibility of the horizontal and the vertical relations. We also need to consider how their interaction affects the mechanisms of domination springing from them. The insight that horizontal relations among market agents presuppose class domination allows us to see these relations from a new (class) perspective. It *'dispels* the illusion [*Schein*] of *relations between commodity owners*' by revealing how the apparent equality between market agents was merely the result of abstracting from everything that takes place outside of the act of exchange (R: 1063):

The two people who face each other on the marketplace, in the sphere of circulation, are not just a *buyer* and a *seller*, but *capitalist* and *worker* who confront each other as *buyer* and *seller*. Their relationship as *capitalist* and *worker* is the presupposition [*Voraussetzung*] of their relationship as *buyer and seller*. (R: 1015; see also 10: 589f)

However, as Marx immediately goes on to add, the class relation does not—contrary to the claims of those who regard class domination as a derived form—spring 'directly from the nature of the commodity, i.e., that no one immediately produces the products they need in order to live, so that each producer produces a specific product as a *commodity* which he then sells in order to acquire the products of others' (R: 1015).³⁴ The market relation between the worker and the capitalist reveals itself to be nothing but a '*mediating form*' of the 'subjugation by capital', that is, it demonstrates that:

³⁴ Beware that Ben Fowkes's translation of this passage—which is admittedly difficult to translate into readable English—is somewhat confusing. See the original in II.4.1: 89f.

In reality, the worker belongs to capital *before* he has sold himself to the capitalist. His *economic* bondage is at once *mediated through, and concealed by*, the periodical renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of individual wage-masters [*Lohnherrn*], and the oscillations in the market-price of his labour. (C1: 724. Emphasis added.)

Capitalist class domination, i.e., the *vertical* relations between the exploiters and the exploited, is *mediated* by the *horizontal* relations among the units of production, or put differently: *proletarians* are subjected to *capitalists* by means of a mechanism of domination which simultaneously subjects *everyone* to the imperatives of capital. At the same, the ‘subjection [*Unterordnung*] of the worker to the product of labour, the [subjection of the] value-creating power to value’ is, as Marx explains in a manuscript of the second book of *Capital*, ‘mediated (appears in) through the *relation of compulsion and domination* between the capitalist (the personification of capital) and the worker’ (II.11: 21f, 572). This is what gives capitalist class domination its distinctive impersonal and abstract character, and this is why it is misguided to equate class domination as such with personal relations of domination or to oppose it to ‘abstract’ domination, as Kurz, Jappe and Postone do.³⁵

We now know that the market is itself a mechanism of domination, and that it furthermore relies on class domination. But there is, as I mentioned briefly at the end of chapter three, even more to it. Not only does the capitalist and the worker *entre* the market in different ways and for different reasons—the capitalist in order to make a profit, the worker in order to survive—they also *leave* it in significantly different ways. After the exchange, the ‘buyer takes command of the seller’ in the production process, and yet another ‘relation of domination and servitude’ comes into existence (30: 106). So, while it is certainly true that the capitalist is ‘just as much under the yoke of the capital-relation as is the worker’, it is crucial to add that the universal domination of the market affects workers and capitalists in fundamentally different ways (30: 399). Wood (2016, p. 41) puts it well: ‘what the “abstract” laws of capitalist accumulation compel the capitalist to do—and what the impersonal laws of the labour market enable him to do—is precisely to exercise an unprecedented degree of control over production’. The interaction of the horizontal and the vertical relations of domination gives rise, in other

³⁵ See Kurz (2012, pp. 77, 252, 289), Jappe (2005, pp. 82, 87), Postone (2003, pp. 30, 126, 159). See also R: 1032 and Elbe (2008, p. 516).

words, to *another dimension of class domination*, namely relations of domination within the workplace. This is the subject of the next chapter. Yet, before we get to that, we have to go through the horizontal relations once more but this time in another form: *competition*.

COMPETITION

The transition from simple circulation to capitalist production in the second part of *Capital* marks a shift of focus from what happens *between* the units of production to what takes place *inside* of them in the production process. That does not mean, however, that everything which needs to be said about the horizontal relations is said in the first part of *Capital*. Here it is important to bear in mind that the dialectical progression of categories in *Capital* (and similar writings) is not a linear series in which every category is constructed, rounded off and closed down before we move on to the next. Against such a ‘building block’-approach, as Harvey (2006, p. 2f) calls it, we should insist on what Endnotes (2010d, p. 116) refer to as the ‘bi-directionality of systematic dialectics’. What this means is that there is always a retroactive constitution of meaning at play in the development of categories; we have to continually re-interpret earlier categories in the light of the subsequent conceptual developments. This is what the concept of competition accomplishes in relation to the theory of value: they refer to same relations—the horizontal relations among market agents—on different levels of abstraction. What initially, in the first chapters of *Capital*, appears simply as private and independent producers are later revealed to be capitalist companies that produce surplus value by exploiting wage labour. With this insight in mind, we can then revisit the horizontal relations and re-conceptualise them as *competition* between capitalist companies as well as between proletarians who sell their labour-power.

Although competition is discussed and criticised already in the *1844 Manuscripts*, it was not until the *Auseinandersetzung* with Proudhon in 1846-47 that Marx really began to ponder its nature. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* he argues that competition ‘implements the law according to which the relative value of a product is determined by the labour time needed to produce it’ (6: 135. *Emphasis added*). This way of phrasing it resembles a conclusion Marx will later come to regard as absolutely crucial: competition *executes* the laws of capital but does not *create* them. In spite of this, however, Marx by and large follows political economy at this stage in his development; he assumes competition to be an unproblematic analytical point of departure and regards it

as a kind of prime mover that explains the dynamics of capitalism. In *Wage Labour and Capital*, for example, he suggests that the movement of wages as well as the development of the productive forces can be explained with reference to competition (Heinrich, 1999a, p. 181). A decisive breakthrough occurs in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx realises that competition does not explain the laws of movement of capital; it merely executes them in the form of ‘reciprocal compulsion’ (G: 651; see Heinrich, 1999a, p. 182). This leads him to craft an analytical distinction between *capital in general* and *many capitals* or *competition*, a distinction he goes on to use as an architectural principle for the ‘book on capital’ in his six-book plan (Rosdolsky, 1977, p. 41ff). The analysis in the *Grundrisse* nevertheless leaves much to be desired, and Marx makes important headway when he returns to the topic in the *1861-63 Manuscripts*. In these manuscripts, we find the first analysis of the relation between competition and the production of relative surplus value, as well as Marx’s first attempt to explain the distribution of surplus value and the formation of a general rate of profit on the basis of competition. The insights yielded by this analysis also allows him to unravel the ways in which competition provides the basis for ideological obfuscations of the inner mechanisms of capitalist production. The *1861-63 Manuscripts* are also the place where the distinction between ‘capital in general’ and the ‘many capitals’ begins to break down, contrary to what many scholars believe (Callinicos, 2014, p. 139f; Heinrich, 1989, 1999a, p. 185ff). The insights of the *1861-63 Manuscripts* are then refined in the *1864-65 Manuscript* for the third book of *Capital*, which seems to be Marx’s last substantial discussion of competition, apart from a few passages in volume one of *Capital* (see Bischoff & Lieber, 2011).

One of the unresolved issues in Marx’s critique of political economy is the question of where to introduce competition in the systematic structure of the theory. The concept crops up here and there, sometimes prefaced with a comment about how ‘it is not our intention here to consider the way in which the immanent laws of capitalist production manifest themselves in the external movement of the individual capitals,’ but that ‘we may’ nevertheless ‘add the following comments’, followed by ‘comments’ which are not only quite substantial, but arguably *necessary* for the further development of the argument (C1: 433; see Bidet, 2007, p. 145; Callinicos, 2014, p. 141f). Several scholars have rightly pointed out that intra-branch competition has an explanatory role in the chapters on relative surplus value in the first

volume of *Capital*.³⁶ Callinicos points out that Marx also evokes competition in his discussion of the concentration and centralisation of capital in chapter 25 of volume one of *Capital* (Callinicos, 2014, p. 144). In a certain sense, however, competition is actually present from the very beginning of *Capital*—not in the banal sense that everything is always present from the beginning of the dialectical unfolding of categories but in the sense that the horizontal relations among producers in chapter one is, as I have already explained, nothing other than what is later termed ‘competition’. Marx seems to suggest as much in the *Ergänzungen und Veränderungen* to the second edition of *Capital*, where he notes that the general level of ‘intensity’ and ‘skills’ determining socially necessary labour time is regulated by competition (II.6: 31). Since the capital form has not been introduced at this point, it is assumed that the aim of exchange is use value, and for this reason we are not exactly dealing with competition in the full sense of the term. Nevertheless, the equalising function of exchange in chapter one clearly resembles the kind of equalisation mechanisms revealed by the analysis of competition (see Bidet, 2007, p. 141; Murray, 2016, p. 167).

The overall systematic structure of Marx’s treatment of competition thus seems to look something like this: it first appears implicitly in the theory of value but only in its general function as a mechanism of equalisation which regulates social production. It then appears as *intra*-branch competition later in volume one in order to help explain the production of relative surplus value and the tendency towards a rising organic composition of capital. Even later in the same volume, it crops up again in order to explain the concentration and centralisation of capital. In the third book, it first appears as *inter*-branch competition in order to explain the formation of a general rate of profit and the objective basis of ideological mystification. Finally, the interaction of *intra*- and *inter*-branch competition—i.e., the combination of the tendency of rising organic composition of capital with the distribution of surplus value—explains the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (or so Marx thinks—more on this in chapter six). In a significant passage in the manuscript for the third book of *Capital* (written before volume one), Marx writes that ‘the actual movement of competition, etc., lies outside of our plan, and we only need to present the internal organisation of the capitalist mode of production in its ideal average, so to speak’ (M: 898; see also 33: 101). Although it must be admitted that it is not entirely clear what Marx

³⁶ See Bidet (2007, p. 145), Callinicos (2014, p. 140), Elson (2015, p. 168) and Giammanco (2002, p. 73).

means by ‘the actual movement’, I think the most convincing reading is that it refers to empirical or historical analysis (see Heinrich, 1989). On this interpretation, all of the aspects of competition referred to in this paragraph belong to the analysis of capitalism in its ideal average.

So far so good. Yet, what *is* competition? In its broadest sense, it is a relation between two social agents striving to obtain the same goal: ‘[w]hoever says competition says common aim,’ as Marx puts it in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (6: 193).³⁷ For this reason, it does not make sense to regard the relation between capital and labour as a competitive relation, as Paresh Chattopadhyay (2012, p. 74), John Weeks (1981, p. 155), Maria Daniela Giammanco (2002, p. 70) and Paul Burkett (1986) do. The worker and the capitalist are engaged in two very different projects; whereas the worker finds herself ‘in the relation of simple circulation’ (G: 288) and ‘only receives money as *coin*, i.e., merely a transitory form of the means of subsistence’ (30: 104), the capitalist is accumulating capital. Competition is an *intra*-class relation which exists among capitalists as well as among workers—or, put differently: competition is a relation between *sellers*, regardless of the kind of commodities they offer.

As previously noted, Marx emphasises that competition ‘executes the inner laws of capital; makes them into compulsory laws towards the individual capital, but [...] does not invent them. It realizes them’ (G: 752, 552; 33: 72, 102). This means both that capital cannot be understood *solely* on the basis of the horizontal relations among producers, but also that it cannot be understood *without* reference to these relations—they are, after all, the mechanism through which the laws of capital are *realised*. Competition is ‘the inner *nature* of capital, its essential character, appearing in and realized as the reciprocal interaction of many capitals with one another, the inner tendency as external necessity’ (G: 414; 33: 75; C1: 381, 739). Capital can therefore ‘only exist as many capitals’ (G: 414), and in this sense the relation *between* capitals is in fact nothing but ‘the relation of capital to itself’ (G: 650).

Competition is a *universalising* mechanism, a transmitter of compulsory commands expressed in the language of prices. Producers are free to produce whatever they want (within boundaries set by law or custom), and purchasers are free to choose who they want to buy from, so producers are forced to react to prices set by other producers. In a certain sense, competition is a deeply Platonic mechanism: it treats every particular capital as the

³⁷ ‘[T]his striving is competition’ (31: 264). *Competition* derives from the Latin *competere*, which means to ‘strive in common’.

immediate incarnation of *capital as such*, very much in the same way as the idealist philosopher mistakes particular fruits for the incarnation of *the Fruit as such*, to use Marx's caricature of idealism in *The Holy Family*. The crucial difference is, of course, that whereas the abstractions of the idealist philosopher are of purely intellectual nature, the abstraction enforced by competition takes place in social reality; capital is an 'abstraction in actu' (C2: 185). Individual capitals are merely representatives of the abstract logic of capital which confronts them as an alien power: *what the individual capital meets when it confronts a competitor is nothing but its own essence disguised as another individual capital*.

The universalising mechanisms of competition take place on several levels of the capitalist totality. *Intra*-branch competition acts as a source of differentiation as well as equalisation. By forcing individual capitals to constantly strive to cut costs in order to secure a surplus profit—i.e., to allow a particular capital to run ahead of its competitors—competition differentiates capitals within the same branch. However, the very same process also forces other capitals within that branch to follow suit, thereby engendering a new compulsory level of productivity. In addition to this, *inter*-branch competition secures the formation of a general rate of profit through migration of capital between branches. Inter- as well as intra-branch competition, then, are universalising mechanisms generating social averages which individual capitals must live up to if they want to survive.³⁸ The same is true of wages, which are also subjected to the equalising movements of the market, even if they are not exclusively or directly determined by them. '[T]he competition among workers is', as Marx notes, 'only another form of competition among capitals' (G: 651). Or, as Michael Lebowitz (2003, p. 83) explains: 'When workers compete among themselves, they press in the *same direction* as capital'. When capitals compete, they are confronted by their *own* essence. It is not so in the case of workers; when they compete, they are confronted with the essence of *capital*.

Another aspect of competition's universalisations is the role of competition in the expansion of capitalist relations of production (C2: 190; M: 347f). Already in the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels identified 'cheap prices' as 'the heavy artillery with which it [the bourgeoisie] batters down all Chinese walls' (6: 488). Expansion can take two forms: *extensive* expansion, i.e., the incorporation of larger parts of the global population into the circuits of

³⁸ On the difference between intra- and inter-branch competition, see Callinicos (2014, p. 142f), Chattopadhyay (2012) and Saad-Filho (2002, p. 41).

capital, and *intensive* expansion, i.e., the integration of larger parts of social life into the circuits of capital. In so far as competition ‘[c]onceptually [...] is nothing other than the inner *nature of capital*’ (G: 414), we can also conclude that ‘[t]he tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself’ (G: 408; see also Clarke, 1995, p. 26).

At first glance, competition seems to be a *splintering* or a *centrifugal* force, something which separates, keeps apart and isolates. Competition forces individual capitals to *differentiate* themselves, to run ahead of others. Competition among workers likewise forces the individual worker to accept a lower wage or to be more compliant than other workers—with the consequence that labour ‘confronts capital as the labour of the individual labour capacity, of the *isolated worker*’ (34: 129). In this sense, competition is a differentiating force, securing the subjection of individuals to capital through a kind *divide et impera* strategy. On a closer look, however, it becomes clear that, like that other separation fundamental to the capitalist mode of production, i.e., that of life and its conditions, this *separation is only the basis of a certain connection and constitution of a unity*. As Marx and Engels explain in *The German Ideology*: ‘competition separates individuals from one another, not only the bourgeois but still more the workers, in spite of the fact that it brings them together’ (5: 75; I.5: 91). Competition is a unity of split and unity, or, to speak Hegelese, it is the practical implementation of the identity of identity and difference. It is the very split among capitals as well as among workers that gives rise to the universalising mechanisms which secure capital’s existence as a totality—it is, in other words, the split which transforms the power of capital into more than a simple aggregation of the power of individual capitals. Capital is ‘a social power’ (6: 499), and competition is the mechanism which brings about this unity; in competition, ‘the individual has an effect only as a part of a social power, as an atom in the mass, and it is in this form that competition brings into play the *social* character of production and consumption’ (M: 303). Competition is simultaneously a ‘*bellum omnium contra omnes*’ (C1: 477) as well as the war of *capital* against the social totality.

The unifying dynamic of competition strengthens the *class* character of the power of capital as it guarantees the unity of competing capitalists as ‘hostile brothers, [who] divide among themselves the loot of other people’s labour’ (31: 264). The division of the loot among various fractions of capital—i.e., the distribution of surplus value—tells us something important about the power of capital. In the Marxist tradition, it is common to view the relation of exploitation as the cornerstone of the power of capital. Stated

briefly, the existence of exploitation is taken as a proof of the existence of a relation of domination. Exploitation is often, however, understood as a relation between the *individual* capital and its employees. This conception is a result of the failure to take into account the distribution of surplus value, thereby reducing the analysis to the level of the first volume of *Capital*. What Marx demonstrates in the theory of the distribution of surplus value is that exploitation is a relation situated on the level of the social totality, or, formulated simply, that labour is exploited by *capital* rather than by individual capitalists. The formation of a general rate of profit and the splitting of profit into rent, interest and profit of enterprise means that the surplus value produced by workers ends up all over the place in the capitalist class (and, through taxation, in the state). Competition is the mechanism through which this distribution takes place, and hence through which the exploitative relation is elevated to a relation at the level of the social totality.

Competition should thus be understood as one of the mechanisms of the economic power of capital. It is an *abstract, universal* and *impersonal* form of domination which *everyone* is subjected to. The bourgeois notions of free competition, free trade and free market thereby reveal their deeply ideological nature. The market has never been the ‘the absolute mode of existence of free individuals’ (G: 649)—in fact, a market can never be free, unless the freedom in question is that of *capital*. ‘It is not individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free’ (G: 650). The so-called ‘individual freedom’ involved in market transactions is in reality:

the most complete suspension of all individual freedom, and the most complete subjection of individuality under social conditions which assume the form of objective powers, even of overpowering objects [*sachlichen Mächten, ja von übermächtigen Sachen*]—of things independent of the relations among individuals themselves (G: 652)

‘Free’ competition is a mode of *domination*, a ‘means of compulsion [*Zwangsmittel*]’, a set of social relations in which the market agents impose ‘the rule of capital’ on each other through ‘reciprocal compulsion’ (31: 275; G: 652, 651). There are at least three dimensions of the unfreedom of the market. In chapter three we saw that a certain form of class domination is needed in order to secure that workers appear on the market as sellers of labour-power in the first place. In other words, *the market is unfree because it presupposes domination*. In this chapter, we have seen that the unfreedom of the market goes

deeper than that. Not only does the capitalist market *rely* on relations of domination, *it is itself nothing but a form of domination*. In a crucial passage in the *Grundrisse* previously quoted in chapter three, Marx points out that ‘state coercion’ was necessary in the early days of capitalism in order to ‘transform the propertyless into *workers* at conditions advantageous for capital’, since at this stage of capitalist development these conditions ‘are not yet forced upon the workers by competition among one another’ (G: 736). In other words, competition has the same function as violence had in the original creation of capitalism, and competition is an absolutely crucial part of the mute compulsion of economic relations. But there is even more to it. As previously noted, workers are not only dominated *before* they show up on the market and *while* they are there; they are also subjected to the power of capital *after* they leave the market and enter the ‘the hidden abode of production’. Competition is a *class-transcending* form of power, but *not only does it presuppose class domination, it also strengthens and intensifies it*, since it forces the capitalist to discipline and subjugate workers within the sphere of production. This is the subject of chapter five.

PART THREE: DYNAMICS

V. THE PRODUCTION OF POWER

Every moment [which is] a presupposition of production [is] simultaneously its result.

—Karl Marx, ‘Summary of my own Notebooks’ (II.2: 283)

In the preceding chapters, I have presented a somewhat static picture of the capitalist mode of production—a sort of synchronic analysis of the essential social relations presupposed by the subjection of social production to the logic of valorisation. This analysis enables us to see why the power of capital takes the form of the mute compulsion of economic relations. But there is more to it. Capitalist relations of production institute certain dynamics or ‘laws of motion’ (C1: 92) expressing themselves on all levels of the economic totality, from the most minute processes in the workplace to global restructurings of capital flows. These dynamics are *effects* of the relations of production but some of them should also be regarded as their *causes*. These dynamics will be the subject of this as well as the next chapter which taken together make up part three. I will begin with an examination of what takes place inside of the workplace, where the power of *capital* assumes the form of the power of the *capitalist*.¹ The central category here is the *real subsumption of labour*; a concept designed to capture the way in which capital continually remoulds the social and material aspects of the production process. I will then go on to expand the concept of subsumption in two directions: first, I will discuss the subsumption of *nature* and how this affects the economic

¹ This includes salaried managers who acts as ‘personifications’ of capital (see 33: 486 and Heinrich, 2012a, p. 193).

power of capital and second, I suggest to understand capital's global restructuring of production—for example by increasing the international division of labour—in terms of real subsumption. The last two sections of this chapter are devoted to an analysis of two *examples* of how real subsumption enhances the power of capital: the development of agriculture since the 1940s and the so-called revolution in logistics which began to unfold in the 1970s. In chapter six, we will consider two crucial dynamics of the accumulation of capital: the creation of a relative surplus population and the crisis-ridden nature of capitalist production.

Taken together, the analysis of these dynamics—the subsumption of labour, nature and the totality, the expulsions of workers from the circuit of capital and the violent convulsions of accumulation—allows us to understand what I referred to at the end of chapter three as the circularity of the power of capital. The *effects* of capitalist relations of production are simultaneously *causes* of those same relations, or, in Hegelese; capital posits its own presupposition. This means that one of the *sources* of capital's power is the *exercise* of this power. It is the aim of this and the following chapter to enable us to understand this paradoxical structure of capitalist domination.

ANARCHY AND DESPOTISM

Let us begin by considering relations of domination within the workplace. From the perspective of the market, there is no essential difference between the buyer and the seller of labour-power: like every other market relation, theirs is seemingly a voluntary transaction between market agents. The peculiar thing about labour-power as a commodity, however, is that, unlike most other commodities, it cannot be separated from its seller. When its buyer wants to realise its use value, it therefore involves domination and the confiscation of a part of the seller's life (33: 493). In this manner, the very *equality* of the seller and the buyer of labour-power is the basis of their *inequality* as soon as they enter the sphere of production, where 'the buyer takes command of the seller, to the extent that the latter himself enters into the buyer's consumption process with his person as a worker' (30: 106). This transition from the sphere of circulation to that of production thus involves a change in the 'the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*', as Marx puts it in *Capital*: the seller becomes a worker, and the buyer a capitalist (C1: 280; see also 30: 106; R: 989). In this way, capitalist production is a unity of the 'anarchy' of the sphere of circulation and the 'despotism' of the sphere of production (C1: 477; 30: 310; M: 943).

Power hierarchies within the workplace represent an anomaly for neo-classical economics, to which power can only be understood as a consequence of imperfect competition. Some economists, such as Alchian and Demsetz (1972), even deny the existence of such power hierarchies by interpreting interpersonal relations within the firm as nothing but a concealed form of voluntary market transactions.² Such a position is, as I pointed out in the introduction, only possible on the condition that we abstract from the class domination necessary for the existence of a labour market. As soon as we drop this abstraction, we can see relations between workers, capitalists and managers for what they are: relations of domination.

In his discussion of relations of domination within the sphere of production, Marx often resorts to terms and metaphors related to the military or authoritarian forms of political power, as when he writes that the worker is subjected to ‘the thoroughly organised despotism of the factory system and the military discipline of capital’ (34: 29). He describes capitalist management as ‘purely despotic’ and the hierarchy in the workplace as comparable to ‘a real army’ (C1: 450). The point of using this kind of language is to highlight the glaring contradiction between bourgeois ideology and the brutal realities of life in the factories. It is, as Marx puts it in the *1861-63 Manuscripts*:

precisely the *apologists of the factory system*, such as *Ure*, the apologists of this complete de-individualisation of labour, confinement in barrack-like factories [*Einkasernierung*], military discipline, subjugation to the machinery, regulation by the stroke of the clock, surveillance by overseers, complete destruction of any development in mental or physical activity, who vociferate against infringements of individual freedom and the *free* movement of labour at the slightest sign of state intervention. (33: 491)

Marx is mostly concerned with industrial production in 18th and 19th century Britain, and he provides substantial empirical evidence in support of his claims about the authoritarian rule of industrial capitalists. Here, however, we need to ask: on what level of abstraction are Marx’s descriptions of capitalist management situated? Are they only valid for a historically and geographically specific variant of capitalist production, as Michael Burawoy

² See Palermo (2014) for an overview and compelling critique of these debates within mainstream economics.

(1985) has argued, or do they tell us something about the core structure of capitalism?

Management practices have obviously changed a lot since Marx's time, at least in certain sectors of the leading capitalist economies. Since the 1970s, the old-fashioned authoritarian and despotic form of management has gradually given way to seemingly egalitarian network-based forms of empowering management accompanied by an ideology of authenticity and innovation.³ The Hobbesian boss who treats workers as homogenous cogs in the machine has given way to the casual boss who treats you as a friend and encourages you to express yourself and bring your personal quirks and emotions with you on the job. If contemporary capitalism increasingly relies on forms of creative, affective and immaterial labour which are difficult to reconcile with old forms of hierarchical control, as Hardt and Negri (2011) and Vercellone (2007) suggest, does that not mean that Marx's descriptions of relations of domination within the workplace are outdated?

Two important things should be noted here. The first thing is that we should understand the transition from traditional or Fordist to postmodern or post-Fordist forms of management as a change in the *form* of domination rather than a decrease in the degree of domination. Domination is inscribed in the very essence of the relationship between the employer and the employee. Competitive pressure forces capitalists to live up to certain standards in order to stay in business. In other words, it is not entirely up to the capitalists to choose how they treat their employees and what management strategies they employ. Competitive pressures act as external constraints on how much freedom employees can be granted. 'Capitalists cannot,' as Vivek Chibber (2013, p. 117) puts it, 'leave it to their employees to work at an intensity consistent with profit maximization'. They have to 'institutionalize direct authority on the shop floor, or within the office, as an intrinsic component of work organization' (Chibber, 2013, p. 117). This authority can, however, take on many different forms. Acting like an absolutist monarch is one strategy and in certain settings this might be the most profitable thing to do. In other contexts, it might be more profitable to offer employees free mindfulness classes (as Google does), cultivate an emotional attachment to the company brand, grant employees a certain degree of autonomy (flexible hours, work from home etc.) or encourage them to express themselves

³ See Boltanski & Chiapello (2018), Fleming (2009), Lordon (2014), Sturdy, Fleming, & Delbridge (2010).

through their job.⁴ These are merely different ways of securing the same goal: the production of surplus value (see also Heinrich, 2012a, p. 114f).

The second important thing to note here is that we should not underestimate the extent to which authoritarian management practices like those examined by Marx are not only still very common but have even spread in the neoliberal era, where many of the victories won by workers' movements in the first half of the 20th century have been rolled back. Despotic management is still the order of the day in the production centres of the global south and the informal sector throughout what Mike Davis calls the 'planet of slums'.⁵ It is also widespread in low-wage jobs in the rich countries. Here are a few examples borrowed from Elizabeth Anderson's recent critique of authoritarian management in the US: Walmart 'prohibits employees from exchanging casual remarks while on duty, calling this "time theft"; Apple 'inspects the personal belongings of their retail workers'; and Tyson Foods 'prevents its poultry workers from using the bathroom' (E. Anderson, 2017, pp. xix, 135ff).⁶

PERSONAL OR IMPERSONAL?

Marx's use of a vocabulary and imagery associated with military command and pre-capitalist forms of political rule also poses another important question: what is the precise relation between the authority of the capitalist within the workplace and the abstract and impersonal domination examined in the preceding chapters? Marx's description of the capitalist as 'the factory Lycurgus'—a reference to the legendary lawgiver of Sparta—and his use of words like 'despotism' and 'autocracy' seems to suggest that the power of the capitalist is similar to the power of pre-capitalist rulers (C1: 550).⁷ In capitalism, Marx explains, the 'power of the Egyptian and Asiatic

⁴ See Boltanski & Chiapello (2018), Cruz (2016), Fleming (2009), Fleming & Sturdy (2013) and Sturdy et al. (2010).

⁵ See M. Davis (2017, p. 178ff), Li, Friedman, & Ren (2016), Loomis (2015), Mezzadri (2016), Ness (2016) and Ross (2004).

⁶ Anderson's critique contains some good insights and examples, but her opposition between despotism in the workplace and the allegedly egalitarian spirit of the market is pure ideology. The despotism of the workplace is, as we have seen, an *effect* of the anarchy of the market, not its opposite.

⁷ 'In the factory code, the capitalist formulates his autocratic power over his workers like a private legislator, and purely as an emanation of his own will' (C1: 549f). In another passage from *Capital*, Marx compares 'the directing authority' of the

kings or the Etruscan theocrats in the ancient world has [...] passed to capital and therewith the capitalists' (30: 260). But if that is the case, does it then mean that it is misleading to describe the power of capital as *abstract* and *impersonal*? Is the power of the capitalist not a very *concrete* and *interpersonal* form of domination?

Let us approach this question through a brief detour. In his critique of the Subaltern Studies Group, Vivek Chibber argues that Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty misunderstand the relationship between interpersonal coercion and the impersonal power of economic relations. Guha and Chakrabarty hold that Indian colonial capitalism failed to produce the typical bourgeois forms of power dominant in Europe. They counterpose the violent and personal authority of managers in colonial capitalism to the 'the body of rules and legislation' and the hegemonic bourgeois culture of European capitalism (Chakrabarty, quoted in Chibber, 2013, p. 105). Rather than dissolving traditional communal bonds, colonial capitalism reinforced caste hierarchies by mobilising them in the effort to dominate workers. Chibber points out—rightly, in my view—that this misrepresents capitalist authority in 19th century Europe, which was just as violent and coercive as that of colonial India (Chibber, 2013, p. 120ff). Furthermore, Chibber demonstrates that the reproduction or even strengthening of caste hierarchies in the Indian context is strikingly similar to the numerous ways in which Western capitalists have profited from racial, gendered, national, cultural and religious divisions within the working class. Capitalists will always—regardless of the historical and geographical context—find it rational (i.e., favourable for the valorisation of value) to utilise differences and antagonisms among workers (Chibber, 2013, p. 117ff). What is more important for our purposes, however, is Chibber's claim that 'the drive to dominate labor above and beyond the impersonal coercion of economic relations is indeed generic to capitalism, and that there is therefore no reason to exclude interpersonal domination from the category of "bourgeois relations of power"' (Chibber, 2013, p. 112). According to him, capital 'has never been content to rely on the "dull compulsion of economic relations" to enforce its diktat'; it has rather always been 'rational for capital to sustain and reinforce

production process to a conductor of an orchestra (C1: 448f). In that passage, however, he is discussing direction and coordination in an entirely general sense, i.e., independently of its capitalist form. The image of an orchestra could thus be read as the communist alternative to the militaristic and despotic capitalist. See also 30: 263.

power relations resembling those of the feudal past' (Chibber, 2013, p. 123f). In other words, the despotic authority of the capitalist within the workplace demonstrates that the reproduction of capitalism relies on a combination of historically novel forms of impersonal domination and (inter-)personal relationships of domination similar to those found in pre-capitalist social formations.

While I agree with Chibber that a despotic form of domination within the workplace is fully compatible with the impersonal pressures of capital, I also think that his descriptions of the despotic authority of the capitalist as a form of *personal* power similar to pre-capitalist forms of authority is misleading. In the manuscripts for the third book of *Capital*, Marx insists that the 'authority that the capitalist assumes in the immediate production process [...] is essentially different from the forms assumed by authority on the basis of production with slaves, serfs etc.' (M: 943; see also 30: 94). The reason why they are 'essentially different' is that the authority of capitalists 'accrues to its bearers only as the personification of the conditions of labour vis-à-vis labour itself' (M: 943; see also R: 989), or, as Marx puts it elsewhere: 'The capitalist only holds power as the *personification of capital*' (34: 122; see also R: 1053f; 34: 123; C1: 450). The relationship between the worker and the capitalist is, as we saw in chapter three, not a result of a personal relation of dependence but of a market transaction: 'What brings the seller into a relationship of dependency is', as Marx explains in the *Results*, 'solely the fact that the buyer is the owner of the conditions of labour. There is no fixed political and social relationship of supremacy and subordination' (R: 1025f; see also 1021). This 'subordination' is thus 'only of an *objective* nature', i.e., it is not grounded in the specificity of the persons involved in the relationship (34: 96). As Marx puts it in a passage which I also quoted in chapter three: '[t]he slave is the property of a particular *master*; the worker must indeed sell himself to capital, but not to a particular capitalist' (R: 1032; see also 9: 203).⁸

Contra Chibber, the authority of the capitalist in the sphere of production is therefore not a form of *personal* power, at least not in the sense in which the power of a feudal lord or a slave owner is personal. It might be argued that the power of the capitalist is 'personal' in the sense that its exercise can

⁸ According to William Clare Roberts, this conception of the power of the capitalist is directly contained in Marx's concept of despotism—Marx inherited this from Hegel, for whom it referred to 'a specific form of tyranny in which constant flux in the person of the despot did nothing to disturb the overall structure of society' (W. C. Roberts, 2017, p. 167).

be attributed to an identifiable person (the manager), in contradistinction to competitive pressures which expresses themselves in prices rather than work instructions. But this merely obscures the crucial difference between the authority of the capitalist and the power of pre-capitalist exploiters, namely that whereas the feudal peasant or the slave is subjected to the rule of a particular person, the capitalist worker is subjected to the capitalist class as such. The authority of the capitalist within the workplace is merely the form of appearance of the impersonal power of capital. This ‘de-personalization’ of the notion of exploitation, as Roberts (2017, p. 124) calls it, is what allows Marx to move beyond the moral critique of capitalists, according to which the origins of this relation of domination is to be sought for in their flawed character. *The despotism of the workplace is nothing but the metamorphosis of the impersonal and abstract compulsion resulting from the intersection of the double separation constitutive of capitalist relations of production.*

SUBSUMPTION: FORMAL AND REAL

Now that we have clarified the relation between the despotism of the workplace and the wider structures of economic power in capitalism, I want to examine what capitalists actually *do* with the power granted them by their position in the capitalist system. This is what the concept of *subsumption* is intended to capture. Marx most likely adopted this concept from Hegel, for whom it referred to ‘the *application* of the universal to a particular or singular posited *under* it’ (Hegel, 2010, p. 555; see Endnotes, 2010c, p. 137; De Sicilia, 2016). Since capital is, as I explained in chapter one, a sort of empty and universal form into which all kinds of different activities, processes and things can be absorbed, it makes perfect sense that Marx utilised the concept of subsumption in his attempt to understand what happens to a labour process when capital takes hold of it. The term crops up here and there in a very general sense in many of Marx’s writings, including some of his early work. The more specific and precise concept of the subsumption of labour under capital begins to appear in the *Grundrisse* (G: 586, 700) and then becomes increasingly central to Marx’s analysis during his first thoroughgoing empirical study of modern industrial production in the *1861-63 Manuscripts* (Beamish, 1992).

The concept of subsumption is sometimes used to refer to everything that is governed or just affected by the logic of capital—it is not uncommon, for example, to come across expressions such as ‘the subsumption of life’, ‘the subsumption of society’ or ‘the subsumption of subjectivity’ in contemporary

radical thought. I will discuss such attempts to extend the notion of subsumption later in this chapter. But first I want to examine Marx's use of it. The first thing to note is that in Marx's writings, subsumption refers to the *labour process*, i.e., to the way in which production is subsumed under the logic of capital. Subsumption is *formal* when it 'does not imply a fundamental change in the real nature of the labour process', i.e., when capital takes over a labour process whose technical and organisational structure is a result of non-capitalist logics (R: 1021; see also G: 586f; 30: 64, 92, 279; C1: 425). In formally subsumed production, capital has simply taken over labour processes 'as it finds them available in the existing technology, and in the form in which they have developed on the basis of non-capitalist relations of production' (30: 92). The transition from non-capitalist production to formally subsumed production is thus only a matter of property relations; capitalist production within specific branches is, at least in the initial stages, perfectly able to 'exist without causing the slightest alteration of any kind in the mode of production or the social relations within which production takes place' (30: 262).

Since the labour process 'remains unchanged' under formal subsumption, its capitalist form 'may be easily dissolved' (30: 279)—a transition from formally subsumed capitalist production to non-capitalist production would, in other words, not require a re-organisation of the production process. This changes when the subsumption of labour becomes *real*. Real subsumption takes place when capital 'radically remoulds' the 'social and technological conditions' of the labour process, i.e., when *capital as a social form materialises itself* (34: 30). The capitalist production process has a dual nature, corresponding to the dual nature of the commodity; it is simultaneously a material process transforming raw materials into use values and a process of valorisation creating surplus value for a capitalist (C1: 283ff). Real subsumption is the process whereby one of these aspects—the valorisation process—mesh with or intervene in the other, i.e., the material character of the labour process; *it is the becoming-substance of form* (30: 140, 279). Marx also refers to this as the 'specifically capitalist mode of production'.⁹

There are two main causes of real subsumption which corresponds to the two fundamental separations constitutive of capitalist relations of

⁹ See the brief comment on the different meanings of the term 'mode of production' in Marx's writings in chapter two.

production.¹⁰ First, there is the resistance of workers: capitalists are continuously forced to re-organise the labour process (new technology, new forms of control and surveillance, new divisions of labour, new managerial structures etc.) in order to deprive workers of the opportunity to exploit vulnerabilities in the technological and organisational setup of the production process. Just to give an example, the intensification of automation in the American automobile industry in the early 1950s was to a large degree a response to many years of militant struggle, as chronicled by James Boggs (2009) in *The American Revolution* (see also Silver, 2003, Chapter 2). The second main cause of real subsumption is the pressure of competition, which forces individual capitals to live up to certain productivity standards. Since each of these can act as causes of real subsumption in the absence of the other, it is possible to separate them analytically. In reality, however, they are closely related, even if their relation can take many different forms, depending on the context. In so far as resistance leads to a decrease in the rate of surplus value, it can intensify competition, which in turn provides capitalists with a stronger incentive to discipline their workers, intensify work, speed up and streamline production, introduce new technology and so on. In so far as worker resistance succeeds in dampening the frenetic pace of technological change imposed on capitalists by competition, however, it can also, as Harvey (2006, p. 117) explains, put ‘a floor under competition’ and thus ‘help stabilize the course of capitalist development’. Strong resistance in one branch might cause capital to flow into other branches, thus affecting the inter-branch competition. An example of a process of real subsumption resulting from both competitive pressures and worker resistance is the transition from water-powered mills to coal-fired steam engines in the British textile industry in the second quarter of the 19th century—a process driven by a convergence of a crisis of overproduction and a wave of strikes and riots (Malm, 2016, Chapter 4).

It is often assumed that the aim of technological and organisational changes in capitalism is to increase productivity. While it is true that productivity is an important—and perhaps the most frequently used—weapon in

¹⁰ In any concrete situation, there might be an infinity of possible causes, such as the idiosyncrasies and quirks of individual capitalists. I am only, however, concerned with those causes which form a part of the core structure of capitalism, i.e., those that demonstrate how real subsumption is, in Arthur’s words, ‘logically implicit in the concept of capital’ (Arthur, 2004b, p. 76; see also Endnotes, 2010c, p. 150).

the competitive struggle amongst capitals, and that the historically unprecedented dynamism of capitalist production has resulted in mind-boggling rates of productivity-growth compared to earlier modes of production, it is always important to bear in mind what the ultimate aim of capitalist production is: *the production of surplus value*. The aim of real subsumption is not productivity increases *per se*, but to increase productivity *in a form compatible with capitalist relations of production*. We should therefore not be surprised to find that the history of capitalism is filled with examples of technologies and organisational arrangements which were chosen despite the fact that cheaper and more productive alternatives were available. Steam-engines won out over water-powered mills in 19th century British industry not because it was cheaper or more productive, but because water technologies were incompatible with both competitive relations among firms and the antagonism between capitalists and workers (Malm, 2016). Similarly, the transition from putting-out systems to the factory system in 19th century British industry was, as Steven Marglin (1974, p. 62) has demonstrated, driven by the need to secure the control by the capitalists over the work process rather than the quest for technical superiority; '[t]he social function of hierarchical work organization is not technical efficiency, but accumulation'. In the post-war boom in US industry, record playback technology was likewise out-matched by numerical control technology, partly because the operation of the former required skilled workers—and to leave skills in the hands of workers is always, as I will come back to, a risk for capital (Noble, 1984, Chapter 7). What this tells us is that real subsumption is not just a matter of technical efficiency; it is a *power technique*, a mechanism for reproducing the capitalist relations of production.

DISCIPLINE AND TEMPORALITY

Once capital takes hold of a labour process, it sets in motion what Braverman (1974, p. 82) calls 'the Babbage principle: break it up into its simplest elements' (see also C1: 617). The production process is a socio-material process which consists of raw materials, energy, skills, knowledge and instruments (tools or machines), which are combined within a certain division of labour and organisational structure. All of these different elements of the labour process can be subjected to changes in the process of real subsumption. In the implementation of changes, capital is 'constantly compelled to wrestle with the insubordination of the workers' (C1: 490). The separation between life and its conditions may force the proletariat to show up on the

market and sell her labour-power, but it does not automatically guarantee her subjection to the demands of the manager; '[h]ence the complaint that the workers lack discipline runs through the whole of the period of manufacture' (C1: 490; Malm, 2016, p. 128). The 'need for discipline and supervision' gives rise to a distinctively capitalist function within the production process, namely the 'labour of superintendence' undertaken by 'overlookers' who 'represent the capitalist towards the workers' (33: 486; C1: 449f; see also Foucault, 1991, p. 174f). In addition to effects of workers knowing that they are being monitored, systematic surveillance is also what provides the capitalists with the knowledge they need in order to optimise the labour process and break what Andrew Ure called 'the refractory hand of labour' (C1: 564). The paradigmatic example of this is the classic Taylorist time-motion study, where every movement of the working body is monitored and used as data in order to increase productivity (Braverman, 1974, p. 173ff). Such studies are becoming more and more efficient and easy with the development of new digital technologies—to cite two recent examples: in 2013, it was reported that workers at a Tesco distribution centre in Ireland were forced to wear electronic armbands tracking their work performance, and in early 2018, Amazon patented a wristband which not only tracks the movements of the workers, but also directs them by means of vibration (Solon, 2018; Rawlinson, 2013).

Another disciplinary tool popular among capitalists—found in formally as well as in really subsumed labour processes—is to pit workers against each other by nurturing or creating hierarchies and differences among them related to scissions such as nationality, gender, racialisation, differing wage levels, religion, age, seniority, and so on (Lebowitz, 2006). Capitalists sometimes have to be careful with this strategy, however, since it can impede cooperation and create conflicts among workers that end up being harmful for the capitalists. In other words, capitalists must aim to keep a level of antagonism among workers strong enough to keep them from forming a collective force but weak enough to not render cooperation impossible.

One of the most important methods for 'the suppression of any claim by labour to autonomy' (30: 340) is the introduction of new technology. Marx demonstrates how machinery is a 'powerful weapon for suppressing strikes' and argues that it 'would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt' (C1: 562f). Capitalists are able to use labour-saving technology in this way because they possess what Brenner

(1986, p. 31) describes as ‘perhaps the most effective means yet discovered to impose labour discipline in class-divided societies’: *the threat of dismissal*. The ability of machinery to ‘produce a surplus working population’ increases competition among workers and thereby makes it easier for capitalists to make workers ‘submit to the dictates of capital’ (C1: 532). A further disciplinary effect of machinery is its ability to calibrate and direct the movements of human bodies; as Marx explains, the ‘compulsion of the workshop [...] introduces simultaneity, regularity and proportionality into the mechanism of these different operations, in fact first combines them together in a uniformly operating mechanism’ (30: 271; see also 30: 259). This aspect of machinery demonstrates why the notion of economic power is necessary in order to grasp the power of capital: the power granted to capitalists by machinery cannot be grasped in terms of the violence-ideology couplet—it is rather a form of power which addresses the subject indirectly by altering its material environment. Foucault (1991, p. 26) puts it well: ‘[t]his subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order’. The ability of capitalists to exert such a ‘micro-physics of power’ through the insertion of human bodies into the mechanical infrastructure of production is greatly enhanced by certain forms of energy. ‘As long as the motive force proceeds from human beings (and indeed animals too) it can,’ as Marx explains, ‘only physically function for a certain portion of the day’. Animate power is troublesome, unreliable and irregular, in distinction to the versatile, flexible, unremitting and submissive nature of coal and oil. ‘A steam-engine etc., needs’, as Marx notes, ‘no rest. It can continue operating for any length of time’, and is therefore well-suited for ensuring that the worker adapts her ‘own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton’ (30: 332; C1: 546). Energy thus plays a key role in guaranteeing the worker’s ‘subordination to the system of machinery as a whole’ (33: 489).¹¹ As Malm (2016, p. 310) notes, the coupling of machinery to motive forces deriving from what he calls ‘the stock’ (primarily coal and oil) allows for coercion to ‘take a step back’, since the exercise of power is now partly *relegated to the system of machinery*. Machinery is thus not only an *effect* of the power of capital; it is also one of its *sources* (Malm, 2016, p. 311; see also Altvater, 2006; Huber, 2013, Chapter 1).

¹¹ See also 30: 269, 342; 32: 419; 33: 488f, 491, 497; 34: 29, 98, 102.

The regularity, uniformity and continuity imposed on working bodies by means of capitalist technology is an indispensable part of the what Daniel Bensaïd (2009, p. 75) calls the ‘temporal despotism’ of capital. One of the conclusions reached by Marx during his study of the history of technology in 1863 was that the clock formed an important part of the material basis for early capitalist industry: ‘[w]hat, without the clock, would be a period in which the value of the commodity, and therefore the labour time necessary for its production, is the decisive factor?’ (33: 403; 41: 450). The clock is, as Lewis Mumford (2010, p. 14) explains, ‘not merely a means of keeping track of the hours, but of synchronising the actions of men’. What the clock measures is an *abstract* kind of time, i.e., a sequence of empty, homogenous blocks measured in units completely detached from the rhythms of nature and human activity. Mumford (2010, p. 15) explains it well:

The clock [...] dissociated time from human events and helped to create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science. There is relatively little foundation for this belief in common human experience: throughout the year the days are of uneven duration, and not merely does the relation between day and night steadily change, but a slight journey from East to West alter astronomical time by a certain number of minutes. In terms of the human organism itself, mechanical time is even more foreign: while human life has regularities of its own, the beat of the pulse, the breathing of the lungs, these change from hour to hour with mood and action, and in the longer span of days, time is measured not by the calendar but by the events that occupy it. The shepherd measures from the time the ewes lambed; the farmer measures back to the day of sowing or forward to the harvest.

With the exception of medieval monasteries and towns, the abstract time measured by the clock was not a significant part of social life until the advent of capitalism (Le Goff, 1980; Postone, 2003, p. 202ff; E. P. Thompson, 1967). Generally speaking, the inhabitants of the pre-capitalist world knew time as something defined by the duration of certain *events* or *actions*—it was a ‘task-oriented’ form of time, as E.P. Thompson (1967, p. 60) puts it in his classic study of time and capitalist work discipline. The relevant units referred to common experiences of everyday life, like the time it takes to cook rice, say a certain prayer, cook an egg or take a piss (E. P. Thompson, 1967,

p. 58; Postone, 2003, p. 201). Time was also defined by religious rituals and—especially in rural life—the rhythms of nature (Le Goff, 1980, p. 48f). This was a world of what Postone (2003, p. 201) calls concrete time, i.e., time as a *dependent* variable in the sense that it was dependent upon *what takes place* in time.

We should be careful not to fall into the trap of idealising pre-capitalist forms of temporality. Working in concrete time is not, as Malm (2016, p. 304) points out, ‘all joy and reward: it can be just as stressful, excessive, disciplined and punishing as any other. When a peasant sees the clouds gathering on the horizon, he may have to work without rest for a whole day’. Nothing is easier than to bemoan the alienating nature of abstract time and write a Heideggerian hymn to the wisdom of the farmer who has no clocks but knows the rhythms of nature like the back of his hand. Pre-capitalist temporality is neither more authentic nor any less socially determined than any other. The problem with abstract time is not that it is contrary to nature, but that it is a *means of oppression*.

The logic of capitalist production does not sit well with concrete time. For one thing, the generalisation of the commodity form means that the exchange of materialised expressions of abstract temporal units of human labour becomes the mechanism through which social life is reproduced. But the rule of abstract time is not just a consequence of the role of exchange in capitalism; it is also the result of the real subsumption of labour, which requires the calibration of the human body to the regularity of machinery. ‘Temporal regularity’ is, in Mumford’s (2010, p. 269) words, the ‘first characteristic of modern machine civilisation’. Capitalism thus gives rise to a form of production in which ‘[t]ime penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 152). In order to do so, capital must diminish the irregularities of nature, for example by substituting coal and oil for water, wind or solar energy. Capitalists purchase labour-power for a determinate amount of time, which means that labour ‘has to occur during that time—not when the weather is right, or when the sun has risen, or when the worker happens to be in the mood for hard labour’ (Malm, 2016, p. 303). The tension between concrete time and the logic of capital is therefore one of the main reasons why capitalist production originally became and still is deeply dependent upon fossil fuels (Malm, 2016).

DESKILLING AND DIVISION

One of the consequences of real subsumption is a tendency to *deskilling* of labour-power. The possession of skills has always been a powerful basis of resistance for workers. Deskilling makes it easier to replace workers, hence increases the competition among them, and for this reason, it is not only an effect of the power of capital but also one of its sources. One way to deskill labour is to re-organise the division of labour within the production process; by transforming a complex labour process into a number of simple tasks—think of Adam Smith’s pin factory—capitalists are able to replace expensive and recalcitrant skilled workers with cheap, unskilled workers, who are generally easier to discipline because they are easy to replace (C1: 455ff; 33: 388; Rattansi, 1982, p. 143ff). Another way to deprive workers of skills is to introduce new technology. A good example is provided by Richard Sennett’s analysis of technological changes in an American bakery. In the late 1990s, Sennett (1999, p. 68) returned to a bakery he had studied more than two decades earlier and found that the skills of the bakers had been replaced by computers: ‘Computerized baking has profoundly changed the balletic physical activities of the shop floor. Now the bakers make no physical contact with the materials or the loaves of bread, monitoring the entire process via on-screen icons’. Another example is the self-acting mule, one of the most important technologies of the industrial revolution, which was invented in the 1820s with the aim of eradicating the jobs of skilled spinners (R. C. Allen, 2009, p. 208). Although re-organisation of the division of labour and the introduction of new technologies can take place independently of each other, they are often closely connected. The introduction of new technologies often results in what Braverman (1974, p. 114) calls ‘the separation of conception from execution’, i.e., the separation of labour and the knowledge necessary for carrying out this labour. Workers are thus divided into a mass of unskilled workers on the one hand and a small group of highly skilled workers, such as engineers, scientists, designers or programmers, on the other. The paradoxical effect of technological development under capitalism is thus, as Braverman (1974, p. 425) puts it, that ‘[t]he more science is incorporated into the labor process, the less the worker understands of the process’. Or, as Marx puts it in the *1861-63 Manuscripts*: ‘*Knowledge thus becomes independent of labour and enters the service of capital*’ (34: 57).¹²

¹² See also 30: 276, 304; 33: 364; 34: 32, 124, 126; R: 1055; C1: 548f.

In his classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman famously defended what has become known as *the deskilling thesis*, according to which capitalist production implies a long-term tendency to deskill the workforce. Although Braverman acknowledges that this is accompanied by a process of polarisation, where knowledge tends to become centralised in a layer of high-skilled workers, he insists that deskilling is the general tendency of capitalist production for the mass of workers (Braverman, 1974, p. 424ff). This idea has been the subject of countless discussions—empirical as well as theoretical—within the field of labour-process analysis since Braverman published his ground-breaking analysis.¹³ In the early 1980s, Harvey (2006, p. 119) concluded that ‘evidence suggests that this [i.e., deskilling] has been the direction in which capitalism has been moving, with substantial islands of resistance here and innumerable pockets of resistance there’. Some twenty years later, in the context of discussions about lean production, Tony Smith (2000, p. 48) concluded that ‘the deskilling thesis has not been definitively falsified, either in its general or in its specific application to lean production. But neither has it been conclusively established’. Since then, discussions about the so-called post-industrial ‘knowledge economy’, the ‘information revolution’ or—in the (somewhat) critical version of this diagnosis—‘cognitive capitalism’ (Vercellone, 2007) and ‘biopolitical production’ (Hardt & Negri, 2011) have led to a resurgence of an old critique of Braverman, namely that capitalism also contains an immanent tendency towards *upskilling* (P. Thompson & Smith, 2010, p. 15f). The well-educated knowledge worker elevated by these critics to be the paradigmatic figure of contemporary capitalism is, however, only found among a vanishing layer of the global workforce, most of which is located in leading capitalist economies. Outside of these economies, low-skilled industrial labour and all kinds of informal work is the norm. Most new jobs in rich countries such as the UK and the US ‘are in low-skill, low-wage parts of the service sector’ (P. Thompson & Smith, 2010, p. 15; J. E. Smith, 2017a, 2017b). Rather than a dynamic and upskilling knowledge economy, the direction in which contemporary capitalism seems to be moving is towards a ‘post-industrial wasteland’ populated by informally employed surplus populations and ‘workers parked in low-productivity service work, exchanged against sub-subsistence

¹³ For overviews of these debates, see Elger (1979), Harvey (2006, pp. 106–119), Knights & Wilmott (1990), Littler (1990), Meiksins (1994), T. Smith (2000, Chapter 2).

wages' (Endnotes, 2015a, p. 156; J. E. Smith, 2017b; Endnotes & Benanav, 2010, p. 37ff).

My point here is not, however, to defend Braverman's deskilling thesis. The discussions about whether or not there has been an empirical detectable trend towards deskilling in the course of the history of capitalism has been a red herring. Rather than reading Marx's analysis of deskilling as an *empirical prediction*, we should follow Harvey (2006, p. 113) and read it as an attempt to disclose 'what it is that workers are being forced to cope *with* and to defend *against*'. In other words: Marx's claims about capital's inherent tendency to dispossess workers of their skills is not a claim about an inevitable historical trend but an identification of the direction in which capital is pushing. Whether or not this will result in a tendency towards deskilling depends on the relative strength of capital in relation to other social forces (primarily forces of labour). This reading also provides us with an answer to a common critique of Marx (and Braverman), namely that he treats workers as passive objects of capitalist domination and underestimates worker resistance and its ability to slow, halt and reverse deskilling pressures (Meiksins, 1994). What this critique overlooks is that Marx's critique of political economy was, as Lebowitz (2003, pp. viii, ix) puts it, 'never intended as the complete analysis of capitalism'; it is rather an analysis of 'capital—its goals and its struggles to achieve those goals'.

Another reason why the preoccupation with the deskilling thesis as an empirical prediction is a red herring is that it fails to realise that '[w]hat is on capital's agenda is not', as Harvey (2014, p. 119f) puts it, 'the eradication of skills per se but the eradication of *monopolisable* skills' (see also Briken, Chillias, Krzywdzinski, & Marks, 2017, p. 4). A process of general upskilling is therefore fully compatible with capitalism and can take place alongside a process of eradication of monopolisable skills. Capital is not interested in deskilling as such, but only in deskilling as a tool of domination—a point often missed by critics of deskilling, who replace Marx's critique of domination with a romantic critique of deskilling as such, based on vague ideals of wholeness and original unity. An example of the importance of distinguishing between skills per se and monopolisable skills is provided by recent debates about the 'emotional labour' required by many workers in the burgeoning service sector. As feminist critics have rightly pointed out, many of the service sector jobs usually regarded as requiring no or few skills actually involve several complex emotional and social skills, which are often rendered invisible by being presented as the natural abilities of the women who

perform this labour (Bolton, 2004; Durbin & Conley, 2010; Hochschild, 2012). As Jonathan Payne (2006, p. 22) points out, however, the problem is that there is often ‘no real shortage of those able to perform the kind of “skilled” emotion work required in the bulk of low-end service jobs’ (see also Durbin & Conley, 2010, p. 188ff).

The capitalist division of labour within the workplace not only tends to eradicate monopolisable skills, it also leads to an increasing *specialisation* of tasks. These two aspects are obviously closely related, since a common method of deskilling is to break up a production process into a number of simple and specialised tasks. It is possible, however, to dissolve a production process into several independent tasks without making these tasks simpler, and for this reason specialisation and deskilling should be conceptually separated. The specialisation and deskilling involved in real subsumption are other examples of what is perhaps the fundamental dynamic of the material restructuring of social reproduction set in motion by capital: *separate in order to reconnect, fracture in order to reassemble, atomise in order to integrate*. In chapter three, we saw how capital drives a wedge between life and its conditions in order to re-connect them through the cash nexus. In chapter four, we saw how the generalisation of the commodity form dissolves pre-capitalist forms of coordinating social production in order to re-establish the connection between different parts of the total social labour through the market. The analysis of real subsumption reveals how a similar process takes place within the production process. Through deskilling and specialisation, capital ‘seizes labour-power by its roots’ (C1: 481) and transforms it into *a potential whose condition of actualisation is the mediation of valorising value*:

If, in the first place, the worker sold his labour-power to capital because he lacked the material means of producing a commodity, now his own individual labour-power withholds its services unless it has been sold to capital. It will continue to function only in an environment which first comes into existence after its sale, namely the capitalist’s workshop. Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of that workshop. As the chosen people bore in their features the sign that they were the property of Jehovah, so the division of labour brands the manufacturing worker as the property of capital. (C1: 482)

The valorisation of value thus becomes ‘a real condition of production’ (C1: 448). In the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, Marx describes this dimension of capital’s power by drawing a useful distinction between the *objective* and the *social* conditions of labour—a distinction which corresponds to the double nature of human production as a social and a natural process (30: 279f; 5: 43). In chapter three we saw how capital’s appropriation of the *objective* conditions of labour is a crucial basis of its economic power. With the real subsumption of labour, however, the dispossession of the worker is taken a step further: capital now also appropriates the *social* conditions of labour. What I described in chapter three as the *transcendental* plane of the power of capital—i.e., its capacity to transform itself into the condition of possibility of social life—can now be grasped as a result of this *double dispossession* of the *objective* as well as the *social* conditions of production. Real subsumption makes the worker ‘one-sided, abstract, partial’, ‘disconnected [and] isolated’, with the consequence that her labour-power ‘becomes powerless when it stands alone’.¹⁴ The unification of these partial and disconnected workers into a single *Gesamtkörper* takes place under the command of capital, which becomes ‘as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle’ (C1: 448f). The cooperation of workers is thus no longer ‘*their* being, but the *being* of capital’ (G: 585):

Nor is it a relation which belongs to them; instead, they now belong to it, and the relation itself appears as a relation of capital to them. It is not their reciprocal association, but rather a unity which rules over them, and of which the vehicle and director is capital itself. Their own association in labour—cooperation—is in fact a power alien to them; it is the power of capital which confronts the isolated workers. (30: 261; see also G: 470f, 587; 30: 262, 269; 34: 30)

The ability of the logic of valorisation to socially and materially reconfigure the production process is premised upon the power granted to capitalists by the relations of production examined in the preceding chapters. In this sense, real subsumption is an *effect* of the power of capital. But, as we have seen, the very exercise of this power tends to reproduce it, and for that reason, the capitalist production process is not only the production of commodities endowed with surplus value—it is at the same time the *production of power*.

¹⁴ Quotations: 30: 279, C1: 357 and 34: 123f. See also 32: 402; 33: 479; R: 1055.

TOTAL SUBSUMPTION?

In Marx's writings, the concepts of formal and real subsumption refer exclusively to the labour process. Several radical thinkers have, however, proposed to extend these concepts in various directions. Cammatte (2011, p. 109) and Negri (1992, pp. 114, 131, 142, 1996, p. 159) both claim that *real* subsumption has been superseded by the *total* subsumption of labour or—in Negri's case—the *total* subsumption of *society*. Hardt and Negri (2003, p. 25) talk about the real subsumption of 'the social *bios*', Jason Read (2003, p. 18) and Matthew Huber (2013, p. 18) both talk about the real subsumption of *subjectivity*, and, according to Fredric Jameson (2011, p. 71), capitalism has reached a stage where 'everything has been subsumed' (see also Balibar, 2019). Such claims are usually based on an idea of capitalism having reached a stage where 'there is no longer anything outside it', where 'capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence' or where 'capitalism, as ideology, practice, and economy, has penetrated all dimensions of social life' (Jameson, 2011, p. 71; *The Invisible Committee*, 2017, p. 84; Read, 2003, p. 1).

While such statements can be rhetorically useful in certain contexts, their analytical value is close to none. It might very well be that there is nothing on this earth which is not somehow *affected* by capital, but that is not the same as saying that everything has been subsumed under capital or that capital has taken hold of all dimensions of social life. The social as well as natural world is shaped by innumerable forces which do not derive from the logic of capital—not only because these forces have been able to keep the logic of capital at bay but also because capital is not a super-villain seeking to rule the entire world. The aim of capitalist production is surplus value, and as long as norms, practices, ideologies, natural processes, lifestyles etc., do not interfere with this aim, there is no reason why capital would want to eradicate or change them. Capital is much more strategic than that; as long as it is able to keep a firm grip on the fundamental conditions of social reproduction, it does not need to meticulously control everything. Take the example of the reproduction of labour-power. As Vogel (2014, p. 157) has pointed out, one of the peculiar things about labour-power is that although it is a commodity, 'it is not produced capitalistically'. Whatever the precise reasons for this, it is remarkable that capitalism is—or at least has been so far—perfectly compatible with relinquishing control over a process which is an absolutely indispensable condition of its existence (Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 81). That does not mean that the reproduction of labour-power takes

place outside of capitalism or is unaffected by it; what it means is rather that the reproduction of labour-power and the production of (other) commodities take place *inside of capitalism in different ways*. Our conceptual apparatus should be able to reflect such real differences, but this is precisely what is obscured by claims about the real subsumption of everything. The commodity-producing labour process has a special status for capital since, as Endnotes (2010c, p. 149) explain, it ‘*is the immediate production process of capital. Nothing comparable can be said of anything beyond the production process, for it is only production which capital directly claims as its own*’. The sphere of production is the stronghold of the power of capital, and although the logic of valorisation spreads like ripples over the entire social field from there, it has no need to subsume other spheres of society in a similar manner.

At this point, it should also be noted that subsumption takes on very different forms in different sectors and branches of production. Real subsumption has always been most intense in manufacturing. Agriculture remained quite resistant to real subsumption until the mid-20th century, after which it accelerated at a rapid pace (more about this later in this chapter). Many (though not all) service sector jobs are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to really subsume—a circumstance which is, as Jason E. Smith (2017a, 2017b) and Endnotes (2015a, p. 155ff) have demonstrated, quite important for understanding the dynamics of contemporary capitalism since it explains why they are left behind by outsourcing and automation. Many of these service sector jobs might never undergo a transition from formal to real subsumption. Such differences between the pace and dynamics of subsumption in various branches and sectors are difficult to discern if the concept of subsumption becomes a synonym for capital’s power in a very broad sense.

These considerations allows us to see why it is also misguided to use the concepts of formal and real (and total) subsumption as the basis of a periodisation of the history of capitalism, as suggested by Vercellone (2007), Negri (1996), Cammatte (2011) and *Théorie Communiste* (see Endnotes, 2010c for a good critique). Using the concepts of formal and real subsumption to characterise different historical phases of the development of the capitalist totality obscures the two important conclusions we have just reached: first, that capital’s relation to the sphere of production is quite different from its relation to other moments of the social totality; second, that *within* the sphere of production there are very important differences as far as the pace and dynamics of subsumption in the various branches and sectors goes.

I thus prefer to maintain Marx's concept of subsumption as referring to the way in which the logic of capital relates to the social and material structure of the production process. This is not a case of conceptual conservatism nor a denial of the profound ramifications of the logic of capital beyond the sphere of production. It is, rather, an insistence on conceptual clarity: in order to understand the power of capital, we need a conceptual apparatus which is able to reflect capital's differing attitudes to the various moments of the social totality.

SUBSUMPTION OF NATURE

There are no rules without exceptions, however. Marx's concept of subsumption has seen at least one further development that has proven to be very useful: its ability to capture capital's relation to *nature*. In a certain sense this is more a shift of perspective than an extension of the meaning of the concept. Since labour is, as Marx is always careful to emphasise, 'the manifestation of a force of nature', the subsumption of labour is also immediately a process in which nature is subsumed under capital (24: 81). Labour-power is embedded in the human body, which has its own natural rhythms which does not always adhere to the demands of capital. The naturalness of labour-power represents an obstacle to capital accumulation, something which comes out particularly clearly in the analysis of the struggle over the length of the working day in *Capital*: in its 'blind and measureless drive, its werewolf hunger for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day' (C1: 375). The boundless logic of valorisation makes it impossible for capital to sustain its own natural conditions, which forces the state to step in and regulate the working day. It thus makes perfectly sense that Burkett (2014, pp. 12, 133ff) finds a 'model of environmental crisis' in Marx's analysis of the length of the working day.

As Malm has forcefully demonstrated, labour and (the rest of) nature share 'an ineradicable *autonomy* from capital' which stems from the fact that they are 'ontologically prior' to capital and are both governed by logics which do not originate in capital (Malm, 2018c, p. 197, 2016, p. 309ff). This is especially—but not exclusively—true of organic processes: 'capitalist production has not yet' as Marx puts it in the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, 'succeeded, and never will succeed in mastering these [organic] processes in the same way as it has mastered purely mechanical or inorganic chemical processes' (33: 291). The ineradicable autonomy of nature is an obstacle for capital, and for this reason capitalist production sets in motion a structural pressure

to iron out the bumps of nature, or put differently, to proceed from the *formal* to the *real subsumption of nature*: ‘[c]apital cannot’, in Malm’s (2018c, p. 201) words, ‘do without the stranger of nature, so it chases it and seeks to subordinate it, integrate it into a disciplinary regime and make its most erratic impulses redundant’. In this process, capital attacks not only labour (as a natural process), but all aspects of the production process in which the autonomy of nature rears its head.

While the concept of the real subsumption of nature was introduced by Burkett (2014, p. 67) in his *Marx and Nature* from 1999, the first attempt to specify its meaning and evaluate its analytical potential was a 2001 paper by William Boyd, W. Scott Prudham and Rachel A. Schurman. According to them, subsumption of nature only takes place in ‘nature-based industries’, by which they mean extractive industries and agriculture (Boyd, Prudham, & Schurman, 2001, p. 562). In their view, the concept of *real* subsumption of nature should furthermore be reserved for a subset of these industries, namely those based on *biological* processes:

The key to understanding the distinction between formal and real subsumption of nature lies in the difference between biological and non-biological systems and the unique capacity to manipulate biological productivity. The *real subsumption of nature* refers to systematic increases in or intensification of biological productivity (i.e. yield, turnover time, metabolism, photosynthetic efficiency)—a concept that obviously applies only to those biologically based sectors that operate according to a logic of cultivation. (Boyd et al., 2001, p. 564)

So, whereas production based on non-biological systems is forced to operate according to a ‘logic of extraction’ in which nature is only formally subsumed—a process similar to the production of absolute surplus value—industries based on biological systems are able to really subsume nature in a manner similar to the production of relative surplus value. Boyd, Prudham and Schurman (2001, p. 565) also argue that with the transition from formal to real subsumption, capital begins to circulate *through* nature rather than *around* it.

While Boyd, Prudham and Schurman capture some important aspects of capital’s relation to nature (especially the difference between its relation to non-biological and biological processes), their concept of real subsumption of nature is ultimately unnecessarily restricted, wherefore they lose sight of

a number of important aspects of the relation between capital and nature. In order to see why, let us begin with the distinction between capital circulating *around* versus *through* nature. On its most basic level, capital is *value in motion*, a motion in which value undergoes a series of transubstantiations: when commodities and money circulate in the form of capital, they are reduced to mere *forms* of an identical *substance*, namely value (C1: 255f). This is why Marx concludes that the ‘different modes in which the values existed were a pure semblance; value itself formed the constantly self-identical essence within their disappearance’ (G: 312). In other words, capital *always* circulates *through* the material bearers of its circuit, whether these bearers are natural or not. Seen from this perspective, capital never circulates *around* anything at all. On a more concrete level, we might also question the adequacy of this distinction on the basis of a simple consideration of traditional agricultural production. How are seeds growing in the field of a 17th century capitalist farmer not an example of capital circulating through nature? Or what about the transformation of grass into milk in the stomach of a cow in traditional dairy production? Fruits intended for sale growing on a tree in an orchard? The production of silk by silk worms? In his discussion of the distinction between production time and working time in the second volume of *Capital*, Marx provides several similar examples: fermentation of wine, drying pottery, bleaching and ripening of corn. In such processes capital is, as Marx explains, ‘handed over to the sway of natural processes’ (C2: 316f).

A more fundamental problem with the analysis presented by Boyd, Prudham and Schurman is their assumption that the subsumption of nature only happens in ‘nature-based’ industries. With this restriction, we are left with no conceptual tools for understanding the relation between capital and nature in other sectors and branches. They claim that ‘the defining feature of nature-based industries is that they *confront nature directly* in the process of commodity production’ (Boyd et al., 2001, p. 556). Could we not say the same thing about manufacturing, however? Capital confronts nature directly in several ways in manufacturing: as working bodies with a set of natural dexterities, needs, capacities and limits; as energy (electricity, oil, gas, coal, water, wind etc.); and, at least in some parts of industry, as chemical processes integrated in the production process. According to Marx, it is ‘mass production—cooperation on a large scale, with the employment of machinery—that first subjugates [*unterwirft*] the *forces of nature* on a large scale—wind, water, steam, electricity—to the direct production process, converts them into *agents of social labour*’ (34: 31f; see also 30: 321; C1: 509).

Capital has always had to wrestle with the autonomy of nature in manufacturing, and over time it has secured a number of fateful victories which has allowed it to gain a higher degree control over nature. A good example of this is provided by Malm's study of the shift from waterpower to steam in the British textile industry. The flow of water needed for the mills was irregular and tied factories to specific locations, often in rural areas, where a combination of an insufficient supply of labour and large investments in fixed capital tended to empower workers. The shift to coal-fired steam engines changed all of that: now the motive force could be turned on and off at will (in contrast to water running in a canal), the power supply could easily be turned up and down, energy could be stored and moved around, and production could relocate to urban areas with plenty of proletarians competing for jobs. In short, whereas water remained 'quasi-autonomous and immune to real subsumption', coal allowed capitalists to achieve a much higher degree of control over nature within the production process, which in turn provided them with a powerful weapon in the struggle against labour (Malm, 2016, p. 313). What took place in the shift from water to coal in the British textile industry was thus, in Malm's (2016, p. 309) words, a process of 'real subsumption of labour by means of really subsumed nature'—a phrasing which has the virtue of highlighting the close relationship between the subsumption of nature and that of labour, and which thereby also highlights the reason why the subsumption of nature is an important element in the economic power of capital. Coal was a *weapon*, a means of cracking down on rebellious workers; the subsumption of nature was a method for tightening capital's grip on social life. For a while it worked well, but at some point, around the turn of the 20th century, reliance on coal became a problem for capital as it enhanced the power of workers located in the strategically important and 'interconnected industries of coal mining, railways docking and shipping' (Mitchell, 2013, p. 23). So, what did the forces of capital do? They took a further step in the real subsumption of nature by shifting to *oil*, which, in contrast to coal, 'flowed along networks that often had the properties of a grid, like an electricity network, where there is more than one possible path and the flow of energy can switch to avoid blockages or overcome breakdowns' (Mitchell, 2013, p. 38; see also Huber, 2013). Such examples demonstrate that '[w]hen capital desperately seeks to restructure the labor process and put it on a more profitable footing, nothing can be more useful than a truly revolutionary power technology. It is the battering ram, the

generalizable device with which capital destroys resistance and swings into renewed expansion’ (Malm, 2018a, p. 172; see also Keefer, 2009).

The subsumption of nature is thus a crucial part of the economic power of capital. This subsumption is formal when capital merely utilises a natural process without altering its form, and it becomes real when capital actively intervenes in natural processes in order to eradicate the autonomy of nature and accommodate these processes to the demands of valorisation—a process which, contrary to the claims of Boyd, Prudham and Schurman, takes place in all sectors and branches of capitalist production.

AGRICULTURE

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I want to examine two important examples of how real subsumption has strengthened the economic power of capital. The purpose of these analyses is illustrative, i.e., they provide us with a more concrete picture of how the mute compulsion of capital functions. In the next section, I will examine how the so-called logistics revolution has affected the power of capital. But before we get to that, I want to take a look at the development of agricultural production since the middle of the last century.

In my analysis of real subsumption in this chapter, I have generally followed Marx in focusing on industrial production. Although the kind of modern industry examined in *Capital* was, at least on a global level, still marginal in Marx’s time, he correctly identified it as the spearhead of capital’s global offensive. The prominence given to industrial capital in Marx’s writings is sometimes used as an argument for a common misperception, namely that the critique of political economy as a theoretical framework is relevant only for analyses of industrial production and not for agriculture. According to ecosocialist critics such as Ted Benton (1989), Marx’s promethean fascination of capitalist industry led him to construct a theory based on industrial labour as a paradigm, with the consequence that it is unfit for understanding agriculture. Such claims have been thoroughly rebutted by the pioneering work of Foster (2000) and Burkett (2014), who have demonstrated that Marx’s critique of political economy was not only very attentive to the ecological destruction wrought by capitalist agriculture in Marx’s time but also that it remains an unsurpassed theoretical framework for understanding the

biospheric crisis created by contemporary capitalism.¹⁵ The agricultural chemist Justus von Liebig's critique of the robbery of soil fertility in modern agriculture had a profound influence on Marx, and as Saito's (2017) recent study of Marx's notebooks has documented, Marx continued to work on the ecological aspects of his critique of political economy in the period after the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867.

There is a good reason why Marx did not have much to say about real subsumption of labour and nature in agriculture: it barely existed in the 19th century. Despite being the birth-site of capitalism, agriculture remained highly recalcitrant to real subsumption until well into the 20th century. To be sure, the specialisation of production and concentration of land associated with the emergence of capitalist agriculture in England did lead to substantial productivity gains (which became the basis for urbanisation and the industrial revolution), but these were mostly achieved using equipment and techniques inherited from the Middle Ages.¹⁶ While technological development raced ahead in manufacturing, agriculture remained stagnant in comparison. Even in an advanced capitalist economy such as France at the end of World War II, 'nearly half the population still lived in localities of fewer than two thousand inhabitants and consumed food from their farms or neighboring ones in ways reminiscent of the Middle Ages' (Isett & Miller, 2016, p. 257). Or, as Eric Hobsbawm (1995, p. 288) dramatically puts it: '[f]or 80 percent of humanity the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s'.

The late 18th and the 19th century witnessed a number of technological innovations, most notably the steel plough and the steam-powered thresher machine, but agriculture still 'remained highly resistant' to real subsumption (Benanav, 2015, p. 122ff; Grigg, 1992, p. 48). One of the main obstacles was soil fertility (Benanav, 2015, p. 121). From the 1940s onwards, this as well as other obstacles were overcome by a dramatic process of real subsumption. Richard Lewontin and Jean-Pierre Berlan (1986) sums up this development in a striking manner:

¹⁵ Their most recent defence is *Marx and the Earth* (Foster & Burkett, 2016). As Malm points out, they sometimes 'take the Marx they like best and claim that no other Karl can be found' (Malm, 2018b, p. 173). For a more nuanced view, see Malm (2017, 2018b).

¹⁶ See R. C. Allen (2009, p. 57ff), Benanav (2015, p. 116ff), R. Brenner (1987b, p. 308ff), Grigg (1992, pp. 33, 47), Mazoyer & Roudart (2006, p. 355f), Weis (2007, p. 172f), Wood (2002, p. 103).

In 1910 farmers gathered their own seeds from last year's crop, raised the mules and horses that provided traction power, fed them on hay and grains produced on the farm, and fertilized the fields with the manure they produced. In 1986 farmers purchase their seed from Pioneer Hybrid Seed Co., buy their "mules" from the Ford Motor Company, the "oats" for their "mules" from Exxon, their "manure" from American Cyanamid, feed their hogs on concentrated grain from Central Soya, and sow their next corn crop with the help of a revolving loan from Continental Illinois Bank and Trust Co.

Since the 1940s, agriculture has 'become completely penetrated by capital' and has changed almost beyond recognition (Lewontin & Berlan, 1986). This development can be summed up as the result of three closely related processes. *First*, a set of technological changes related to mechanisation, fertilisers and biotechnological manipulation of plants and animals. *Second*, an organisational restructuring related to new divisions of labour. *Third*, an increasing and ever-tighter subjection of agriculture to market forces as a result of the Green Revolution, the logistics revolution and the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s. Let us take a closer look at these three trends, beginning with the technological changes.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the German chemists Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch developed a method—the so-called Haber-Bosch process—for artificially fixating nitrogen from atmospheric gasses. Nitrogen is one of the essential soil nutrients needed for plants to grow (and for life in general), and the inability to devise effective methods for fixating it in a form absorbable by plants was a crucial impediment for attempts to increase land productivity in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Benanav, 2015, p. 117ff). The development of the Haber-Bosch process was thus 'a break-through of world-historical significance', as it made possible the production of synthetic fertilisers, which led to tremendous productivity gains (Benanav, 2015, p. 126; Weis, 2007, p. 55f). The rapid dissemination of synthetic fertilisers after World War II effectively overcame the impediment of productivity increases by traditional, organic methods for restoring soil fertility. At the same time, another hugely important technological development gathered pace: the mechanisation and automation of production processes made possible by the introduction of tractors, combine harvesters and other machines. These machines greatly reduced the need for animal traction as well as human

labour.¹⁷ To cite just one example, Bret Wallach (2015, p. 203f) reports that ‘James G Boswell II, until his death in 2009 one of the biggest cotton producers in the United States, had once employed 5,000 cotton pickers. In his lifetime they were replaced by a hundred machine operators who picked Boswell’s 150,000 California acres’. As Aaron Benanav notes, these two crucial technological breakthroughs—synthetic fertilisers and mechanisation—amounted to ‘a double revolution [which] transformed farms and feed-lots into *open-air factories*’ (Benanav, 2015, p. 114). Agriculture finally caught up with industry—or rather, gradually *became* a branch of industry—and the wave of real subsumption resulted in massive productivity growth as well as ecological destruction. The double revolution led to increasing specialisation and the spread of monocultural production, which in turn made farming vulnerable to pests, thereby making it necessary to develop new forms of pesticides (Benanav, 2015, p. 139; Lewontin, 2000, p. 97). As Tony Weis (2007, p. 57) explains, ‘[t]he rise of agro-chemicals revolutionized the control of insects, weeds and fungi, replacing the need for on-farm diversity and labour-intensive ecological management with a new normative objective: biological standardization’.

Alongside the development and dissemination of synthetic fertilisers and mechanisation, another revolutionary leap forward in the ability to subjugate the refractory hand of nature took place in the field of biotechnology. This was partly a result of the need to develop plants that were not only capable of absorbing large amounts of synthetic fertiliser but also fitted the new machines used for harvesting and threshing (Mazoyer & Roudart, 2006, p. 386ff). Humans have always altered nature through selective breeding of plants and animals, so in a sense, biotechnology is as old as agriculture itself (or, in the case of domestication of animals, even older). Nevertheless, the biotechnological advances achieved in the course of the first half of the 20th century represents a profound rupture in the history of plant breeding. This is where we find some of the most stunning examples of the real subsumption of nature. In a process similar to the replacement of craft knowledge with science in 19th century industrial production, plant breeding went from being a farming practice to a complicated, scientific undertaking. At first, research was—at least in the US, which was at the forefront of this development—mainly conducted by the state, but eventually plant breeding came to be completely dominated by agro-business (Kloppenburger, 2004).

¹⁷ See Benanav (2015, p. 134ff), Lewontin (2000, p. 97), Lewontin & Berlan (1986), Mazoyer & Roudart (2006, Chapters 9, 10).

Today, farmers are compelled to buy seeds from transnational corporations (agro-TNCs), such as Monsanto, in order to remain competitive.

In its attempt to commercialise plant breeding, capital has always had to struggle with a powerful expression of the autonomy of nature: the ability of plants to reproduce. This radically undermines the dependence of farmers upon seed companies. If a seed grows into a plant with the ability to reproduce, ‘the seed company has provided the farmer with a free good’ (Lewontin, 2000, p. 98). The double nature of the plant as both a product and a means of production represents a serious biological obstacle for capital (Kloppenburg, 2004, p. 10f). ‘Capital has’, as Jack Kloppenburg (2004, p. 11) notes in his study of the political economy of the seed, ‘pursued two distinct but intersecting routes’ to overcome this barrier. One option is to impose the commodity form on seeds by means of legislation. By obtaining patent rights on seeds and installing DNA fingerprints in them, agrobusinesses can legally prevent farmers from exploiting the ability of seeds to reproduce, despite it being technically possible. Another option—one which has been pursued by capital with great success—is to genetically modify seeds in order to make their reproduction impossible. This was first achieved with the development of hybrid plants in the 1930s. Although hybrid plants do have the ability to reproduce, their progeny ‘exhibits a considerable reduction in yield’ (Kloppenburg, 2004, p. 93; see also Lewontin, 2000, p. 98f). Farmers are therefore obliged to return to seed companies every year, and, in this way, hybridisation ‘opened to capital a whole new frontier of accumulation’ (Kloppenburg, 2004, p. 11). It turned out, however, that hybridisation had a number of technical limitations, chief among which is that the method cannot be applied to a number of important crops, such as soybeans and wheat (Lewontin, 2000, p. 99). Another major step in the commercialisation of seeds was the development and widespread adoption of genetically modified crops from the 1990s onwards—the most well-known example is the soybeans developed by Monsanto, which are only compatible with their herbicide Roundup (Weis, 2007, p. 73ff; Kloppenburg, 2004, Chapter 11). In this way, farmers are forced to buy seeds and chemicals from agro-TNCs. A further step in the real subsumption of nature was achieved with the development of so-called genetic use restriction technology (GURT), or ‘terminator’ technology, as it is sometimes called: *seeds which produce completely sterile plants*. The first patent for such ‘suicide seeds’ was issued in 1998, but so far the technology has been so controversial that its use

has been politically blocked.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, however, there is a continued interest in and development of this technology in agrobusiness; a fact which demonstrates that at least some corporations believe that the ban will eventually be lifted (Lombardo, 2014). In contrast to hybridisation, terminator technology is applicable to all crops, so if this technology is ever put to use, it means that ‘at one blow, the problem of capitalist seed production [...] has been solved’ (Lewontin, 2000, p. 102; Middendorf, Skladny, Ransom, & Busch, 2000, p. 112). Farmers would then be completely dependent upon seed companies.

These biotechnological ‘improvements’ provide us with an excellent and concrete example of how the mute compulsion of capital is enhanced by the material restructuring of processes necessary for social reproduction to take place—in this case, the material restructuring of the biological properties of plants. As Kloppenburg (2004, p. 201) explains, a seed is essentially:

a packet of genetic information, an envelope containing a DNA message. In that message are encoded the templates for the subsequent development of the mature plant. The content of the code crucially shapes the manner in which the growing plant responds to its environment. Insofar as biotechnology permits specific and detailed ‘reprogramming’ of the genetic code, *the seed, as embodied information, becomes the nexus of control over the determination and shape of the entire crop production process.*

Here, the real subsumption of nature really becomes palpable. Similar to the way in which the capitalist division of labour tends to create workers whose labour-power is useless outside of the mediations of capital, commercial biotechnology aims at inscribing the logic of valorisation into the genetic code of the seed, so that the plant cannot grow without the mediations of capital. Biotechnology thus provides a good example of the relation between economic and coercive power. As long as plants can reproduce, capital has to rely on patent rights, and thereby the coercive power of the state. The case of hybrid seeds, GMOs and terminator technology demonstrates how the economic power of capital can replace the violence of the state by means of technology. If suicide seeds are ever released, it would, as Tony Weis (2007, p. 75) eloquently puts it, ‘shift the *seed as commodity* from a more

¹⁸ See Kloppenburg (2004, p. 319ff), Weis (2007, p. 75), Lewontin (2000, p. 100f) and Lombardo (2014).

tenuous *scientific-legal conception*, where it can be contested in various ways (e.g. saving seeds, challenging patents), to a *biophysical attribute* whereby their annual purchase is simply irresistible'. Here we see one dimension of what it means to say that mute compulsion is a form of power which operates by means of the restructuring of the material conditions of social reproduction; capitalist biotechnology *inscribes the logic of valorisation into the biophysical structure of plants*. It thereby becomes unnecessary for agro-businesses to inspect fields and (threaten to) sue farmers; instead, they simply relegate their power to the seeds. Note that this is not just a techno-dystopian future scenario; hybrid seeds achieved this already in the 1930s, GMO crops accelerated the materialisation of the commodity form in the 1990s, and the only thing that prevents a truly nightmarish rolling out of terminator technology is resistance.

The real subsumption of nature by means of biotechnology has been most dramatic in the field of plant engineering but it also takes place in the bodies of animals in meat- and dairy industries. Breeding, growth hormones, genetic engineering and antibiotics have substantially increased productivity in livestock production. For example, cows produce more milk than ever before, and production time for salmons has been reduced from three years to a year and a half (Holt-Giménez, 2017, p. 79). The perhaps most spectacular example is broilers. As Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore (2017, p. 3) explain, '[t]oday's birds are the result of intensive post-World War II efforts drawing on genetic material sourced freely from the most profitable fowl. That bird can barely walk, reaches maturity in weeks, has an oversize breast, and is reared and slaughtered in geologically significant quantities' (see also Weis, 2007, p. 60). The productivity-gains achieved in crop production freed up land for animal feed, which in turn led to cheapening of meat and, what Weis (2007, p. 17) calls, the 'meatification' of diets in the second half of the 20th century, 'implying a near-doubling of the meat consumption in the average diet of every single person on earth amid a soaring human population'. As with the production of crops, this development has dramatically increased the dependency of producers upon providers of external inputs.

The *second* major process which has revolutionised agriculture since the middle of the 20th century is a re-structuring of the division of labour. Until well into the 20th century, agriculture remained a 'closed system' in which farms generally produced their own means of production (Benanav, 2015, p. 123). The technological developments described in the preceding paragraphs changed that completely, since it made farming dependent upon a

wide array of inputs which had to be bought on the market: machinery, fuel, seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones etc. In a remarkably prescient passage in the *Grundrisse*, Marx anticipated this development:

if agriculture itself rests on scientific activities—if it requires machinery, chemical fertilizer acquired through trade, seeds from distant countries etc., and if rural, patriarchal manufacture has already vanished [...] then the machine-making factory, external trade, crafts etc., appear as *needs* for agriculture. [...] in this case, agriculture no longer finds the natural conditions of its own production within itself, naturally, arisen, spontaneous, and ready at hand, but these exist as an independent industry separate from it. (G: 527)

As Marx goes on to add, ‘[t]his pulling-away of the natural ground from the conditions of every industry, and *this transfer of its conditions of production outside of itself*, into a general context’ is an immanent tendency of capital (G: 528. Emphasis added). And this is, indeed, precisely what took place with an accelerating pace throughout the 20th century. As Lewontin (2000, p. 94f) points out, this development makes it necessary to distinguish between *farming* and *agrobusiness*. Farming is ‘the physical process of turning inputs like seed, feed, water, fertilizers, and pesticides into products like wheat, potatoes, and cattle on a specific site, the farm, using soil, labor, and machinery’. Agrobusiness, on the other hand, is a broader category which, in addition to farming, includes all of the processes which precede and follows farming (production of inputs and processing of outputs). Farming is by nature quite impervious to the logic of capital. Despite enlisting science in its service, capital has never been able to completely eliminate the irregularities of nature—far from it. Turnover times are generally difficult to reduce, and things like the weather, the climate and diseases cause sudden interruptions that are very difficult to prevent. In addition to this, agricultural production is spatially fixed, requires large investments in sunk capital, provides limited opportunities for economies of scale and requires labour processes that are difficult to monitor and control (Lewontin, 2000, p. 95).¹⁹ For these and other reasons, the farming part of agricultural production is not that attractive for capital. The strategy pursued by capital has therefore been to empty

¹⁹ For discussions of these and other obstacles to the logic of capital posed by the nature of agriculture, see Kloppenburg (2004, p. 27ff), S. A. Mann & Dickinson (1978), Mooney (1982) and Perelman (1979).

farming of as many aspect of the production process as possible and turn them into industrial production processes. Farmers are thereby reduced to a kind of subcontractors or ‘putting out’ workers, who might own their means of production but are nevertheless completely dominated by the agrobusinesses who provide them with inputs and purchase their outputs (Lewontin, 2000, p. 105). Farming is still dominated by small producers, but they have gradually been reduced to an ancillary in a system of production dominated by input-producing companies on the one hand and distributors, retailers and food-processing companies on the other (Weis, 2007, pp. 29, 70ff, 81; Lewontin & Berlan, 1986; Bernes, 2018, p. 352). The deeply paradoxical thing here is that what must count as one the absolutely most crucial processes in the reproduction of social life, namely farming, has been reduced to a kind of leftover or an troublesome but regrettably necessary task. Here, the nature of capitalism becomes plain for everyone to see: ‘Here, production appears only as necessary mediation, in reality a necessary evil for the purpose of making money’ (II.11: 31).

The *third* major trend in capital’s restructuring of agriculture over the course of the last century is its *global expansion*. All over the world, and especially in the global south, traditional forms of subsistence farming have been replaced by industrialised production for the market. Enormous numbers of people who were hitherto at least partially shielded from the market are now exposed to its vagaries (Araghi, 2000; Benanav, 2015). The creation of market dependence has taken many forms, among them ‘the promise of higher incomes [...] the pulverization of holdings through population growth, or expropriation by landlords’ (Benanav, 2015, p. 111). As in early modern England, violence has often played the most prominent role in this, for example in the form of US-backed military coups against governments planning to introduce progressive land reforms (Weis, 2007, p. 97f).

One of the most important drivers of proletarianisation of peasants in the global south was the so-called Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Led by the US government and American foundations (Ford and Rockefeller), this ‘revolution’ exported the industrial agricultural model based on high-yield crops, hybrid seeds, irrigation, synthetic fertiliser, pesticides and machinery to countries in Latin America, Asia and, to a lesser extent, Africa (H. M. Cleaver, 1972; Shiva, 1991; Weis, 2007, p. 106ff; Kloppenburg, 2004, p. 157ff). Peasants were made dependent upon commercial inputs, and production was redirected towards export of cash crops and livestock products (Araghi, 2000, p. 149). Smallholders without the resources to make

this transition were mostly wiped out (Holt-Giménez, 2017, p. 48; Weis, 2007, p. 108). The Green Revolution thus resulted in a considerably tighter integration of peasants of the global south into the world market and therefore also a considerable increase in the reach of the economic power of capital.

When considering the dynamics of the agricultural sector, it is always important to bear in mind what is commonly referred to as Engel's law, i.e., the fact that people tend to spend a smaller part of their income on food as their income rises—or, in other words, that there is a low income elasticity of demand for agricultural products (Benanav, 2015, p. 141ff). Combined with the immense productivity increases brought about by the global industrialisation of agriculture, this led to a persistent pattern of falling prices of agricultural goods throughout the 20th century (Benanav, 2015, p. 140ff). This increased competitive pressures among farmers, who had already been enmeshed in 'complex and ever more despatialized corporate webs' (Weis, 2007, p. 162). 'The price mechanism, that juggernaut of the capitalist mode of production, smashed its way through the agricultural sector, irrespective of the policy regime in place', as Benanav (2015, p. 173) aptly puts it. Many countries of the global south were forced to take on enormous debts, which—combined with the Volcker Shock of 1979—set the scene for the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the 1980s, through which capital's grip on the global food system was tightened even more.²⁰ Under the direction of the IMF and the World Bank, 'a similar package of reforms was', as Weis (2007, p. 118) explains, 'stamped upon every debtor nation, generally including: trade and investment liberalization; export promotion; currency devaluation; fiscal austerity; price and wage deregulation; the privatization of state services and enterprises; and the assurance of private property rights'. SAPs accelerated tendencies that were already well underway, partly as a result of the Green Revolution (Benanav, 2015, p. 171f). Around the same time, the revolution in logistics—which I will examine in the next section—contributed greatly to securing the conditions for global competition in agriculture. 'Food is logistical now, too', as Jasper Bernes (2018, p. 348) notes: 'Under the coordinative power of the supermarket system, food travels farther than before. But even where source and destination are proximate, the logistics of agricultural inputs—from seeds, to fertilizers, to machinery—are themselves complex and likewise dependent upon long

²⁰ See Araghi (2000, p. 150), Mazoyer & Roudart (2006, p. 471ff) and Benanav (2015, p. 172ff).

supply chains for their production'. The globalisation of industrial agriculture was institutionalised with the establishment of the World Trade Organisation in 1995 and the effectuation of the Agreement on Agriculture, the aim of which is, in the words of Weis (2007, p. 129), 'to entrench and extend the rights of transnational capital' (see McMichael, 2000; Weis, 2007, Chapter 4; Murphy, 2009).

In my run-through of the real subsumption of agriculture, I have focused on those aspects which are immediately relevant as examples of how the economic power of capital works. It should also be noted, however, that this development has led to immense ecological destruction in the form of pollution, reduction of biodiversity, soil erosion, unforeseen consequences of genetic modifications and tremendous increases of greenhouse gas emissions from petrol-fuelled machinery, transportation, synthetic fertiliser and the meatification of diets.²¹ Another important consequence of the agricultural trends of the last century is the massive and global displacement of rural populations, large parts of which have ended up as un- or underemployed informal workers in the ever-growing urban slums of the global south (Benanav, 2015, Chapter 3)—a topic I will come back to in the next chapter, although on a higher level of abstraction.

In order to understand how the trends described in the preceding pages affects the power of capital, it is important to bear in mind that agriculture has a very special status in all societies. Regardless of how small a percentage of GDP it accounts for, or how small a percentage of the labour force it employs, agriculture remains the sector in which the most basic necessities of life are produced. It possesses a qualitative significance stemming from the circumstance that 'humans must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history"', as Marx and Engels put it (5: 41). Barring the possibility of its abolition—which would require wiping out 90 percent of the global population (Mazoyer & Roudart, 2006, p. 19)—agriculture, and especially farming, is a necessary part of the metabolism of human societies and nature. When capital seizes hold of agriculture and subjects it to real subsumption, it significantly tightens its grip on social reproduction. The logic of capital existed for thousands of years until it managed to enmesh itself in crops, animals and the soil. As Wood (2002, p. 97) emphasises, it was not until the market managed to penetrate the production of food that capitalism proper was born. Despite the agrarian origins of capitalism,

²¹ See Patel & Moore (2017, Chapter 5), Pirani (2018, pp. 72f, 88ff), Shiva (1991) and Weis (2007, p. 28ff).

agricultural production remained resistant to real subsumption for centuries. While capital recorded many victories in its struggle against nature in 18th and 19th century *industry*, the autonomy of plants, animals, the soil, the climate and the weather proved difficult to break. Once real subsumption accelerated, however, its pace and results have been mind-blowing. Capital has remoulded agricultural production on all levels, from the biophysical structure of seeds to international treaties securing the uninhibited reign of agrobusinesses. Biotechnological manipulation has inscribed the commodity form in the raw material of production, and all over the world farmers have been hurled onto a world market sustained by planetary supply chains, financial flows and international institutions. The violent system of colonialism has been replaced by the subjugation of the global south to Western agro-TNCs by means of the mute compulsion of global markets. ‘Agriculture as we know it now is saturated with market relations’, as Bernes (2018, p. 355) puts it. Recall what Marx identified as the crucial thing about formal and real subsumption and power: formal subsumption ‘may be easily dissolved’ (30: 279). Not so with real subsumption. It would have been much easier to make the transition from capitalist to non-capitalist agricultural production a hundred years ago than it is today—and for this reason, the real subsumption of nature and labour in agriculture represents an incredibly important basis of the power of capital in our time.

LOGISTICS

Capital is by definition *expansive*. As we know from chapter four, immanent determinations of capital such as its expansive drive are forced upon individual capitals by their competitive relation to other capitals. Competition compels capitals to seek new outlets for their commodities, and thereby also to strive ‘beyond every spatial barrier’, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse* (524). Or, as the famous line from the *Manifesto* goes: ‘The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe’ (6: 487). Capital’s tendency to tear down spatial barriers to accumulation is, however, not only the result of its need for new outlets for commodities, it has other causes as well. Chief among these is the need to find ways of curbing the power of workers: an increase in capital mobility amounts to a fusion of labour markets, which increases competition among workers and makes it easier to discipline them. ‘All improvements in the means of communication’, Marx explains, ‘facilitate the competition of workers in different localities’ (6: 423). The ability of relocate production,

and thereby jobs, also puts pressure on the state; in order to avoid unemployment, loss of tax revenues and increases in public expenditures, states are compelled to secure a so-called business-friendly environment. In short: *mobility is power*, and means of transportation and communication are *weapons* (C1: 579).

Capital is always on the run, not only from disobedient workers, disobedient governments and disobedient nature, but also from itself, i.e., its tendency to overproduction, which acts as a powerful impetus towards the expansion of markets. We should be careful, however, to avoid the claim that the ideal world of capital would be a frictionless space of absolute mobility. Relative immobility of *labour-power* is often advantageous for capital, since it is generally easier to keep wages low if the unemployed are unable to migrate. If production is spatially fixed, however, a highly mobile labour force will often be beneficial for capital, especially if demand for labour varies with the seasons. For certain forms of agricultural production (e.g. fruit production), the ideal labour force is thus a free-floating surplus population of migrants. In short, ‘the fundamental tensions and ambivalences on the part of capital’ generate, as Harvey (2006, p. 384) puts it, ‘countervailing influences over the geographical mobility of labour-power, independently of the will of the workers themselves’. So, while the logic of capital requires *money and commodities* to move freely, it sometimes requires the movement of *labour-power* to be constrained.

Capital is a movement in which value alternately takes on the form of *money* and *commodities*. In recent years, a vast amount of literature has been devoted to the study of how the global mobility of *money* has shaped the neoliberal epoch. Combined with new information technologies, financial deregulation and easy credit, the exhaustion of the post-war boom led to a financialisation of the global economy, which is now dominated by an ever-growing financial sector in which enormous amounts of obscure financial instruments are incessantly traded by algorithms. The literature on financialisation has uncovered many important aspects of contemporary capitalism, including the encroachment of finance on everyday life by means of consumer credit, mortgages, and student debt. It has also, however, contributed to the widespread idea that contemporary capitalism has disappeared into an immaterial ether of symbols, information, signs, narratives and algorithms. What often gets lost in discussions about financialisation is the acceleration in the circulation of *physical commodities* which has taken place alongside the acceleration of the circulation of money (Danyluk, 2018, p.

632). Neoliberal financialisation *is* an extremely important feature of contemporary capitalism, but it is only one aspect of it. Another and equally important aspect is the so-called logistics revolution, which began roughly around the same time as the wave of financialisation, as the ‘hidden counterpart’ of the latter (Bernes, 2013, p. 182f).

Before examining the logistics revolution, however, I first want to take a brief look at Marx’s thoughts on what is today known as logistics. The first thing to notice is that, from very early on in his writings, Marx was extremely attentive to the *global* nature of capitalism and its connection to colonialism and world trade (see e.g. 5: 69f; I.5: 81ff; 6: 485ff; C1: 918f). As Lucia Pradella (2015) has convincingly demonstrated, Marx understood British capitalism as a global and expansive system and thereby rejected methodological nationalism, i.e., taking the nation-state as the point of departure and basic unit of analysis. Marx was also very attentive to developments in transportation and communication—which is not surprising, given that he lived in a time where ‘the necessary tendency of capital to strive to equate circulation time to 0’ expressed itself in the spread of railways, steamboats and telegraphs (G: 629; see also C2: 326ff; 32: 419f; C1: 506ff).

Transportation occupies a peculiar position in the systematic structure of Marx’s critique of political economy. In the various drafts for his unfinished project, Marx generally deals with transportation in the sections devoted to the *circulation* of capital. At the same time, however, he consistently argues that transport should be regarded as a part of the *production process* (G: 534; 33: 38; 34: 145; II.4.1: 203; C2: 135). The rationale behind this is that *location* is a part of the use value of a commodity: the product is not really a commodity until it is actually available on the market (G: 534, 635, 672; 32: 421). For this reason, Marx argues that the production process encompasses everything that is today called the supply chain, including warehousing, distribution and retail (33: 41).

Transportation is thus ‘the continuation of a production process *within* the circulation process and *for* the circulation process’ (C2: 229). This takes place in *time* and *space*. In capitalism, however, spatiality is dissolved into ‘a merely *temporal* moment’ (II.4.1: 203). Space is reduced to time in the sense that distance matters for capital only because it takes time to cross it, which is why Marx notes that ‘[t]he spatial determination itself here appears as a *temporal determination* [*Zeitbestimmung*]’ (II.4.1: 203). Capital’s tendency to reduce turnover time therefore takes the form of an ‘annihilation of space through time’ (G: 524). This is not only a matter of *speed* in a narrow sense

but also of a certain *regularity* of time. Capital not only needs transport to be fast, it also needs it to be regular, reliable and scheduled.

Marx's attentiveness to the development of means of transport and communication as a result of capital's expansive drive serves as a useful reminder that recent phenomena such as containerisation, intermodalism and just-in-time (JIT) production are nothing but contemporary incarnations of a dynamic as old as capitalism itself. In *Capital*, Marx quotes a London factory owner to exemplify the ramifications of railways and telegraphs:

The extension of the railway system throughout the country has tended very much to encourage giving short notice. Purchasers now come up from Glasgow, Manchester, and Edinburgh once every fortnight or so to the wholesale city warehouses which we supply, and give small orders requiring immediate execution, instead of buying from stock as they used to do. Years ago we were always able to work in the slack times so as to meet the demand of the next season, but now no one can say beforehand what will be in demand then. (C1: 608)

If capital is to be mobile, it needs an *infrastructure*: roads, canals, rails, ports, airports etc. Such projects require large investments in sunk capital and are usually too risky or unprofitable to be attractive for individual capitals. Infrastructure forms a part what Marx called the 'general conditions of production', in contradistinction to the conditions of particular capitals or fractions of capital. Capital has to shift such burdens 'on to the shoulders of the state,' since the latter is the only institution that possesses 'the privilege and will to force the totality' (G: 531).²² An early example of this is the construction of canal systems in the US in the 1820s and 1830s, where new steamboats and growth in trade required investments too costly and risky for individual capitals to undertake (Chandler, 2002, p. 33f).

To sum up, three characteristics of Marx's analysis of logistics stands out. *First*, it traces the drive to improve transportation and communication technology to the fundamental relations of production characteristic of capitalism. *Second*, it throws light on the relation between capital and the state by pointing out that capital relies on certain conditions of production which cannot be secured by individual capitals. *Third*, it breaks with the view of

²² See Harvey (2006, p. 378ff). The concepts of infrastructure and the 'general conditions of production' were central in the German state derivation debates of the 1970s. See e.g. Altvater (1978), Hirsch (1978) and Läßle (1973).

logistics as simply a matter of cost reduction; it conceives of logistics as a *weapon*, as a mechanism for domination.

A brief look at the history of capitalism demonstrates its intimate connection to the annihilation of space through time. Initially it was based on transport technology developed under pre-capitalist modes of production. Without the improvement in ship design achieved in the 15th and 16th centuries, for example, colonisation would have been difficult, if not impossible. During the 18th century, ocean freight rates declined dramatically due to technological as well as organisational changes (Harley, 1988; North, 1958). The 19th century witnessed the emergence of means of transportation and communication which had ‘no precedent for regularity, for the capacity to transport vast quantities of goods and numbers of people, and above all, for speed: the railway, the steamship, the telegraph’ (Hobsbawm, 2004, p. 68). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the Panama Canal in 1914 significantly contributed to the eradication of spatial barriers to world trade.²³ The invention and dissemination of the internal combustion engine led to the proliferation of trucking, which became a serious competitor to railways from the 1920s onwards (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 96f; Levinson, 2016, p. 205).

Despite all of these important advances, there was still considerable room for improvements in the transport sector by the middle of the 20th century. The field of business logistics slowly began to emerge in the US in the 1950s and 1960s, but the incentive to systematically reduce costs and increase productivity in transport was dampened by the relative high profit rates in the post-war boom (W. B. Allen, 1997, p. 108; Cowen, 2014, Chapter 1). Moving freight by ship in the 1950s ‘was still a hugely complicated project’, as break bulk cargo had to be loaded and unloaded manually by gangs of unionised dock workers (Levinson, 2016, p. 21). The situation began to change in the 1970s, as the post-war boom came to an end while waves of social unrest spread in the leading capitalist countries. Intensified competition, falling rates of profit and labour militancy provided companies with powerful incentives to seek new ways to discipline labour and cut costs, and one of the results of this endeavour was the so-called logistics revolution. But what *is* logistics? As Charmaine Chua (2017, p. 169) notes, ‘it is not altogether clear how one should define the vast behemoth that has come to be known as “logistics”’. The term usually refers to ‘the management of the entire supply chain’ (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 3), and in this sense it can

²³ See Engels’s comments in volume three of *Capital* (37: 75).

refer to a distinctive branch of industry—i.e., companies specialising in logistics—or a set of activities within companies, or both. In his excellent essay on contemporary logistics, Bernes (2013, p. 180) describes it as:

the active power to coordinate and choreograph, the power to conjoin and split flows; to speed up and slow down; to change the type of commodity produced and its origin and destination point; and, finally, to collect and distribute knowledge about the production, movement and sale of commodities as they stream across the grid.

As is often pointed out in the critical literature on this topic, modern logistics in part originates in the military, where the coordination of the flow of supplies to the front has been a concern at least since armies became so large that the traditional plundering of local populations became an unfeasible strategy for the provision of food and other necessities (Creveld, 2004). The historical connection between military and commercial logistics is expressed clearly in what is perhaps the most important piece of technology in modern logistics: *the standard container*. The early development of what eventually became one of the most salient symbols of globalisation began in the US in the mid-1950s, but it was only after the American military decided to use it to clean up the logistical chaos of the Vietnam War that the containerisation of world trade began to accelerate.²⁴ Restructuring the global system of transportation to make it fit the container was a huge task requiring enormous investments in ports and ships, deregulation of the transport sector and standardisation of container designs. Once this infrastructure was in place, however, the scene was set for a revolution of transportation. The rise in oil prices throughout the 1970s prevented the container from unfolding its full potential, but from the end of the decade ‘the real cost of shipping goods internationally started to fall rapidly’ (Levinson, 2016, p. 341). This trend continued to accelerate in the 1980s, where the deregulation of the American transport industry gave rise to so-called ‘intermodal’ transportation, i.e., transportation involving direct transfers of containers between ships, trucks and trains, allowing ‘for the door-to-door movement of cargo

²⁴ The history of the container is told in Marc Levinson’s *The Box*—an informative and an interesting read provided that the reader is able to abstract from the typically bourgeois mix of entrepreneurial ideology, idealism and disdain for ignorant dock workers.

on a single bill of lading' (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 53; Levinson, 2016, p. 351; Cowen, 2014, p. 41ff).

The logistics revolution has profoundly changed the landscape of global production. Today, more than 80 percent of the volume and more than 70 percent of the value of global trade is transported by ship (UNCTAD, 2017, p. x). Every day enormous amounts of commodities flow through increasingly automated mega-ports; in 2017, a staggering 40.230.000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) were handled by the busiest port in the world: the port of Shanghai (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 73). In 1973, when containerisation was already well underway, American, Asian and European containerships transported 4 million TEUs. Ten years later, in 1983, this number had tripled to 12 million (Cowen, 2014, p. 57). In 2017, the total number of TEUs flowing through the ports of the world reached an astounding *709 million* (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 71). Despite chronic overcapacity, shipping companies continue to build ever-larger ships in order to face up to intense competition. Levinson (2016, p. 388) notes that in 2005, a ship with a capacity of 8.000 TEUs was 'considered unusually large'. Twelve years later, in 2017, the largest ships reached a capacity of 21.413 TEUs. These ships are unloaded in enormous deep water ports where longshoremen have been replaced with automated vehicles and cranes stacking containers equipped with unique ISO-codes (Levinson, 2016, p. 372ff). These ports, many of which are partly or completely privatised, compete for ships and 'behave more or less like private, profit-making corporations' (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 55).

As a result of these trends, the historically radical and militant dockworkers' unions have been seriously weakened. Edna Bonacich and Jake B. Wilson (2008, p. 15) summarise the impact of the logistics revolution on workers in this way: 'increased contingency, weakened unions, racialization, and lowered labor standards' (see also Cowen, 2014, p. 41ff; Reifer, 2004). This is true not only of dockworkers but also of workers in railway and trucking industries. The real significance of the logistics revolution, however, lies not in its impact on the shipping industry viewed in isolation but in its effects on the entire structure of the global economy (Levinson, 2016, p. 330). Containerisation and intermodalism was, along with computerisation, a crucial precondition for the emergence and dissemination of just-in-time production: cheap, fast and precise transportation made it possible for manufacturers to move away from the traditional, vertically integrated company structure with large inventories of raw materials and finished products ('just-in-case' production, as Tony Smith (2000) calls it) in order to focus on their

core operations in a network of horizontally integrated production (Bernes, 2013, p. 78; Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 4; Levinson, 2016, p. 356ff). Marx's claim that transportation should be regarded as a part of the production process has never been as relevant as it is today, where intermediate products make up the bulk of internationally traded goods. Commodities are, as Deborah Cowen (2014, p. 2) puts it, 'manufactured *across logistics space* rather than in singular place'. This constant flow of commodities has reduced inventory levels, and the remaining warehouses and distribution gradually replace workers with robots handling palleted goods with barcodes and RFID-tags (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 123ff; Levinson, 2016, p. 358). The modern supply chain has also led to a shift of power from producers to large retailers, who systematically collect data in order to closely monitor customers and control the entire supply chain (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008, p. 6ff).²⁵

In recent years a growing body of critical literature has emphasised the intimate connection between logistics and power (Chua, Danyluk, Cowen, & Khalili, 2018, p. 621). It is increasingly clear that logistics is 'the invisible heart of the new geography of power in the global economy', as Thomas Reifer (2004, p. 18) puts it. Most of this literature is, however, hampered by a number of weaknesses relating to their focus as well as their theoretical framework. Many studies focus more or less exclusively on the impact of the logistics revolution *within* the logistics sector, i.e., how it has undermined the power of workers employed in this sector or how it has led to a shift of power from producers to retailers.²⁶ This is certainly an important part of the story, but if we want to understand the true extent of the impact of the logistics revolution on the balance of forces on a more general level, we also have to take into consideration its effects *outside* of the sector itself. Some of these studies focus more specifically on capital's increasing reliance on racialized

²⁵ See also Starosta's (2010a, 2010b) Marxian analysis of global supply chains. For an analysis of Wal-Mart, see LeCavalier (2016). The rise of retailer power is overlooked by Neilson (2012, p. 328), who claims that supply chains imply 'a decentralization of the decision-making practices that apply to strategy and tactics'. While the move away from vertically integrated firms to modern lean production has involved a form of diffusion of functions, this has not led to a decentralisation of power. We should rather follow Bennett Harrison and talk of 'the "concentration without centralisation" of corporate authority' (in Bernes, 2013, p. 179).

²⁶ See Bonacich (2003), Bonacich & Wilson (2008), Cowen (2014), Reifer (2004) and Tsing (2009).

and female low-wage workers in this sector.²⁷ Anna Tsing (2009, p. 171) argues that ‘supply chain capitalism’ relies on ‘social-economic niches’ which are ‘reproduced in performances of cultural identity’. This leads her to rehearse an old criticism of Marxism popular among post-colonial theorists, namely that workers in contemporary supply chain capitalism are unable to ‘negotiate the wage in the manner imagined in much of both Marxist and neo-classical economics: that is, as abstract “labor,” without the obstacles of these ‘cultural’ factors’ (Tsing, 2009, p. 158). As Vivek Chibber has demonstrated, this is simply a misreading of Marx’s analysis. The concept of abstract labour has nothing to do with the cultural identity of workers, and Marx’s claims about the universalising drive of capital does not in any way imply the claim that capital tends to eradicate cultural differences. In fact, Marx’s analysis of capital demonstrates why it is always advantageous for capital to reproduce and utilise cultural identities and hierarchies (Chibber, 2013, Chapter 6).²⁸ It also demonstrates that this production of difference—which Tsing erroneously perceives as an example of the irrelevance of the Marxian analysis of capitalism—is not specific to the logistics sector. In other words, the analysis of the reproduction of cultural identities among workers employed in the logistics sector actually tells us something about the logic of capital as such but it tells nothing about *logistics* specifically.

As previously mentioned, many critical scholars of the logistics revolution emphasise the proximity between military and commercial logistics (Reifer, 2004; B. Neilson, 2012; Cowen, 2014). They interpret the military origins of modern logistics as an indication of the ‘precarity of the distinction between “civilian” and “military”’, ‘the militarization of society’, the ‘intersection between U.S. military and corporate power’ or ‘the intimate relationship between state violence and commercial trade in the modern era’ (Cowen, 2014, p. 4; B. Neilson, 2012, p. 323; Reifer, 2004, p. 25; Chua et al., 2018, p. 620). Although such claims seem to be motivated by a sympathetic impulse—namely to undermine the idea of international trade as a peaceful execution of voluntary market transactions—they rely on questionable assumptions and inadvertently obscure the nature of the kind of power executed by means of logistics. These problems can be summed up in three points. *First*, while it might be true that business logistics did not emerge as

²⁷ Reifer (2004, pp. 15, 23f), Tsing (2009), Bonacich & Wilson (2008), Alimahomed-Wilson (2016).

²⁸ Brett Neilson (2012, p. 336), referring to Tsing and Chakrabarty, commits the same mistake.

a concept and an independent field until the post-World War II era, the systematic effort to improve transportation and secure an effective management of supply chains have, as previously noted, been a part of capitalism from the beginning. The preoccupation with the martial origins of logistics leads some scholars to convey the impression that capitalism has no history of revolutionising the means of transportation prior to the 1950s, when logistics migrated from the military to business (e.g. Chua et al., 2018; Cowen, 2014). *Second*, the origin of a technology does not necessarily tell us anything about its function and effects when transposed from one social context to another. Take money as an example: it existed for thousands of years before capitalism emerged, but once that happened, the social role of money fundamentally changed. To argue that the commercial adoption of a technology originating in the military signals a militarisation of society is to subscribe to an essentialist understanding of technology in which origin always determines function and effect, regardless of the social context. *Third*, as I will come back to, logistics should be understood as a part of the *economic power* of capital. Military power is perhaps *the* paradigmatic form of the *violent, coercive power* of the state. The attempt to understand the logistics of capital through the lens of warfare obscures the difference between the violent logic of military power and the mute compulsion of capital.

Another problem with previous attempts to understand the power of logistics is the widespread inability to identify the driving force behind the logistics revolution, i.e., to *explain* why it took (and still takes) place (Danyluk, 2018, p. 631). Everyone more or less agrees that it has to do with ‘capitalism’, ‘the market’ or ‘commercial interests’, but these terms are rarely explained or defined. This seems to be partly a result of the theoretical frameworks through which these scholars try to decipher the phenomenon of logistics. One popular framework is Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2010) claim that logistics is a ‘biopolitical technology central to managing the movement of labour and commodities’. Niccolò Cuppini, Mattia Frapporti and Maurilio Pirone (2015, p. 122) likewise hold that logistics is ‘a complex biopolitical apparatus [...], a *dispositif* that produces subjectivity’. However, they never really explain why nor what it means.²⁹ As we saw in chapter three, biopolitics is a concept intended to capture the way in which the modern state assumes the management of the biological body of the population as one of its tasks. It is not immediately

²⁹ Neilson (2012) refers to Julian Reid’s (2009) Foucault-inspired concept of ‘logistical life’. This does not, however, have anything to do with capitalism.

clear what this has to do with capitalist logistics, which is concerned with *commodities* rather than *people* and controlled by *capital* rather than *the state*. But let us give it a try. One might argue that in so far as social reproduction has become dependent upon global supply chains, logistics is ‘not only about circulating *stuff* but about sustaining life’ (Cowen, 2014, p. 3). This is certainly true, but it does not tell us anything specifically about *logistics*; the same could be said of virtually all aspects of the capitalist economy. If we take this as evidence of the ‘biopolitical’ nature of logistics, we end up with a very broad and impoverished concept of biopolitics. Another way to support the interpretation of logistics as a biopolitical apparatus might be to focus on the tension between the flow of commodities and the flow of people. Craig Martin (2012, p. 359) points out that global supply chains aim at ‘the *curtailment* of movement for unsanctioned flows [...] whilst also *facilitating* the movement of sanctioned flows’. The same technology which secures the seamless flow of things also poses a threat for border regimes since it can be exploited by those that capital and the state want to stay immobile. The logistics revolution has thus compelled states to develop new ways of controlling the flow of people across borders (Cowen, 2014, Chapters 2, 4). Controlling migration is certainly one of the characteristic biopolitical tasks of the modern state, so perhaps this provides a basis for the claim about the link between logistics and biopolitics (Foucault, 1998, p. 140; Cowen, 2014, pp. 196–231)? I do not think so. While it seems reasonable to conclude that modern logistics has led to an *intensification* of biopolitical control of migration, this does not merit the conclusion that logistics is *itself* a biopolitical apparatus. Logistics did not emerge as a method for state control of the population; the need for improved means of controlling migration is a *by-product* of the logistics revolution.

Some scholars have attempted to throw some Marxist categories into the Foucauldian mix—and the results are not impressive. Brett Neilson argues that logistics plays a ‘pivotal role’ in ‘negotiating’ the ‘distinction between abstract and living labor’, a distinction he attributes to Marx (B. Neilson, 2012, p. 330f; B. Neilson & Rossiter, 2010). In his view, logistics tends ‘to eliminate the gap between living and abstract labor’ (B. Neilson, 2012, p. 336). This makes no sense: for Marx, abstract labour *is* living labour. The counterpart to living labour is *dead* labour, which refers to products of labour, especially those employed as instruments of labour, such as machines and tools. In capitalism, *living* labour has a double nature: it is simultaneously *concrete* labour producing *use values* and *abstract* labour producing *value*.

Abstract labour is thus *an aspect of living* labour in capitalism. Another misguided attempt to employ Marxist categories to logistics is found in Cuppini, Frapporti and Pirone’s study of struggles in the Po Valley in Italy. Not only do they mistake a quote from Marx for a quote from Roman Rosdolsky and misunderstand the distinction between surplus value and profit, they also come up with the baffling and rather vague claim that in capital’s attempt to reduce turnover time, it has historically ‘worked to reduce mainly circulation time, improving communications with the development of credit systems and so forth’ rather than reducing production time (Cuppini et al., 2015, p. 123). The authors do not seem to realise how controversial their claim is, and they offer no historical evidence for it. If anything, the opposite—that capital has historically tended to focus on the reduction of production time by increasing labour productivity—would be truer. In addition to this, they ascribe to Neilson the idea that ‘logistics has gradually become an integral part of production processes’ without realising that this merely repeats Marx’s most basic argument about transport: that it is a part of the production process.

This is not to say that there is nothing valuable in the critical literature on logistics. On the contrary, many of the studies I have cited—especially the work of Cowen (2014) and Bonacich and Wilson (2008)—offer important insights, despite the flaws just described. In addition to this, two critical studies of the logistics revolution stand out: those of Jasper Bernes (2013) and Martin Danyluk (2018). Both of them identify the logic of capital—and not a martial or biopolitical logic—as the driving force behind the logistics revolution. This enables them to *explain* why there is a systematic drive to revolutionise the means of transportation and communication in the capitalist mode of production, and it also enables them to avoid depicting this drive as something which emerged only after World War II. Bernes and Danyluk are also capable of explaining why the logistics revolution happened when it did: the economic crisis resulting from the exhaustion of the post-war boom alongside increasing labour militancy made it necessary for capital to launch an assault on labour by orchestrating what Harvey calls a ‘spatial fix’ (Danyluk, 2018, p. 640ff; Harvey, 2006, p. 431ff; see also Silver, 2003). Both of them also underline that logistics is not just a matter of reducing costs but also of securing the domination of workers—not only of those employed in the logistics sector, but of workers in all sectors. As Bernes (2013, p. 186) explains, ‘the sophisticated, permutable supply chains make it possible for capital to seek out the lowest wages anywhere in the world

and to play proletarians off of each other. Logistics was therefore one of the key weapons in a decades-long global offensive against labour’.

What I want to add to this is an interpretation of the logistics revolution in light of the theory of the economic power of capital developed in this and the preceding chapters. This allows us to specify what *kind of* power is at stake here. What the logistics revolution has permitted capital to do is to bolster its grip on society without using direct violence and ideology. As I have emphasised several times, my claim is neither that capital relies *exclusively* on the mute compulsion of economic relations nor that it ever could. This also applies to logistics. Infrastructure projects, for example, often involve violent dispossession of those who live where someone wants to build an airport or a highway. Increasing mobility also allows capital to relocate production to countries where violent suppression of labour militancy is more common. Once infrastructural and logistics systems are in place, however, they enable capital to replace violence and ideology with economic power—that is, they allow capital to restructure the material conditions of social reproduction in a manner which tightens its grip on society as whole. This restructuring has at least three dimensions.

First, capital’s power over *workers* is strengthened by the increase in the capacity to relocate production or change subcontractors. This power is not grounded in the capacity of capitalists to employ physical violence nor is it a case of ideological power; it is rather grounded in the ability to relocate production, and thereby to fire workers, i.e., to break the fragile link between proletarian life and its conditions. Capitalism is founded upon the insertion of the logic of valorisation into the gap between life and its conditions, and what the spatial flexibility bestowed upon capital by global supply chains does is to enhance capital’s ability to master this vital link.

Second, increasing spatial flexibility merges and expands markets, and thereby also intensifies competition among capitals as well as among workers. Here, logistics acts as an intensifier of the form of domination springing from the horizontal relations of production. What this tells us is that the logistics revolution has not only enhanced the power of *capitalists over workers*, it has also strengthened the power of *capital over everyone*.

The *third* dimension is the restructuring of the international division of labour. Previously in this chapter, we saw how the real subsumption of labour implies an increasing division of labour within the workplace, with the consequence that capital supplements its appropriation of the *objective* conditions of labour with the appropriation of the *social* conditions of labour. A

similar process takes place on a global level and has been significantly accelerated by the logistics revolution. Similar to the way in which capital ‘seizes labour-power by its roots’ (C1: 481) within the workplace, it seizes local, regional or national economies by their roots and subjects them to the familiar process of fracturing and reassembling: it breaks up production processes and sectors into pieces and spreads their fragments all over the globe in order to reunite them through planetary supply chains. The consequence of this is that the conditions necessary for social reproduction to take place on a local or regional level might be scattered all over the world, with the means for their mediation under the firm control of capital. Logistics thus allows capital to supplement its appropriation of the *objective* and *social* conditions of labour with the appropriation of the *spatial* or *geographical* conditions. This amounts to a kind of *real subsumption*, yet on the level of the global totality rather than on the level of the workplace. As Cowen (2014, p. 109) points out, the ‘process mapping’ used in supply chain management ‘might be understood as a *rescaled motion study* in the interest of *transnational* efficiency. It works at multiple scales: from the scale of the worker’s body to the inter-modal system, aiming to calibrate the former to the latter’. And as we know, real subsumption makes it more difficult to dissolve the stranglehold of capital. Increasing geographical integration of networks of production makes it tremendously difficult to break with capitalism since it increases the scale on which such a transformation would have to take place. As Bernes (2013, p. 197) notes, the logistics revolution tends to create a situation in which ‘any attempt to seize the means of production would require an *immediately global* seizure’.

These three mechanisms of domination, created or intensified by the logistics revolution, all spring from capital’s ability to restructure the material conditions of social reproduction—they form, in other words, a part of the economic power of capital. All of them are simultaneously the *result* of this power and one of its *sources*, that is, they display the same circular structure as the other mechanisms of domination examined in this chapter. Logistics and the infrastructure it relies on are essentially methods of carving the logic of capital into the crust of the earth.

However, ‘where capital goes, conflict goes’, Beverly Silver reminds us (2003, p. 41). As virtually all critical studies of logistics stress, the logistics revolution has not just strengthened the power of capital—it has also made it more *vulnerable*. In 2012, Barack Obama launched a ‘National Strategy for Global Supply Chain Security’ with what sounded almost like an invitation

to anti-capitalist forces: ‘As the global supply chain becomes more complex and global in scope, it is increasingly at risk from disruptions including natural hazards, accidents, and malicious incidents. [...] even localized disruptions can escalate rapidly’ (The White House, 2012). Recent years have seen an increase in forms of protests directly attacking the ‘choke points’ of capital, a trend which has led some scholars and activists to proclaim blockades and sabotage to be the paradigmatic tactics of anti-capitalist resistance in the 21st century.³⁰ Among the most well-known examples are the Occupy movement’s blockade of the port of Oakland in 2011, the ILWU strike on May Day in 2015 (also at the port of Oakland) in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, strikes at Amazon warehouses and the G20 protests in Hamburg in 2017 under the parole ‘Shut Down the Logistics of Capital!’. As the US strategy for global supply chain security demonstrates, governments are well aware of this. All over the world, ports, trucks, highways, railways, sea routes, ships, containers, trains, distribution centres and warehouses are controlled and protected by an increasingly militarised security apparatus (Cowen, 2014, Chapters 2, 4). Does this invalidate my analysis of logistics as something which enhances the power of capital? Should we rather think of capital’s reliance on global supply chains as a sign of its *weakness* i.e., as a ring corner into which resistance has forced it to retreat? No. It is true that every shift of strategy on the part of capital gives rise to new vulnerabilities; every basis for its power is simultaneously a basis for resistance to this power. But *vulnerability* is not the same as *weakness*; vulnerability is *potential* weakness, and there is nothing that guarantees the realisation of this potential. Historically, there are many examples of workers who have successfully taken advantage of being located in strategically important parts of the economy, such as coal miners or railway workers (Mitchell, 2013; Silver, 2003). So far, however, the logistics revolution has failed to produce a general enhancement of proletarian power. While there have been successful examples of proletarians who have managed to take advantage of the vulnerabilities

³⁰ For examples of such protests and discussions of their strategic perspectives, see Alimahomed-Wilson (2016), Alimahomed-Wilson & Ness (2018), Angry Workers of the World (2014), Bernes (2013, 2018), Bonacich (2003), Chua (2017), Cillo & Pradella (2018), Clover (2016), Cuppini, Frapporti & Pirone (2015), Degenerate Communism (2014), Diamanti & Simpson (2018), Moody (2018), Out of the Woods (2014), *Short-Circuit: A Counterlogistics Reader* (n.d.), Silver (2003), Society of Enemies (2011), Srnicek & Williams (2015), The Invisible Committee (2015), Toscano (2011, 2014), Transnational Social Strike (2017), ...ums Ganze! (2017).

created by global supply chains and JIT production in recent years, it seems fair to conclude, *first*, that the neoliberal era has generally enhanced the power of capital at the expense of the power of anti-capitalist forces, and *second*, that the logistics revolution has been a central strategic element in the neoliberal counter-offensive.

A different but related question is whether the contemporary networks of infrastructure and logistics can be ‘repurposed’ or ‘reconfigured’ to other ends than the accumulation of capital. Beginning with a critique of the ‘romantic vision of communitarian sabotage’ advanced by The Invisible Committee, Alberto Toscano (2014) has recently defended the idea that there are no a priori reasons to declare logistical technologies ‘dialectically irrecuperable’. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015, p. 150f) expand on this idea and argue that ‘an efficient and global logistics network’ will be an essential ingredient in the creation of a sustainable, flexible and highly automated postcapitalism.³¹ At the other extreme, we find the romantic insurrectionism of The Invisible Committee, which leaves little room for the ‘re-appropriation’ of anything not organically springing from existential bonds within a revolutionary cell (2015, Chapters 3, 7, 2017, p. 84f). A nuanced argument against ‘the reconfiguration thesis’ is presented by Bernes (2013, p. 194), who reminds us that the ‘fixed capital of the contemporary production regime is designed for the extraction of maximum surplus value; each component part is engineered for insertion into *this* global system’. In other words, we should always remember that the *use value* of some technologies might correspond to a need which exists *only* in a capitalist society—and, according to Bernes, this is precisely the case with capital’s logistics. This does not mean that a post-capitalist society would not be able to use parts of this system or some of the technologies involved (Bernes, 2013, p. 201). Considered as a totality, however, it is ‘a system in which extreme wage differentials are built into the very infrastructure. Without those differentials, most supply-chains would become both wasteful and unnecessary’ (Bernes, 2013, p. 194).

Note that this dispute concerns *logistics* technology, not technology *as such*. As Toscano (2014) notes, he and Bernes ‘broadly agree that there is no a priori way to simply declare certain features of capitalist production and circulation as allowing for communist uses. The test is a practical and political one’. Despite their generally optimistic view on technology, Srnicek and Williams (2015, p. 152) also hold that ‘[t]here is no a priori way to determine the potentials of a technology’. This leads me to the general question of the

³¹ See also Jameson’s (2009, p. 420ff) reading of Wal-Mart as a utopian allegory.

relation between social relations and technology, a question we have encountered several times throughout this chapter. One of the tasks of the analysis of the real subsumption of labour and nature is to reveal the poverty of productive force determinism. Technological development is determined by social relations. As Malm (2018b, p. 176) puts it, with reference to the advent of steam: ‘The relation chose the force, not vice versa’. The history of capitalism is full of ‘roads not taken’, to use David Noble’s (1984) phrase: historical junctures where certain technologies were abandoned, not because they were less productive, but because they were incompatible with capitalist relations of production. In these cases, capitalist relations of production *hindered* the development of the productive forces; technologies were left behind *despite* being cheaper, more productive or more effective, or all of these things.³²

It is not enough, however, to get the *direction* of the causal relation between forces and relations right. We also have to clarify the *strength* of this link, i.e., how tightly bound technologies are to the social relations of which they are results. The task here is to avoid two well-trodden positions: on the one hand, the view that technologies are essentially neutral in the sense that even though they are outcomes of specific sets of social relations, they can always be put to use in other social contexts; and, on the other hand, the technopessimistic view according to which technologies will always carry with them the social relations out of which they emerged, so that their use will inevitably re-erect those social relations. In opposition to both of these positions, we should insist that this question cannot be answered on the level of technology in general. As Melvin Kranzberg (1995, p. 5) puts it: ‘[t]echnology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral’. *Some* technologies can be applied in other social contexts than the ones in which they emerged. Many medical technologies, for example, would be useful in a post-capitalist society despite being the outcome of the quest for profit. On the other hand, some technologies are so intimately linked to capitalist property relations that it is extremely difficult to see how they could possibly be of any use in a non-capitalist context. An example is suicide seeds, the sole purpose of which is to secure that farmers are cut off from control over the crops they grow. Here, we can really say that ‘*relations of production are within the productive forces*’, as Raniero Panzieri (1976, p. 12) puts it. Suicide seeds would not have any use value whatsoever in a post-capitalist world. The case of suicide seeds is a

³² For examples, see Kloppenborg (2004, Chapter 5), Malm (2016, Chapter 6), Marglin (1974), Noble (1984, Chapter 7).

good example of what technological development under capitalism is all about—not only because it unambiguously demonstrates the causal primacy of the relations of production but also because it demonstrates another important fact which should always be borne in mind when thinking about technology and capitalism: that the logic of capital, no matter how omnipotent it may seem, is only *one* social force among many. If this were not the case, the use of suicide seeds would have been widespread by now.

* * *

In this chapter, we have discovered something important about the economic power of capital, namely that it is partly *a result of its own exercise*. The economic power of capital stems not only from the relations of production but also from the social and material reconfigurations resulting from those relations. When capitalist production first emerged on the stage of history, it did so in a world shaped by non-capitalist social logics. It had to base itself on political institutions, customary arrangements, technologies, divisions of labour, cultural forms and international relations inherited from a world where the valorisation of value was far from the ‘all-dominating economic power’ it later became. Initially, capital was a social *form* imposed on *pre-capitalist content*. As soon as its grip on the conditions of social life was established, however, this form revealed itself to possess a strong propensity to *materialise* itself, to transcend its own formality and incarnate itself in a mesh of limbs, energies, bodies, plants, oceans, knowledges, animals and machines—a process which continues to constantly reshape the world to this day. This is what the concept of *real subsumption* captures. The process is far from frictionless, and among the most important of the many obstacles capital encounters are *labour* and *nature*, both of which possess an ineradicable autonomy which capital has had to struggle with for centuries.

For a long time, the hotspot of this struggle was the industrial shop floor, where the power of capital metamorphosed into the despotic authority of the capitalist manager. Through the introduction of machinery and the restructuring of the division of labour, capital began to gnaw itself into the bodies of workers in order to secure their submission to the profit-imperative and its accompanying regime of discipline and abstract time. In the 20th century, after having struggled with autonomy of plants, animals, the soil and the weather for hundreds of years, capital finally managed to subject agriculture to a process of real subsumption similar to what took place in

manufacturing during the 19th century. Once again, capital enlisted the help of science in its effort to crack open the biophysical structure of seeds and the bodies of animals in order to secure a steady flow of profit. When the post-war boom came to a close as a result of its own immanent contradictions, capital swung into action on a global scale by launching a revolution in the means of transportation and communication. By accelerating the process of real subsumption on the level of the global totality of production, capital moved closer to creating a world in which profitability is the condition of life.

On the basis of the analysis of real subsumption in this chapter, we can now go back to the idea, presented at the end of chapter three, that capital *posits its own presupposition*. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx provides a sequence of answers to the question of *what* gets produced in the capitalist production process. On the basis of part one, which deals with simple circulation, we can conclude that capitalist production is the production of *commodities*. After having introduced the concept of capital, Marx is able to specify that capitalist production ‘is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value’ (C1: 644). Then, after examining the production of relative surplus value, which requires the real subsumption of labour, Marx is able to conclude that as a ‘process of reproduction’, capitalist production ‘produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself’ (C1: 724)—or, as he puts it in the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, in the most compressed version of this insight: ‘the *capital-relation* generates the *capital-relation*’—with a crucial addition: ‘on an increased scale’ (34: 187; see also R: 1065; 30: 115). For this reason, Marx approvingly cites Simonde de Sismondi’s description of capital as a *spiral* (G: 266, 620, 746; 32: 153; C1: 727, 780). The power of capital thus has a circular structure: the ‘presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming—and hence could not spring from its *action as capital*—now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as *posited by it*—not as *conditions of its arising*, but as *results of its existence*’ (G: 460).

What circulates in millions of containers or grows in eroding soils pumped with synthetic fertiliser and Monsanto seeds is thus not only commodities but also capitalist relations of production. *Capitalist production is the production of capitalism*. This insight demonstrates that the economic power of capital is in its essence *dynamic*: if we take into account only the relations of production, we overlook an important source of this power, namely the *dynamics* set

in motion by these relations. In this chapter, we have examined one particular aspect of these dynamics: the socio-material remoulding of production. But as we will see in the next and last chapter, there is more to say about these dynamics.

VI. THE ACCUMULATION OF POWER

We see then that commodities are in love with money, but that
“the course of true love never did run smooth”
—Karl Marx, *Capital* (C1: 202)

In this chapter, I want to examine two fundamental dynamics of the accumulation of capital: first, capital’s tendency to create a *relative surplus population* of un- and underemployed proletarians, and, second, its tendency to undermine itself in the form of *crises*. In contrast to the dynamics examined in the preceding chapter, capital’s tendency to generate a surplus of labour-power and a surplus of capital tend to follow a cyclical pattern. Similar to the real subsumption of labour and nature, however, they are simultaneously *results* and *sources* of the power of capital. Both of these tendencies should likewise be regarded as belonging to the core structure of the capitalist mode of production, across its many historical variations. For these reasons, an account of the economic power of capital has to include a consideration of both.

SURPLUS POPULATIONS

In chapter 25 of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx argues that capitalism necessarily leads to the continuous generation of a relative surplus population (C1: 794). As Harvey (2006, p. 158f, 2010, p. 268ff) notes, Marx constructs two models of accumulation in this long chapter. In the first model, he abstracts from the development of the productive forces in order to demonstrate how capital necessarily generates a certain level of unemployment, independently of the development of productivity. The argument is fairly

simple: as accumulation proceeds, an increasing demand for labour eventually leads to rising wages. This will, however, cause accumulation to slow down and hence cause a drop in the demand for labour-power, leading to a decline in wages. In other words: the ‘mechanism of the capitalist production process removes the very obstacles it temporarily creates’ (C1: 770). What emerges from this movement is a cyclical pattern in which a certain level of unemployment is maintained in order to secure a wage level compatible with a certain level of profitability; ‘[t]he rise of wages is therefore confined within limits that not only leave intact the foundations of the capitalist system, but also secure its reproduction on an increased scale’ (C1: 771). The relative surplus population is, as Marx explains, ‘the background against which the law of the demand and supply of labour does its work’. Capital thus ‘acts on both sides’, as Marx puts it: the accumulation of capital determines not only the *demand* for labour-power but also its *supply*, since unemployment is an expression of the needs of accumulation (C1: 792f). Marx distinguishes between three forms of existence of this relative surplus population, which he considers to be a necessary condition of capitalist production (32: 186): the *floating* surplus population, i.e., workers belonging permanently to the labour force but temporarily under- or unemployed; the *latent* surplus population, i.e., proletarians who are not regularly a part of the workforce, but can be drawn into wage labour when capital needs them—Marx cites the example of rural populations, but we could also mention domestic workers or proletarians on public benefits (Benanav, 2015, p. 13); finally, the *stagnant* surplus population, which refers to the lowest strata of the working class, i.e., those who have ‘extremely irregular employment’ (C1: 796) but, unlike the latent surplus population, generally do not have access to means of subsistence outside of the wage relation (C1: 792ff). Taken together, these different subgroups within the relative surplus population make up what Marx calls the industrial reserve army.

In his second model of accumulation, Marx considers the effects of productivity increases on unemployment and concludes that in the long run, the relative surplus population tends to grow. This is what he refers to as the *general law of capitalist accumulation* (C1: 794ff). Again, the argument is quite simple: competition forces individual capitals to increase productivity by introducing labour-saving technology, and, as these technologies disseminate, the technical composition of capital increases. Assuming that the falling demand for labour as a result of increasing productivity is stronger than the rising demand of labour as a result of the expansion of production, the

capitalist economy as a whole will, in the long run (i.e., across multiple business cycles), shed more workers than it will absorb. Ever larger segments of the relative surplus population will thus become ‘*absolutely redundant*’ for the valorisation of value (Endnotes & Benanav, 2010, p. 29).

‘Like all other laws’, the general law of capitalist accumulation ‘is modified in its working by many circumstances’ (C1: 798). Marx acknowledges the possibility that the growth of capitalist production might in principle be so strong that the relative surplus population will contract rather than expand; but he insists that the opposite will indeed happen over time. As Heinrich points out, however, Marx does not produce an argument as to why ‘the redundancy effect of the rise in productivity outbalances the employment effect of accumulation’ in the long run (Heinrich, 2012a, p. 127, 1999a, p. 323f). Note that this is not a matter of determining the relation between a tendency arising from the logic of capital on the one hand and a counter-tendency arising from some other social logic on the other hand. It is rather a question of determining the relative strength of two tendencies immediately contained in the concept of capital: on the one hand, the necessity of expanding production and, on the other hand, the expulsion of living labour from the production process. Marx does not produce an argument to back up the assumption that the latter will necessarily be stronger than the former in the long run, and for this reason, the ‘*tendency of a growing industrial reserve army*’ assumed by Marx cannot be strictly substantiated as a claim’ (Heinrich, 2012a, p. 126; see also Harvey, 2006, p. 160ff).

Marx’s analysis of the effects of accumulation on the proletariat has often been misunderstood as a claim about the necessary decline in the living standard of the working class, understood in a purely quantitative sense—what is often called the ‘immiseration thesis’ (Endnotes, 2015b, p. 282f; Endnotes & Benanav, 2010, p. 33f; Heinrich, 2012a, p. 127f). Throughout the 20th century, the theory of surplus population was mostly either discarded as irrelevant or rejected as a false prediction, even by many Marxists (Benanav & Clegg, 2018). It seemed particularly irrelevant from the vantage point of the post-war boom, when rising productivity went hand in hand with rising real wages. It turned out, however, that these golden years were, in the words of David McNally (2011a, p. 27), ‘anything but normal; they represent a period of unprecedented dynamism whose return seems highly improbable’. After a couple of decades of neoliberal counter-offensive, Marx’s theory of surplus population has become the object of renewed interest, and in recent years a number of studies have demonstrated its acute

relevance (Jameson, 2011, p. 71). In his superb study of the history of global unemployment since 1950, Aaron Benanav demonstrates how a combination of de-industrialisation, de-agrarianisation and population growth has created an enormous global surplus population: according to his estimate from 2015, it ‘numbers around 1.3 billion people, accounting for roughly 40 percent of the world’s workforce. By contrast, only about 33 percent of the world’s workforce is employed in the non-agriculture formal sector’ (Benanav, 2015, p. 25). In 2011, David Neilson and Thomas Stubbs (2011, p. 451) estimated that the global surplus population ‘is set to grow further in the medium-term future’ and pointed out that it is ‘distributed in deeply unequal forms and sizes across the countries of the world’. These proletarians excluded from the circuits of capital are mostly racialised populations, immigrants and inhabitants of the global south. In the global south, they are forced to get by as informal workers in ever-growing slums (M. Davis, 2017), and in the US, the black surplus population is managed by policing and mass incarceration (M. Davis, 2017; Gilmore, 2006; Rehmann, 2015).¹ It turns out, then, that Marx’s general law of capitalist accumulation actually provides a rather precise account of the forces at play in the neoliberal era. Perhaps Marx’s predictions were—as suggested by Clegg and Benanav (2018)—only wrong on one point: the timing.

An *empirical* validation of Marx’s predictions does not, however, tell us anything about the necessary relation between the accumulation of capital and the growth of the surplus population. The issue at stake here is not whether or not capitalism involves a secular tendency for the surplus population to grow, but how we *explain* such a tendency. The general law of capitalist accumulation cannot be substantiated as a claim about the core structure of capital, and this means that if we can empirically verify its existence, we need to find a way of explaining it which refers not only to the logic of capital (even if this remains a crucial *part* of the explanation).² Things stand a bit differently with the *first* model of accumulation, however, since this is formulated independently of claims about productivity growth. What we are able to conclude at the level of abstraction of the analysis of capitalism in its ideal average, then, is that a surplus population is a necessary condition of capitalist production, and that capital itself gives rise to cyclical dynamics

¹ See also Clover (2016, Chapter 8), Endnotes (2015b) and Farris (2012, 2015).

² Many commentators accept Marx’s assumptions without further ado. See e.g. Clarke (1994, p. 254ff), Endnotes (2015b), Endnotes & Benanav (2010), Fine & Saad-Filho (2010, p. 83f) and W. C. Roberts (2017, p. 181f).

which ensure its continuous existence. When rising wages begin to threaten profits, competitive pressures force accumulation to slow down or compel capitalists to introduce labour-saving technology. The result is a rise in the supply of labour-power and a drop in wages, which leads to the restoration of the conditions of accumulation.

Most discussions of capital's tendency to uncouple proletarians from the circuit of capital tend to focus on its causes and its negative impacts on the situation of proletarians. Here, however, I am interested in something else, namely the fact that it 'greatly increases the power of capital' (32: 180). It does so first of all by intensifying competition among workers, which has several advantages for capital (32: 441). '[T]he pressure of the unemployed compels those who are employed to furnish more labour'—the easier it is for employers to replace their workers, the easier it is for them to discipline the workers (C1: 793).³ In this way, competition among workers tend to enhance the power of the employer within the workplace. In addition to this, increasing competition for jobs is also a fertile ground for turning divisions among workers into antagonisms such as racism or nationalism—which helps to prevent proletarians from confronting capital collectively. The figure of the job-stealing immigrant, for example, seems to have been a relatively stable ideological formation throughout large parts of the history of capitalism, including in contemporary Europe and the US. Marx analyses a concrete example of such a dynamic in his writings on Ireland. Recall that the Irish were regarded as a 'race' in Marx's time (T. W. Allen, 2012, p. 27ff; K. B. Anderson, 2016, Chapter 4). Due to hunger, industrialisation, centralisation of land holdings and the conversion of tillage into pasture, a large number of people migrated from Ireland in the 19th century (11: 528ff; 20: 5f; 21: 189ff). A part of this relative surplus population ended up as the lowest stratum of the proletariat in English industrial towns.⁴ In Marx's

³ Jason E. Smith (2017a) provides a recent example: 'While in most economic slumps productivity tends to drop off rapidly, with output falling faster than jobs can be shed, in the opening round of the recent crisis [i.e., the global crisis of 2008] something else happened entirely. Firms on average registered modest *gains* in productivity, despite the hostile climate. Yet they did so despite rapid *drop-offs* in output: total output was shrinking, but payrolls were being slashed even faster. The uptick in productivity, in this case, was likely due not to technical innovations, but to longer, more stressful, days on the job for those who kept them'.

⁴ See Engels's description of the living conditions of Irish proletarians in Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (4: 361).

view, the ruling classes benefited tremendously from the tensions between English workers and racialised immigrant workers:

the *English bourgeoisie* has [...] divided the proletariat into two hostile camps. [...] in *all the big industrial centres in England* there is profound antagonism between the Irish proletarian and the English proletarian. The average English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the *standard of life*. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He regards him somewhat like the *poor whites* of the Southern States of North America regarded black slaves. This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this scission is the *true secret of maintaining its power*. (21: 88, 120)

This is just one example of how the generation of a surplus population strengthens the power of capital by giving rise to and consolidating all kinds of antagonisms among proletarians (see also Farris, 2019). This tells us something about the relation between different forms of power: in this case, the mute compulsion of accumulation creates the ground on which racist, nationalist and religious ideology can flourish.

As previously mentioned, capital ‘acts on both sides at once’ in the supply and demand for labour. This does not, however, prevent ‘capital and its sycophants, political economy’ from condemning trade unions as ‘the infringement of the “eternal” and so to speak “sacred” law of supply and demand’ (C1: 793). Neither does capital hesitate to employ direct violence in order to establish the mechanism of supply and demand in the first place:

as soon as (in the colonies, for example) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army, and with it the absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class, capital, along with its platitudinous Sancho Panza, rebels against the “sacred” law of supply and demand, and tries to make up for its inadequacy. (C1: 794)

What Marx suggests here is essentially that violent dispossession and the mechanisms by which accumulation secures the continuous existence of a surplus population should be regarded as two different ways of regulating the supply of labour-power available to capital. Once the producers have been violently separated from access to means of subsistence outside of the

circuits of capital, the mechanisms of accumulation take over; economic power replaces direct coercion.⁵ The dynamics through which a relative surplus population is created and reproduced thereby ‘rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock’ (C1: 799).

CAUSES

Capitalism has always been haunted by ‘an epidemic that, in all other epochs, would have seemed an absurdity—the epidemic of over-production’ (6: 490). The debates about the nature of capitalist crises have been going on non-stop for more than a century and have produced a vast amount of literature.⁶ Most of these debates have revolved around the question of what *causes* crises: the restricted consumption of the working class, disproportionality between sectors, overaccumulation of capital or overproduction of commodities? Although there is no consensus about the causal mechanisms, all Marxists agree that crises are not the result of contingent and external shocks to the economy; they stem rather from the deeply and inherently contradictory nature of capitalism. The ‘true barrier to capitalist production is’, as Marx puts it, ‘*capital* itself’ (M: 359). What I want to add to the debates in Marxist crisis theory is to offer some considerations on the *effects* of crises on the way in which the logic of valorisation imposes itself on social life.

It is not possible to simply circumvent the question of causes, however, so let me offer some signposts and briefly sketch out how the position defended in the following relates to the debates about the causes of crises. As most contemporary scholars, I regard underconsumptionist crisis theory as belonging to the graveyard of Marxism, alongside productive force determinism, analytical Marxism and other dead-end streets. It was very popular in the first half of the twentieth century, but since the 1970s it has lost its influence and finds few defenders today. Underconsumptionist crisis theory relies on the basic misunderstanding that consumption is the motive force of capitalism. As Simon Clarke (1994, p. 206) explains, if ‘capitalism depended on the consumption needs of the working class, it would be not merely crisis-prone but its very existence would be impossible’.⁷ Another important

⁵ See also chapter 33 of *Capital* vol. 1 and the passage from the *Grundrisse*—quoted in chapter three—where Marx points out how ‘state coercion’ is replaced with competition (G: 736).

⁶ For overviews, see Clarke (1994, Ch. 1, 2), Mandel (1976, Ch. 1), Shaik (1978).

⁷ See also Kliman (2012, Chapter 8) and Shaik (1978, p. 226ff).

variant of Marxist crisis theory is disproportionality theory, i.e., the idea that crises arise from disproportionalities between different branches of production. The problem with this theory is, firstly, that it offers no explanation as to why disproportionalities arise in the first place, and, second, that it does not explain why disproportionality leads to a *general* crisis instead of just local crises in certain branches, which is actually the mechanism through which disproportionalities are usually removed (Clarke, 1994, p. 204).

Since the 1970s, most Marxist theories of crisis have taken the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as their point of departure. This law hinges on the assumption that in the long run, the organic composition of capital will rise rapidly enough to outpace its countervailing force, namely a rise in the rate of surplus value. But as Heinrich (1999a, p. 327ff, 2012a, p. 149ff, 2013b, 2013a, 2014) has demonstrated, there are some serious problems with this assumption. Essentially, the basic problem can be stated this way: ‘regardless of how we express the rate of profit, it is always a relation between two quantities. The *direction* of movement for these two quantities (or parts of these two quantities) is known. That, however, is not sufficient; the point is, *which of the two quantities changes more rapidly*—and we do not know that’ (Heinrich, 2013a). What is at stake here is, once again, what we can and what we cannot conclude at what levels of abstraction. What Heinrich argues—convincingly, in my view—is that we cannot demonstrate the existence of a *necessary* tendency of the rate of profit to fall on the basis of an analysis of the ideal average of the capitalist mode of production. This does not imply the denial of the *possibility* that the profit rate might fall precisely in the manner predicted by the ‘law’. It does not even imply denying that such a tendential fall of rate of profit has taken place throughout the history of capitalism.⁸ It merely implies that the long term tendencies of the profit rate is an empirical question which cannot be deduced from the analysis of the core structure of capitalism.⁹

⁸ As many have pointed out, the idea that the profit rate had a long-term tendency to decline was completely uncontroversial in Marx’s time. It is thus reasonable to assume that Marx regarded his task as that of providing an explanation of a well-established empirical fact.

⁹ For other good critical discussions of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall from which I have drawn inspiration, see Bellofiore (2018), Clarke (1994, Chapters 5, 7, 9), Harvey (2006, p. 176ff, 2016). G. A. Reuten (2004), Thomas & Reuten (2014), Weeks (1981). See also Saito (2018) and the rejoinders to Harvey and Heinrich by Callinicos (2014, Chapter 6), Callinicos & Choonara (2016),

Where does this leave us? The good news is that we do not need the law of tendency of the rate of profit to fall in order to build a coherent Marxist theory of crisis (Heinrich, 2012a, p. 153f). The necessary tendency to overproduction can be derived from the capital form without reference to the law of tendency of the rate of profit to fall. In order to see why, it is necessary to recall that the aim of capitalist production is surplus value, an aim which is forced upon individual capitals by competition. For any individual capital, the possibilities for making profit are not restricted by the size of the market, since the individual capital has the possibility of capturing market shares from competitors. In other words, *from the perspective of the individual capital*, the expansion of production, insofar as it allows this individual capital to undercut its competitors, is itself an expansion of the market. On the level *the totality*, however, this leads to a general overproduction. In this way, a crisis arises from the contradiction between what is rational from the point of view of the individual capital and what is rational from the point of view of the capitalist system as a whole. Simon Clarke (1994, p. 281) sums up this dynamic well:

Once the capitalist has taken command of production, the characteristic way in which the capitalist appropriates a profit is not by responding to fluctuations in demand for the product, but by introducing new and more productive methods of production in order to reduce his costs below those of his competitors. The capitalist who is able to reduce his costs is not confined by the limits of his share of the market, but can expand his production without limit in the anticipation of undercutting his competitors. The tendency to expand production without limit is not just a matter of subjective motivation of the capitalist, since it is imposed on every capitalist by the pressure of competition.

For this reason, capitalist production necessarily results in crises of overproduction. This is a mode of explanation firmly rooted in the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, namely the contradiction between use value and value. In the capitalist mode of production, the production of useful things is subordinated not only to the production of value, but to the *valorisation* of value, and the mute compulsion of competition forces individual capitals to produce without regards for the limits of the market, like a stuck gas pedal

Carchedi & Roberts (2013), Kliman, Freeman, Potts, Gusev & Cooney (2013) and M. Roberts (2016).

in a car heading towards a cliff.¹⁰ As Clarke (1994, p. 283) notes, the fact that ‘opportunities to achieve a surplus profit by the introduction of new methods of production [...] are unevenly developed between the various branches of production’ has the consequence that the most dynamic sectors will take the lead in this collective race into the abyss. For this reason, disproportionality is a common feature of crises and might be the immediate cause of a crisis, even if it is not its ultimate cause (as disproportionality theories hold).

As I will come back to in the next section, a crisis is not only the point at which accumulation breaks down; it is also a mechanism by means of which capital re-establishes the conditions of another round of accumulation. An understanding of crises along the lines sketched out here therefore requires us to reject the idea of secular crises; ‘permanent crises do not exist’, as Marx states it, contra Adam Smith (32: 128). What the theory of crisis demonstrates is not the inevitable collapse of capitalism but rather ‘the permanent instability of social existence under capitalism’ (Clarke, 1994, p. 280).

The limits of what an analysis of the capitalist mode of production in its ideal average can tell us comes out particularly clearly in the theory of crisis. On this level of abstraction, we can conclude that capitalist production necessarily generates periodic crises of overproduction; what we cannot derive, however, is the specific mechanisms which trigger a crisis. While we can say something about its ultimate or underlying cause—overproduction—we cannot identify the *immediate* or *proximate* causes of concrete crises without taking into account the specific and contingent details of the situation (Clarke, 1994, p. 285; Heinrich, 1999a, p. 356f, 2012a, p. 174f).

EFFECTS

Crises has often had mesmerising effects on revolutionaries. In his study of the 1848 revolutions in *The Class Struggles in France*, Marx reached the conclusion that the economic crisis of 1847 had ‘hastened the outbreak of the revolution’. On this basis, he and Engels became convinced that a ‘*new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis*’ (10: 52, 135; see also 497, 510). In the following years, Marx constantly looked for signs of this coming crisis, which he anticipated several times in the *New York Tribune*.¹¹ When a global financial crisis finally did break out in

¹⁰ A similar view is defended by Heinrich (1999a, Ch. 8.5, 2012a, p. 172ff, 2013a).

¹¹ See Clarke (1994, Ch. 4), Krätke (2008b), Musto (2018, Ch. 3, 4).

the autumn of 1857, he and Engels were euphoric. ‘The American crisis—its outbreak in New York forecast by us in the November 1850 *Revue*—is beautiful’, Marx wrote Engels in October 1857 (40: 191). A couple of weeks later, he confessed that ‘never, since 1849, have I felt so cosy as during this outbreak’ (40: 199). Engels agreed, and replied that ‘[p]hysically, the crisis will do me as much good as a bathe in the sea; I can sense it already. In 1848 we were saying: Now our time is coming, and so in a certain sense it was, but this time it's coming properly; now it's a case of do or die’ (40: 203).

The crisis of 1857 provided Marx with an occasion to finally write down the results of his economic studies at the same time as he was writing articles about the crisis for the *New York Tribune* as well as compiling a comprehensive logbook about the crisis, which has only recently (2017) been published in the MEGA² (40: 214, 226; IV.14; Krätke, 2008b, 2008a). He wanted to make sure to ‘at least get the outlines [*Grundrisse*] ready before the *déluge*’, as he wrote to Engels (40: 217). In the so-called fragment on machines in *Grundrisse*, written around February or March 1858, Marx announced the inevitable breakdown of ‘production based on exchange value’ (G: 705). But the *déluge* never came. The global crisis turned out to be relatively brief, and the high hopes Marx and Engels had placed in the crisis were left unfulfilled. As Peter D. Thomas and Gert Reuten (2014, p. 326) have demonstrated, this led Marx to reconsider his conception of crisis when he returned to the subject in the manuscripts from 1861-65: the ‘eschatological theory of crisis’ of the *Grundrisse* gave way to a conception of crisis as a regular phase of cycles of accumulation.¹² Such a perspective was, to be sure, already somewhat visible in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx wrote that crises ‘violently lead it [capital] back to the point where it can go on without committing suicide’. However, he immediately adds that ‘these regularly recurring catastrophes lead

¹² For similar analyses of the development in Marx’s understanding of crisis, see Clarke (1994, Chapters 3–7), Heinrich (1999a, p. 345ff, 2014) and G. A. Reuten (2004). Marx’s declining health forced him to stop working on the *Grundrisse* in April 1858 (‘Obviously I overdid my nocturnal labour last winter’, he writes to Engels [40: 310]). After spending May and June recovering, he finally succeeded in writing up a part of his critique in a form which could be published (after drafting the *Urtext* in August-October 1858). The result, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, was finished in January 1859. He then went on to spend large parts of 1859 and 1860 on the feud with Karl Vogt, until he finally returned to his studies in 1861. This explains the gap of four years in Marx’s writings on crisis (1858-62).

to their repetition on a higher scale, and finally to its violent overthrow' (G: 750). What Marx suggests here is the existence of a cyclical pattern evolving around a secular decline.

Marx's abandonment of a theory of crisis as the meltdown of capitalism precipitating its revolutionary overthrow led him to formulate a number of insights which are highly relevant for a theory of the economic power of capital. Put briefly, Marx moved from a conception of crisis as a *crisis of* the power of capital to an understanding of crisis as a *part of* the power of capital. In this view, a crisis is 'a necessary violent means for the cure of the plethora of capital', a mechanism by means of which capital *avoids* breakdown (33: 105). Rather than a question about the *causes* of crises, this has to do with the *effects* or the *political meaning* of crises. Although many commentators have noted this aspect of Marx's analysis, discussions about Marxist crisis theory tend, as previously noted, to focus on the causes of crises rather than their effects. Furthermore, they fail to integrate this dimension of crises into a wider analysis of the strategies through which capital reproduces its sway over social life.

Crises are not only results of the mute compulsion of competition, they are also one of its sources (M: 365; Clarke, 1994, pp. 239, 242). Faced with the risk of falling prey to a frothing market in times of crisis, capitalists have to step up their competitive game by all means available to them: intensifying work, disciplining workers, cut down costs (including wages), introduce new technology, find new outlets for their commodities and so on. In a crisis, companies will often find it hard to finance large investments, and so they tend to focus on things which do not require new investments, such as the intensification of work, cutting down on superfluous costs or shedding the least profitable parts of their business. Increased competition also intensifies the expansive nature of capitalist production by forcing capitalists to look for new markets as a response to overproduction. But they will not all make it in this struggle. Bankruptcies and downsizing—and the gloomy prospects of making investments in general—results in the 'violent annihilation of capital not by circumstances external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation' (G: 749f). As Marx explains in the *1861-63 Manuscripts*, such annihilation can take two forms: the *physical destruction* of means of production, whereby 'their use value and their exchange value go to the devil' (32: 127), and *depreciation*, where only value, and not use value, is lost (Clarke, 1994, pp. 189f, 232ff). Depreciation and destruction 'purge excess capital from the economy', thereby setting the stage for a new upswing (McNally,

2011a, p. 82). Furthermore, surviving capitalists can usually buy means of production from downsized or bankrupted companies at a bargain price, thereby lowering the value-composition of capital and increasing their profit rates (Harvey, 2006, p. 200ff). The annihilation of capital especially is especially hard on branches where overproduction is particularly acute, and for this reason crises also tend to abolish disproportionalities (Heinrich, 1999a, p. 354; Hirsch, 1978, p. 74). ‘[T]he crisis itself may’, in Marx’s words, ‘be a form of equalisation [*Ausgleichung*]’ (32: 151).

A crisis also intensifies competition among *workers*, and, as we know from chapter four, competition among workers is one of the mechanisms through which the laws of capital are realised (Harvey, 2006, p. 202; McNally, 2011a, p. 82). As accumulation slows down, the relative surplus population grows and creates a downward pressure on wages. The employed workers ‘have to accept a fall in wages, even beneath the average; an operation that has exactly the same effect for capital as if relative or absolute surplus-value had been increased’ (M: 363). In addition to this, intensification of competition also makes it a lot riskier to resist the real subsumption of labour. This leads to an increase in the rate of surplus value. It is thus no coincidence, for example, that Taylorism was developed in the crisis-ridden American steel industry during the Great Depression of the late 19th century (Hobsbawm, 2002, p. 44).

Through these mechanisms—annihilation of excess capital, expansion of markets, downward pressure on wages and an increase in the rate of surplus value—a crisis removes its own (proximate) causes and prepares the way for a new round of accumulation: ‘a crisis is always the starting-point of a large volume of new investment’ (C2: 264). It is thus a ‘method of resolution’ (M: 362), a moment of what Marx refers to in the French edition of *Capital* as the ‘rejuvenating cycles [*les cycles renaissants*]’ of capital accumulation (II.7: 557). Crises are ‘momentary, violent solutions for the existing contradictions, violent eruptions that re-establish the balance [*Gleichgewicht*] that has been disturbed’ (M: 358). As Heinrich (1999a, pp. 354f, 369) emphasises, this should not be understood as a restoration of an equilibrium in the sense of bourgeois economics, since *it is precisely the ‘balance’ which in and of itself generates its breakdown*. We are not, in other words, dealing with an equilibrium that can only be disturbed by factors external to it.

Here, we reach the limit of what we can say about the way in which crises enhance the power of capital on the level of abstraction at which this thesis is situated. Like the approximate *causes* of crises, their immediate effects

depend on a host of factors which cannot be deduced from the core structure of capitalism. So, what *can* we say at this level of abstraction? *First*, we can conclude that the fundamental social relations underlying the capitalist mode of production set in motion a dynamic which inevitably drives the economy into crises of overproduction. *Second*, we can also conclude that capitalism is extremely crisis-prone, meaning that it is extremely vulnerable to external shocks. *Third*, we can also demonstrate that a crisis generates mechanisms—depreciation, falling wages etc.—which restore the conditions of accumulation. In drawing such conclusions, we abstract—as I explained in the introduction—from historical circumstances which are only externally related to the core structures of capitalism. If we did not do that, we would not be able to build theories at all.¹³ Social theory always deals with an empirically existing object which must always, as Marx stresses in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, ‘be kept in mind as the presupposition’. The critique of political economy is, as Chris Arthur (2004b, p. 4) aptly puts it, ‘concerned with the articulation of categories designed to conceptualise an existent concrete whole’. In order to do that—i.e., in order to determine the precise relation between the different moments of the social totality—we need to conceptually isolate them by abstracting from inessential features. In ‘the analysis of economic forms’, however, ‘neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance’, as Marx puts it in *Capital*: ‘The power of abstraction must replace both’ (C1: 90). What this means is that the kind of dynamics described in this chapter should not be understood as empirical predictions of inevitable future trends. The laws of capital executed by competition are, ‘like all economic laws’, *tendencies*, i.e., laws ‘whose absolute implementation is paralysed, held up, retarded and weakened by counteracting factors’ (M: 286, 339). As in the case of the tendency to de-skilling discussed in the preceding chapter, the analysis of the dynamics of accumulation and crisis on this level of abstraction depicts the structural pressures stemming from the basic social relations of capitalist society. At any point, a proletarian uprising or a natural disaster might of course bring about an abrupt ‘disintegration of the whole shit’ (43: 25). But until that happens, the dynamics of capital-accumulation will be a social force to reckon with.

The question of how a crisis affects the relation between capital and the state lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, let me offer a few comments and examples, just in order to indicate how important this

¹³ See the comments on method in the introduction.

dimension is to bear in mind when thinking about the impact of a crisis on the balance of forces. The state's reaction to a crisis depends on a lot of different factors: the immediate cause and nature of the crisis, the location of a state in the global system of production as well as international alliances, the balance of forces between classes, access to natural resources and energy etc. Given that all capitalist states depend on the accumulation of capital, however, it is possible to point to certain structural pressures which states will most likely find themselves subjected to in times of crisis. First and foremost, crises put pressure on states to help capital, and this can happen in countless different ways. States can support expansion of markets through imperialist policies or international agreements; they can ensure cheap credit, crack down on social protests, invest in infrastructure, lower corporate taxes, privatise public assets, and so on. The history of capitalist crises is filled with examples of how states have employed combinations of such strategies in order to facilitate the recovery of profitability. In the 1830s and 1840s, for example, the crisis in the British cotton industry put pressure on the government to repeal the Corn Laws, since they held up wages. This was at least one of the factors which eventually lead to the repeal of the tariffs in 1846 (Hobsbawm, 2003, p. 57f). The Great Recession of the late 19th century likewise pushed states to support expansion through colonialism; according to Eric Hobsbawm (2002, p. 45), 'it is quite undeniable that the pressure of capital in search of more profitable investment, as of production in search of markets, contributed to policies of expansion—including colonial conquest'. Fast forward a century, to the crisis of the 1970s, and we find a number of the strategies just mentioned: deregulation of international trade and finance, cheap credit, tax cuts, investments in infrastructure, repression of unions—all of which were preconditions for the partial neoliberal recovery of the 1980s (R. Brenner, 2002, 2006; Harvey, 2005; McNally, 2011a). Some of these strategies can have contradictory effects, reflecting the contradictory pressure on the state: on the one hand, states are under pressure to facilitate, or at least not stand in the way of, the restoration of profitability; on the other hand, they must also avoid the kind of social instability which easily arises if capital is allowed to run amok in its destructive fury. An example of this is the provision of cheap credit; on the one hand, it dampens the crisis, but, on the other hand, it also prolongs it by putting capitals with one foot in the grave in a debt respirator. As several scholars have pointed out, this is exactly what happened in the 1970s; 'the same expansion of credit that ensured a modicum of stability also held back

recovery’ by ‘making possible the survival of those high-cost, low-profit firms that perpetuated over-capacity and over-production’ (R. Brenner, 2006, p. 157; see also Benanav & Clegg, 2018; McNally, 2011a, p. 83). Something similar happened in the wake of the crisis of 2008, where the US ‘established itself as liquidity provider of last resort to the global banking system’ (Tooze, 2018, p. 9; R. Brenner, 2009). Aside from bailing out banks and flooding the economy with cash, governments in leading capitalist economies also assisted capital in overcoming the crash through austerity, tax cuts, police repression, removing legal barriers to precarity in the labour market, selling public property at a bargain, handing over power to technocrat governments or, in the case of China, undertaking massive public investments (Harvey, 2017, Chapter 9; Tooze, 2018, Chapter 10). As German chancellor Angela Merkel explained in 2011, it was a question of organising ‘parliamentary codetermination in such a way that it is nevertheless market conforming’—a project which of course entails acknowledging that ‘elections cannot be allowed to change economic policy’, as Merkel’s finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble put it (quoted in Tooze, 2018, pp. 396, 522).

NEGATION AS CONDITION

By now it should be clear why crises should be regarded as one of the impersonal and abstract power mechanisms through which capital imposes itself on social life. Crises are perhaps *the* best example of the *impersonal* character of the economic power of capital; as an outcome of anarchic yet patterned myriads of individual actions, a crisis is the systemic effect par excellence. When a crisis hits, it becomes clear just how much a society in which social reproduction is governed by the valorisation of value is a society which has lost control over itself. *No one is in control and there is no centre from which power radiates; instead, capitalist society is ruled by social relations morphed into real abstractions whose opaque movements we call ‘the economy’—‘like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells’* (6: 489). In times of crisis, it becomes clear just how much capitalism has surrendered life to the vagaries of the market.

A crisis is a temporary *solution* to the inherent and ineradicable contradictions of accumulation; it is capital’s attempt to flee its own shadow. Capital survives by *internalising its own partial negation*: it has to annihilate a part of itself in order to carry on. The logic of valorisation thus includes within itself its own negation, ‘not by circumstances external to it’, as Marx puts it, ‘but rather as *a condition of its self-preservation*’ (G: 749f, emphasis added). One of

the ways in which a crisis helps to restore profitability is by *intensifying* the mechanisms of domination which are also operative *outside* of times of crisis. Competition, downward pressure on wages, unemployment, real subsumption: all are completely normal parts of every phase in an accumulation cycle. Crises do not *create* these mechanisms—rather, if competition *executes* them, as we saw in chapter four, a crisis is the compressed and temporary *intensification* of them.

One way to think of the relation between crisis and power is therefore to see crises as levers of the mechanisms of domination examined in the preceding chapters. Crises intensify capital's expansive drive; it compels capital to draw more and more people and activities into the circuit of capital by means of privatisation and accumulation by dispossession or commodification of activities which have hitherto remained outside the direct command of capital.¹⁴ In this way, crises tend to expand and fortify the form of class domination we examined in chapter three. This also leads to a strengthening of the mechanisms of domination described in chapter four, as the expansion of capitalist class domination increases competition and market dependence and imposes the commodity form on new spheres of life. Finally, by tightening the grip on individual capitals, crises also accelerate the real subsumption of labour and nature as capitalists struggle to survive the massacre on the market. In addition to these intensifications of mechanisms which operate throughout all phases of accumulation cycles, crises also have their own specific mechanism: the annihilation of capital.

I want to emphasise that the analysis of the role of crises in the reproduction of capitalism presented here does not imply the claim that crises can be reduced to a form of internal self-regulation of the capitalist system. My claim is not that crises always and everywhere lead to rehabilitation, expansion and strengthening of the power of capital. My claim is, rather, that the *immanent* tendency of crises is to set in motion powerful dynamics which, *if left unchecked*, tend to restore and expand the power of capital. Whether or not these dynamics will prevail depends on a number of factors, chief among which is the balance of power between classes in the concrete situation. Similarly, my analysis does not imply the view that a crisis can never be a sign of the weakness of the power of capital, nor the view that a crisis can never

¹⁴ According to Jason E. Smith (2017b), 'the colonization of human activity by the service sector has most likely only begun. In principle, the entire range of human activity is subject to segmentation; these segments can be transformed into occupations, which can in turn be organized along capitalist lines'.

bring about unique revolutionary openings. The history of capitalism is fraught with examples of revolutionary struggles being accelerated by crises. A crisis of capital is always a crisis of proletarian reproduction, and therefore also a situation in which the incompatibility between the convulsions of accumulation and the need for a secure and stable life achieves its most glaring expression. No wonder, then, that crises tend to result in social unrest and struggle. At the same time, however, the history of capitalist crises seems to suggest that crises often lead to a weakening of revolutionary forces. The first global capitalist crisis in 1857 was followed by a wave of capitalist expansion, as was the Great Recession of the late 19th century, in spite of a rapidly growing and self-confident labour movement. The results of the Great Depression of 1929 were more ambiguous; working class insurgency proliferated in the 1930s, but was eventually crushed by fascism and, after World War II, by a massive capitalist expansion, often led by social democratic governments. The peaks of anti-capitalist resistance have often taken place in a context marked not by economic crisis but by war—as was the case with the Paris Commune in 1871 and the revolutionary sequence of the late 1910s—or, in the case of the late 1960s, relative prosperity. The crisis of the 1970s undermined rather than accelerated anti-capitalist resistance—as Benanav and Clegg (2018, p. 1634) put it, ‘the era of a deep crisis of capitalism has been accompanied by an even deeper crisis in the practical opposition to capitalism’.

But what about the most recent crisis? There is no question that the global crisis of 2008 opened up a new cycle of struggles. Movements against anti-austerity and neoliberalism more generally has spread across Europe, reaching a dramatic and ultimately disappointing head in Greece in 2015. In the Global South, especially in India, South Africa and China, recent years have witnessed a surge in the number and impact of strikes and riots. In addition to this, there has been a number of important struggles which might not be explicitly anti-capitalist, but are nevertheless often connected to the crisis and its impacts and contribute to the widespread feeling that something—or perhaps everything—is about to collapse: the Black Lives Matter movement, the Arab Spring, the Movement of the Squares, #metoo and other feminists movements, the escalating climate justice movement, riots, and—at the time of writing—the Yellow Vests movement in France.¹⁵ Despite this

¹⁵ For analyses of some of these movements, see Clover (2016), Endnotes (2013a, 2013b, 2015c), McNally (2013), Myers (2017), Ness (2016), ‘No Way Forward, No Way Back: China in the Era of Riots’ (2016), Sotiris (2018), Taylor (2016).

massive wave of social unrest, which is unlike anything seen since the 1970s, we cannot unequivocally conclude that the power of capital has been weakened. Although it might be a bit too early to draw conclusions, it seems more likely that the opposite is the case: that the crisis has strengthened the power of capital. Concentration of wealth has accelerated, global inequality has skyrocketed, public assets have been privatised, austerity has been imposed, taxes have been cut, wages have declined and so on—in short, capital has by and large succeeded in pushing through many of its core objectives. We should, as Endnotes (2013b, p. 29) point out in their survey of the crisis and class struggles of 2011-13, ‘guard against the tendency to mistake the crisis of this mode of production for a weakness of capital in its struggle with labour. In fact, crises tend to *strengthen* capital’s hand’.

The functionaries and ideologues of capital know this. In 2010, the IMF (2010, p. 1) urged policymakers to ‘seize the moment and act boldly’. The European Central Bank (2014, p. 40) declared that ‘the crisis has clearly shown that there is no alternative to structural reforms’. In 2014, the then President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso (2014) summed up the crisis management of the preceding six years in the following way: ‘[t]he crisis ended up giving us the political momentum to make changes that before the downturn had been unattainable—some of those changes were even unthinkable’. In a similar vein, Milton Friedman (2002, p. xiv) once argued in that:

[o]nly a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.

Friedman wrote this in 1962, when many still believed that Keynesianism had found a way of neutralising the crisis-tendencies of capitalism. By the mid-1970s, however, the crisis Friedman hoped for had arrived, and he was able to implement many of his neoliberal ideas as an advisor—first to Chile’s dictator Augusto Pinochet, and later to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (see Klein, 2008). The forces of capital know very well that a crisis is a splendid opportunity to strengthen capital’s grip on social life. We should also take heed of that.

CONCLUSION

Human beings have to work if they want to live. Or, more precisely: *some* have to. Human individuals generally have the capacity to produce more than what is necessary for their own survival, and for that reason, securing the reproduction of a human community does not require everyone to work. Human societies have always included people who are temporarily or permanently unable to work due to illness, disability, pregnancy, injury or age. For this reason, human societies have always had to find a way of making some people work for others or, in other words, to find a way of organising surplus labour. There is nothing inherently oppressive about this. Surplus labour is simply a necessity, and even a communist mode of production would have to figure out a way of securing the survival of those who are unable to work.

The capacity to perform surplus labour might be a condition of possibility of the existence of humanity as such, but it has a gloomy downside: it makes *class society* possible. In order to realise this potential, some people have to figure out how to force others to work for them. How does one do that? How does a group of people establish itself as a ruling class? How can they create and reproduce social relations allowing them to exploit a class of producers? Throughout history, ruling classes have generally relied on a combination of ideology and (the threat of) violence. Ideology shapes how people understand the world they inhabit and what they take to be just and unjust, necessary and contingent, natural and artificial, divine and human, inevitable and permutable. Such ideas and intuitions function as coordinates for action, and for this reason, ideology can be an important source of power for ruling classes. Violence is usually a bit more straightforward and

palpable: since most of us try to avoid pain and death, the threat of violence is often an effective motivating force.

The earliest large-scale class societies in ancient Mesopotamia was, as James C. Scott (2017, p. 180) puts it, ‘based systematically on coerced, captive human labor’. According to him, it ‘would be almost impossible to exaggerate the centrality of bondage, in one form or another, in the development of the state until very recently’ (2017, p. 155). Slavery was likewise the basis of the Qin dynasty and the early Han dynasty in China as well as ancient Greece and the Roman empire. Feudal society was also ‘violent at its very basis’, as Christopher Isett and Stephen Miller (2016, p. 40) put it. In these pre-capitalist class societies, ruling classes relied on violence in their efforts to extract surplus labour from producers.¹ Producers were *personally unfree*, which means that they did not have the right to withdraw from the exploitative relation and that an attempt to do so would, at least under normal circumstances, imply great difficulties and risks.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, something historically significant happened in the English countryside: a set of social relations began to emerge which increasingly allowed ruling classes to extract surplus labour from peasants without having to resort to violence. Peasants were separated from the land and forced to sell their labour-power to farmers, who then sold their products as commodities in competitive markets with the aim of making money. The pursuit of wealth in its monetary form, which had previously been relegated to the margins of society, now began to infiltrate the entire social fabric; capital became ‘the all-dominating economic power’ (G: 107). Marx traced this historical trajectory in chapter 28 of the first volume of *Capital*, where the passage from which this thesis derives its title appears. Marx’s primary objective in this section of *Capital* is to demolish the idyllic fantasies of political economy by narrating the story of how capital came into the world ‘dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’ (C1: 926). Once it had been established, however, violence was gradually replaced by another form of domination, namely what Marx refers to as ‘the mute compulsion of economic relations’. This mute compulsion does not *create* the class domination on which capitalist production rests; it ‘seals’ it, as Marx puts it (C1: 899). The emergence of capitalism did not, then, lead

¹ On the role of violence in the reproduction of pre-capitalist class relations, see M: 777, P. Anderson (1974, Chapter 1), R. Brenner (1987b, 1987a, 2007, p. 64f), De Ste. Croix (1989), Dimmock (2014, Chapter 3), Isett & Miller (2016, pp. 17ff, 32, 40), J. C. Scott (2017, Chapter 5), Wood (2002, p. 55f, 2016, Chapter 1).

to an *evacuation* of power from the economy—it rather signalled a new configuration of power. The coercive power required to guarantee property relations was centralised in the hands of the state, formally separated from the organisation of production and the extraction of surplus labour, which now became governed by an abstract and impersonal form of domination. This historically novel way of organising the reproduction of social life turned out to be tremendously tenacious, versatile and endowed with a fiercely expansionary drive. Today, four to five centuries later, it is more entrenched than ever before.

In the six chapters that precedes this conclusion, I have tried to understand what this mute compulsion is and how it works. In order to do so, it proved necessary to dispense with a number of theories and widespread assumptions about the nature of power, capital and economy. First of all, the assumption that social power comes in two basic forms, violence and ideology, had to be discarded. Economic power is neither of these: rather than springing from the ability to hurt and physically constrain human bodies or the ability to influence how these bodies think, economic power is rooted in the ability to arrange the material conditions of social reproduction in such a manner that people are forced to do certain things—for example, to produce surplus value. In addition to this, it was also necessary to break with the idea that capital is a subject, while at the same time insisting that this does not mean that capital is incapable of exercising power. For this reason, I also had to reject an assumption shared by almost all mainstream theories of power, namely that power presupposes agency. Perhaps most importantly of all, it was necessary to reject the assumption that the economy is an ontologically distinct sphere governed by a *sui generis* economic logic or rationality.

I am of course not the first since Marx to have noticed that the reproduction of capitalism relies on an abstract and impersonal form of domination—far from it. Throughout the preceding six chapters, I have drawn on a number of studies which have uncovered important aspects of how the mute compulsion of economic relations works, such as the work of Malm (2016, 2018b), Heinrich (1999a, 2012b, 2012a), Braverman (1974), Postone (2003), Wood (2002, 2016), Roberts (2017), Benanav (2015), Bernes (2013, 2018) and Kloppenburg (2004). Many of these are empirical studies rather than theory-building; some build theories of particular *aspects* of the economic power of capital and some of them are hampered by conceptual deficiencies. This thesis is the first study to systematically elaborate the concept

of economic power, distinguish it clearly from other forms of power, scrutinise its socio-ontological presuppositions and specify the exact relations between its sources, levels and modes of functioning.

ABSTRACTIONS

In order to construct a theory of the economic power of capital, it has been necessary to make a lot of abstractions, i.e., to theoretically construct an object of analysis by analytically separating what in reality belongs together. Rather than assembling a typology of forms of power on the basis of empirical generalisations, I have attempted to follow Marx's systematic method of progressing from the abstract to the concrete by means of a conceptual analysis of the inner connections between the economic forms which constitutes the core structure of the capitalist mode of production. This means that I have generally abstracted from anything which cannot be derived from the capital form itself. The great advantage of such an analysis is that it tells us something about the *necessary and inherent* structures and dynamics of capitalism, which is something an empirical analysis would never be able to do. We should always bear in mind, however, that such an analysis is, as Marx puts it, 'right only when it knows its own limit' (29: 505). Before summarising what this has allowed me to conclude, I want to briefly indicate what it has left unexamined.

First of all, I want to emphasise that my analysis of the economic power of capital is not a description of an empirically observable state of affairs. The object of my analysis is the core structure of capitalism or its ideal average. The mechanisms and forces which can be identified at this level of abstraction are operative in any situation in which a substantial part of economic activity is subjected to the logic of valorisation. Any historically and geographically specific form of capitalism, however, is shaped by multiple social forces as well as historical and geographical conditions, which might accelerate, inhibit, distort, thwart or even block the immanent dynamics of capital. If we want to know something about how the economic power of capital works in a temporally or spatially determinate social formation, we have to pay attention to such factors. This also includes *resistance* to capital. Readers with autonomist leanings will most likely dismiss my analysis as an 'objectivist' interpretation 'which infinitively assert[s] the power of capital to possess and command all development' (Negri, 1992, p. 132). I have two replies to such criticism: first, describing the power of capital does not imply any claims about the relative power of anti-capitalist forces. My aim has

never been to provide an exhaustive account of power-relationships in capitalism, but only to theorise the power of capital. Second, the Negriist strategy of theoretically pretending that victory is just around the corner does not necessarily further the anti-capitalist cause. Proletarian resistance does not become stronger just because theorists proclaim it to be ontologically primary. Proletarian resistance *is* omnipresent. However, the thorny question is why capital nevertheless still manages to hold on to its power.

Another thing I want to mention is that I have generally abstracted from the existence of different forms of capital (productive capital, merchant's capital and interest-bearing capital) as well as different factions of the capitalist class and the distribution of surplus value among them (as profit of enterprise, ground rent and interest). I have done so in order to focus on the fundamental logic of valorisation shared by all forms of capital. It would be interesting, however, to examine how different forms of capital contribute to the overall reproduction of the power of capital. One could speculate, for example, that there is a kind of division of labour within the capitalist class. Landowners receive ground rent as a reward for keeping proletarians off the land, i.e., to secure the relation of domination analysed in chapter three. Marx seems to suggest as much when he notes that the only function of private property in land in capitalism is that it 'should *not* be common property' (31: 278). Productive capital takes care of the domination of the workers within the workplace, i.e., the mechanisms examined in chapter five. In so far as mercantile capital 'helps to extend the market and facilitates the division of labour between capitals' (M: 388), its function could be said to be the expansion and entrenchment of the forms of power examined in chapter four. Finally, financial capital fulfils several functions of domination. It lubricates the entire system by financing investments, equalising profits and facilitating the realisation of the world market (including the imperialist adventures of capital). The form of domination specific to financial capital, however, is *debt*. At its root, debt is a relation of domination between a debtor and a creditor. Marx regards the credit system as a 'terrible weapon in the battle of competition', a weapon which functions by means of 'invisible threads' (C1: 778). In the *1864-65 Manuscript*, he suggests that speculative '*gambling*' can sometimes 'take the place of direct violence' (M: 567). Marx primarily considers the debtor-creditor relation as a relation between different factions of capital, i.e., as an antagonism between 'capital as *property*' and 'capital as *function*' (M: 481f). As such, debt is a mechanism which ensures the commitment of individual capitals to the execution of the general laws

of capital. In the neoliberal era, however, debt has become increasingly central to the entire economy—not just as a relation between different factions of capital, but also as a relation between capital and the state as well as capital and proletarians. The SAPs of the 1980s and the case of Greece in the 2010s have clearly demonstrated how public debt can act as a powerful stranglehold on the state, forcing it to comply with markets. The massive increase in *consumer debt* (mortgages, student debt, credit card debt, etc.) in recent decades has likewise shown itself to be a central component of capital's power over proletarians. Marx did not pay much attention to proletarian debt. In so far as he mentions it, he tends to regard it as a remnant of pre-capitalist forms of usury capital (32: 532f; 33: 10; M: 693ff). He comes close to the subject in the manuscript *Wages* (1847), where he briefly criticises the idea that proletarian misery can be remedied by means of 'savings banks'. Such a system would, according to Marx, be a 'machine of despotism' channelling wages back to capitalists and thereby strengthening their 'direct ruling power [*Herrschemacht*] over the people' (6: 427). The central role of debt in contemporary capitalism should be regarded as a specific characteristic of the neoliberal era; it is not a necessary feature of capitalist production, and for this reason, it lies outside the scope of this thesis. It would, however, be interesting to see what a systematic consideration of debt within the theoretical framework developed here could tell us.

Another subject which would be worthwhile digging deeper into is the precise relationship between violence, ideology and economic power. In the course of the preceding six chapters, there has been several points at which a relationship between these forms of power has been indicated. We have seen how violence can be replaced by economic power, but we should also bear in mind Marx's suggestion that the coercive power of the state is always in the background, ready to step in if mute compulsion turns out to be insufficient. We have also encountered several examples of economic power forming the basis of ideological power: commodity exchange as the basis of fetishist naturalisation and the bourgeois ideology of equal market agents; the distribution of surplus value through competition as the basis of the mystification of exploitation; the separation between a formal economy and a domestic sphere of reproduction as the basis of sexist ideology; or the generation of a relative surplus population as a fertile ground for racist ideology. In order to fully understand the power of capital, we would have to integrate the theory of economic power into a broader theory of power and capital,

which would have to include an account of the role played by violence and ideology in the reproduction of capitalism.

Then there is the question of the relation between the power of capital and the division of human beings into genders, races, sexualities, nationalities, cultures and religions, just to name a few significant social differences. I have argued that in so far as we are concerned only with the core structure of the capitalist mode of production, the only thing we can say is that capital has a structural propensity to reproduce and strengthen antagonisms among proletarians. What we cannot do is to derive the specific nature of these differences from the logic of capital. If we want to examine how capital reproduces its power in a concrete situation, we will obviously have to take into account how the mute compulsion of capital interacts with the social differences and antagonisms in that specific context. It would be impossible, for example, to understand American capitalism without taking racism into account. It would also be difficult to understand the persistent ability of the capitalist class to push through neoliberal austerity in contemporary Europe without understanding the ideological function of islamophobia. But this is not only a matter of being sensitive to the peculiarities of the conjuncture; there is also a *theoretical* task here, which consists in systematically integrating the theory of the economic power of capital with theories of race, gender, sexuality, etc. I have referred briefly to such connections several times in the course of this thesis, for example in the discussion of the reproduction of labour-power in chapter three, the analysis of discipline and divisions of labour within the workplace in chapter five and the examination of surplus populations in chapter six. Armed with theories of 'race', gender, sexuality and other significant social differences, it would be possible to reconsider all of the mechanisms of the mute compulsion of capital in order to systematically map out how they affect different categories of proletarians and how these forms of social oppression affect the power of capital.

These abstractions all represent possible directions for future research which could contribute to our understanding of why and how our lives continue to be subjected to the imperatives of capital. Such research is only possible, however, on the basis of a coherent and systematic theory of the way in which capital imposes itself on social life by moulding its social and material conditions. This is what I hope to have provided in this thesis. In conclusion, I want to briefly summarise my findings.

MUTE COMPULSION

In chapter two, I argued that the corporeal organisation of the human body is the basis of a unique ability of humans to mediate their social relations through things, and thereby also to infuse materiality with power. The porosity of the human metabolism makes it possible for relations of domination to weave itself into social life in a manner unavailable to other animals. Capitalism is the first mode of production to fully exploit the ontological precarity of the human animal. Pre-capitalist modes of surplus extraction were based on the intimate *connection* between the producers and the means of production; either the producers were subsumed under the means of production, as with various forms of slavery, or the means of production were subsumed under the producers, as in feudalism. The power of pre-capitalist ruling classes was premised on *securing the unity* of producers and the means of production. The power of the capitalist class, in contrast, is grounded in the reproduction of *the separation* of these constitutive moments of the human metabolism in order to govern their *temporary re-connection* at the point of production.

In order for the logic of valorisation to insert itself as the mediator between life and its conditions, the proletarian condition had to be universalised. At its root, capitalism relies on a biopolitical fracture in which proletarian life is reduced to a pure possibility of labour, cut off from the conditions of its realisation. This is the fundamental class domination presupposed by the capitalist mode of production; a class domination where the subordinated part consists not only of those who are formally exploited by capital, but of everyone who is dependent upon the circuits of capital, regardless of whether they are wage-labourers or not. In order to make sure that the production of surplus value becomes the condition of the reproduction of life, capital has to turn entire communities into *vogelfrei* proletarians.

The separation between life and its conditions forces the proletariat to send some of its members off to the market, where they sell a part of their life as the commodity known as labour-power. In distinction to a slave or a feudal peasant, proletarians are compelled by their own needs to offer themselves up for exploitation. This is what makes it possible for apologists of capital to represent the relation between the buyer and the seller of labour-power as a voluntary contract between free agents. In truth, however, the very existence of a market for labour-power is a *result* of class domination. But it does not stop here. When the proletarian goes to the market, she is confronted by a another face of the power of capital: value and competition.

The organisation of social reproduction by means of the exchange of products of labour produced by independent and private producers transforms social relations among people into real abstractions which confront them as an alien power. Society loses control over itself, as social relations autonomise and incarnate themselves in money, whose interaction with commodities on the market sets the conditions under which people gain access to the things they need in order to live. The worker who shows up on the market to sell her labour-power is therefore confronted with something called a 'price'. Rather than a piece of information on the basis of which she can decide how to rationally allocate her resources, a price is a *command* issued by the market.

The generalisation of the commodity form means that the *vertical* relation of exploitation between workers and capitalists is mediated by the *horizontal* relationships among capitalists as well as among workers. These horizontal relations take the form of *competition*, which is the mechanism through which the laws of capital are executed. Competition is a form of domination that everyone—not only proletarians—is subjected to. This tells us something important about the power of capital: it cannot be grasped solely in terms of class domination, or, put differently: the power of *capital* cannot be reduced to the power of the *capitalists*. The economic power of capital results from *the conjunction of two separations*: that of life from its conditions, and that of producers from other producers and of workers from other workers.

When the worker sells her labour-power, another relation of domination comes into being: the power of the capitalist within the workplace. At first sight, this relationship might resemble pre-capitalist social hierarchies. In reality, however, it is radically different. The relationship between the worker and the capitalist is not a personal relationship of dependence, since it is instituted and mediated through the market, and since both parts have the right to terminate it. Capitalists are functionaries of capital, who only possess power over workers in so far as they are personifications of capital.

The economic power of capital thus has its ultimate source in two sets of social relations. First, the vertical class relations, which operate on two levels: (a) as a relation between capital and the entire proletariat and (b) a relation between capitalists and a subset of the proletariat, namely those employed by capital as workers. Second, the horizontal relations within classes, i.e., among capitals and among workers. These two sets of relations, which are founded upon two separations, are *sources* of power for capital, and their mutual mediation of each other explains why this power takes the form of

an impersonal and abstract form of domination which cannot be reduced to neither ideology nor violence, even if all three forms of power are functionally integrated in the actual reproduction of capitalism.

But relations of production are not the only source of the economic power of capital. In addition to these, we also have to take into account the *dynamics* set in motion by the relations. Capitalists use the power granted them by the relations of production to exploit workers. But capitalists are themselves subjected to the mute compulsion of capital in the form of competition, which compels them to constantly re-configure the labour process in order to reduce costs, increase control over workers and expand their market. In other words, capitalists use their power not only to exploit workers but also to *re-configure the production process*. When they do so, they not only *exercise* the power of capital, they also *fortify* it. How? By altering the social and technological structure and content of the production process in a manner which makes it increasingly incompatible with social logics other than the valorisation of value. Through this process of real subsumption—of labour as well as nature—capital gradually supplements its control over the *objective* conditions of labour with the appropriation of its *social* conditions. And, as we saw in the analysis of the logistics revolution in chapter five, capital also sets in motion a similar process of real subsumption on the level of the social totality, through which it gradually takes control over the *geographical* conditions of labour as well. This circular structure, in which effects become causes, is also at play in the dynamics of accumulation, which I examined in chapter six. Through the constant generation of a relative surplus population, capital keeps up competition among workers, thereby making it easier for capitalists to discipline them and cut their wages. Finally, the partial self-negation of capitalist production in times of crises allows capital to avoid undermining itself completely, and thereby to continue its insatiable quest for surplus value on an expanded scale.

The mute compulsion of capital, then, is the result of a particular set of social relations and a particular set of dynamics set in motion by those relations. Taken together, this explains why capitalist society is dominated by an expansive logic of valorisation imposing itself on society not only by means of violence and ideology but also by inscribing itself into the material fabric of social reproduction.

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APPENDIX A: CITED VOLUMES OF MECW

VOL.	TITLE	WRITTEN	PAGES
1	Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. First Article. Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates	Apr. 1842	132-181
	The Leading Article in No. 179 of the <i>Kölnische Zeitung</i>	Jul. 1842	184-202
	Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. Third Article. Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood	Oct. 1842	224-263
	Letter to Arnold Ruge	Mar. 1843	398-402
3	Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law	Mar.-Aug. 1843	3-129
	Letters from <i>Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher</i>	Mar.-Sept. 1843	133-145
	On the Jewish Question	Aug.-Dec. 1843	146-175
	Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction	Dec. 1843-Jan. 1844	175-187

	Critical Marginal Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian"	Jul. 1844	189-206
	Comments on James Mill, <i>Éléments d'économie politique</i>	First half of 1844	211-228
	Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844	Apr.-Aug. 1844	229-348
4	<i>The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company</i>	Aug.-Nov. 1844	5-211
	Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book <i>Das nationale System der politischen Oekonomie</i>	Mar. 1845	265-294
5	Theses on Feuerbach	Spring of 1845	3-5
	<i>The German Ideology</i>	Nov. 1845-May 1846	19-539
6	<i>The Poverty of Philosophy</i>	Jan.-Jun. 1847	105-212
	Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality	Oct. 1847	312-340
	Wages	Dec. 1847	415-437
	<i>Manifesto of the Communist Party</i>	Jan. 1848	477-519
9	Wage Labour and Capital	Dec. 1847	197-228
10	<i>The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850</i>	Jan.-Oct. 1850	45-146
	Review, May to October 1850	Autumn of 1850	490-532

	Reflections	March 1851	584-592
11	<i>The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte</i>	Dec. 1851-Mar. 1852	99-197
	Forced Emigration.—Kossuth and Mazzini.—The Refugee Question.—Election Bribery in England.—Mr. Cobden	Mar. 1853	528-534
12	The London Press.—Policy of Napoleon on the Turkish Question	Mar. 1853	18-23
	The Labor Question	Nov. 1853	460-463
20	Inaugural Address to the Working Men's International Association	Oct. 1864	5-13
	Value, Price and Profit	May-Jun. 1865	101-149
21	The General Council to the Federal Council of Romance Switzerland	Jan. 1870	84-91
	Confidential Communication	Mar. 1870	112-124
	Notes for an Undelivered Speech on Ireland	Nov. 1867	189-193
24	Critique of the Gotha Programme	Apr.-May 1875	75-99
	Letter to <i>Otecheestvenniye Zapaski</i>	Nov. 1877	196-201

	Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasluch	Feb.-Mar. 1881	346-369
	Letter to Vera Zasluch	Mar. 1881	370-371
	Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner's <i>Lehrbuch der politischen Oekonomie</i>	1881	531-559
29	<i>A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy</i>	Nov. 1858-Jan. 1859	257-420
	The Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of <i>A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy</i>	Aug.-Nov. 1858	430-517
30-34	<i>Economic Manuscript of 1861-63</i>	Aug. 1861-Jul. 1863	All
40-46	Letters	1856-1883	All

APPENDIX B: DETAILED LIST OF CONTENTS

<i>A Note on Translations and References</i>	7
INTRODUCTION	9
Economy and Power	13
Aim, Method, Scope	19
Overview	29
PART ONE: CONDITIONS	
I. CONCEPTUALISING POWER	37
Terminology	38
Power	41
Capital	44
Historical Materialism	51
The State	53
Ideology	59
Economic Power	63
Foucault	67
II. THE SOCIAL ONTOLOGY OF ECONOMIC POWER	73
Relations and Relata	76
The Human Essence	79
Settling Accounts	84
Human Animals	88
Corporeal Organisation	91
Social Tool-Makers	94
Natural and Social	99
Modes, Relations, Forces, History	101
Materialism	104
Metabolic Domination	108

PART TWO: RELATIONS

III. VERTICAL POWER	117
Dependency	118
Class	120
Reproduction of Labour-Power	122
Wage Labour	131
Biopolitics	141
IV. HORIZONTAL POWER	153
Value is Form	155
Value is Domination	159
Fetishism	165
Postone	170
Value and Class	174
Competition	184

PART THREE: DYNAMICS

V. THE PRODUCTION OF POWER	195
Anarchy and Despotism	196
Personal or Impersonal?	199
Subsumption: Formal and Real	202
Discipline and Temporality	205
Deskilling and Division	210
Total Subsumption?	215
Subsumption of Nature	217
Agriculture	221
Logistics	232
VI. THE ACCUMULATION OF POWER	253
Surplus Populations	253
Causes	259
Effects	262
Negation as Condition	268

CONCLUSION	273
Abstractions	276
Mute Compulsion	280
<i>Bibliography</i>	283
<i>Appendix A: Cited Volumes of MECW</i>	321
<i>Appendix B: Detailed List of Contents</i>	325
<i>English Summary</i>	329
<i>Dansk resumé</i>	333
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	337

ENGLISH SUMMARY

Despite a decade of crisis and social unrest, capitalism is in many ways stronger than ever before. Never before have such a large share of the global population and such large parts of life been so tightly woven into the social logic that Karl Marx identified as the ‘all-dominating economic power in bourgeois society’: *capital*. Capital is not a certain category of things, but rather a *process* in which things are *used* in a certain way, namely as a means of making money, i.e., purchasing and selling with the aim of accumulating wealth in its abstract, monetary form. In other words, capital is *the valorisation of value*.

This thesis is an attempt to contribute to the explanation of how capital maintains its position as the ruling principle of the organisation of the reproduction of society. Earlier attempts to answer this question has tended to rely on the (often implicit) assumption that power essentially comes in two fundamental forms: *violence* and *ideology*. From such a perspective, the power of capital is explained with reference to either the guaranteeing of property rights by means of (the threat of) state violence or the ideological legitimisation of capitalist relations of production or—in most cases—a combination of these two. The fundamental claim of this thesis is that this violence-ideology couplet overlooks a form of power that is crucial for the reproduction of capitalism, but cannot be reduced to neither violence nor ideology, namely what Marx refers to in *Capital* as ‘the mute compulsion of economic relations’, or what I will also refer to as *economic power*. In contrast to violence and ideology, economic power addresses the subjugated part in a relationship of domination *indirectly* through its social and material surroundings and conditions. Violence addresses the body by inflicting pain and injury, and ideology addresses the ways in which we understand ourselves and our surroundings. In contrast, *economic power* forces people to do certain things by *reorganising the social and material conditions of their existence*.

In pre-capitalist societies, exploitation of workers was anchored in personal relationships of dependence, upheld by (the threat of) direct, physical coercion. The unique thing about capitalism is that the exploited class is tied to the exploiting class through an abstract, anonymous and impersonal form

of power. This thesis is an attempt to construct a systematic theory of this mute compulsion. The foundations for such a theory can be found scattered out all over Marx's writings. Marx himself, however, never explicitly worked it out, and, as I demonstrate in this thesis, his successors and interpreters have not succeeded in formulating a satisfactory theory of the mute compulsion of capital either, though several Marxist studies from the last couple of decades have succeeded in uncovering many important aspects of its workings. The thesis therefore proceeds from a critical reading of Marx's writings in order to excavate essential insights and combine them with other insights drawn from relevant scholarly literature, Marxist as well as non-Marxist.

The thesis consists of three parts with two chapters in each. Part one is about *conditions* in a two-fold sense: the *conceptual* conditions of the rest of the thesis and the *real* conditions of the economic power of capital. Through a discussion of the concept of capital as well as the concept of power in mainstream social sciences, the work of Michel Foucault and the Marxist tradition, chapter one clarifies what is meant by the expression 'the power of capital'. Chapter two examines the *social ontology* of economic power. On the basis of a reconstruction of Marx's widely ignored but highly original analysis of the human body, I attempt to explain why it is possible for human societies to materialise relations of domination in the social, technological and natural processes upon which the reproduction of society rests.

The second part of the thesis (chapters 3 and 4) concerns one of the two main sources of the economic power of capital: the relations of production, i.e., the social relations without which capitalist production would be impossible. These relations can be grouped into two categories: the *vertical (class) relations* between exploiters and exploited and the *horizontal relations* among the units of production. Chapter three demonstrates that capitalism relies on a historically unique form of class domination, which under normal circumstances allows the class that controls the means of social reproduction to force workers to perform surplus labour without having to resort to violence. In this chapter, I also discuss the relation between the production of commodities and the reproduction of labour-power as well as the question of how we account for the fact that the performance of reproductive labour has been forced upon women throughout the entire history of capitalism. Chapter four examines how the organisation of social production by means of the exchange of the products of labour as commodities gives rise to a set of (market) mechanisms that subjects *everyone*—proletarians as well as

capitalists—to the imperatives of capital. The central concepts here are *value* and *competition*. In this chapter, I also address an important question that is widely neglected in the literature: what is the precise relationship between the vertical and the horizontal relations?

Part three examines the other main source of the economic power of capital: the *dynamics* set in motion by the relations examined in part two. These dynamics are simultaneously an *effect* and a *cause* of the power of capital. This power thus has a circular structure as it is partly *the result of its own exercise*. Chapter five analyses the consequences of the more or less constant organisational, material and technological reconfiguration of the production process, which capitalists are forced to undertake due to pressure from competitors as well as workers. This dynamic, which Marx encapsulates in the concept of *real subsumption*, results in a tendency to create processes of production that are only compatible with one social logic: the valorisation of value. In the second half of the chapter, I analyse two concrete examples of how the mute compulsion of capital works, namely the industrialisation and globalisation of agriculture since the 1940s and the so-called logistics revolution of the 1970s. Chapter six is about *surplus population* and *crisis*. In the first part of the chapter, I demonstrate how the immanent tendency of capital accumulation to generate a relative surplus population is one of the mechanisms by means of which the logic of valorisation imposes itself on social life. I then go on to interpret capitalist crises, not as a portending of the final breakdown of capitalism but rather as a mechanism of domination through which capital re-establishes the conditions of a new and expansive round of accumulation.

The result of this analysis is a theory which enables us to transcend the violence-ideology couplet that has hitherto restricted our capacity to grasp the power of capital. The theory of the mute compulsion of economic relations makes it possible to fill an important gap in the existing literature and helps us to understand how the expansive logic of capital imposes itself on the life of society—not only by means of violence and ideology, but also by inscribing itself in the material structures of social reproduction.

DANSK RESUMÉ

Trods mere end ti års krise og sociale protester er kapitalismen på mange måder stærkere end nogensinde før. Aldrig har en så stor af del menneskeheden og så mange aspekter af livet været vævet ind i den sociale logik, Karl Marx identificerede som ‘den altdominerende økonomiske magt i det borgerlige samfund’: *kapital*. Kapital er ikke en bestemt kategori af ting, men snarere en *proces*, der implicerer en bestemt måde at *bruge* ting på, nemlig som midler til at tjene penge, dvs. købe og sælge med henblik på at akkumulere rigdom i dens abstrakte, monetære form. Kapital er med andre ord *valorisering af værdi*.

Formålet med denne afhandling er at levere et teoretisk bidrag til at forklare *hvordan* kapitalen fastholder sin position som det styrende princip for organiseringen af samfundets reproduktion. De fleste tidligere forsøg på at forklare dette har opereret ud fra den (ofte implicite) forudsætning, at magt grundlæggende antager to former: *vold* og *ideologi*. Kapitalens magt forklares således enten med henvisning til statens opretholdelse af den private ejendomsret ved hjælp af (truslen om) direkte fysisk tvang, eller med henvisning til den ideologiske legitimering af kapitalistiske produktionsforhold, eller—hvilket oftest er tilfældet—en kombination af disse. Grundidéen i denne afhandling er, at en sådan dualitet overser en form for magt, der er afgørende for kapitalens reproduktion, men som ikke kan reduceres til hverken vold eller ideologi: nemlig det, Marx i *Kapitalen* kalder ‘de økonomiske forholdsstumme tvang’, og som jeg også omtaler som *økonomisk magt*. I modsætning til vold og ideologi adresserer økonomisk magt det undertvungne subjekt på en *indirekte* måde, gennem dets materielle omgivelser og betingelser. Vold adresserer kroppen ved at påføre den skade og smerte, og ideologi adresserer måden hvorpå vi forstår os selv og vores omgivelser. *Økonomisk magt* er derimod en form for magt der tvinger mennesker til at gøre bestemte ting ved at *reorganisere de sociale og materielle betingelser for deres eksistens*.

I førkapitalistiske samfund var udbytning af arbejdere primært forankret i personlige afhængighedsforhold og opretholdt af (truslen om) direkte, fysisk tvang. Det unikke ved kapitalismen er, at den udbyttede klasse er bundet til den udbytende klasse gennem en abstrakt, anonym og upersonlig form for

magt. Denne afhandling er et forsøg på at konstruere en systematisk teori om denne stumme tvang. Grundlaget for en sådan teori er spredt ud over Marx' talrige skrifter, men Marx udarbejdede den aldrig selv, og som jeg demonstrerer i afhandlingen, er det heller ikke lykkedes hans efterfølgere eller fortolkere at formulere en fyldestgørende teori om kapitalens stumme tvang—også selvom en række marxistiske studier inden for de sidste årtier er lykkedes med at afdække væsentlige *aspekter* af den. Afhandlingen tager derfor udgangspunkt i en kritisk læsning af Marx' skrifter med henblik på at uddrage væsentlige erkendelser og koble dem med indsigter fra relevant marxistisk såvel som ikke-marxistisk forskningslitteratur.

Afhandlingen består af tre dele med to kapitler i hver. Første del handler om *betingelser* i en dobbelt forstand: dels de *begrebslige* betingelser for resten af afhandlingen, dels de *virkelige* betingelser for kapitalens økonomiske magt. Gennem en diskussion af kapitalbegrebet samt magtbegrebet i mainstream samfundsvidenskabelig litteratur, i Michel Foucaults værker og i den marxistiske tradition specificerer kapitel 1, hvad vi skal forstå ved udtrykket *kapitalens magt*. Kapitel 2 undersøger den økonomiske magts *sociale ontologi*. Med udgangspunkt i en rekonstruktion af Marx' særdeles oversete analyse af den menneskelige krop forsøger jeg at forklare, hvorfor det overhovedet er muligt for menneskelige samfund at materialisere dominansforhold i selve de sociale, teknologiske og naturlige processer, samfundet reproduktion beror på.

Afhandlingens anden del (kap. 3 og 4) omhandler den ene af de to hovedkilder til kapitalens økonomiske magt: produktionsforholdene, dvs. de sociale relationer, der ligger til grund for kapitalistisk produktion. Disse relationer kan deles op i to grupper: *vertikale (klasse)relationer* mellem udbyttede og udbyttere og *horisontale* relationer mellem produktionsenheder. Kapitel 3 demonstrerer, at kapitalismen forudsætter en historisk unik form for klassesdominans, der under normale omstændigheder gør det muligt for den klasse, der kontrollerer betingelserne for den social reproduktion, at tvinge arbejdere til at levere merarbejde uden at ty til vold. I dette kapitel undersøger jeg også forholdet mellem produktionen af varer og den reproduktion af arbejdskraften, der gennem hele kapitalismens historie primært er blevet pålagt kvinder. Kapitel 4 undersøger, hvordan organiseringen af samfundets produktion gennem udvekslingen af arbejdsprodukter som varer resulterer i et sæt af (markeds)mekanismer, der tvinger *alle*—proletarer såvel som kapitalister—til at eksekvere kapitalens imperativer. De centrale begreber her er *værdi* og *konkurrence*. I dette kapitel adresserer jeg desuden et vigtigt

spørgsmål, hvis manglende besvarelse udgør en væsentlig mangel i den eksisterende litteratur: hvad er den præcise relationen mellem de vertikale og de horisontale relationer?

Afhandlingens tredje del handler om den *anden* hovedkilde til kapitalens økonomiske magt: de *dynamikker*, der opstår som et resultat af de relationer, der blev undersøgt i anden del. Disse dynamikker er på en og samme tid en *effekt af* og en *årsag til* kapitalens magt. Denne magt har således en cirkulær struktur, i og med at den delvist er *et resultat af sin egen udøvelse*. Kapitel 5 undersøger konsekvenserne af den mere eller mindre konstante organisatoriske, materielle og teknologiske rekonfiguration af produktionsprocessen, som presset fra konkurrenter såvel som arbejdere tvinger kapitalister til at iværksætte. Denne dynamik, som Marx sammenfatter med begrebet *reel subsumption*, resulterer i en tendens til at skabe produktionsprocesser, der kun er kompatible med én social logik: valoriseringen af værdi. I anden halvdel af kapitlet analyserer jeg to konkrete eksempler på, hvordan kapitalens stumme tvang fungerer: først industrialiseringen og globaliseringen af landbrugsproduktionen siden midten af 1900-tallet, og dernæst den såkaldt logistiske revolution, der begyndte i 1970'erne. Kapitel 6 omhandler *overskudsbefolkninger* og *kriser*. I kapitlets første del viser jeg hvordan kapitalakkumulationens tendens til at generere en relativ overskudsbefolkning bør ses som en af de mekanismer, hvorigennem valoriseringens logik påtvinger sig samfundets liv. Dernæst følger en fortolkning af kapitalistiske kriser som en magt-mekanisme, der snarere end at varsle kapitalismens endelige sammenbrud reetablerer betingelserne for en ny og ekspansiv akkumulationsrunde.

Resultatet af denne undersøgelse er en teori, der gør os i stand til at overskride den vold-ideologi-dualitet, der hidtil har begrænset vores forståelse af kapitalens magt. Teorien om de økonomiske forholds stumme tvang udfylder således en væsentlig mangel i den eksisterende litteratur og gør os i stand til at forstå hvordan kapitalens ekspansive logik ikke blot påtvinger sig samfundets liv ved hjælp af vold og ideologi, men også ved at indskrive sig i den social reproduktions materielle strukturer.

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