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Lula and the Continuity of Neoliberalism in Brazil: Strategic Choice, Economic Imperative or Political Schizophrenia?

Introduction
This article offers a political-economy interpretation of Lula’s election to the Brazilian presidency in 2002, and an assessment of his administration. Lula’s election in October 2002 was greeted with delight by his left-wing supporters in Brazil and abroad. For them, Lula’s remarkable trajectory, including childhood poverty and hard work as a lathe operator in São Paulo’s industrial belt, his contribution to the renewal of Brazil’s trade unions and his leadership role in the Workers’ Party (PT), his principled opposition to the élite pacts that have always shaped Brazilian political life, and his unquestionable integrity, showed that his election would open a new stage in the history of Latin America’s largest country.1 Paradoxically, however, his new allies on the political Right also warmly greeted Lula’s victory. For them, the PT seemed to have finally achieved political ‘maturity’, which is always deserving of applause.

1 The history of the PT is reviewed by Branford and Kucinski 1995 and 2003.
More importantly, they expected the new administration to join the neoliberal consensus that has ruled Brazil since the early 1990s, dealing a terminal blow to the powerful Brazilian Left.

It is important to address this paradox in order to understand the current government’s power base, objectives and margin for manoeuvre. Even if the new administration fails to deliver the policy changes and welfare improvements originally expected by many of Lula’s supporters, it is worthwhile assessing what has been achieved, why and how, and what economic and social improvements are realistically possible in one of the world’s most unequal societies. Brazil has a vast territory and abundant natural resources, a developed industrial base, enormous productive potential and a relatively organised and experienced working class: if significant improvements in social welfare cannot be achieved there, it would be difficult to claim that they are feasible in other poor countries.

It is impossible to assess the new administration from all of these angles in a short essay. This article reviews the social, political and economic processes underpinning Lula’s election, and the strategic choices of his administration, in six sections. The first reviews the social forces supporting the new administration, summarised under the term ‘losers’ alliance’. The second explains the political and economic rationale of Lula’s commitment to neoliberalism. The third analyses the trajectory of the Brazilian economy during the last fifteen years, in order to assess the material basis of the neoliberal transition, the economic constraints faced by the new government and the scope for alternative policies. The fourth and fifth review the administration’s record in 2003–4, and its economic and political achievements. The sixth section summarises the article and briefly outlines the most likely scenarios for the second half of Lula’s administration.

I. The losers’ alliance

Lula was elected by a losers’ alliance: a loose coalition of social groups having in common only the experience of losses under neoliberalism. This was not a Gramscian historical bloc. The ‘losers’ alliance’ was not a strategic alliance, it did not have a hegemonic power project, and it never challenged the state

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The alliance was purely tactical; these groups were essentially attempting to limit the costs of neoliberalism, either by marginally changing the priorities of economic policy or by simply shifting its costs onto others. However, there was no agreement about how this should be done or what alternative policies should be implemented. The ‘losers’ had very modest and possibly mutually incompatible objectives, centred on a relative improvement of their economic and social position and an increase of their political influence.

The loser’s alliance included four main groups. First, the unionised urban and rural working class, especially the skilled and semi-skilled manual and office workers, the lower ranks of the civil service, sections of the professional middle class and many informal workers. These groups have been the backbone of the Brazilian Left (and the main source of support for the PT) since the disintegration of the military régime, in the early 1980s. They have also lost out most heavily under neoliberalism. They were penalised by heavy job cuts, the stagnation or decline of real wages, the dilution of employment rights and the contraction of public and social services that accompanied the neoliberal transition.

Second, Lula was supported by large segments of the unorganised and unskilled working class, including many informal and unemployed workers of the metropolitan peripheries. Some of these groups had been reluctant to engage with the PT, partly for ideological reasons (especially their attachment to clientelistic and populist political practices), and partly because of the relative scarcity of channels connecting them to the PT. (In contrast, multiple and overlapping channels linked the PT to the formal-sector workers, for example, trade unions, community associations, social movements and the ‘base communities’ of the Catholic church.) In 2002, these large but mainly unorganised groups supported Lula because of his perceived rejection of neoliberalism and because of the PT’s political pact with several evangelical churches, which are increasingly influential among this segment of the working class.

Third, several prominent capitalists also supported Lula, especially among the traditional manufacturing élite of the Southeast. They were disappointed by the failure of the neoliberal growth strategy associated with President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Many of these capitalists were exhausted by the long stagnation of the Brazilian economy, the onslaught of transnational firms and the relentless pressure of cheap imports, especially after the hasty trade liberalisation in the early 1990s. Some magnates were also concerned
with the negative social implications of neoliberalism, especially the perceived
deterioration of the distribution of income and its presumed security
implications: violent crime, random shootings, kidnappings, the growing
power of heavily armed drug-trafficking gangs, and so on. These capitalists
hoped that Lula would combine economic ‘responsibility’ with a more pro-
active strategy to tackle Brazil’s social problems. Their preferred economic
policy was nationalist and expansionary. It was based on the reduction of the
debt burden of productive capital, minimisation of exchange-rate volatility,
rationalisation of the tax system, expansion of state procurement and
development finance, and marginal income distribution. Typically, Globo, a
reactionary and heavily indebted media empire, ditched the official presidential
candidate early on and supported Lula, hoping that his ‘nationalist’
administration would help the corporation to stave off bankruptcy.

Fourth, several notorious right-wing oligarchs, landowners and influential
local politicians from the poorest regions of Brazil also supported Lula. Their
unexpected political conversion was not due to pressure from below; rather,
it was the outcome of a shrewd political calculation. Since the early 1990s,
these oligarchs and their protégés were being squeezed out of their influential
positions in Brasília by the encroachment of a new cohort of upper- and
middle-managers of state institutions appointed by the financial interests
associated with neoliberalism. In contrast with the previous generation of
lawyers, engineers and talentless political appointees from the poorest regions
of the country, the new managers are economists, financiers and professional
administrators, mainly from the rich Southeast, and carefully trained in the
neoliberal arts in the best international universities. The traditional oligarchy
also resented the rationing of ‘development’ funds imposed by the fiscal
austerity measures in place since 1990, which badly eroded their political
influence. Finally, they felt betrayed by a ‘dirty tricks’ campaign allegedly
inspired by president Cardoso and his party’s presidential candidate, José
Serra. By switching their support to the PT, these oligarchs attempted to
defeat the neoliberal interests associated with Cardoso. They also anticipated

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4 In March 2002, Maranhão state governor Roseana Sarney (daughter of former
president José Sarney, and supported by oligarchic interests of Centre and Northeast)
was far ahead of José Serra in the opinion polls. She was disgraced when Federal
Police broke into her husband’s office and found a large hoard of cash that would
allegedly be used in her campaign. Her downfall turned Serra into the only viable
right-of-centre candidate. However, the use of the Federal Police and live media
coverage of the search pointed to the government’s hand behind the affair.
that Lula would depend heavily on their support in Congress and in the state
governments, and that the PT would be more sensitive than the neoliberals
would to the plight of poorer regions – both of which would maximise the
oligarchs’ political power and influence.

Two important groups resisted Lula’s advances, in spite of the PT’s effort to
broaden the coalition as much as possible. Unsurprisingly, most of the élite –
including the large and medium capitalists, financiers, exporters, traders, the
media, most big landowners and local political chiefs, their intellectual and
political proxies and the top civil servants – refused to support Lula under
any circumstances. However, their resistance against the PT was much less
vociferous in 2002 than in previous elections, especially in 1989, when Lula
was narrowly defeated by a brutal campaign of intimidation, coercion and
sheer economic pressure.

The other reluctant group was the urban middle class. Although it is
relatively small, internally divided and politically unstable, this group is also
highly influential because of its ideological ascendancy over the working class
and its privileged access to the media and the organised social movements.
Although there is a significant left-wing constituency among the urban middle
class, important segments remain attached to clientelistic politics, right-wing
ideology and landowner interests (especially the rapidly growing agribusiness
interests in São Paulo, the South and the Centre-West). This class suffered
badly under neoliberalism. ‘Good jobs’ in the private and public sectors
contracted drastically, higher education no longer guarantees sufficient income
to satisfy their aspirations, and young adults can rarely replicate the social
and economic achievements of their parents. This group as a whole yearned
for expansionary economic policies; however, many were reluctant to ditch
the neoliberal-globalist ideology that they had fully incorporated only recently.
They were proud of their new international credit cards, glad to have access
to imported consumer goods and full of memories of recent trips abroad
(which, until the 1980s, were possible only for a tiny minority). They were
also frightened by the ‘radical’ image of the PT. Their dilemma was exacerbated
by the continuing turmoil in neighbouring Argentina and Venezuela – the

Unsurprisingly, Roseana’s vengeful father supported Lula. In turn, the PT helped him
to be elected Speaker of the Senate.

5 In 1999, just after the devaluation of the real (see Morais, Coelho and Saad-Filho
1999 and Saad-Filho and Morais 2002), the president of the Central Bank, Francisco
Lopes, defended in the Brazilian Congress the liberalisation of the capital account of
the balance of payments, and rejected demands for emergency controls on capital
flows. He claimed that controls
former collapsing because of the dismal failure of its extreme neoliberal experience, while the latter was forever unable to achieve political stability as it charted new political waters. Under intense pressure from all sides, the urban middle class splintered across the political spectrum.

II. Lula’s neoliberal shift

The social, political and economic features of Lula’s administration were determined by the alliances underpinning his election, described in the previous section, the material changes imposed by neoliberalism, reviewed in Section III, and the PT’s reaction to the 2002 exchange rate crisis, explained below.

In mid-2002, the emerging losers’ alliance was already sufficiently strong to give Lula a comfortable lead in the opinion polls. However, Lula’s radical image deeply worried the Brazilian and international financiers and the neoliberal élite. They feared the loss of political and economic leverage in an administration led by the PT, and they were especially concerned that the new administration might default or compulsorily reschedule the domestic public debt and Brazil’s foreign debt. Because of these concerns, several financial institutions refused to buy government securities maturing after 31 December 2002 (the last day of Cardoso’s presidency).6

The resources released by the brokers’ refusal to purchase government securities were transferred either to the foreign-exchange market (devaluing the real) or to the open market.7 In 2002, US$9.1 billion were transferred abroad.
in this way, devaluing the *real* from R$2.32 to the dollar in March to R$3.42 in July, and R$3.80 in October (inflation was only 4 per cent during the entire period). The country’s net international reserves tumbled, from US$28.8 billion in March to only US$16.3 billion in December. The devaluation of the currency and the brokers’ loud complaints about the ‘lack of policy clarity’ after the elections led to the downgrading of Brazilian bonds and foreign-debt certificates abroad which, in turn, triggered the recall of short-term loans and commercial credit lines by foreign banks. Half of the country’s commercial credit lines were lost in a few weeks. The Brazilian balance of payments was on the verge of collapse.

At the same time, the proportion of the stock of public securities traded in the open market increased from 0.7 per cent in February to 2.5 per cent in April, 5.3 per cent in July and 12.4 per cent in December. The Central Bank increased its open market operations to try to prevent these funds reaching the foreign exchange market, leading to a catastrophic devaluation of the *real*. In September, the stock of highly liquid securities in the open market reached 5.3 per cent of GDP, exceeding the monetary base and the Central Bank’s international reserves.

There is no question that the Cardoso administration was complicit in the meltdown of the Brazilian balance of payments, the evaporation of the government’s capacity to sell medium- and long-term securities and the Central Bank’s loss of control over the open market. In mid-2002, the Brazilian economy tottered on the brink of collapse. Media pressure on the government and the presidential candidates was intense, fuelling speculation even further. Lula’s poll leadership wobbled badly and his competitors sensed an opportunity. It was claimed that whoever managed to overtake Lula at this critical juncture would have strong chances of being elected, because he (there
The conversion of Lula and the PT to neoliberalism did not begin in 2002. It started after Lula’s defeat in 1989, with the subsequent decision of the party leadership to shift the PT to the ‘middle ground’. The transformation of the PT into a mainstream political party is reviewed in Saad-Filho and Morais 2005.

were no female candidates) would secure the growing anti-Lula vote and the accompanying campaign funds, just as Fernando Collor did in 1989. However, Lula was determined to stabilise his position and win his fourth presidential election. On 22 June, he issued a ‘Letter to the Brazilian People’ stating that his government would respect contracts (that is, service the domestic and foreign debts on schedule) and enforce the economic programme agreed with the IMF.

This shrewd move was sufficient to disarm the media, prevent a further deterioration of the economy and secure Lula’s leadership in the opinion polls, but it was not enough for the neoliberal coalition. Realising that Lula was poised to win, the neoliberal camp now demanded institutional guarantees of the continuity of neoliberalism, especially an independent Central Bank committed to a ‘responsible’ monetary policy and a new IMF agreement spanning well into the new administration. Lula acquiesced, and the wheels turned extraordinarily rapidly in Brasília and Washington. The new IMF agreement was signed in record time, on 4 September 2002. It involved a loan of US$30 billion, of which only US$6 billion would be available immediately. The rest would be available to the new government, if its policies were approved by the Fund. Lula’s consent opened to the PT the doors of financial institutions and conservative governments around the world.

Lula’s pact with neoliberalism virtually ensured his election, and he duly won both rounds of the vote by a large margin. However, his concessions imposed narrow limits for the new administration. They implied that his government would follow Cardoso’s neoliberal economic policies – but, it was promised, with more competence, honesty, creativity and sensitivity to the need for compensatory (targeted) social policies. During the campaign, little was said about the blatant contradiction between Lula’s commitment to the neoliberal agenda and the expectations of most of his voters. Most of the ‘losers’ were bound to be disappointed.

The 2002 economic crisis, and its political resolution – Lula’s complete capitulation to neoliberalism – illustrate the growing power of finance in Brazil. Finance can influence decisively not only economic policy, but also the democratic process in the country. The outcome of the crisis also implies

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that the Lula administration is limited in three important ways. First, Lula was elected by an unstable coalition of incompatible social and political forces attempting to shed the stagnationist bias of the neoliberal policies imposed in 1990. Beyond this, the ‘losers’ have only a limited range of short-term objectives in common, and their alliance is unable to offer consistent support to the government. Second, the capitulation of the PT leadership to the power of finance enserfed the government to the interests that the PT had hoped to defeat since its foundation, more than two decades ago. Finally, the losers’ alliance – and the forces supporting the new administration in Congress and at State level – does not generally aim to shift policy away from neoliberalism. The disparity between Lula’s impressive victory, the distribution of seats in Congress, where the PT and its dependable allies hold less than one-third of the seats, and the Left’s negligible influence on the judiciary shows that radical changes are not unambiguously popular, and they may be unenforceable. In sum, although Lula’s election created the expectation of changes, the President does not have a mandate for radical change, and he was not unambiguously committed to specific outcomes or even processes of change.

III. The economic stranglehold of neoliberalism

Sections I and II explained the most important political constraints upon the new Brazilian administration. This section argues that the economic constraints are no less binding. For neoliberalism is neither simply an ideology nor one viewpoint contending with others in a democratic debate. The ‘reforms’ have given rise to a material basis for the reproduction of neoliberalism through the transformations that they have wrought on the Brazilian economy and society. Three aspects of these transformations are especially important.

First, the reforms dismantled the ‘division of labour’ between domestic, foreign and state-owned capital established during the period of import-substituting industrialisation (ISI, between 1930–80), and the corresponding

10 Lula received 40m votes (46.4 per cent) in the first round of the elections, and 53m (61.3 per cent) in the second round. Serra, his nearest rival, was beaten by 20m votes in both rounds.

11 Lula’s centre-left alliance, including PT, PSB, PL, PCdoB, PPS, PV and PDT, elected 177 deputies (34.5 per cent of the house) and 25 senators (30.9 per cent). The centrist and right-wing PMDB, PTB and PP joined the coalition in 2003, while the PDT left. The government can now count, at least notionally, on 368 deputies (71.7 per cent) and 48 senators (59.3 per cent).
The share of manufacturing in Brazil's GDP has declined from 33 per cent in 1980 to around 20 per cent. In contrast, in South Korea, this share has remained around 30 per cent during this entire period (see World Bank 2003).


During ISI, domestic capital tended to produce non-durable consumer goods and capital goods, while transnational companies (TNCs) produced durable consumer goods. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) provided infrastructure and basic goods and services (steel, electricity, telecommunications, water and sanitation, oil extraction and refining, air, road, rail and port links and so on). Finally, state-owned banks played an essential role in the provision of long-term credit, especially for economic diversification and industrial development. The neoliberal reforms included the privatisation of most productive and financial SOEs, and they promoted the alliance between foreign and domestic capital at firm level within most value chains (including the denationalisation of industry and infrastructure). While ISI encouraged the diversification and domestic integration of manufacturing production, import liberalisation and the ongoing process of international integration of Brazilian capital have fostered the production of a narrower range of relatively unsophisticated goods. They have hollowed out the Brazilian manufacturing base, and made the economy structurally more dependent on foreign trade, investment and technology.

The destruction of strategically important production chains established under ISI was associated with the widespread use of subcontracting in manufacturing and services, and the sharp reduction of the number of stable and relatively well-paid blue-collar jobs. Although the productivity of the remaining firms has increased, industry has been starved of development funds, the manufacturing base has contracted, unemployment has mounted, and the informal economy has expanded significantly. These were not simply the inevitable outcomes of a technically neutral process of economic ‘rationalisation’. Quite the contrary: they are the economic consequences of a profound transformation in the Brazilian political economy. The country’s productive structure has been converted in order to service the short-term imperatives of *global* accumulation, rather than the short-term requirements of *national* accumulation, as was the case under ISI (the long-term interests of the poor majority were neglected in both cases).

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Second, the state has deliberately dismantled its institutional capacity for macro-economic planning and micro-economic intervention through mass privatisations, downsizing, SOE and agency closures and large-scale subcontracting at ministerial level. These processes were accelerated by a brutal staff cull imposed by president Collor in 1990, and two waves of ‘voluntary’ redundancies in 1998 and 2003. Lack of managerial and institutional capacity would make it very difficult for the Lula administration to implement alternative economic policies, even were the necessary legal and financial resources available.

Third, Brazilian finance has been profoundly transformed in two important respects. On the one hand, the financial system has become closely bound up with global finance through extensive privatisations, mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances between domestic and foreign institutions. On the other hand, and even more significantly, the institutional and regulatory reforms imposed during the neoliberal transition have extended the control by the financial system over the three main sources of money capital in the economy: domestic credit, the public debt and foreign capital. This critically important aspect of neoliberalism has been largely neglected in the literature. However, it has played a central role in the restructuring of Brazilian economy and society, and it has severely limited the policy choices available to the new administration. In what follows, the implications of the extension of the power of finance are analysed in further detail.

Financial-sector control over domestic credit has been extended through the privatisation of most of the Brazilian financial system, except two federal commercial banks, Banco do Brasil and Caixa Econômica Federal, and the state development bank, BNDES (Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social). Although they are relatively large, the state-owned commercial banks are legally required to operate under market rules. Compliance is carefully monitored by the Central Bank, the media and the financial markets, allegedly in order to avoid corruption or the populist use of public funds.

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14 Collor’s attempt to dismiss 100,000 civil servants and close dozens of state agencies and departments was never fully completed, and it was partly reversed several years later. However, it disorganised the state apparatus, demoralised the civil servants and greatly facilitated the reorganisation of the state along neoliberal lines by the Cardoso administration.


16 Banco do Brasil and Caixa Econômica Federal are the largest banks in the country. In 2001, they controlled, respectively, 27.4 and 16.6 per cent of the assets of the ten largest banks in Brazil (Valor Econômico 2002, p. 96).
of their resources. These are surely valid concerns. However, they imply that these institutions have been neutralised from the point of view of industrial and financial policy objectives, and are effectively private rather than public concerns. In addition to this, in 1999, the government started implementing the Basle rules as part of the IMF agreement. Although these rules helped to strengthen the financial system, they have also induced the banks to increase their holdings of public securities, potentially reducing the availability of loans to the private sector. These regulatory changes have also contributed to the concentration and centralisation of capital in the financial sector. The number of banks declined by more than half during the last decade and, in the late 1990s, up to 40 per cent of the assets of the banking sector belonged to foreign institutions.17

The leverage of the financial sector over the public finances has increased sharply, especially because of five policy and regulatory changes. First, the 1988 Constitution bars the monetisation of primary fiscal deficits, effectively allowing the financial institutions to limit the state expenditures unilaterally, through their (un)willingness to purchase new public securities. Second, the Fiscal Responsibility Act (2000) imposes stringent financial constraints upon all levels of the public administration. For example, the Act mandates the federal, state and municipal governments to pass annual budget laws including primary surpluses large enough to service their existing debt. Failure to achieve these targets in any bi-monthly period triggers automatic expenditure cuts, including the suspension of service provision and payments, except debt service and civil-service wages and pensions. In practice, the former have been protected more often than the latter. In other words, under the pretext of ensuring fiscal rectitude, the financial institutions have been granted privileged access to the tax revenues, at the expense of the users of public services, civil servants, pensioners and the non-financial creditors of the state.18

Third, permanently high interest rates since the 1992 liberalisation of the capital account of the balance of payments have inflated dramatically the stock of public securities owned by private financial institutions.19 Fourth,

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18 Public investment declined from 1.11 per cent of GDP in 1994 to 0.92 per cent in 1998, and 0.75 per cent in 2003. Investment in 2002 was even lower (0.42 per cent of GDP), because of the expenditure cuts due to the exchange rate crisis (Governo do Brasil, Sistema Integrado de Administracao Financeira, SIAFI).
19 Saad-Filho and Morais (2000) show that the growth of the domestic public debt between 1991–9 is mostly due to the accumulation of interest rather than primary fiscal deficits.
the exchange-rate risk has been nationalised through the sale of public securities indexed to the dollar, especially in periods of exchange-rate instability. In particular, the state absorbed the cost of the January 1999 exchange-rate crisis (approximately 5.6 per cent of GDP). Although this helped to avoid an economic depression in the wake of the devaluation of the real, it also contributed to the rapid growth of the public debt and the shortening of the maturity of this debt – most bills are very short-term, normally maturing in 24 to 36 months. Later efforts to control this debt have contributed to the destabilisation of the entire economy (see Section IV).

Finally, financial-system control over the flow of foreign resources has increased significantly in recent years, especially after the gradual liberalisation of foreign currency deposits and the capital account of the balance of payments. A small number of banks control most of these transactions, as well as foreign trade credit (foreign institutions are allowed to offer trade credit only in partnership with a domestic bank).

These regulatory and institutional changes were accompanied by fiscal, monetary and exchange-rate policy shifts towards a neoliberal policy compact. Under ISI (especially in its last period, 1968–80), fiscal policies were generally activist, while monetary and exchange-rate policies were accommodating. After the neoliberal transition, fiscal policy became increasingly contractionary (see above), while monetary policy developed a more activist role, which was sometimes supported by the overvaluation of the currency. This policy combination was especially prominent in 1994–8, during the real stabilisation programme. Finally, after the 1999 currency crisis, a new policy framework was imposed by the Cardoso administration (and continued by Lula). It was based on the managed fluctuation of the real, large fiscal surpluses and high domestic interest rates. Essentially, given the maximum fiscal surplus achievable, the interest rates were determined by the overlapping objectives of demand control (to achieve the government’s inflation targets), exchange-rate stability, attraction of foreign capital to finance the balance of payments and maintaining the solvency of the state (generating sufficient demand for public securities).

The substitution of interest-rate manipulation for fiscal policy as the most important macro-economic tool replicates in Brazil the shift in other neoliberal

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22 This period is reviewed by Amann and Baer 2000, Bresser-Pereira 2003 and Saad-Filho and Mollo 2002.
economic areas, especially the United Kingdom (since 1976), the United States (since 1979) and the Eurozone (since, at least, 1992). However, monetary policy is critically important in Brazil for two additional reasons. On the one hand, most industrial and financial institutions, including the pension funds, hold vast quantities of public securities, whose valorisation is determined by the level of the interest rates. Under normal circumstances, lower interest rates should stimulate private consumption, investment and economic growth. However, in Brazil, this expansionary effect is partly offset by the contraction of the pool of investible funds, due to the slower growth rate of the stock of government debt. In extreme circumstances, for example, if the federal government defaulted on its domestic debt, the economy would face a devastating crisis – liquidity would disappear, and a large part of the existing stock of money capital would be destroyed. On the other hand, if the holders of public securities switch their assets into foreign currency (as some did in 2002), the Brazilian real would collapse. This risk must weigh heavily upon every macro-economic policy decision, and it compels the economic authorities to remain in the straight and narrow path of neoliberalism.

Brazilian fiscal policy has been limited to accommodating, through adjustments in the fiscal surplus, the macro-economic disequilibria created by neoliberalism. Alternatively, it can be argued that the main objective of fiscal policy is to fund the administration of neoliberal policies by the state. In essence, fiscal policy supports the transfer of tax revenues to the holders of public securities, and finances the compensatory social programmes that legitimate neoliberalism and limit some of its perverse effects. The developmental role of fiscal policy, which figured prominently during ISI, has been almost completely abandoned, and the fiscal surpluses have become part and parcel of the reproduction of neoliberalism in Brazil. For this reason, Lula has been compelled to intensify the fiscal restrictions imposed by Cardoso, even though they have limited his capacity to deliver economic stability and sustained employment growth and welfare gains to the ‘losers’ (see Section IV).

Finally, the floating exchange-rate régime has minimised the Central Bank’s influence upon the value of the real, in spite of its importance for the level

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24 In 1990, the Collor administration partly froze financial assets, including the domestic debt, in an attempt to eliminate high inflation. The economy collapsed, with GDP contracting 4.3 per cent during the year. The stabilisation plan became economically and politically unsustainable, and had to be abandoned. High inflation rapidly resumed.
of employment, real wages, industrial development and macroeconomic stability in Brazil. The institutional and policy changes explained in this section facilitated the transfer of control over the most important levers of accumulation in Brazil to a small number of unaccountable institutions, controlled by domestic and international finance. They control a large share of the private-sector loans, hold the vast majority of the public securities, command large amounts of foreign currency, dominate the foreign-exchange and foreign-assets markets25 and mediate the flows of foreign investment into the country (especially investment by Brazilian flight capital).26 They have amassed enormous political influence, and they can determine (and, potentially, destabilise) state policy and social welfare, as was demonstrated in the politically induced exchange-rate crisis in 2002 (see Section II).

IV. ‘Left neoliberal’ economic policy

Although the PT presents itself as a left-wing party, Lula leads a centre-left administration supported by a centrist coalition in Congress and answerable to a conservative judiciary, and his government has been implementing a neoliberal programme normally associated with the political Right. The fractured – one might even say schizophrenic – nature of the Lula administration is due to the political alliances underpinning his election (explained in Section I), the policy choices made at the highest level of government (described in Section II) and the constraints imposed by the neoliberal reforms (outlined in Section III). These political and economic constraints have obliterated the social-democratic aspirations of the PT, destroyed the party’s élan and impaired its unity. They have also created severe difficulties for the PT’s supporting mass organisations, especially the largest federation of trade unions in Brazil (Central Única dos Trabalhadores, CUT) and, to a lesser extent, the landless peasants movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST). Many members are finding it difficult to accept that their urgent needs and long-term aspirations

25 The only exception is the foreign-exchange hedge contracts, in which the state-owned banks play a key role.

26 The significance of investment by Brazilian flight capital can be gauged by the share of FDI originating in Caribbean tax havens, which increased from 20.2 per cent in 2000 to 29.5 per cent in 2003 (see Notas à Imprensa do Banco Central do Brasil – Setor Externo, June 2001, June 2002 and March 2003). There is no similar data for portfolio investment, but it is generally assumed that the participation of Brazilian capital is even larger.
should be contained in the name of political and economic ‘stability’, precisely when – they think – the PT and its allied organisations are finally in a position to implement their historical programme.

This section reviews the economic policies of the new administration in 2003–4, and their outcomes. It will be shown that, while most financial and balance of payments indicators have improved, the production, income and employment data deteriorated in 2003. Their recovery in 2004 is likely to be limited, and the prospects for the near future are not especially good.

The first significant economic policy decision of the Lula administration was to increase unilaterally the primary fiscal surplus target agreed with the IMF from 3.75 per cent of GDP to 4.25 per cent. The surplus actually achieved in 2003 was 4.32 per cent of GDP, leading to complaints that the government ‘must learn to spend money’. Subsequently, the government increased the surplus target further, to 4.5 per cent in 2004. These initiatives served two purposes. On the one hand, they signalled the government’s firm commitment to neoliberalism. On the other hand, they reduce the pressure for politically damaging interest-rate increases in order to contain inflation, especially the bubble induced by the 2002 currency crisis. In spite of Finance Minister Antonio Palocci’s supportive fiscal policy, Central Bank chairman Henrique Meirelles raised base rates from 25.0 to 26.5 per cent in the first three months of the new administration,27 and only reduced them after inflation had been subdued (see below).

In addition to its unambiguously neoliberal macro-economic management, the new administration has implemented four important policy initiatives. First, it rammed through Congress a wide-ranging reform of public-sector pensions that had eluded F.H. Cardoso for a whole decade. The government’s bill was virtually undistinguishable from the one that the PT had previously defeated, but this time it passed by a large majority. The bill faced opposition from three sources: civil-service trade unions controlled by PT activists, that called a long but fruitless strike against the reform; a small number of PT deputies and senators, that refused to support a bill that they had previously defeated (and were punished for echoing their party’s criticisms of Cardoso’s bill); and Cardoso supporters seeking to embarrass the government by rejecting...
a bill that was very similar to the one that they had failed to approve under the previous administration. These political gyrations created confusion, demoralised the PT and its left-wing activists and offered an excellent opportunity for political cartoonists to exercise their skills.

Second, the new administration approved in Congress a neoliberal tax reform, also inspired by one of Cardoso’s initiatives. The reform preserved the high taxation required to service the public-sector debt (Brazilian taxes are equivalent to 36 per cent of GDP, which is unusually high for a middle-income country), but with higher indirect taxes and rebates for financial transactions. The reform also reduced the fiscal autonomy of the municipal and state governments, allegedly in order to quell the expensive ‘tax wars’ between them.28

Third, the government approved a constitutional amendment separating the regulation of the Central Bank from the regulation of the financial system as a whole. This may seem to be arcane but, in fact, it has simplified enormously the legal process of granting independence to the Central Bank.29

Fourth, the administration has proposed a reform of labour law that aims to offset, at least in part, the high tax rates required by the public debt service. Under the guise of promoting free association and free negotiations between the workers and their employers, the reform bill will curtail existing rights and undermine the financial position of many trade unions. The government is probably also hoping that this will put pressure on the right-wing labour confederations and facilitate the encroachment of unions linked to the PT into these fiefdoms.30

The government’s contractionary macro-economic policies were costly. Persistently high interest rates choked inflation (annual inflation rates peaked at 17.2 per cent in May 2003, fell to 5.1 per cent in May 2004, and tended to rise slightly subsequently).31 Even though the base rates declined to 16 per

28 This is only part of the truth: the federal government also wanted to reduce the policy autonomy of the subnational levels of the public administration.
29 In mid-2004, in response to a corruption scandal touching on the president of the Central Bank, Lula upgraded this post to Minister of State – thus awarding Meirelles immunity from prosecution. This was not only in order to reward a new friend, but also to protect the government from politically-motivated police investigations that threatened to undermine the administration and destabilise the economy. Conveniently, this measure has also removed another potential difficulty in the road to Central Bank independence.
30 The relationship between the trade-union bureaucracy and the PT is perceptively examined by Oliveira 2003.
31 Inflation rates measured by IPCA, see Conjuntura Econômica.
cent in April 2004 (rising again to 16.25 per cent per cent in September), real interest rates continued to hover around 10 per cent – among the highest rates in the world.\textsuperscript{32} Manufacturing output fell one per cent in 2003, and GDP declined 0.2 per cent during the year – the first economic contraction in eleven years. The recession was tempered only by the strong expansion of agriculture, which grew 5 per cent.

The income and employment results in 2003 were also disappointing.\textsuperscript{33} Open unemployment in the six largest metropolitan areas in the country\textsuperscript{34} increased from 11.7 per cent of the labour force, in December 2002, to an all-time high of 12.3 per cent one year later. In the São Paulo metropolitan area, total unemployment (including open and hidden unemployment and the discouraged workers) reached 20 per cent. Labour income in the six metropolitan areas (including the earnings of the wage workers, underemployed and informal sector workers) declined 9.9 per cent in 2003 (–18.4 per cent since 2001), while wage income fell 5.1 per cent (–13.7 per cent since 2001).\textsuperscript{35} The deterioration of the workers’ earnings while the financial and export sectors reported rising profits probably implies that the concentration of income has increased in the first year of the PT administration.

In 2004, the economy performed more strongly (see below). Incomes increased and many jobs were created, but the unemployment rate initially rose marginally – probably because of the return of many discouraged workers to the labour market – but it later declined to 11.2 per cent, in July. The main sources of growth, predicted to reach 4.0–4.5 per cent in December, were exports (especially agribusiness) and the mild recovery of the domestic market, fuelled by the export sector and the good performance of manufacturing. Strong improvements in the formal labour market contributed to an increase in average worker income, which has finally returned to the level of late 2002.

The balance of payments and the financial indicators improved steadily, for four reasons. First, the partial recovery of the world economy from the collapse of the dot.com bubble increased the availability of capital in the

\textsuperscript{32} The real interest rates are the base rates minus the financial markets’ inflation expectations (see BCB 2004).


\textsuperscript{34} São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre, Salvador and Fortaleza.

\textsuperscript{35} Some groups of unionised skilled workers were able to bypass this declining trend of wages. For example, the heavily-unionised metal and bank workers were able to negotiate real wage increases in 2003. Their success owes nothing to the federal government; it was entirely due to the strength of these categories of workers.
international financial markets, helping to relieve the Brazilian balance-of-payments constraint. Second, the new administration has established its ‘credibility’ with domestic and international finance that, at least, helped to avoid further turbulence. Third, inflation declined, as was explained above. Finally, the cumulative devaluation of the Brazilian real, from R$1.16 per dollar in January 1999 to a peak of R$3.80 in October 2002, helped to boost the country’s trade performance. Exports increased 50 per cent between 1999 and 2003, to US$73 billion, while imports have remained stable around US$50 billion. In 2001, Brazil had its first trade surplus in seven years and, in 2003, the first current account surplus in eleven years. The inflows of portfolio capital increased strongly, from minus US$4.7 billion in 2002 to plus US$5.1 billion in 2003 (however, the foreign direct investment inflows have declined steadily, from a peak of US$32.8 billion in 2000 to only US$10.1 billion in 2003). These improvements of the balance of payments supported a limited recovery of the foreign currency reserves (up US$8.7 billion since the 2002 crisis to US$25.0 billion in mid-2004), and contributed to the decline of the domestic real interest rates (see above). The Bovespa index of the São Paulo stock exchange reacted strongly to these good news, gaining 127 per cent in 2003 (but remaining stable in 2004), and J.P. Morgan’s EMBI+ Brazilian risk index declined from over 2000 to only 480 points during 2003, but later rose to 600 points).

The steady hand of the Brazilian authorities may not have been the most important reason for these performance improvements. In 2003, the financial indicators performed strongly even in countries whose policies are presumably undeserving of ‘credibility’, such as Venezuela (the Caracas stock exchange rose by 135 per cent). Moreover, permanently high interest rates, steady capital inflows and the Central Bank’s relative neglect of the exchange rate contributed to the appreciation (and subsequent stabilisation) of the real around R$2.90 per dollar since late 2003. The revaluation of the real has contributed not only to inflation control (as would be expected) but also to the improvement of the public-sector accounts, because it has reduced the demand for public securities indexed to the dollar. In spite of this, and the

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36 Calvo et al. 1993 argue that capital flows to Latin America are determined primarily by the level of US interest rates, rather than the domestic policies in the recipient countries.

37 This is not only a Brazilian phenomenon; the currencies of other troubled middle-income countries, such as Argentina, Turkey and Venezuela, also appreciated in 2003.

38 However, the revaluation may make it difficult to achieve further improvements in the trade and current accounts in the medium term.
record primary fiscal surplus achieved in 2003, high interest rates and the
growing stock of the public debt (rising from 48.8 per cent of GDP in 2000
to 55.5 per cent in 2002 and 58.2 per cent in 2003) led interest payments on
the domestic debt to reach an all-time high of 9.5 per cent of GDP in 2003.

The growth spurt in 2004 has been presented as the ‘proof’ that the neoliberal
strategy of the PT administration was fundamentally sound. After the sacrifices
of 2003, and with the ‘recovery’ of the fundamentals (inflation and exchange-
rate stabilisation, confidence in the government, export growth, and so on),
the economy is allegedly poised for a recovery of investment and a long
period of growth. Maybe. But another interpretation is possible. The Brazilian
economy may have simply rebounded from the recession of 2003, under
relatively favourable domestic and external circumstances. There is no evidence
that this is the beginning of a cycle of prosperity. The Brazilian economy has
had a disappointing performance for over twenty years, with occasional
growth spurts (see Figure I), which were not sustained either because of
external constraints (as in 1986, 1996 and 2000) or because of domestic instability
(as in 2002). In the meantime, the economic recovery has helped the PT in
the 2004 municipal elections (see below).

Figure I: Brazil – GDP growth rates, 1980–2004 (%)
V. Policy schizophrenia

For all its weaknesses, self-doubt and vulnerabilities – and perhaps because of them – the current administration seems to be able to impose neoliberal policies more consistently and successfully than any other government, however right-wing or ideologically committed to neoliberal interests. It seems that Brazilian neoliberalism has achieved the perfect coup: after the corrupt maverick (Fernando Collor) and the aristocratic ex-Marxist sociologist (F.H. Cardoso), it is now the former trade-union leader’s turn to impose the policies favoured by the financial interests and the new élite consensus. There really seems to be no alternative to neoliberalism.

The schizophrenic character of Lula’s administration allows it to systematically wrong-foot the opposition from the Left as well as the Right. The government has shown that it can incorporate virtually any policy initiative of the right-wing opposition, including fiscal orthodoxy, privatisation, the concession of privileges for finance or the rich and neoliberal reform of pensions, labour law, the financial system and social security. At the same time, the administration has also been able to occupy the political space of the Left, through its popular appeal, the capture or paralysis of the most important social movements in the country (including, in particular, CUT and, to a lesser extent, the MST), and through the government’s activist foreign policy.

The administration’s much-publicised foreign-policy successes were predicated on its spotless track record in the domestic sphere. In their negotiations at the WTO, UNCTAD, MERCOSUR and FTAA, Brazilian diplomats have been instructed to defend the interests of the country’s main exporters (including, obviously, both domestic and foreign capitalists), rather than simply bowing to demands that the country should accept the trade barriers currently imposed by the US and the EU. The Brazilian negotiators have only been able to stand their ground because the government’s adherence to neoliberalism at home has minimised the ability of the US and the EU to object to Brazil’s foreign-policy stance. In addition to these commercial-policy

39 Brazilian social movements, largely under PT control, managed to frustrate many neoliberal reform initiatives since the mid-1980s. Lula’s election and his determination to follow neoliberal policies have thrown these movements into confusion. In the words of Oliveira 2004, p. 7, the PT government has ‘anesthetised the popular demands, and effectively kidnapped Brazilian civil society’.

40 Gentili 2004 reviews the Brazilian strategy of confrontation followed by negotiations at the WTO and the FTAA.
clashes with the world’s most powerful economies, Brazil has been garnering support for the holy grail of its diplomacy in the postwar era, a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. The country has also been pursuing South-South commercial deals with South Africa, India, China and other ‘non-traditional’ partners, as part of Brazil’s export drive and, simultaneously, to enhance its international standing. So far, these initiatives have achieved only limited success (except in the case of China), but they offer a vast strategic potential for Brazilian capital and for foreign firms based in Brazil. Lula has embraced these foreign-policy initiatives wholeheartedly. In addition to promoting Brazil’s narrow commercial interests, Lula has been seeking to take over Nelson Mandela’s mantle, partly in order to enhance the profile of Brazil’s aspirations and partly to offset his meagre achievements at home with high-profile triumphs abroad.41

The tensions between Brazilian foreign and domestic policy are part of the schizophrenic nature of the current administration. They have, in common, the prominent role played by the President, and his undeniable charm. These tensions also imply that the Lula administration is fully committed to the ‘market mechanisms’ advocated by the neoliberal orthodoxy, both at home and abroad. The government’s strategic option includes the attempt to gain ‘credibility’ by respecting the existing rules and contracts and reducing Brazil’s external vulnerability through structurally high trade surpluses. This strategy avoids the difficult problems of confronting the US and the ruling international system on the domestic arena, and it opens the possibility of increasing Brazil’s international influence and expanding its foreign markets. This interpretation of the foreign-policy orientation of the Lula administration bypasses the misguided opposition between the claim that nothing has changed with Lula and the opposing claim that Lula’s foreign policy is inspired by genuinely leftist principles. In reality, Brazil’s foreign policy is part of the overall strategy of the PT leadership that has avoided politically damaging confrontations with neoliberalism and the US government both at home and abroad, while seeking to expand the spaces available to improve the outcomes of the government’s neoliberal policies.

At home, the PT has been attempting to stabilise its position by claiming to its disaffected left-wing supporters that it is the lesser evil and, therefore,

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41 These demands and opportunities explain Brazil’s ready acceptance of a leading role in the UN military mission in Haiti, in spite of the bitter experience of the Brazilian contribution to the US-led occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965.
that it must receive their support regardless of its actual record in office. After all, the PT is firmly established throughout the country, electorally viable, organically connected to social movements, and sensitive to the plight of the poor in a way that no right-wing party could claim to be. Moreover, the President himself regularly rants against unemployment and touchingly deplores the poverty of many Brazilians which once afflicted his own family. No left-wing political party can hope to beat the PT at this game.42

Under favourable economic circumstances, the PT’s image as both government and opposition can confound the Left, deprive the Right of a credible platform and ensure a comfortable majority coalition in Congress, as well as Lula’s re-election in 2006. However, this strategy could also backfire. For example, if the economy performs poorly during the next two years, if the government is racked by scandals or if Lula’s credibility wanes because he is unable to deliver the changes expected by most of his supporters, the administration could become paralysed by its internal contradictions. The ‘loser’s alliance’ would unravel and the PT could suffer a crushing defeat in the next presidential elections.

Securing support for the administration could also become difficult if the living standards of the ‘losers’ decline further – especially the formal and informal workers (many lower-ranking civil servants may have already been lost since they have been heavily penalised by the government’s pensions reform and its unwillingness to offer them significant improvements in pay and conditions).43 In spite of Brazil’s improving economic performance, especially in the export sector, the manufacturing élite has also been disappointed by the administration’s failure to live up to its commitments to support domestic industry. The government has produced an inane industrial policy review, including few clear priorities, no performance monitoring instruments and insufficient funding. High interest rates continue to hinder private investment, and the stringent fiscal targets limit the scope for public investment, which is essential to relieve the severe infrastructure constraints in Brazil, especially in the areas of transport and electricity generation. Although the state development bank, BNDES, has extended additional loans to Brazilian


43 The wages of most civil servants have been virtually frozen since 1994 (exceptions include the military, the Inland Revenue and the Treasury Department).
firms, the Ministry of Finance has challenged this ‘discrimination’ against foreign companies. The government’s most significant industrial-policy initiative is the domestic production of two deep-water oil platforms for the state oil company, Petrobras, and the renewal of the company’s tanker fleet. This will help to revitalise the construction, metal and shipbuilding industries, especially in the politically important state of Rio de Janeiro.

The conflicting expectations of the groups in the losers’ alliance, as well as opposition pressure and the schizophrenic character of Lula’s administration have created a state of permanent fluidity and political tension in Brazil. These conflicts boiled over, for the first time, in the so-called ‘Waldomirogate’ scandal in early 2004, and again when Central Bank chairman Meirelles was accused of tax evasion in the middle of the year.44

These simmering tensions can also be explained in another way. Lula’s election and the neoliberal about-turn of the PT have shown how difficult it is to ‘vote away’ neoliberalism or, more generally, how difficult it is to shift economic policy by constitutional means. The disconnection between political and economic democracy, expressed by the inability of the majority to influence economic policy to any significant degree, is the most important challenge to the Brazilian constitutional order since the restoration of democracy in the mid-1980s.

The 2004 local elections

Brazilian mayors and local councillors are elected every four years, half-way through the mandate of the President, federal deputies and senators, state governors and state representatives. The outcome of these elections helps to assess the political strength of the federal and local governments and it signals, albeit imprecisely, the prospects of the various contenders for the next electoral cycle.45 The 2004 elections took place on 3 October in Brazil’s

44 The Meirelles scandal was outlined above. Waldomiro Diniz, a high-ranking advisor of Lula’s Chief of Staff, José Dirceu, has admitted taking bribes and channelling funds from gambling mobs to PT candidates. Although this is a relatively minor scandal by Brazilian standards, press hostility, public dejection (the ‘incorruptible’ image of the PT was shattered), and the government’s ineptitude handling the scandal turned ‘Waldomirogate’ into a defining moment for the administration. José Dirceu has not been accused of any wrongdoing; however, he is the leader of the government’s ‘left wing’. The damage to his reputation has increased the influence of the ‘right wing’ Ministry of Finance (even though Diniz used to advise Finance Minister Palocci before the election!).

45 Historically, there is only a weak correlation between local and national election
5,600 municipalities. There was also a second-round mayoral election on 31 October in 44 municipalities with more than 200,000 registered voters, where the first-round winner failed to obtain 50 per cent of the valid votes.

The first round results were presented by the PT as a vindication for the Lula administration, since the Party received 17.2 million votes (18.1 per cent) and, for the first time, the largest share of the national mayoral vote (up from fourth place in 2000). However, this triumphalist view is superficial, and it hides the most important aspects of the picture.

The PT elected 400 mayors in the first round, well short of its target of 800, and its performance in the larger cities was mostly disappointing – in other words, the PT grew in small towns that are politically less influential and that will play only a minor role in deciding the outcome of the 2006 presidential elections.

The second round of the local elections was especially unfavourable for the PT. The PT participated in 21 run-offs, but it lost most of them. The most important defeats of the PT were, first, in São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil, and where Lula campaigned so intensely that he was fined by the Electoral Court and, second, in Porto Alegre, the base of the World Social Forum and a city administered by the PT for sixteen years. In both cities, the incumbent PT mayors lost badly. The PT won only in one large city, Fortaleza, but the new mayor is a left-wing dissident who ran against the wishes of the Party leadership and criticised the federal administration heavily during her campaign. The PT won only in three other important cities (Nova Iguacu, Niterói and Vitória), and it lost heavily throughout São Paulo state, the richest and most populous state in Brazil and the cradle of the party. Although PT allies obtained localised victories, the outcome of the second round was clearly unfavourable to the PT and the Lula administration. The Party has spread itself thinly, and lost its most important strongholds. This bodes ill for Lula’s re-election bid in 2006 because the Party will lack strong and prestigious local administrations supporting its national campaign.\(^46\)

\(^{46}\) This does not, of course, imply that Lula is bound to lose the 2006 elections. The incumbent president is naturally the favourite, and Lula’s charisma has not dissipated yet. Moreover, the right-wing opposition lacks any credible presidential candidate, and it continues to suffer from political fragmentation and infighting. The Left will probably not play a significant role in these elections, although the campaign may contribute to the organisation of left-wing political movements.
Finally, the PT Left performed poorly, in spite of its remarkable victory in Fortaleza. This is, in part, because of its reluctance to criticise the federal government and, in part, because the PT leadership refused on principle to support all left-wing candidates and starved them of resources. It is also noticeable that the ‘professional’ political campaigns currently favoured by the PT have failed to enthuse the Party activists, weakening significantly the capacity of the PT to mobilise support among the working class. This may also become a source of problems for Lula in 2006.

VI. Conclusion

Brazil’s economic performance in 2003–4 was mixed. Employment and incomes fell and the domestic public debt increased, but the financial and balance of payments indicators improved (nevertheless, they remain highly vulnerable to adverse developments in the US, Europe and Japan, and to ‘market sentiment’ at home). Even under the best possible circumstances, the prospects for Brazil’s long-term development remain poor. The country’s infrastructure bears the weight of two decades of underinvestment. The privatisation, denationalisation and deregulation of infrastructure provision and of several basic industries, including telecommunications, rail and air transport, the petrochemical and steel industries, mining (except Petrobras), finance (except Banco do Brasil, Caixa Econômica Federal and BNDES) and large chunks of the electricity supply, water, sanitation and road networks, limit the capacity of the state to lead a process of rapid and co-ordinated economic recovery. Moreover, the state’s industrial policy institutions have been largely disabled, and the federal government is financially exhausted due to the costs of the domestic debt, widespread resistance against further tax increases and the creeping informalisation of the economy. The openness of the capital account has made the balance of payments structurally vulnerable, and the prospects for the exchange rate are also uncertain.

Neoliberalism has also transformed the Brazilian industrial base substantially. Brazilian capital is much more closely integrated with foreign capital than at any time since 1930, and the manufacturing sector has been disarticulated and largely integrated into competing transnational value chains (even where they serve primarily the domestic market). Finally, the institutional and policy changes imposed by neoliberalism have transferred control of the most important levers of accumulation to a relatively small number of financial
institutions. They command most private-sector loans, own the vast majority of the public securities, control large amounts of foreign currency and mediate the flows of foreign investment into the country. They have amassed enormous political influence and can destabilise state policy and social welfare, as was shown in mid-2002.

Balance of payments fragility and the fiscal crisis of the state are the most important constraints to growth in Brazil, but they cannot be addressed adequately through the neoliberal strategy adopted by the Lula administration. In spite of this, abandoning neoliberalism for an alternative (democratic) economic strategy, including controls on international capital movements, limitations on the foreign and domestic public debt service and an aggressive policy of employment generation, income distribution and integration of the manufacturing base, would not be cheap, simple or rapid. Powerful economic interests would flatly reject this policy shift, and the strategy may founder because of administrative shortcomings or obstruction in Congress or in the courts, or it may be spurned by the voters because of short-term macroeconomic instability or media pressure. The domestic constraints to an economic policy shift will weaken significantly only if there is a significant deterioration of the international economy. If the grip of the international financial markets on the periphery weakens, or if the Brazilian economy collapses because of a balance of payments crisis, capital controls may become inevitable, and mass pressure could more easily force the redistribution of income and wealth (especially land) as part of a new development strategy centred on the domestic market.

In the worst possible (‘Argentinian’) scenario, this policy shift would be imposed upon a reluctant government by a severe economic crisis, after increasingly frantic attempts to ‘make neoliberalism work’. This may yet come to pass. In the meantime, the government’s faltering popularity has reduced its margin for manoeuvre and exhausted the ‘losers’ tolerance with the PT’s amateurish handling of the state. The decline of government capacity to accommodate conflicting demands within the losers’ alliance increases the likelihood of a complex political realignment taking place in the near future, potentially affecting the administration’s parliamentary base and its sources of mass support.

47 Alternative economic strategies for Brazil are reviewed in the special issue of Análise Econômica 2003 and by Sicsú, Oreiro and Paula 2003.
In this sense, the outcome of the 2004 elections is worrying for the administration. The growth of the PT and its allied parties in the small and middle-sized cities was largely due to the advantages of power at the federal level, which is not unexpected in Brazil. This has nothing to do with the rise of an autonomous working-class movement in the political sphere, or even with the spread of ‘citizenship’, which is allegedly one of the PT’s key political objectives. The PT lost especially heavily in the large cities, both in terms of the number of its elected mayors and councillors and in terms of the alarming loss of the vote of the middle class. In São Paulo, the loss of this important social group was not compensated by the spread of PT votes among the poor periphery of the city. The loss of support for the PT among the middle class may indicate that the Party will have difficulties replicating the ‘losers’ alliance’ in 2006. It may also be symptomatic of the loss of a social group that has been enormously influential in shaping the political ideology of the PT and that plays a key role in the connection between the working-class poor, the social movements and their political expression within the state.

While the PT struggles to stabilise its sources of support and the administration attempts to make neoliberalism deliver according to its promises, the Brazilian Left has very different concerns: building the foundations of a new political movement that will offer concrete and realistic alternatives for the expansion of economic and political democracy in the country. This will take many years. Neoliberalism has eroded the social, economic and political roots of the working class and demolished its traditional forms of political expression and organisation. It is not yet possible to anticipate the precise form of this new left movement or estimate its potential success, but its construction will be the most exciting political project in Brazil for a generation.

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Joseph Fracchia

**Beyond the Human-Nature Debate: Human Corporeal Organisation as the ‘First Fact’ of Historical Materialism**

With his ‘anti-humanist’ Marxism, Louis Althusser provoked a heated and still unresolved debate on the question of Marx’s view of human nature. Those who, following Althusser, deny that Marx’s materialist conception of history is grounded in a view of human nature have it fairly easy: they need only read – all too literally – the sixth of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach which states that the human essence ‘is no abstraction inherent in each single individual…[but] the ensemble of social relations’. Taking this statement as a categorical denial of any transhistorical human constants, they need not waste time thinking about how humans make their own history, but can focus exclusively on the structures that prevent them from doing so as they please.¹

Those who defend a notion of human nature, or of some kind of human constants, however, have a rather more difficult time of it – unless, of course,

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¹ See Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 145. Of course, the sixth thesis on Feuerbach need not be read in the ultra-structuralist manner of Althusser and his followers. Oskar Negt for example, understands it not as an *a priori* denial of human constants, but as ‘a research direction in relation to the Subject’ (Negt 1988, p. 230).
they are content with a reductionist reading of Marx’s definition of the first historical act as the satisfaction of needs, which gives rise to new needs and the means to satisfy them, and so forth.\textsuperscript{2} The result of such an approach is a \textit{Homo economicus} view of human nature as an organic bundle of easily definable material needs whose history is thus a dialectic of needs and technology.\textsuperscript{3}

Those seeking a tenable, because sufficiently nuanced, historical-materialist definition of human nature, however, have a longer path to tread and more imposing obstacles to confront. For not only must they show that Marx’s materialist conception of history rests on a view of human nature, but they must also define the attributes of that nature. In so doing, they must negotiate a variety of dilemmas, not least of which are the following: they must determine the relation between the natural/biological and social; they must speak of universals, yet avoid universalising a particularist notion, and still be able to account for how one species can produce a seemingly endless variety of cultural forms; they must be able to account for historical change without falling into a transhistorical Whiggishness and to discern the directions of historical changes without falling into teleologies; and, if they manage to avoid all of these traps, they must still determine the methodological place-value of human nature in historical-materialist theory and analysis.

Over the last twenty-five years, several works have taken up that challenge and attempted to offer a historical-materialist account of human nature. These include: John McMurtry, \textit{The Structure of Marx’s World View}; György Márkus, \textit{Marxism and Anthropology}; Kate Soper, \textit{On Human Needs}; Norman Geras, \textit{Marx and Human Nature}; William Peter Archibald, \textit{Marx and the Missing Link: Human Nature}; Richard Lichtman, ‘The Production of Human Nature by Means of Human Nature’; and, most recently, Sean Sayers’s \textit{Marxism and Human Nature}.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{2} See Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{3} This \textit{Homo economicus} view of human nature and technologically-determinist view of history is undeservedly attributed to Engels and deservedly to the official Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals. G.A. Cohen defends a much more sophisticated version of this dialectic of needs and technology in \textit{Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence}. In different ways, Theodor Adorno and Jean Baudrillard attributed this view of human nature and history to Marx – the former with his accusation that Marx wanted to turn the world into a workhouse and the latter with the accusation that Marx was imprisoned within the categories of bourgeois political economy. See Adorno 1975, p. 241 and Baudrillard 1975.
\textsuperscript{4} All of these works take several steps toward determining the nature of human nature, but come up short – largely because, as I argue below, they are not materialistic enough and fail to root their depiction of human nature in human corporeal organisation.
Although they travel along different paths, all of these works are headed in the same general direction and share the common goal of overcoming the obstacles mentioned above in order to provide a historical-materialist definition of human nature. It is my contention that, though heading in the right direction, these works have bogged down while attempting to negotiate those theoretical obstacles, and have become entangled in seemingly endless battles with their antagonists. As I shall argue below, the reason they have stalled is that they are not materialistic enough and have failed to grasp Marx’s materialist conception of history by its corporeal roots. In order to explain why these works have fallen short of their goals, I will consider briefly one of the most recent attempts, Sean Sayers’s *Marxism and Human Nature*. Then I shall suggest an alternative way of formulating the problem and a research direction, both following the ‘corporeal turn’ which Marx took with his off-hand, but foundational comment that ‘human corporeal organisation’ is the ‘first fact to be established’ for historical theory.

**‘Human nature’ as a categorial trap**

Acknowledging the ‘controversy and... confusion’ generated by the question of human nature, Sayers seeks ‘to restate, and to clarify and defend, a fundamental and central strand of Marxist philosophy’, that is, its ‘historicist account of human nature’.\(^5\) Sayers is convinced that this historicist account of human nature will enable him to carve a path between and beyond the poles of such conceptual binaries as essentialist universalism vs. relativism and natural vs. socio-cultural. He promises to go ‘out of [his] way to bring [this account] into relation and dialogue with other contemporary philosophical positions and to show its relevance within the context of the wider current philosophical debate’ and ‘to show how Marxism involves... an unfamiliar and... illuminating approach to problems which appear intractable from within a more traditional and familiar philosophical perspective’.\(^6\)

Sayers’s overly Hegelianised (and by no means unfamiliar) historicist account of human nature, however, casts only a translucent light. While attempting to find a resolution of these binary oppositions, he does effectively wield the historicism that he attributes to Marx against several of Marx’s critics. He exposes the obvious problems with essentialist absolutism and

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\(^6\) Ibid.
arbitrary relativism, with the ahistoricism of analytical Marxism, the myopic utopianism of Andre Gorz’s vision of the liberation from work, and with the inflated charges of those environmentalists who accuse Marx of Promethean productivism. But he fails to resolve the problems posed by the binary oppositions, and therefore does not succeed in the most important matter: the construction of an efficacious historical-materialist conception of human nature. Consequently, as Terry Eagleton has relentlessly shown,7 the problems remain as intractable at the end of the book as they were in the beginning. Here, I want to focus on what I consider the fundamental problem – one that has beset not only Sayers’s book, but virtually all attempts to construct a historical-materialist view of human nature. And that is the problem resulting from the invocation of a human nature in order to avoid relativism, combined with a reticence about defining that nature (except as becoming in a historicist sense) in order to avoid essentialism.

Sayers chooses to stake his theoretical claim on the field already surveyed by Kate Soper, who insisted (specifically regarding a Marxist theory of needs, but also applicable to Sayers’s undertaking) that ‘all theorisation . . . must necessarily live in the field of forces created by the antithetical poles of relativism and essentialism’.8 One should not, indeed cannot, avoid engaging with relativism and essentialism in the attempt to develop a notion of human nature. But the choice to fight the theoretical battles on the conceptual terrain between these two poles enhances the risk of becoming entrapped between them, instead of carving out a position beyond them. And this is Sayers’s greatest dilemma. Unable to escape the conceptual space delineated by these antithetical poles, he attempts to hold the middle ground. Caught between universalist essentialism and arbitrary relativism, his strategic problem is that he commits himself to fighting a two-front battle on the conceptual terrain delineated by his binary antagonists. And, his tactical problem is that, while he engages his antagonists one at a time, he yields to the temptation of alternately borrowing the conceptual weaponry of each to attack the other. So, against the universalists, naturalists, and essentialists, he argues that there is no universal human nature or essence. But, against the relativists and extreme social constructionists, he argues that since Homo sapiens is the species whose nature is to create its own nature, essential human nature is in the process of (progressively) becoming. Trapped in a defensive position, Sayers

7 See Eagleton 1999.
remains too pre-occupied insisting that there is such a thing as human nature, yet he never delineates it sufficiently to win the battle.  

While Sayers is tautologically correct in stating that the nature of humans is to make their own nature and their own histories, the fundamental problem is that he fails to explain what it is about human beings that enables them to do so. He justifies his hesitation to define human nature with the quite correct insistence that human universals, such as biological needs, are malleable and always socio-culturally mediated, and thus can only be discussed with a certain degree of abstraction. But abstractions, as Marx very consciously wielded them, can be both meaningful and methodologically invaluable (see below). Moreover, the particularity of their manifestations does not abrogate the universality of needs: if some people refuse to eat what others consider a delicacy, the fact is that both have a minimum caloric requirement. Because he does not define (in consciously abstract terms) such universal needs as a first step toward analysing the different forms given them by different cultures, he produces, by default, a philosophy of history consisting of a formless species that somehow forms itself while making its own history.  

10 On this matter, Sayers relies heavily on Richard Lichtman. I agree fully with Lichtman's formal statements that nature is 'the condition of embodied practice', that human beings are 'self-constituting, that we are simultaneously the subject and object of our own activity', that human nature provisionally understood is 'the structure of capacities, tendencies, and sensibilities that humans bring, incompletely formed to their life world' and that 'the self-constitution of human nature means the production of a variety of fundamentally different human natures' (Lichtman 1990, pp. 14–18).
figure out how to ground historical theory in human nature, he ends up having history produce human nature. In a definitional sleight of hand, he introduces us to a human nature – but one that resembles an invisible ink drawing on an apparent *tabula rasa*: the sketch is there, but its form and contents can only be brought forth by the light of its own history. Without having explained, however, what it is about humans that enables them to create their own nature and to make their own histories, how that nature affects (and limits) the histories they make, and thus where it belongs in historical-materialist analysis, Sayers methodologically reduces the human nature on which he so emphatically insists to the status of merely a ‘simple prerequisite’ (the term Marx used in depicting the political economists’ treatment of use-value).11

Seeking to establish an efficacious, but not essentialist notion of human nature, Sayers’s only recourse is to appeal to a future-perfect historicism. And this traps him in a difficult place; for he can only argue, in effect, that, since human nature is in the process of becoming, there is no human nature until it will have become; and, until it will have become, it cannot be described except in what he considers empty abstractions. This methodological insistence on an essentially formless human nature that forms itself in the course of its history results in a kind of teleonomic progressivism: history has no teleological purpose, but it is a one-way street: since human nature is to cultivate itself, and since this self-cultivation is cumulative, history is the progressive development of human nature – the measure of which is the mutually reinforcing expansion of human needs and human productive capacities.12

The problem with such progressivism, of course, is that it must view history as an ascending arrow and it measures historical time by its great leaps forward. Though it frees the future from *a priori* essentialism, it imprisons the past in ‘primitivism’. According to this logic, past or present ‘under-

But at least two of his particular formulations have unfortunate implications. One is the perhaps unintended Whiggish progressivism embedded in his notion that we are born ‘incomplete’, (Lichtman 1990, pp. 15–18), that ‘as we appropriate the world, we come to appropriate ourselves and produce ourselves as distinctly human’ (Lichtman 1990, p. 21). This is obviously true ontogenetically, the case of a child growing into culture, which is the situation that Lichtman most often addresses explicitly in his essay. But if applied phylogenetically, which Sayers explicitly does, the notion that we are born incomplete entails a Whiggish view of history ascending from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘truly human’.

11 See Marx 1857, pp. 227 and 540.

12 To be sure, several passages throughout Marx’s writings seem to entail this progressivist view of human nature. I have argued elsewhere that such unidirectional progressivism is counter to historical-materialist logic (see Fracchia 1991).
development’ can only be understood as various, perhaps necessary, but nevertheless still incomplete stages in the process of human self-cultivation. The complex histories of ‘precapitalist’ socio-cultural forms are reduced to one-dimensionality and considered only in terms of their contribution to the self-production of human nature. Such an approach only lets us measure what we have gained, not treasure what we have lost; and it can only treat the barbarism of what, according to this itinerary, should have been the most civilised of centuries, the twentieth, as atavistic remnants of a primitive past, rather than a product of ‘civilised’ human productive capacities.

These problems resulting from the simultaneous appeal to relativism to avoid essentialism, and to the historicist becoming of an essential human nature to avoid relativism, are not peculiar to Sayers’s analysis, but remain unresolved in most historical-materialist accounts of human nature. Insofar as they attempt to avoid the binary extremes of dogmatic essentialism and arbitrariness, these works are headed in the right direction. But they have ultimately fallen short. As mentioned above, the reason for this is that they are not materialist enough. An historical-materialist conception of human nature that could not only avoid the binaries that entrapped Sayers but also perform all the tasks mentioned in the opening paragraph must be able to explain both the universal attributes of human beings and the relative autonomy (though not arbitrariness) of human socio-cultural forms.

**Corporeal roots**

I argue that the means to develop such a conception of human nature is to take seriously and to elaborate – in a manner consistent with his materialist conception of history, but well beyond what he had in mind – a seemingly offhand and almost universally neglected, but nevertheless very striking, aphorism that Marx tossed off in the *German Ideology* while laying the foundations of his materialist conception of history. There he suggested that human nature needed to be radically rethought, grasped by its corporeal roots.

To differentiate himself from ‘German philosophers’ who were ‘devoid of premises’, Marx began by stating his own: ‘the first fact to be established’ for historical theory is ‘the corporeal organisation of human beings’.13 The

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13 Marx 1845a, p. 21. Marx’s words are ‘körperliche Organisation der Menschen’ – Tucker’s translation of which as ‘physical organisation’ (1978, p. 148) is imprecise and misleading.
foundational force of this formulation and the immense range of its implications make its neglect rather puzzling to say the least. True, it appears, at first glance, to be an offhand comment, and it is certainly overshadowed by the prefatory ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, the sixth of which apparently dissolves human universals into the changing ‘ensemble of social relations’. Nevertheless, I would argue that this statement about human corporeal organisation and the sixth thesis on Feuerbach are complementary, rather than contradictory. In the sixth thesis, Marx rid himself of the philosophical baggage carried by the notion of a human ‘essence’; he rejected the notion of an essence or nature embedded \textit{a priori} in all human beings, and insisted instead that the manifestations of human being are produced by humans living in specific sets of social relations and thus vary accordingly. With the other statement, a strong, concretely corporeal one about human universals, he alluded to the transhistorical attributes of human corporeal organisation that underlie and make possible the infinite though not unlimited range of those changing manifestations of human being – that is, of socio-cultural forms.

This grounding of historical materialism in human corporeal organisation presents a number of daunting challenges perhaps best summarised by Terry Eagleton’s formulation of the question that animated Marx’s massive undertaking: ‘What if an idea of reason could be generated up from the body itself, rather than the body incorporated into a reason which is always already in place? What if it were possible, in a breathtaking wager, to retrace one’s steps and reconstruct everything – ethics, history, politics, and rationality – from a bodily foundation?’\textsuperscript{14} This attempt to rethink history up from the body is, as Eagleton continues,

\begin{quote}
fraught with perils... [H]ow could it safeguard itself from naturalism, biologism, sensuous empiricism, from a mechanical materialism or false transcendentalism of the body every bit as disabling as the ideologies it seeks to oppose? How can the human body, itself in part a product of history, be taken as history’s source? Does not the body in such an enterprise become simply another privileged anteriority, ... spuriously self-grounding ...?\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

In the remainder of this essay, I will take up this wager and attempt to develop the outlines of what might be called a ‘historical-materialist taxonomy of human being’ – and one that is capable of negotiating these problems as well.

\textsuperscript{14} Eagleton 1990, p. 197.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
as those on which Sayers and others have foundered. In so doing, I will show that, if the attempt to rethink history up from the body is fraught with perils, it is also laden with possibilities.

Other than his comments on human needs, Marx never systematically elaborated what he meant by ‘human corporeal organisation’ – leaving perhaps the impression that he too treated the body solely as the locus of needs or as only a ‘simple prerequisite’. I argue, however, that a systematic and foundational corporeal logic is present behind the numerous passages on human corporeal organisation scattered throughout his writings. In *Capital*, for example, corporeally based categories such as use-value and concrete labour were crucial to his deciphering of the logic of capitalist exploitation; and throughout the long chapters on the production of absolute and relative surplus-value, he measures the degree of workplace-produced immiseration in terms of the deformation of the body, the flip-side of which is that the free cultivation of bodily attributes and capacities is essential to any historical-materialist notion of freedom.\(^{16}\) Although (and also because) Marx never systematically elaborated the very corporeal foundations of human being in which he rooted his critique of capitalism, it is a task well worth undertaking.

Because of its focus on human corporeal organisation, the historical-materialist attempt to delineate the attributes of *Homo sapiens* certainly runs against the idealist current of discussions of ‘human nature’ in the Western intellectual tradition since Socrates. The longevity and one-dimensional idealism of that tradition has burdened the term ‘human nature’ with too much philosophical baggage – baggage that all too easily diverts attention away from the body. This explains perhaps why even historical materialists such as McMurtry, Geras, Soper, Lichtman and Sayers, all of whom cast glances of varying duration at human corporeal organisation, do not go beyond treating it as a ‘simple prerequisite’.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) On the corporeal roots of Marx’s categories see Fracchia 2004b; on the corporeal depths of Marx’s concept of immiseration, see Fracchia 2004a.

\(^{17}\) McMurtry insists that the essential attributes of a historical-materialist definition of ‘human nature in general’ are the human capacity for material self-realisation and the ‘projective consciousness’ (see below) that enables humans to imagine that self-realisation. Though he recognises the importance of ‘bodily instruments’ that enable humans to accomplish that self-realisation, he conceptualises them under the category of ‘other’ (McMurtry 1978, p. 34). In speaking of the capacities that make socialism possible and which are potentially accessible to all human beings, Geras lists only mental and behavioural qualities such as civic intelligence, responsibility, mutual sympathy, a deep feeling for human equality, etc. and neglects the bodily capacities that make the production of human worlds possible in the first place and that form
the interior structure of artefacts, whether material or semiotic. Kate Soper makes perhaps the greatest overture toward the body. She is emphatic about the bodily locus of needs and the importance of human biology to ‘human nature’, and she advocates a ‘new area of investigation’ that she calls ‘social biology’. Understandably wanting to avoid an essentialist definition of human nature, she also insists emphatically that needs are always socio-culturally mediated, and that there is never any purely natural human being. Accordingly, her social biology ends up focusing exclusively on social mediations without having explained what is being mediated. In short, she treats the body as a ‘simple prerequisite’. And this is the same problem that has plagued all those from Alfred Schmidt to Sean Sayers who want to hold onto a historical-materialist view of ‘human nature’, it has two distinct, and interrelated advantages: if, as I have suggested, it has indeed been the philosophical baggage of ‘human nature’ that has acted as a drag preventing historical-materialist analyses of human constants from being sufficiently corporeal and materialist, from following Marx’s ‘corporeal turn’, then a renaming of the undertaking as ‘A Historical-Materialist Taxonomy of Human Corporeal Organisation’ might help us to rethink its contents and enable us to overcome that drag and take that turn.18
To ensure that this taxonomy keeps to its historical-materialist path and can effectively lead us through Marx’s corporeal turn, its construction must be guided by historical-materialist principles. The historical-materialist principle that could best serve as the guiding thread to such a taxonomic endeavour is Marx’s oft-repeated aphorism about human beings and their histories, namely that ‘people make their own history, but not always as they please’. Marx generally intended this aphorism to refer to socially determined capacities of people to make their own history and to social limits and constraints on people doing so as they please. But, behind changing social capacities such as the specific character of technology, it is the set of corporeal capabilities that establishes the possibilities for humans to make their own histories; and beyond the changing limits of inherited socio-cultural conditions, it is the set of corporeal constraints, the needs and limits embedded in human corporeal organisation, that prevents humans from making their histories as they please, that imposes limits on the variability of human cultures and on human malleability. A taxonomy constructed according to this principle must delineate both the capacities and the constraints embedded in the corporeal organisation of Homo sapiens. In so doing, it would establish the range, that is, the infinite but not unlimited possibilities, of all too human worlds.

If Marx’s aphorism about people making their own history though not as they please provides a general direction, the next step is to establish the criteria for inclusion in a historical-materialist taxonomy. The path toward the body can be specified more clearly by focusing on the fundamental historical-materialist concept denoting human history-making – the concept of ‘objectification [Vergegenständlichung]’. Developed in the 1844 Manuscripts as a materialist alternative to Hegel’s idealist category of ‘externalisation [Entäusserung]’, objectification is the crucial concept that enabled Marx to complete his historical-materialist redefinition of the subject-object relation and thereby to effect his Aufhebung of philosophy. The mainstream of Western philosophy had always defined the subject (and human nature) in terms of its capacity to know and the object as the object of knowledge. With the concept of ‘objectification’, however, Marx was able to redefine the content of this relation by conceiving of subjects as makers and objects as the and dexterities in the process of transforming nature and constructing human worlds – that is, the making of history. ‘Objectification’ thus points both ‘backward’ toward the evolutionary process, described by Darwin that resulted in a corporeal form capable of labour, language and culture, and ‘forward’ to the human histories described by Marx.
According to Lewontin (1985, pp. 85–106), all species are capable of objectification; for, even if instinctually rather than intentionally, all species create their environments (beavers’ dams, spiders’ webs, beehives, etc.) by transforming what is naturally given into worlds made in the image of their own needs and capacities. And he therewith reduced knowledge to one – perhaps the most important, but nevertheless only one – of the possible kinds of human artefacts.

There is no space here to elaborate this fully, but it is a mistake to view objectification as applicable solely to the production of material objects. It is true that after the *1844 Manuscripts*, during his long quest to decipher the social hieroglyphics of capital, Marx used ‘objectification’ primarily in the context of his economic studies. Nevertheless, as is indicated by his use of the term in the *Manuscripts* to depict the apprehension of the world by human sense organs, he intended its range to be understood much more broadly: ‘objectification’ is the dialectical category depicting the interaction of subjects with the world, both natural and social. Provisionally and very generally defined, objectification describes the ways in which humans (or any species for that matter) living in distinct social groups work over, rework, and transform the given (the ‘natural’ as well as the pre-existing socio-cultural) into human worlds made in the image of their own bodily form, capacities, and practices. The modes of objectification are as many as human capacities and practices; and the results of objectification are worlds of artefacts – material, social and semiotic.

The centrality of the concept of objectification to a historical-materialist view of human nature and, accordingly, of the histories that humans make through their objectifications has not gone unnoticed. Gyorgy Márkus points to objectification as the key category that distinguishes Marx’s historical-materialist understanding of human beings from that of the ‘old materialism’. What John McMurtry conceptualises as the ‘projective consciousness’ (‘the ability to raise a structure in imagination and then erect it in social reality’) and insists is the ‘essential feature of human nature’ for Marx, is (almost) precisely what Marx means by objectification. What is, from a corporeally-
rooted historical-materialist perspective, frustrating about both of these works, however, is that, once they point out the centrality of the concept of objectification for a historical-materialist delineation of human nature, they then turn away, back to the products of objectification and to history, rather than enquire further into what it is that enables and limits, that establishes the multi-dimensional, but nevertheless limited, range and modes of human objectification. McMurtry, for example, with his reference to the ‘bodily instruments’ that make objectification possible, does imply more than the insufficient nod in the direction of the body made by most authors attempting a historical-materialist account of human nature. But, by classifying them as ‘other’ capacities – that is, other than the ‘essential’ human capacity of projective consciousness – he reduces them to, and dismisses them as, a ‘simple prerequisite’. It is, then, not enough just to nod in acknowledgement that historical materialism is rooted in the body before relegating it to a marginalised status. Rather, if human corporeal organisation is the ‘first fact’ to be established for a materialist conception of history, then the links between that corporeal organisation and the peculiarly human modes of objectification must be established. And, in order to show to establish those links and thereby to conceive of human corporeal organisation as not just a ‘simple prerequisite’, but as the foundation and starting point for historical-materialist theory, it is necessary to proceed to the next step of this undertaking: to develop the categorial apparatus for the depiction of those aspects of human corporeal organisation that enable human beings to make their own, albeit constrained, histories.

Anlage

To develop this conceptual apparatus, we might begin by considering a term that appears irregularly in Marx’s works, always in the context of defining the general attributes of human being. This term, Anlage, is one whose generic character makes it a promising candidate for bringing categorial order to a historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation. Generally, what Marx meant by speaking of sense perception as a process of objectification or the kind of collective processes of objectification that produce semiotic artefacts (language, symbolic forms). It would, I think, be more accurate to say that the projective consciousness is the crucial component of one (very productive) mode of objectification, but is not a prerequisite for objectification (see note 18).

22 McMurtry 1978, p. 34.
23 Perry Anderson calls attention to a passage in the Grundrisse in which Marx
Anlage refers to a ‘facility’, ‘arrangement’, ‘installation’ or ‘disposition’. For my purposes, appropriately, the term also has a specific biological application meaning the ‘natural tendency’ or, in the plural Anlagen, the ‘hereditary factors’ that predispose an organism to act in certain ways. Given this definition, Anlagen may serve as the generic category for the ‘predispositions’ inherent in human corporeal organisation and thus as the ordering principle for a historical-materialist taxonomy of Homo sapiens.

As the generic category encompassing all attributes of human corporeal organisation, Anlagen must be subdivided into sets of subcategories that can cover the range of Marx’s references to the body and also include dimensions of human corporeal organisation that he did not address but that belong to a historical-materialist taxonomy of Homo sapiens. If the guiding thread of a materialist conception of history is that people make their own history, but not as they please, then the two major categorial subdivisions of Anlagen or corporeal dispositions would accordingly have to be the capabilities and constraints embedded in human corporeal organisation – the corporeal capabilities that enable people to make their own history, and the corporeal constraints that prevent them from doing so as they please.

Surveying Marx’s scattered comments about corporeal capabilities, we find the following: in the 1844 Manuscripts, he devoted some of his most powerful prose in praise of the human capacity to apprehend the world sensually through employment of what Marx called the theoretical powers of the senses, or what J.J. Gibson would later call the body’s ‘perceptual systems’.24 Discussing the bodily prerequisites of labour in the Grundrisse, he wrote that ‘No production [is] possible without an instrument of production, even if it is only the hand. No production without stored-up, past labour, even if it is only the dexterity gathered together and concentrated in the hand of the primitive through repeated practice’.25
In Capital, when discussing the labour process in general, he spoke of labour as an embodied process and about embodied instruments of labour. In the labour process, humans set in motion ‘the natural powers belonging to [their] embodiment’, and all labour involves the labourer’s use of a means of labour, the most original (in the temporal sense) and the most immediate (in the spatial sense) of which were the labourer’s own ‘bodily organs’. Echoing Marx’s reference to the hand, Engels, in his essay on ‘The Role of Labour in the Humanisation of the Ape’, pointed to bipedality as the decisive step in human evolution, since its result was that ‘the hand had become free and was able constantly to develop new dexterities’ – the hand therefore is ‘not only the organ of labour’, it is also its product. Engels, not afraid of risking a bad pun, concluded that the development of the sense organs and the production of cultural artefacts went ‘hand in hand’ with the development of the hand through labour:

through the constantly renewed application of this hereditary refinement
[of the hand] to new, increasingly complicated tasks, the human hand attained
that high degree of perfection on the basis of which it could conjure forth
the paintings of Raphael, the statues of Thorvaldsen, the music of Paganini.26

From these passages, we can glean two subdivisions within the set of bodily attributes enabling humans to make their own histories. The references to the hand and other bodily organs as instruments of labour may be subsumed under the category of ‘bodily instruments’.27 In addition to the human hand, whose opposable thumb, flexible digits, and prehensile grasp were so appreciated by Marx and Engels, the most obvious of these bodily instruments are the uniquely flexible human 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. (A historical-materialist taxonomy considers *Homo sapiens* a thinking body, rather than, as is so current today, an embodied mind; while the latter treats the body only as a site for thinking, the former situates the mind where it belongs: as one of the many indispensable human bodily instruments28).

27 This term is John McMurtry’s (McMurtry 1978, p. 34). Though Marx may not have used the term ‘körperliche Instrumente’ (I know of no such precise usage), McMurtry is surely justified in using the term ‘bodily instruments’ to refer collectively to Marx’s scattered references to the body’s tools.
28 The positivist-Marxist theory of consciousness, the economic-reductionist, mirror theory of mind, was developed primarily by Second-International Marxists in the late
These uniquely human bodily instruments are deployed in an astonishing variety of ways, giving rise to what Marx called bodily dexterities (which, of course, change according to socio-cultural form, though not always in a progressive manner – as evidenced by Marx’s graphic descriptions in Capital of the atrophy of so many corporeal dexterities effected by the capitalist labour process). Perhaps the most crucial dexterity in human evolution is bipedality, which freed the hands for, and therewith the mouth from, carrying – thus making possible the development of speech organs capable of producing an extraordinary range of nuanced sounds, of what Susan Langer referred to as those ‘mouthy little noises we call words’.29 This is but one corporeal example of what makes Homo sapiens so unique: the extraordinary flexibility of bodily instruments that enables humans to develop an even more far-ranging set of dexterities; and these, in turn, give human production that ‘universal’ – that is, adaptable and diverse – character that Marx contrasted...
to the one-dimensional, instinctual production of other species.\textsuperscript{30} These bodily instruments, and the corporeal dexterities to which they give rise, enable humans to produce the means necessary to enable them to break out of a narrow ecological niche of the kind inhabited by other species and to adapt to the most varied of niches from desert to polar regions and to create artificial instruments that allow us to develop the capacities embodied in other species such as moving through the air, on and under the water, for digging underground passages, building dams, and so forth.

Although the possibilities opened up by human bodily instruments are seemingly infinite, they are by no means unlimited. Beyond the changing limits of inherited socio-cultural conditions, it is the set of constraints, the needs and limits embedded in human corporeal organisation, that prevents humans from making history as they please, that imposes limits on the infinite variability of human cultures and on human malleability. The bodily constraints that most preoccupied Marx are systems of bodily needs – caloric intake, hydration, bodily warmth, and so on – whose satisfaction is the absolute precondition of human existence and which provide the impetus and telos of production. In this regard, it is, as Agnes Heller argues, useful (though, as I shall soon argue, insufficient) to characterise the biological or, as she calls them, the ‘natural needs’ of \textit{Homo sapiens} as ‘not a group of needs but 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’.\textsuperscript{31} This, of course, corresponds to Marx’s insistence that human beings must first be able to live in order to be able to ‘make history’ and points specifically to the physiological imperative of bodily survival and reproduction (of the body, not yet next generation). When Marx refers to these needs as eating, drinking, abode, clothes and ‘still much else’,\textsuperscript{32} these are shorthand forms of saying that the body needs a certain number of calories to reproduce its cells, a certain amount of liquid to prevent dehydration, a certain amount of shelter to maintain its temperature within a fairly narrow range. Under ‘still much else’ we might include the equally obvious bodily needs for a certain amount of oxygen, rest and sleep – no doubt for a certain amount of exercise, too.\textsuperscript{33} Looked at in this way, the set of bodily needs surely does

\textsuperscript{30} Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{31} Heller 1976, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{32} Marx 1845, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{33} An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay noted that this ‘still much else’ ‘keeps open the limits of what counts as a human need’ and suggested that a
represent quite literally a vital ‘limit concept’, the limits of human being. Every species has its ‘limit concept’ – and humans are no exceptions. For each species, of course, the contents of, and the range covered by, that limit concept varies. And the peculiarly human limits emerge when we begin to define those contents and delineate those ranges: how many calories, what kind of vitamins and minerals, what range of body temperature, how much rest and sleep (and when)? While the elasticity of physiological adaptation (to, for example, high altitudes) necessarily results in a degree of fuzziness at the borders which makes it impossible to define those limits with quantitative precision, we can assert with certainty the qualitative biological needs whose satisfaction is an absolute prerequisite of human existence.

Despite countless universalist accusations to the contrary, Marx endlessly insisted that human biological needs are always satisfied in socio-culturally specific ways. It would be platitudinous to state the obvious point that the fact that needs are always satisfied in socio-culturally specific ways does not abrogate the biological character of those needs, were it not for the numerous recent works in postmodern cultural studies insisting that there is no such thing as the ‘natural’ body and, therefore, that the only relevant analytical aspect is the culturally specific mode of satisfying biological needs. By thus severing the link between the body and culture, such studies retreat to a neo-idealist notion of human being, defined now ‘culturally’ rather than ‘philosophically’. In a kind of decentred neo-Cartesianism, their insistence on the arbitrariness of cultural forms is a kind of declaration of the independence of those forms from the body. In thus treating (mentally-produced) cultural forms as if they had no relevant relation to the body, its needs and its capacities to satisfy those needs and produce new needs, wants and desires (of course, in socio-culturally specific ways), such postmodern studies of the body reiterate traditional philosophy’s separation of body and mind. Having said that, however, it is imperative to acknowledge in our taxonomic categories the fact that biological needs are always satisfied in socio-culturally specific ways. Accordingly, we might speak of biological needs...
and their socio-cultural refinement or mediation – the biological needs providing the limit concept for our taxonomic sketch of *Homo sapiens*, and the category of socio-cultural mediation pointing to both the necessarily abstract character of the taxonomy and therewith too to the absolute necessity for historical-materialist analysis of the culturally specific ways of satisfying biological needs.

These socio-culturally mediated needs are themselves supplemented by socio-cultural determined wants and desires whose pertinence to the body is not always immediate. At the level of abstraction involved in a historical-materialist taxonomy, it is not necessary to discuss the content of those socio-culturally refined needs nor of those socio-culturally determined wants and desires. But it is necessary to recognise the complexity of, and the range of, possible relations between, needs and wants and desires. On the one hand, postmodern cultural studies are right to point out that the cultural determination, for example, of what properly satisfies hunger and of what is considered too disgusting to eat can result in a situation that a starving person in need of food will not eat some form of nourishment because of cultural taboos. We may admire the power of culture to elevate mind over body, but we should not forget that rejection of food because of cultural taboos will ultimately lead to the pyrrhic victory of the body over mind – death. Nor should we forget that the opposite is also true – as perhaps most brashly maintained by Mick Jagger: you can’t always get what you want, but you can get what you need. The tasks of determining the specific contents, and of reconstructing the mediated corporeal pertinence of, and the relations between, biological needs, their socio-cultural mediation and wants and desires falls to concrete historical-materialist analysis of specific socio-cultural forms.

Here, however, it suffices to establish the nuanced range of sub-categories (biological needs, socio-culturally refined needs, socio-culturally determined wants and desires) that fall under the general heading of corporeal constraints.

In order to complete the inventory of corporeal constraints, it is necessary to supplement the category of needs with two related categories. These are bodily limits and constraints: limits such as those of the human sense organs or, most emphatically, human mortality; constraints such as human terrestriality and diurnality or those resulting from needs (for example, the need for oxygen which makes it impossible to live without artificial support above certain

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34 On needs and wants, see Archibald 1989, pp. 83–97 and Márkus 1978, pp. 9–12.
Stephen Jay Gould (1980 and 1994) makes this point, focusing specifically on the significance of limits and constraints for evolutionary direction. However, those corporeal factors that prevent us from making our history as we please — that which we lack and need, want or desire, that which constrains and even limits our capacities — should not be understood exclusively in negative terms as mere and passive limits. First of all, constraints and limits give definition and form to an organism that would otherwise be the living contradiction of a shapeless form. Constraints and limits force the organism to focus its energies, to direct them in relation to its predispositions or *Anlagen*, to exercise and develop the capacities and dexterities that it does have. Furthermore, though Heller is right to see corporeal needs and constraints as ‘limit concepts’ that establish the boundaries of human being, they also present challenges that provoke the production of artefacts ranging from material goods to symbolic forms. It is the very elasticity of, and the creative capacities embedded in, our universal human corporeal organisation that can turn bodily limits into cultural opportunities and that create the variety of human worlds. As Marx noted in his double definition of the prerequisite of human existence, the ‘first historical act’ consists of satisfying needs and producing the means to satisfy those needs. As alluded to above, the far-ranging capabilities made possible by our bodily instruments and corporeal dexterities enable us to turn natural constraints into problems to be solved by human artifice — by, for example, building aeroplanes, developing means of artificial lighting, oxygen canisters for breathing at high altitudes or underwater.

Moreover, our bodily limits such as mortality, terrestriality, diurnality, and so forth also provide us with food for thought — the material which humans living in different socio-cultural contexts transform into a corporeally consistent variety of metaphors, symbolic forms and other semiotic artefacts. One need only think of the corporeally-based unitary logic underlying the various culturally-specific symbolic meanings attached to natural phenomena: how our terrestrial constraints provide the underlying logic beneath the culturally-varied meanings attached to the sky and sea; how our diurnal constraints provide that logic underlying culturally-varied meanings attached to night and day, to the sun and moon; how the limits of our bodies, our death, underlie the variety of meanings attached to mortality and immortality. Or consider the important cultural usages of temporary disruptions of our corporeal equilibrium. As Andre Leroi-Gourhan notes, ‘if we bear in mind

that in all cultures many unusual motor or verbal phenomena occur as a
result of individuals being “transported” to a mental state other than their
normal one, we must acknowledge that disturbances of the rhythmic balance
do play an important role.\textsuperscript{36} Leroi-Gourhan gives examples of disruption of
the visceral sensibility such as fasting, sexual abstinence and prolonged periods
without sleep. We might add several examples of rituals that take advantage
of the disruption of vestibular sensibility. From the aesthetic-religious sublime
of trance dancers in Bali or the whirling dervishes of Islam to the banal but
enjoyable thrill of riding a roller coaster, not to mention the use of substances
that alter the mind’s chemistry, whether for insight, thrills or both – all of
these, and many other, cultural practices consciously exploit the distortion
of vestibular sensitivity for a brief walk on the unbalanced side. But it is
precisely the abnormality, the transitoriness, that is the seduction; and the
return to normality is quite literally the salvation. We simply could not live
with permanent disruption of our vestibular sensitivity – or, were our bodies
so constituted that we could, we would be different beings with vastly different
cultural forms. These rather basic examples clearly indicate that, though
cultural forms are certainly relative, they are not arbitrary; they are inextricably
linked to human corporeal organisation and mediated through social practice.
In this way, the body is, as Elaine Scarry put it, the ‘the interior structure’
also of semiotic artefacts.\textsuperscript{37}

At this point, the construction of the categorial framework for a historical-
materialist taxonomy is complete. It begins with the generic category of
\textit{Anlagen} denoting the general predispositions embedded in human corporeal
organisation. It then moves to the two sub-categories that together establish
the range of human corporeal predisposition: one delineating those aspects
of human corporeal organisation that allows us to make our own history –
the bodily instruments, capacities, and dexterities; and the other delineating
those bodily attributes that prevent us from making our history as we please
– bodily needs, (socio-culturally mediated) wants and desires, and bodily
limits and constraints which themselves could be transformed into challenges
that humans solve through the production of artifice. Having constructed the
framework for this taxonomy, the next question, and the last that will be
addressed in this essay, is: What is its methodological place-value? That is:
What can it do? What can it not do? How do we use it?

\textsuperscript{36} Leroi-Gourhan 1993, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{37} See Scarry 1985, Chapter 5.
Methodological place-value

Precisely because there are so many theoretical dangers in talking about ‘the body’, it is absolutely crucial to define very carefully the capacities and limits of this taxonomy – its methodological place-value in historical-materialist analysis. Several of the potential dangers and abuses of any attempt – the present one included – to define ‘the human body’ were mentioned above. The greatest danger that would produce the greatest abuse would be to posit as universal a particularist definition of ‘the body’ and then illegitimately to impose it on all bodies. The methodological means to avoid this risk lies in a proper understanding of the nature and use of historical-materialist abstraction.

In *Capital*, Marx abstracted from really existing capitalist societies in their historical, national and cultural specificities, and from really existing individuals whom he consciously treated as bearers of economic categories, for the methodological purpose of presenting the general logic of the capitalist mode of production and of its valorisation and exploitation process. In like manner, in order to construct the categorial framework for a historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation, it was necessary here to abstract from those same specificities, from the concrete diversity of cultural forms. The methodological purpose of these abstractions was to determine what it is that defines the possibilities and limits of human being, that establishes the infinite possibilities and ultimate limits of the diversity of cultural forms and human histories. *Capital* is not a depiction of any existing capitalist society, nor is this taxonomy a depiction of any existing human body. Both are conscious abstractions necessary for certain purposes, but necessarily insufficient for others.

Let us begin with its insufficiencies which result from the fact that it is an (albeit conscious) abstraction. Marx himself was well aware of the danger of confusing an abstraction with reality and imposing the former on the latter. While developing the overall framework of his materialist conception of history in the *German Ideology*, he explained the methodological place-value of the ‘general results, abstractions which [arose] from [his] observation of the historical development of people’: ‘viewed apart from real history’, he insisted, ‘these abstractions have no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does
philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history’ (my emphasis). \footnote{Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 155 [emphasis added].} And, later, in the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy, he referred to such abstractions as the ‘guiding threads’ of his study. \footnote{Marx in Tucker 1978, p. 4.} In like manner, and as an abstraction, a historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation can provide a research direction and the guiding threads for historical-materialist research and analysis; it can, among other things, lead us to consider the bodily dimensions of human history and sensitise us to the corporeal roots of cultural forms. But only if we acknowledge its abstract character, draw the methodological consequences and analyse ‘real history’ consisting of real bodies can we avoid the deterministic and reductionist consequences of confusing the abstraction with reality and imposing it as an a priori recipe or schema on real bodies in their concrete cultural specificity.

Perhaps the greatest danger facing such a taxonomy is its potential abuse to occlude issues of race or gender. Though I fear that a brief comment on such crucial and complex topics may be a greater injustice than no comment at all, I must at least emphasise two points on the relation between this taxonomy’s abstract conception of human corporeal organisation and the multiplicity of really existing bodies that might indicate ways of addressing these issues more thoroughly. As I have argued throughout, the reason for talking in the singular about human corporeal organisation as the object of a historical-materialist taxonomy is to define what it is about human beings that allows them to make their own histories and that delineates the corporeal possibilities and limits of the histories they can make. As should be obvious, the same set of culture-creating instruments, capacities and dexterities (human hands, a human brain, human perceptual systems and a human supra-laryngeal tract) is common to all races and sexes. This is why any visitor to a zoo can differentiate human beings, regardless of sex or race, from other species. And this is why it is possible to speak generically (and abstractly) of human corporeal organisation. The kinds of histories that different groups of humans make will, of course, vary according to social form and technology, geography, the legacy of the group’s own past and the particular kind of cultural forms it develops. In the production of those cultural forms, sexual dimorphism and phenotypic differences, real or imagined, \footnote{Another anonymous reviewer of the earlier draft insists that ‘it is a mistake to}
cultural mediation in the construction of socially efficacious symbolic forms. Although race is a cultural construct, if all human beings were of the same skin colour and had the same physiognomic attributes, there would be no foundation for its construction. Although gender is a cultural construct, if humans reproduced asexually, there would be no foundation for its construction. The problem lies not in the recognition of physiological differences, but in the issuance of hierarchical verdicts on their significance that both produce and support exploitation, oppression and discrimination. The particular content of those semiotic forms cannot be predicted by any general theory. But it can be analysed in a historical-materialist manner and understood as the particular product of people living within a specific set of social relations inscribing particular meanings onto what are constructed as racialised or gendered bodies.

Although there are many dangers to be recognised and avoided, an abstract historical-materialist taxonomy of human corporeal organisation has several possible uses. Even though Marx himself never systematised his thoughts on the body nor developed such a taxonomy, it is implicit in the foundations of his work. As mentioned above, his corporeal approach to human being allowed him to rethink and expand the structure and content of historical analysis to include not just the mind and philosophy, but also the corporeal capacities that are essential to the making of history and the needs, wants, limits and
constraints that establish the outer boundaries of possible human histories. Marx’s construction of categories grounded in human corporeal organisation, furthermore, enabled him to decipher the exploitative character of capitalism and to expose the corporeal depths of capitalist immiseration. In this way, he wielded human corporeal organisation as a limited, but effective, normative measure for social critique and as an attribute of freedom: labour practices which deform the body and atrophy its dexterities are indicators of exploitation, while those that enhance its capacities and cultivate its dexterities are emancipatory.

But these were only Marx’s first steps toward winning his wager on reconstructing everything from a bodily foundation. Of the many remaining challenges, perhaps the greatest and most complex lies in the analysis of cultural forms. As I have indicated above, a corporeal turn rooted in a materialist conception of history opens up immense possibilities for the analysis of cultural forms. Concern with the relation between the body and cultural forms has generally been absent from historical-materialist theory, and most of the work in the last few decades ostensibly on ‘the body’ has been done by poststructuralists and postmodernists who have taken a linguistic or cultural turn. Such approaches have been invaluable in exposing how the body is constituted and/or disciplined by symbolic, semiotic, cultural, or discursive systems. However useful these cultural turns toward the body are for the analysis of signs, symbols, discourse and cultures, they tend methodologically to dissolve the materiality of the body into a semiotically, symbolically, discursively or culturally constituted mental construct. That is, they always treat the body as constituted by meaning, but not as being in any way constitutive.

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41 One notable exception is David McNally’s *Bodies of Meaning* (2001). In the Introduction and third chapter, entitled ‘Bodies that Talk: Sex, Tools, Language, and Human Culture’, McNally sketches a notion of ‘corporeal reason’ that has several affinities with my attempt in this essay to develop a historical-materialist taxonomy which is itself part of my larger book project entitled *Historical Materialism as Corporeal Semiotics*. The difference, however, is that McNally focuses on the reification of language in capitalist society and seeks to elaborate an emancipatory linguistic practice which understands that, and how, language is rooted in the body. This very important focus results in formulations that are both perfectly appropriate and susceptible to abuse. He rightly insists that the body, capitalistically-deployed, is ‘a site of domination’ that, however, remains ‘the space of slumbering powers of emancipation’ (p. 229). If this accurate depiction of the capitalist deployment of the body (and the body as a site of memory), is ‘universalised’ and taken as the extent of ‘corporeal reason’, the result would be a reduction of corporeality to a logic of embodiment rather than an elaboration of it as the body’s logic. McNally’s book has produced a spirited exchange between Chik Collins and himself. See Collins 2003 and McNally 2004.
of meaning. Their semiotic nod toward the body wants to grasp humans as embodied in the world; but they treat the body as essentially the locus of thought and seek to explain how the embodied mind has been culturally inscribed. Concerned with embodied minds rather than thinking bodies, their focus on ‘skin-deep’ inscriptions results in a silhouette-like view of the body that relegates its materiality and culture-creating capacities to the shadows.

One need not deny that all cultures inscribe the body with meanings to assert that the body is more than its cultural inscriptions. Indeed, these inscriptions themselves pertain to the textured materiality of corporeality as the site of needs, wants, desires, limits, constraints and capacities. To understand inscriptions on the body, therefore, it is not sufficient to take a linguistic/cultural turn toward the body and focus only on their textuality. The body itself as the site of inscription and the mode (that is, the means, social relations and purpose) of inscription are as important to deciphering their meanings as are the inscriptions themselves. Thus, in order to decipher inscribed bodies, the analysis of the textuality of the inscriptions must first be grounded in a corporeal turn toward society and culture – an historical-materialist turn that acknowledges human corporeal organisation as the starting point of historical theory, that understands thinking bodies, distributed in social space according to the logic of the social relations of production, as the producers of human worlds consisting of not only material, but also semiotic artefacts. Such a turn would lead us to view the body – its capacities and dexterities as well as its needs and constraints – as ‘the interior structure of the artefact’ and would help us to see the corporeal traces that inhere in cultural forms.

Taking such a turn would also require us to confront questions of geographical and ecological space. As Marx insisted immediately after having

42 See Scarry 1985. Combining Scarry and Marx, we can view artefacts, both material and semiotic, as corporeal hieroglyphs. To decipher these hieroglyphs, we must answer at least two questions: What kind of bodily capacities were requisite for their production? How do they pertain to the body and its ‘sentience’ (as Scarry puts it)? In my larger project (of which this historical-materialist taxonomy will be a part), I am attempting to develop a historical-materialist key to facilitate the process of deciphering. This key, I suggest, lies in elaborating ideas proposed by Mark Johnson. Johnson 1987 explains the roots of conceptual meanings and the structure of reason itself in terms of image-schemata derived from human corporeality. He constructs image schemata based on embodied experience and derives from them a wide range of what had been considered purely abstract ideas. He shows, for example, how our bodily sense of balance provides an image schema whose metaphorical projections provide us with ideas of aesthetic proportion, rational argument, psychological equilibrium and justice. I suggest that the same is possible in the analysis of symbolic meanings and cultural forms.
established it as the first fact of historical theory, human corporeal organisation entails ‘a relation to the rest of nature’. While noting that he could at that point discuss neither that corporeal organisation nor its relation to nature, he listed the ‘natural foundations of historical writing’ – ‘the geological, orohydrographical, climatic, and other relations’ – and he insisted that historical writing must ‘begin with those natural foundations and their modification in the course of history by human actions’, themselves made possible by human corporeal organisation.43 Though Marx had to set aside his concerns with these matters in order to focus on deciphering the capitalist mode of production, they must be confronted if historical materialism is to go beyond theoretical abstractions and grasp the concrete lives of real people. For the very nature of needs, wants, and desires, as well as the preferred means of their satisfaction, are obviously not unrelated to the geographical locus of a social group, to the site-specific geology and climate, flora and fauna. Equally obviously, the site-specific complex of needs, wants and desires, as well as the site-specific capabilities and dexterities developed to satisfy them will inevitably serve as the ‘raw material’ for the semiotic production of meanings specific to those needs and practices and produce the specificity of cultural forms practices, rituals, and so on. Here, too, is a concrete example of how the complex of bodily needs is not only a ‘limit concept’ nor a ‘simple prerequisite’ of human history, but, to borrow Marx’s term, a Produktivkraft, a force in the production of cultural forms, a positive provocation to people inhabiting particular geographical sites to develop commensurately particular cultural forms. To neglect the complex of site-specific bodily needs and capabilities and ignore the way they very literally inform cultural forms is to disembody society and culture and to slip into an idealist conception of history.

The analysis of cultural forms from a bodily foundation and in a site-specific manner are just two of the many new horizons opened up by historical materialism’s corporeal turn. Although Marx initiated that turn, he barely had time to glimpse around the bend. And, here, I have done little more than systematise his scattered but insightful thoughts on the role of the body in a materialist conception of history. It is up to us to explore the corporeal horizons opened up by his initial efforts. And the best way to do so is to take seriously his insistence that human corporeal organisation is the first fact to be established for historical theory, to establish this fact by recognising the astonishingly

43 Marx 1845, pp. 149–50.
flexible and malleable capacities and dexterities, and the needs and constraints, embedded in human corporeal organisation, and to proceed from that basis to study the modes of human being, of socio-cultural forms, in their infinite though not unlimited diversity. Such a starting point provides the means to carve a path between and beyond the binaries that trapped Sayers and others, to confront both poles of the essentialist/relativist, natural/social binaries without being tied to either, to avoid dogmatic universalism and arbitrary relativism. It also provides the means to look at both socio-cultural diversity and historical change while avoiding any kind of teleology or Whiggish view of history as evolution from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘civilised’. In short, it provides the means to confront the challenges that Eagleton enumerated as obstacles to winning the breathtaking wager on reconstructing history from a bodily foundation.

References


Craig Brandist

Marxism and the Philosophy of Language in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s

One of the main weapons wielded by postmodernist critics of Marxism in the 1980s and 1990s was the apparent lack of attention given to language by Marxist thinkers. Some Marxists were stung by the accusation and moved towards a ‘post-Marxist’ position based on a poststructuralist theory of language, while others sought to uncover whether and, if so, how Marxists actually did engage with the philosophy of language in the 1920s and 1930s. There clearly were real engagements at that time, with the work of Antonio Gramsci and Valentin Voloshinov being the examples that really stand out. However, these people have often seemed to be exceptions within a relative dearth of Marxist engagements with the question of language in the period. Indeed, the Marxist credentials of Voloshinov’s writings, along with his very authorship of the 1929 book Marxism and the Philosophy of Language have been repeatedly questioned,1 while Gramsci’s writings

1 The case for this position was put most eloquently by Clark and Holquist 1984, pp. 146–70. There has, however, never been any convincing evidence to seriously doubt Voloshinov’s authorship. On the recent state of scholarship see Brandist 2002 and Hirschkop 1999, pp. 126–40. I will touch on the work of the Bakhtin Circle only tangentially in the current article.
on language were clearly based on the work of non-Marxist thinkers, which were then reworked according to a Marxist paradigm. Attempts to construct a specifically Marxist linguistics were common in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, but as Vladimir Alpatov has recently shown, the results were always less than convincing and involved a sort of category mistake. Philosophical ideas about language were often put to Marxist use, however, and, as in the case of Gramsci, this is where the interesting work was really done. In this article, I want to show that productive Marxist engagements with the philosophy of language were not as uncommon as is generally believed, and that these engagements continued in the Soviet Union well into the Stalin period.

The direction of Soviet work on language was determined by three related features: the state of language studies at the time of the Revolution, the practical tasks set for linguists by the progress of the Revolution and the influence and prestige of Marxism among linguists. In considering the first feature we must mention the influence of Western scholarship, particularly linguistic geography and Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*, but also the very advanced formal linguistics of the Moscow Linguistic School of Filipp Fortunatov and Aleksei Shakhmatov and the general linguists of Jan Baudouin de Courtenay. Soviet linguists were well aware of international developments in linguistics, and from the outset of the new era, were at the cutting edge of contemporary linguistic thought. They were thus well prepared to take advantage of the new conditions opened up by the Revolution.

This leads to the second feature, dominated by the egalitarian and democratic national and language policies of the early Soviet government. This strove to raise minority languages to a level of development where they could achieve formal equality with Russian. This often meant the working out and codification of written language forms for the former colonies of the Russian Empire, and the spreading of literacy and educational opportunities to the masses. There were many pressing and practical tasks for linguists who supported the Revolution in these years, and this was a precondition for some of the best theorising about language of later years.

In the 1920s, the language of the Imperial ruling class was kept within the bounds of a new ‘legality’, while the undeveloped languages of the former colonies and illiterate social groups were raised to the level of that ‘legality’. 

\[2 \text{ Alpatov 2000a.}\]
No longer was Imperial standard Russian the only official language and a modified Cyrillic alphabet applied to subject languages. Instead, early Soviet linguists attempted to complete and structure the language of hitherto marginalised groups, to consolidate what was only implicit in the oral language. This was no easy task, since many language groups were split into numerous dialects, and many languages still had no written forms. Education of children in their native languages required agreement on a standard version of a language, which might have many dialects. The main criterion for choosing a dialect was its role in the literary traditions of written languages, or in the case of previously unwritten languages its suitability for adapting to a written form. This policy was initially pursued on a centrally co-ordinated but detached basis, what we might call ‘democratic centralism’. Choices were made and implemented in alliance with the ‘national progressive intelligentsias’ of a particular region. So, too, with the promotion of the Latin alphabet in the Muslim states of the old Russian Empire. The Latin alphabet had no connotations of great-Russian chauvinism or Tsarist Russification policies and so allowed the combination of local interest with central political needs. Mass literacy and education campaigns were facilitated, while the influence of the Muslim clerical establishment, which advocated adoption of the Arabic alphabet, was undermined. The results were impressive: by 1924, 25 different languages were being published in the Soviet Union, rising to 34 the following year and 44 by 1927, while literacy among the general population rose very quickly.3

Such a dynamic environment was not especially conducive to extended theorising; the detachment necessary for reflection and composition was not available to most linguists at this time and, just as in other fields, the theoretical fruits were only harvested at the end of the 1920s. By this time, however, language policy had degenerated considerably. In the First Five Year Plan, a ‘liquidation of the old forms of alphabets’ was centrally instituted, the central office of the Latinisation movement shifted from Baku to Moscow and public support for Latinisation became a sign of loyalty to the régime. Soon afterwards, Latinisation itself became suspect for threatening to detach the national regions away from Russia. The return of Russification was signalled, and this was to coincide with the purging of undesirable elements from the Russian language.

Democratic centralism was replaced with bureaucratic centralism as the language policy became regressive, reverting back to Imperial and hierarchical relations. Cultural orthodoxies and a unitary conservative order ultimately resulted from the stabilisation of the system at the end of the ‘cultural revolution’.

The third feature, the influence of Marxism, is rather more ambivalent, but there is little doubt that Marxist ideas constituted an important element of the worldviews of many linguists in the early Soviet Union, and, while this did not in every case lead to an attempt to construct a Marxist linguistics, it nevertheless influenced their research agenda and methodology. Bureaucratic distortions were certainly very clear in academic disciplines by the end of the 1920s, but, while Marxism within official politics deteriorated in step with the Stalinist degeneration of the Revolution, Marxism within academic institutions was less immediately compromised. The very distance of many intellectuals from political life at this time actually insulated them from the cruder corruptions of Marxism, even when intellectuals were subject to vicious attacks by the self-proclaimed guardians of ‘proletarian culture’ during the Cultural Revolution (1928–31). From July 1931, when Stalin restrained and then dissolved the groups of intellectual-baiters, a space for intellectual endeavour was opened up, with real debates being carried out in several disciplines before the professional orthodoxies of those disciplines were finalised in the mid-1930s. Even then, though, orthodoxies were not simply imposed by Party dictates. There was no ‘Party line’ on such issues as the philosophy of language or literary technique. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, while the Party required the insights of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ be acknowledged in the social sciences and

\[\text{applied the principle of partiinost' [party-mindedness] to the work of Communist intellectuals . . . the criteria and desiderata could provide only limited guidance as long as the party did not require party membership of the intelligentsia and gave equal or greater honour to cultural figures who were neither Communist or Marxist.}\]

Furthermore, in most situations, the orthodoxies of immediate practical relevance to the professions were not political. They were local professional

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1 Smith 1998.
2 On the debates that led to the formulation of ‘socialist realism’ in the arts, see Robin 1992.
orthodoxies, established by a process of interaction between the professionals and the Party’s cultural administrators, which was only in a few cases affected by intervention or explicit direction from the party leadership.

From 1930 onwards, the so-called ‘new doctrine on language’ of Nikolai Marr (1865–1934) was well on its way to becoming the orthodoxy within linguistics. It dominated the field until Stalin’s famous denunciation of Marr in 1950. As Alpatov and others have noted, Marr’s theory amounted to little more than hitching an already formed, and highly questionable, doctrine on to well-known Marxist tenets, but, by 1934, ‘Marrism had been proclaimed to be a subset of Marxism; and Marr himself had been decorated with the Order of Lenin, buried beside Lomonosov, and beatified through a series of “memory immortalisation” decrees’. While there was significant resistance to the dominance of Marrism until 1932 from such important Marxist figures working within linguistics as Evgeny Polivanov (1891–1938) and Timofei Lomtev (1906–72), Marrism was regarded as ‘Marxism in linguistics’ and open criticism within the Soviet Union carried real risks.

The victory of Marrism undoubtedly distorted relations between Marxism and the philosophy of language, but it did not mark the end of constructive Marxist engagements with it. Writers on language had to show respect for Marr’s ideas and work within a framework that Marrism could accommodate, but this did leave considerable scope for research. Furthermore, while many of Marr’s individual ideas were as unsound and sometimes as bizarre as some of the ideas of Lysenko in biology, not all of his ideas were of this type. Ideas such as the derivation of all languages from four primary elements and the denial of the existence of families of languages were undoubtedly the product of fancy, but other ideas proved to be compatible with some significant developments in the study of language as a social phenomenon. The linguist and literary scholar Viktor Zhirmunskii (1881–1971) publicly opposed Marr’s ‘four elements’ theory as late as 1940,’ but his attitude to Marrism was not totally negative. Looking back on the Marr period from the 1970s, Zhirmunskii noted that Marr’s ‘theoretical ideas and separate pronouncements’, though ‘in most cases not fully worked out and chaotic’, contained...
productive and fruitful thoughts that most of us (especially Leningrad linguists) were bound to find chiming with our own work. I mainly have in mind such things as Marr’s struggle against the narrowly Euro-centric theory of traditional linguistics; the stadial-typological approach to the development of languages, and comparison of them regardless of their common line of descent; research into the realm of the interrelations of language and thought; and what might be called the semantic approach to grammatical phenomena.10

Zhirmunskii and his fellow ‘Leningrad linguists’ produced some of the most interesting and sadly neglected works on language from a generally Marxist perspective of the whole Soviet era.

**Institutions and history**

There were several institutions that included important figures who studied language from a broadly Marxist perspective following the October Revolution and the Civil War. Some of the most important were established under the organisational umbrella RANION (Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia nauchno-issledovatel’skih institutov obshchestvennikh nauk [Russian Association of Scientific Research Institutions of the Social Sciences]), which included both Marxist and fellow-traveller intellectuals. Most important for our purposes was the Moscow-based IIaL (Institut iazyka i literatury [Institute of Language and Literature]) and the Leningrad-based ILIaZV (Institut sravnitel’nogo izucheniiia iazykov i literature zapada i vostoka [Institute for the Comparative Study of the Languages and Literatures of the West and East]) which existed from 1924–30. The linguistic section of RANION was presided over by Polivanov, with Lev Iakubinskii (1892–1945) directing the study of linguistics in Leningrad. The most significant figures at IIaL were Mikhail Peterson (1885–1962), the specialist in general and comparative Indo-European linguistics, and the general linguist and medievalist Rozalia Shor (1893–1939). The Moscow linguists had emerged from the traditions of the Moscow Linguistic School led by Fortunatov (1848–1914), who insisted that language is a system of signs. In the 1920s, Peterson and Shor introduced a whole generation of Soviet linguists to important developments in proto-pragmatics such as the work of Karl Otto Erdmann, Anton Marty and Karl Bühler, though criticising these

10 Bazylev and Neroznak 2001, p. 18.
approaches for paying inadequate attention to sociological factors.\textsuperscript{11} They also made the first Soviet attempts to bring sociological ideas to bear directly on the philosophy of language, with Peterson supporting Meillet’s contention that, hitherto, linguists had only noticed the social side of language by accident.\textsuperscript{12} The main figures at ILIaZV were four linguists who either had been or who regarded themselves as pupils of the Polish-Russian linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929):\textsuperscript{13} the general linguist Lev Shcherba (1880–1944), the Russianist Iakubinskii, the Germanist Zhirmunskii and the Russianist and Baltist Boris Larin (1893–1964). These figures remained at ILIaZV when it was re-organised and became GIRK (Gosudarstvennyi institut rechevoi kul’tury [State Institute of Discursive Culture]) in 1930, and remained there until its final demise in 1937. Before the Revolution, Iakubinskii and Zhirmunskii were associated with the Petrograd Formalists (though Zhirmunskii always maintained a critical distance), but Iakubinskii soon left the group and by 1923 he was siding with Marr at ILIaZV, where he published an article on dialogic discourse that was to have a profound influence on the work of the Bakhtin Circle.\textsuperscript{14} Zhirmunskii facilitated some important translations of German philologists Oskar Walzel, Leo Spitzer, Karl Vossler and others into Russian, and criticised the Russian formalists on the basis of German philosophy in this period.\textsuperscript{15} Larin wrote on artistic discourse in the 1920s but, like Zhirmunskii, he was interested in forms of conversational discourse and urban dialects from the mid 1920s onwards. It was in the realm of dialectology and the history of the formation of the national language that the ILIaZV (GIRK) scholars were to excel in the 1930s.

Common to the ILIaZV scholars was a reorientation of their work in the late 1920s away from artistic literature and towards the sociology of language. This trend was undoubtedly strengthened during the years of the so-called ‘cultural revolution’ (1928–31) when RAPP, the self-appointed guardians of ‘proletarian literature’, launched attacks on fellow-travellers. It is likely that a limited association with Marr in these years extended a certain protection to scholars in a precarious position, intensifying the appeal of incipient

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{12} Peterson 1927. On Meillet’s influence in Russia, which was very significant in these years, see Scherba 1966 and Desnitskaia 1991.
\footnote{13} On Baudouin de Courtenay see Koerner 1972, Stankiewicz 1972 and Adamska-Salaciak 1998.
\footnote{14} See Iakubinskii 1986a.
\footnote{15} See, for example, Dmitrev 2001.
\end{footnotes}
sociolinguistics. Testimony of two younger researchers at ILIaV and its successor suggest there was a strong collective orientation at the institute, and the move to a sociology of language appears to have been common there. Similarly, scholars there tried to find a practical application for their research, conducting empirical research into urban multilingualism and the patterns of language change.\footnote{16} Voloshinov’s \textit{Marxism and the Philosophy of Language} (1929) and Pavel Medvedev’s \textit{Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics} (1928) both fitted into the orientation at ILIaZV in these years, with the former much more closely integrated into the linguistic section of the Institute than the latter. ILIaZV was also one of Marr’s power bases, and all postgraduate students, Voloshinov included, were obliged to study Marr’s theory as one approach among many.\footnote{17} Furthermore, the influence of Marrism spread beyond the study of language into anthropology, ethnology, literary and folklore studies, where its effects were also by no means universally negative. The influential Marrist scholars of antiquity Izrail’ Frank-Kamenetskii (1880–1937) and Ol’ga Freidenberg (1890–1955) carried out research and teaching in the institute, exerting an influence on several disciplines in the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, the relationships between folklore and literature and that between dialects and the national language to some extent represented two sides of a single research programme. The relationship between Marrism as an intellectual tendency (rather than just the works of Marr) and the work of the Leningrad linguists is therefore a crucial issue in what follows.

**The influence of Marr**

It is essential to grasp two features of ‘mature’ Marrism in order to understand the work of the Leningrad linguists. First, language is understood as part of the ideological superstructure and, as such, it goes through changes in accordance with transformations in the economic base of society.\footnote{18} All societies, and therefore languages, pass through the same distinct stages, though not necessarily at the same rate of change. Different languages are therefore the result of different societies being at different stages of development and not...
the result of the existence of different families of languages. It should be noted that Marr’s ‘stadial theory’ was already formed before its ‘Marxist’ recasting, being derived from such diverse sources as the historical poetics of Aleksandr Veselovskii (1838–1906), the anthropology of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) and the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945). However, none of these figures actually argued, as Marr did, that the formal structure of language (lexis, grammar, and so forth) indeed changed according to these stages, along with modes of thought. The other feature of Marrism to be noted is the notion that

a national, all-national language does not exist, but there is a class language – and languages of one and the same class in different countries reveal (if there is an identity of social structure) more typological relationship to each other than languages of different classes in one and the same country, one and the same nation.

This was harmonised with the stadial theory through the argument that linguistic phenomena are immortal and that a historical language shows traces of all stages of its development. These stages can be uncovered through ‘paleontological analysis’. Thus, all language develops from a primordial mythical thinking in ‘primitive communism’, but then becomes stratified according to profession (thus the development of distinct spheres of knowledge) and then, finally, it is divided according to different classes. Ultimately, with the coming of world communism, all languages will merge into a super-language that is qualitatively different from all existing historical languages. However, in their struggle for dominance in linguistics, the Marrists knew how to exploit the growing Russian chauvinism. Arguing that all languages would merge under a new socialist society and that different languages are an expression of different stages of development, the Marrists adapted this to the cause of ‘socialism in one country’, justifying the fusion of the languages of the USSR with the one dominant and progressive language: Russian.

19 See Frank-Kamenetskii 1929 and Desnitskaia 1951, p. 55.
21 A full account of Marr’s work is beyond the scope of the present article. For a detailed outline see Thomas 1957 and Alpatov 1991, pp. 32–78.
Baudouin de Courtenay and Marr

Clearly much of this theory is difficult to take seriously, and one famous linguist, Nikolai Trubetskoi, was even moved to label Marr a ‘lunatic’, though, unfortunately, ‘not sufficiently insane to put in an institution’.22 However, the Leningrad linguists found much in Marrism that converged with certain key ideas of Baudouin, who had himself shown Marr’s early and more reasonable work considerable respect.23 For example, as Zhirmunskii in particular recognised, dialectology, in which Baudouin had been a pioneer, converged with the cause of ‘linguistic paleontology’ to the extent that studying living languages was regarded as a precondition for the ‘study of paleontological remains’ and uncovering the earlier stages of a language’s development.24 Similarly, one finds Marr’s idea that all languages are the product of ‘cross-breeding’ anticipated in Baudouin’s insistence in ‘On the Mixed Character of All Languages’.25 Furthermore, like Marr, Baudouin was influenced by the Völkerpsychologie of Steinhall and Wundt, and linked linguistic change to changes in the collective consciousness. However, unlike Marr, Baudouin distinguished rigorously between pure linguistics, the subject of which is ‘the sum total of more or less homogenous facts that belong totally to the so-called manifestations of human life, and applied linguistics, whose subject is the application of the results of pure linguistics to questions pertaining to other sciences’. He further distinguishes between the internal history of a language, which studies the ‘changes that occur within a language’ and the external history ‘which approaches language ethnologically, from the point of view of the fate of its speakers, and which is consequently a part of applied linguistics’.26 The interaction between these factors should be studied, but the distinction between them should on no account be effaced.

In his 1932 book on language, Iakubinskii developed this idea, insisting that language has two distinct functions, from which the other functions identified by contemporary ‘bourgeois linguistics’ are derived.27 According...
to Iakubinskii, the two basic functions are ‘1) language as a medium of intercourse and 2) language as ideology’. While the distinction is essential, ‘in no cases must these fundamental functions be separated from one another: in all its phenomena language fulfils both these functions at once’. Marxism must show how, driven by socio-economic forces, these two aspects ‘enter into contradiction’ at various stages of a society’s development and how this acts as the ‘inner motor’ of language development. Iakubinskii argues that it is the second function that can be linked to the stratification of language according to profession and class, but this does not mean that the first function is unaffected by social transformations. They form a unity at any moment, but they are not fused. Language is, therefore, stratified according to profession and class, but one cannot (as Marr thought) simply read profession, class and the level of a society’s development off the formal structures of language. There is a dialectic between these functions. Under capitalism there is a tendency to unify i) language as a medium of intercourse while dividing ii) language as ideology.

The same capitalism that maximally differentiates language as ideology strives to transform it into an all-national inter-class means of intercourse. In this way language, having taken shape in capitalist society, is characterised by the intensification of that internal contradiction that we mentioned above. This contradiction may be formulated as the contradiction between the commonality of language as a means of intercourse (form), and the class differentiation of language as ideology (content).

The contradictory tendencies toward a unified (trans-class) national language and towards the ‘class differentiation of a language as ideology’ are but two sides of a single process inaugurated and pursued by capitalism.

**National language and dialects**

In the 1930s, the Leningrad linguists all studied the issue of the formation of the national language. Larin and Iakubinskii concentrated on the Russian and Zhirmunskii on the German languages. Crucial in this was the relationship between regional dialects and the national language, and the changes brought

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28 Ivanov and Iakubinskii 1932, p. 62.
about by the encroachment of capitalist economic relations and urbanisation. In this, they followed an agenda set by Baudouin de Courtenay and by the Moscow Linguistic School (Fortunatov, Peshkovskii, Shakmatov, and so on), which initiated significant studies of Slavonic dialects. However, the sociological orientation of the Leningraders was much more pronounced, and, in this respect, it converged with contemporary ‘linguistic geography’ in France, Germany and Italy. The key figures in these countries were Anton Meillet (1866–1936) and Jules Gillérion (1854–1926) in France, Georg Wenker (1852–1911) and Ferdinand Wrede (1863–1934) in Germany and Graziaio Ascoli (1829–1907) and Matteo Bartoli (1873–1946) in Italy. Baudouin had attended Ascoli’s lectures in Milan in 1872, published some work in Italian, and knew Miellet and Saussure personally.30 Zhirmunskii travelled to Germany to study Germanic dialectology several times in the 1920s, while Larin held Western dialectology, especially the work of Gillérion, in high regard, and led a research project to study ‘urban dialectology’ at ILIaZV. He ultimately hoped to edit an atlas of Slavonic dialects on the model of Gillérion’s 1902 Atlas linguistique de la France.31 While all the scholars worked closely at ILIaZV and IRK, it seems only Iakubinskii never published on dialectological research. Rather, he worked out many of the methodological principles for a Marxist sociology of language that arose from the practical problems being pursued by his colleagues. Thus, whereas Mikhail Peterson had sought to fully sociologise the ideas of his Moscow School predecessors by viewing the philosophy of language through the sociology of Durkheim,32 the Leningrad linguists turned to Marxism to sociologise the ideas of their predecessor, Baudouin de Courtenay.33

This agenda, and the formulations that resulted from following it, bear a striking resemblance to Gramsci’s attempt to restructure the work of Italian linguistic geographers according to the principles of Marxism. As Franco Lo Piparo has shown, Gramsci’s writing on hegemony was deeply indebted to the ‘neo-linguistics’ of Bartoli who, according to Gramsci, had established linguistics as a historical discipline.34 Gramsci, in fact, related to Bartoli just as the Leningrad linguists related to Baudouin. Gramsci found in Bartoli’s work on linguistic conflict and patterns of innovation an extremely useful

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31 See Kornev 1969.
32 See Peterson 1927. On Durkheim’s considerable influence in Russia, see Gofman 2001.
33 Polivanov 1974, pp. 60–1.
34 See Lo Piparo 1979 and Brandist 1996.
way of theorising political and cultural power relations, but he thought that Bartoli’s reliance on the psychologistic idealism of Croce seriously weakened the analytical power of neolinguistics.\(^{35}\) The Leningrad linguists similarly valued Baudouin’s studies of Slavonic dialectology, along with his account of language change through conflict, but were unwilling to follow him in basing this on an ethno-psychology akin to that of Wundt.\(^{36}\) The roots of the inherited linguistic conceptions nevertheless remained significant. The inheritance from Croce, Vossler and Wundt led to the belief that linguistic facts are embodiments of ideas. Form can, therefore, not be treated in isolation. Shared roots in Gilliéron’s linguistic geography are also important. They led to an understanding of language as both a synchronic system and a historically developing institution, and, in this, they resembled Saussure’s bifurcation of synchronic and diachronic sciences of language. However, once they began to seek out the antecedent forms of linguistic phenomena, both innovations through borrowing and inherited factors were given equal weight. This last point fundamentally divided the linguists we are discussing from those in a broadly neo-grammariam tradition, who treated innovations as marginal phenomena.\(^{37}\) It also explains the Leningrad linguists’ hostility to the work of Saussure, which they understood in the spirit of Gilliéron. Like many structuralists, though with a diametrically opposed evaluation, Iakubinskii misunderstood Saussure’s \textit{la langue} as a description of how a language actually exists at a certain instant rather than a methodological principle.\(^{38}\) For both Gramsci and the Leningrad linguists, Marxism was to provide the methodological basis for reworking these central notions of linguistic idealism and linguistic geography.

In an important article of 1932, Zhirmunskii argues that linguistic geography shows that, in contradistinction to the ‘old idea that there exist more or less isolated dialects that are characterised by the totality of several dialectological features’, one should use the methods of ‘social geography’ to trace linguistic change brought about by trade and other factors and the formation of advanced and ‘backward’ areas. One should also study linguistic hybridisation and

\(^{36}\) See Boduen de Kurtene 1963, p. 95 and Adamska-Šalaciak 1998, pp. 33–4. Like Gramsci, however, the ‘Baudoinians’ tended to think of language as an uninterrupted process of collective thinking, as linguistic activity.
\(^{37}\) On this distinction, see Jankowsky 1972, pp. 230–1.
\(^{38}\) See Iakubinskii 1986b. On the prevalence of this misinterpretation, see Thibault 1987, pp. 80–2.
bilingualism that results from such changes.\textsuperscript{39} Zhirmunskii argued for the
Marxist utilisation of this approach and carried out detailed studies of German
dialectology from such a perspective, linking this to the study of folklore,
which he similarly considered to involve the study of ‘relic’ phenomena.\textsuperscript{40} In
his \textit{National Language and Social Dialects} (1936), Zhirmunskii went on to argue
that forms of bilingualism under feudalism reflect a blunt difference between
the languages of the victor and the vanquished.\textsuperscript{41} Under capitalism, however,
the difference between national language and social dialects is one of social
function. The two are tied together by a ‘complex interaction of hierarchical
subordination and struggle, conditioned by the common direction of social
development in a given epoch and country’. Referring to Marx’s \textit{German
Ideology}, Zhirmunskii argues that economic and social domination leads
to ideological domination, and ‘the ruling class’ cultural hegemony in turn
conditions linguistic hegemony’.\textsuperscript{42} The passage from linguistic geography
to the study of class hegemony, which Gramsci also travelled, is clearly
stated here.

\textbf{The sociolinguistics of the cultural revolution}

The sociolinguistics of capitalist development and its envisaged transformation
under the dictatorship of the proletariat was most systematically developed
in a series of articles written by Lev Iakubinskii at the height of the ‘cultural
revolution’ in 1930–1. Iakubinskii linked his dialectic of form and content to
the accounts of the development of capitalism found in the historical writings
of Marx and Lenin, especially the latter’s pioneering \textit{The Development of
Capitalism in Russia} (1889). Iakubinskii’s account begins with an examination
of the language of the peasantry under feudalism, where society ‘was divided
into a series of linguistic regions corresponding to feudal estates [\textit{pomest’e}]’.
Feudal linguistic relations were generally characterised by regional ‘enclosure’
and ‘isolation’, for ‘peasants spoke differently in various regions and within
a region common features of language arose naturally, though still retaining
features inherited from previous epochs’.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Zhirmunskii 1932, 84. Zhirmunskii evidently had in mind Wenker’s discovery
that the boundaries of regional dialects were impossible to draw with any degree of
precision. On this, see Iordan and Orr 1970, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{40} See Zhirmunskii 1934.
\textsuperscript{41} See Zhirmunskii 1936, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{42} Zhirmunskii 1936, pp. 15–16.
\textsuperscript{43} Iakubinskii 1930a, p. 85.
With the uneven development of capitalist relations within the framework of a feudal society, linguistic relations began to change. These new relations were first apparent within a growing town, where, from its inception, the population is to some extent a mixture of people from various feudal estates. A certain common conversational language arose as a result, reflecting the features of those local dialects of the population that arrived and settled there. The language of each separate town was, however, formed in the grasp of intensifying inter-urban relations, on the basis of the conversational language of the largest centre(s) of the society. This forms the nucleus of the common-national [obshchenatsional’nyi] language, which develops as the bourgeoisie concentrated wealth in fewer and fewer hands, centralised production and thus the population, and brought about political centralisation. Paraphrasing Marx, Iakubinskii argues that ‘linguistic sociality becomes ever less like that sack of dialects that it was under feudalism’. Giving earlier schematic accounts of centrifugal and centripetal forces within language some sociological concreteness, Iakubinskii argues that the formation of the national language is a ‘tendency, (striving [stremlenie]) towards commonality’, the progress of which depends on factors such as the arrival of new peasants with their own dialects, the stage of capitalist development and the size of the capitalist centre. More importantly, however, the urban population is divided into classes and a stratum of ‘professional intellectuals’:

the degree of commonality of various social classes of a city is different. Different classes generalise their language to different degrees depending on the extent to which they are compelled to do so by their objective class interests and the extent to which this generalisation is permitted by the objective political conditions within which a given social class exists and develops.

The proletariat has an interest in generalising its language, but being politically subordinate, exploited and oppressed, it is unable to become a ‘class for itself’. The contradictions of capitalism thus both drive and limit the development of a common national language.44

Public discourse and its genres

Iakubinskii argues that the ‘capitalisation’ of linguistic relations is crucially tied to the development of ‘public discourse [publichnaia rech’], which is to

44 Iakubinskii 1930a, pp. 86–8.
be distinguished from conversational language in terms of possible numbers of participants and length of utterance. Platforms for public discourse only really arise as a result of the ‘capitalisation’ of linguistic relations, for ‘public discourse begins to “bloom” in parliament and at court, in higher education institutions and at public lectures, at rallies and conferences; even the public square becomes its platform’.

Parliamentary discourse, a diplomat’s address to a conference, a statement in a dispute or at a rally, a political speech, the discourse of a lawyer or prosecutor, agitational speech on the street etc. etc. These are genres of public discourse characteristic of capitalism as opposed to feudalism, regardless of the fact that we find their embryos under feudalism. Capitalism speaks publicly incalculably more and in a different way than feudalism. Public speaking under feudalism is narrowly specialised, limited by the narrow domains of sociality; public speaking under capitalism pretends to universality; it wants to be as universal a form as conversational language. . . . In accumulating the various genres of oral public discourse, capitalist sociality also accumulates corresponding written genres.

**Linguistic unification**

Iakubinskii’s next points of focus are ‘1) how the peasantry accommodates itself to the conversational language arising in capitalist society and 2) how the peasantry joins the process of the transformation of public discourse into the universal form of intercourse on the basis of its new genres (that are alien to feudalism)’. This dual problem leads to three theses: a) the peasantry’s assimilation of the common-urban language is an uneven process depending on the variety of social groups in a given village, the distribution and character of capitalist centres and the penetration of market forces into villages generally; b) the process of assimilation is not linear as a result of peasant resistance to the common-urban language; and, consequently, c) assimilation is to a large degree a conscious process on the part of the peasantry. It is thesis c) that we are most concerned with here. According to Iakubinskii, the peasantry’s move towards the common-urban language is a ‘conscious act’:

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\( ^{45} \) Iakubinskii 1930a, pp. 89–90 [emphasis in original].  
\( ^{46} \) Iakubinskii 1930a, pp. 91–2 [emphasis in original].  
\( ^{47} \) Iakubinskii 1930b, p. 51.
By counterposing the common-urban language to local way of speaking [gover], capitalism introduces linguistic facts into the peasantry’s consciousness, forcing them to notice, recognise and evaluate these facts. It [capitalism] transforms unconscious language, language-in-itself into language-for-itself. Destroying feudal fixity, the traditionalism of peasant linguistic intercourse, through the class stratification of the village and the complex counterposition of the city to the village, capitalism forces the peasantry to choose between its own, old, local and the new urban, ‘national’ [language]. On this soil arises a struggle, and one of its weapons is mockery, linguistic parody of the speech of the backward or the innovators.48

From raznoiazychie to raznorechie

Moving on to the language of the proletariat, Iakubinskii argues that the proletariat is a collective of social groups that arise from the division of labour:

These intra-class groupings do not contradict the working class’ objective interests as long as the specialised professional vocabulary is used within the narrow sphere of a given form of production and does not permeate the whole language of the worker, does not completely detach him, in linguistic relations, from the worker of another professional group.

The linguistic relations between professional linguistic groups in capitalist society are therefore sharply distinguished from those between the professional groups of feudalism, where ‘secluded’ groups developed their own mutually incomprehensible languages. The professional stratification of language within the proletariat is thus quite different from the ‘raznoiazychie’ that the proletariat inherits from the peasantry. This latter contradicts the objective interests of the working class and must be ‘liquidated’ in the formation of an independent proletarian language.49

In its transformation from a ‘class in itself’ to a ‘class for itself’, the proletariat must develop its own language in contradistinction to the language of the bourgeoisie. The manifestation of this distinction is not, and here Iakubinskii shows considerable distance from Marr, in the proletariat’s pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary, but in the proletariat’s ‘discursive method’. This is ‘the mode of usage of the material of the common-national language’, the ‘treatment

48 Iakubinskii 1930b, pp. 58–62 [emphasis in original].
49 Iakubinskii 1931a, pp. 24–5.
of this material, ‘the mode of selection from it of facts necessary for concrete purposes’, the ‘attitude toward these facts and their evaluation’. This ‘proletarian discursive method’ is formed spontaneously during the proletariat’s struggle with the bourgeoisie ‘in the order of everyday conversational intercourse and is organised by the most advanced linguistic workers, the ideologues of the proletariat (writers and orators) in the various genres of oral and written public discourse’. This method is at first mainly formed in the ‘political, philosophical and scientific genres of public discourse’, but after the proletariat’s seizure of political power the process acquires a ‘mass character’ and spreads to ‘all discursive genres’.  

Iakubinskii’s series of articles ends with a characterisation of current ‘linguistic politics’ during the cultural revolution. All unnecessarily technical vocabulary associated with ‘bourgeois specialists’ must be shunned in favour of a truly ‘popular-scientific language [nauchno-populiarnyi iazyk]’. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the common-national language must be ‘common in its tendency towards all the genres of discourse’. It will be ‘more democratic the more it is accessible to the masses, and the less it is differentiated according to genre’ overcoming the enormous differentiations of the ‘assimilation of actuality in discursive genres’ introduced by capitalism. The development of a common-national language, and thus the overcoming of ‘raznoiazychie’, can reach fruition. This is because capitalism’s contradiction between town and countryside can be overcome and the subordination of previously oppressed classes can cease. Since the proletariat is a universal class, it aims to destroy the class structure once and for all, and so the national language can now become ‘common to all classes of society’.

The new application

Iakubinskii’s articles of the 1930s clearly grew out of the practical work of linguists in the 1920s, but they were composed and published in a very different era when linguistic standardisation and the relations between Russian and minority languages were controlled by a centralised bureaucratic elite. The fact that the articles were published in Gorky’s Literaturnaia ucheba was significant, for it is here that the official political idiom was formulated and

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50 Iakubinskii 1931a, pp. 32-3.
51 See Iakubinskii 1931b.
52 Iakubinskii 1931c, p. 74.
53 Iakubinskii 1931c, p. 71.
passed on to young writers not yet attuned to the standard literary language. Iakubinskii’s articles were used to argue that the traditional forms of correct usage must be maintained, along with a ‘proletarian’ lexis and style as defined by the bureaucracy through its official organs. The dialects of the ‘rabble’, which threatened to fragment the supposedly proletarian worldview should therefore be marginalised, while social dialects should serve limited social functions within an overarching standard.54

To what extent the Leningrad linguists consciously participated in the regressive tendencies of the cultural revolution is difficult to judge, for, while they certainly participated in the establishment and consolidation of the Soviet cultural hierarchies that crystallised in the 1930s, their work was not simply an expression of that drive. The methodology of their research programme granted their work a certain autonomy from the ideology which it ultimately ended up serving. The insights of any scientific study, whether Marxist or not, can ultimately prove to be useful for a ruling class seeking to pursue its own interests. Furthermore, the emancipatory impulse that initially motivated their work, and the critical spirit that permeates it, had become detached from progressive linguistic policy and reverberated differently in the new circumstances and served new ends. Marxists were undoubtedly to a significant extent confused by recent developments, and it is at least arguable that the ideologically motivated members of the Stalinist bureaucracy were themselves ignorant of the kind of society they were creating. This is a question for sustained historical analysis, but the time has now arrived when such a type of analysis can be carried out and some of the obscured potential of the revolutionary era can once again be made to serve progressive ends.55

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For a brief period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, film studies was dominated by the psychoanalytically and Marxist informed theory associated with the journals *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France and *Screen* in the UK. Through the work of Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (amongst others), the notion of the cinematic apparatus was elaborated to account for the cinema as an ideological institution that interpellated film spectators as specific kinds of cinematic subjects. The critique of *Screen* theory is now well established and, I would argue, substantively correct. The theory led to an abstraction of the spectator/screen relationship and placed disproportionate emphasis on the productivity of the text, leaving no room for spectator agency. The analogy of the apparatus was also seen to be essentially ahistorical, which was rather problematic from the perspective of an explicitly Marxist approach to cinema. Finally, and perhaps most worryingly for a theory that derived from psychoanalytic conceptions

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1 See Doane 1991 for such a critique. The charge of ahistoricism is cast in a slightly different light, however, if we take de Lauretis and Heath’s edited volume *The Cinematic Apparatus* (1980) as representative of work produced in the field at this time. Over half of the contributions to the volume consist of historical accounts of cinematic technology, including Stephen Heath on technology as a historical and cultural form,
of scopophilia and fetishism, apparatus theory demonstrated a marked lack of understanding of psychoanalytic concepts. The theory invariably elided the question of sexual difference, to account for which these concepts had been initially formulated.2 It is certainly not, therefore, the intention of this paper to call for a return to the theoretical abstractionism and ideological position-taking of Screen, but to suggest that the necessary elements for a more mediated account of screen spectatorship were in fact present in the original theory, had the Marxian side of the equation been maintained.

In response to the deficiencies of the apparatus approach, film theorists pursued a number of alternative routes. Figures associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies initially elaborated a more production/consumption model of screen spectatorship. This work, however, very quickly bracketed questions of production, focusing primarily on consumption patterns through empirical audience research.3 Neoformalist and historicist practitioners within film studies also moved with an unseemly haste to a post-theoretical position drawing on the more conservative field of cognitive and behavioural psychology to counter psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity and film spectatorship.4 Finally, the response from feminist and psychoanalytically informed critics of this essentially ‘male’ paradigm, located in journals such as m/f in the UK and Camera Obscura in the US,

Peter Wollen’s historical overview of the different phases of cinema technology, Jeanne Thomas Allen’s account of standardisation and patents, Douglas Gomery on the economic history of sound, Dudley Andrew on the development of colour since 1945 and Jean-Louis Comolli’s history of the cinema as a ‘social machine’. Far from ignoring the question, the early apparatus theorists were in fact acutely aware of the historicity of technology.

2 Again, the question of sexual difference was very evident in the apparatus volume from Teresa de Lauretis’s concluding statement ‘Through the Looking Glass’ (1980) and Jacqueline Rose’s contribution ‘The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory’ (reprinted Rose 1986). Both of these contributions were commissioned after the conference from which the apparatus volume derived and as reflections on issues raised, they point to an awareness of the limitations of the model by the apparatus theorists themselves, as opposed to the usual presentation of them as blindly doctrinaire ideologues (see Bordwell 1989).

3 Stuart Hall’s influential ‘encoding/decoding’ model of visual spectatorship was first developed as a critique of the reification of the spectator in Screen theory and argued for the centrality of questions of production in the analysis of visual culture (see Hall 1980). Hall’s essay also suggested a structural break between the processes of production and consumption and it is this break, along with the accompanying notion of reading positions, that has proved to be the most influential aspect of the essay, legitimating an emphasis purely on the consumption of images at the expense of production (see Morley 1980 and 1986). David Morley has himself provided a critique of the way in which these early studies were picked up and subsequently deployed in cultural studies with an over-emphasis on consumption and spectator freedom to oppositionally decode media messages (see Morley 1992).

4 See Bordwell and Carroll 1996 for an overview of this work.
was to offer ever more elaborate expositions of the Lacanian subject and psychoanalytic theory. What each of these three responses shared, in line with the general trajectory of cultural politics in the 1980s, was a rapid and progressive move away from the Marxian problematic of cinema as an ideological institution.

This paper takes up the final strand of the above criticisms and argues that we can hold together the two sides of this approach, psychoanalysis and Marxism, without it resulting in an overly deterministic model and passive spectators. On the one hand, a proper understanding of psychoanalysis does not lead to the perceived closure of apparatus theory or the celebration of pleasure and sexual dissidence as political strategies in their own right. On the other hand, a Marxist understanding of cinema as an institution and a commodity is essential if we are to fully grasp the centrality and importance of film within a globalised media culture and not to remain with discrete readings of the play of desire in isolated texts. Laura Mulvey has recently observed that the feminist appropriation of psychoanalytic theory to develop a politics of representation has tipped the scales between Marx and Freud too far (that is to say, completely) in the direction of psychoanalysis. Today, as the spheres of the economic and the social relentlessly force themselves back onto the stage, we need to once more rethink our positions in the light of Marxism. If, in the 1970s and 1980s, Marxism was perceived as needing psychoanalysis, today psychoanalysis needs Marx.

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6 Michael Ryan, in contradistinction, has advanced a critique of the élitism, valorisation of avant-garde film practice and politics of subject-positioning inherent in the Screen project, while at the same time wanting to retain a Marxist and psychoanalytic framework. Arguing against the individualism of Lacanian influenced theory, Ryan has drawn on the British tradition of object relations theory to provide a more pluralist and democratic form of film criticism based on popular desires and needs commensurate with the more populist environment of the US. I find Ryan’s characterisation of object relations theory as collective, social and dynamic in contrast to Lacanianism’s individualism, libidinal exclusivity and stasis to be theoretically and politically untenable (see Ryan 1988).
7 Gaylyn Studlar, for example, argues for the need ‘to reaffirm the power of film as a phenomenological experience, engaging us in pleasures that defy the limits of our most cherished assumptions and that may suggest possible avenues of resistance and rebellion to patriarchal imperatives binding women – and men – in their tenacious and repressive hold’ (1988, p. 8). Similarly, Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen (1994) conclude their study of female fetishism with a (qualified) celebration of the radicalism of fetishism as our postmodern condition.
9 See also, in this context, an interview with Slavoj Žižek 2000, wherein he argues that Marxists have put too much faith in psychoanalysis and that no form of Lacanian politics can substitute for a properly Marxian social analysis.
In a re-appraisal of the early *Screen* project, Stephen Heath charts the fluctuations in fortune of its psychoanalytic concepts, ‘[s]uture is no longer doing well, nor, on the whole, is fetishism; the phallus is mostly holding up, while fantasy is fine but prone to disparate appreciations; as for the real and symptom, they have come up strong indeed’. Heath concedes that *Screen* ‘over-egged the pudding’, to the extent that film spectators were seen to be wholly determined by the cinematic apparatus, but what many contemporary critics of *Screen* tend to forget is the political dimension of its particular conjuncture. ‘*Screen*’s point,’ writes Heath, ‘was an appropriation of psychoanalysis politically, insofar as it could be made conjuncturally useful, and notably as regards identifying and describing mechanisms of subject inscription for ideology’. Here, I will take up what has become one of the least popular concepts of early psychoanalytic film theory, fetishism, arguing that it does not inevitably or necessarily lead to the crude and heavy-handed reductionism that critics maintain. It is also perhaps not surprising that the notion of fetishism, drawing together as it does questions of production and consumption, as well as the ideological dimension of the subject of representation, has fared less well than fantasy or the symptom in a progressively de-Marxifying field of study. The notion of fetishism opens up the analysis of cinema in two directions simultaneously, that is, sexual fetishism and the libidinal investment of spectators in specific films as well as commodity fetishism and the economic underpinning of cinema as an industry. I will come back to this below; first, I will say something about why psychoanalysis was introduced into Marxist film theory in the first place and raise certain problems with its subsequent development.

**From ideology critique to cinematic pleasure**

Psychoanalysis was originally introduced into Marxist film theory in the 1960s and 1970s to account for what we might call its pleasure deficit and to provide a theory of subjectivity (I will return to the question of subjectivity at the end of the paper). Materialist film theory, as it developed in 1960s France, within *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique*, had argued for an understanding of cinema as a vehicle for the expression of the dominant ideology:

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10 Heath 1999, p. 33.
12 See Bordwell 1989 for one of *Screen*’s most strident and acrimonious critics.
13 For an excellent analysis of the materialist film culture in France in the 1960s and
Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the ideology. ... The film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself ... it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology.  

Drawing on an eclectic mix of Russian formalism and the 1920s avant-garde, Brechtian notions of dramatic estrangement and the alienation effect, semiotics and structuralism, as well as Althusserianism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the film theorists associated with these journals advocated an avant-garde strategy of disrupting the spectacle of contemporary cinematic illusion in order to lay bare its ideological function. If, the argument went, the cinematic apparatus functions through the creation of an illusion of continuity and transparency, presenting an unmediated representation of reality, what happens when the machine breaks down and the materiality of the apparatus is revealed? These ideas would find their filmic expression in the ‘engaged’ cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, especially La Chinoise (1967) and One Plus One (1968), as well as the avant-garde and structuralist filmmaking of directors such as Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice. A materialist cinema developed a film practice that sought to foreground the materiality of the medium through non-continuity editing, non-narrative forms, the disjunction of sound and image, as well as emphasising the quality and materiality of the film stock itself.  

As with other forms of revolutionary avant-garde theory and practice, however, there was an inherent tension or contradiction in the project. On the one hand, this ostensibly revolutionary film culture made films that few people tended to see, while on the other, it conspicuously failed to account for the very films that the majority of audiences enjoyed seeing, that is, Hollywood narrative cinema. What was seen to be absent from this materialist film criticism and practice was any conception of pleasure, or, the libidinal investment of film spectators in both specific films and genres but also in the cinema as an institution. For, as Christian Metz put it, the cinema often becomes an object of pure love – it is, in psychoanalytic terms, always a ‘good

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1970s, see Sylvia Harvey 1980 and for the importation of these ideas into Anglo-American film studies, see David Rodowick 1994.  
15 On the question of Godard and the avant-garde cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, see Peter Wollen 1982, especially the chapters ‘Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d’Est’ and ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’.
object’ and is governed by good object relations. That is to say, the cinema is something that we always invest with positive affect and feelings, even if, at certain times, it creates fear and anxiety for spectators. According to Metz, the ‘institution as a whole has filmic pleasure alone as its aim’.\textsuperscript{16} Psychoanalysis, then, was introduced into film studies to provide an account of ‘visual pleasure’ and how spectators identify with the image that was seen to be lacking from previous Marxist and materialist film theory. It was thus part of a wider theoretical framework through which a materialist theory of film could account for both the ideological positioning of cinematic subjects and their affective investment in the image. But it also introduced into the theory the very elements that would eventually undermine it.

The politics of pleasure

\textit{Screen} theory developed as an attempt to explain the function of cinema on a number of different levels simultaneously. As Constance Penley puts it, the metaphor of the apparatus arose, ‘from the need to account for several aspects of film, ranging from the uniquely powerful impression of reality provided by cinema and the way in which the subject is positioned as a spectator, to the desire intrinsic to cinema-going itself’.\textsuperscript{17} First and foremost, the notion was used to articulate the intersection of two distinct but dialectically related registers of experience, the psychic apparatus, through which subjects are constituted as desiring subjects, and cinema as an \textit{institutional} apparatus embedded within a broader process of production and ideological reproduction. The content of specific films was seen to be secondary to the analysis of cinema as an industry that promoted the experience of a specific technology. The term ‘institution’ must, in this context, be understood in a much broader sense than the usual understanding of the social organisation of the cinema as an industry. The ‘institution’ of cinema served to designate both its social aspect and ‘the “interior machine” of the psychology of the spectator, “the social regulation of spectatorial metapsychology”, the industry of the “mental machinery” of cinema, cinema as “technique of the imaginary”’.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, all three concepts – the institution, the apparatus and the machine – are double-edged, each was developed to account for both the psychic and

\textsuperscript{16} Metz 1982, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{17} Penley 1989, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{18} Heath 1980, p. 2.
social aspects of cinema simultaneously. It was the precise nature of this relationship, or analogy, that was seen by critics of apparatus theory to be untenable.

Jacqueline Rose pointed out some time ago that a critical problem with Baudry’s account of the apparatus is that it works through a series of analogies between optics and the camera, the process of production and film as an industrial commodity and, finally, the process of projection and the spectator’s identification with the camera and/or fiction.¹⁹ In each case, argued Rose, there is assumed to be a kind of technological programming of the subject’s desire for recognition. The difficulty with recourse to analogy, however, is that it is one of the weakest forms of equivalence – it suggests that something is like something else at the same time that it is not. Baudry himself seemed to be aware of this problem when he concluded his essay by suggesting a move beyond a mere analogy between the cinematic apparatus and the formation of the split subject, as theorised by Lacan, to positing a direct correspondence between the two. In other words, the cinema is to be conceived as a kind of psychic apparatus that directly corresponds to the Lacanian split subject and is, at the same time, determined by the dominant ideology. As I will argue below in relation to fetishism and subjectivity, this is to radically misconstrue the materiality of social and psychic reality and to conflate incommensurable registers of experience. The subject in Baudry’s work may have been many things, but it was certainly not the Lacanian subject of the unconscious. For psychoanalytic feminist critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Joan Copjec, the solution to the impasse of apparatus theory was to produce more finely nuanced readings of Lacan and the play of desire within cinema, but at the expense of film as a commodity of industrial production or mode of ideological reproduction. I want to suggest that, rather than collapsing the cinematic and the psychic apparatus together as Baudry proposes, or following the Lacanian feminists in sundering them and prioritising the psychic, a more dialectical approach would insist on the necessity of relating distinct phenomena or registers of experience at the same time that it maintains their separation. The notion of fetishism and, in particular, its mechanism of disavowal facilitates just such an operation. Before addressing this issue, let me say why I think such an approach is required.

In her 1988 book *In the Realm of Pleasure*, Gaylyn Studlar argues that film spectatorship, like perversion, provides us with pleasurable, albeit limited, forms of object relations similar to the acting out of desire through dreams and fantasy. Studlar quotes approvingly from Baudry: ‘Technology cannot explain cinema. The cinema-effect can only be explained from the viewpoint of the apparatus, an apparatus which is not limited to the instrumental base but also includes the subject, and especially the subject of the unconscious’.20 For Studlar, the primary appeal of the notion ‘of the cinematic apparatus lies in its relationship to the unconscious and its ability to mobilize specific forms of pleasure’,21 and she develops this idea with reference to Bertram Lewin’s conception of the *dream screen*. According to Lewin, ‘all dreamers, whether aware of it or not, project their dreams upon a blank screen, a dream screen, that represents the maternal breast, the first sight of falling asleep into a dream’.22 From the perspective of Kleinian psychoanalysis, the maternal breast is the primary object of identification for the infant and, as such, it is a very specific kind of object. During the earliest phase of its life, the infant cannot distinguish between self and other, as its ego has not yet developed. Thus, the infant does not recognise the mother as a separate individual but experiences her as an object that either gratifies or denies its needs, and, as an object, the maternal breast signifies this state flux and lack of differentiation. The breast is split into either the ‘good breast’ that satisfies and is lovable or the ‘bad breast’ that denies satisfaction and is vengeful and rejecting. Melanie Klein and her followers saw these processes as primary and more ‘primitive’ – psychologically speaking – than the Oedipus complex. This is the significance of Lewin’s notion of the dream screen, for Studlar, as it implies a certain regression into a pre-Oedipal state where the ego begins to dissolve. The experience of watching a film is seen to reverse the process of ego differentiation and return spectators to this more primitive state of identification. Just as in our dreams we allow ourselves to become immersed in the flux of erotic desires and fantasy, where borders dissolve and identifications multiply, the cinema, as a structure, allows for the free-play of these primitive and regressive pleasures. The experience of cinema, writes Studlar, ‘retroactively touches upon regressive perceptual modes reaching further into the archaic past of psychic life than either Oedipal conflict, the male castration complex, or the...

20 Baudry quoted in Studlar 1988, p. 177.
21 Studlar 1988, p. 177.
female’s “negative castration complex”. In short, the cinema offers identificatory positions for both male and female spectators that draw upon the pre-Oedipal experience of psychic bisexuality and provides the sensual pleasure of polymorphous sexuality.

While Studlar provides a welcome critique of psychoanalytic phallocentrism and its reliance on castration theory, her work also seems to me to be symptomatic of a wider problem with psychoanalytic film theory. The whole experience of cinematic pleasure is reduced to infantile, regressive and perverse pleasures to the exclusion of other formal, aesthetic or what we might call political forms of pleasure. I should emphasise here that I am not suggesting that cinema cannot offer identificatory positions for psychic bisexuality and a mechanism for masochistic fantasies, but, first, I would not characterise these as either infantile or regressive and, second, I would argue that such pleasures do not exclude other forms of cinematic identification and pleasure, which contemporary psychoanalytic film theory has tended to do by default. If previous Marxian accounts of cinematic and visual spectatorship had lacked a theory of pleasure, apparatus theory was now offered as an elaborate theory of perverse pleasures to the exclusion of all else.

If we briefly recall the essay that initiated the whole debate around Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism, Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, we can see that the question of pleasure was originally conceived in a very different manner. The problem of narrative cinema, as Mulvey then saw it, was precisely the kind of pleasure we derive from it. A truly radical theory of pleasure, she argued, would undermine such forms of pleasure and articulate a new language of desire. In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson has questioned the use of pleasure and its value as a political slogan. Within a consumer society, we are faced with the problem, as were an earlier generation of Frankfurt theorists, of how we distinguish between real pleasures and mere diversions, as our most intimate experiences and pleasures have increasingly become commodified. There is no such thing as pleasure as such, suggests Jameson, only specific ideas or ideologies of pleasure, that is to say, of what constitutes pleasure in particular historical and social contexts. Once we begin to think of pleasure in this more abstract sense, the question of the subversive force of these new ideologies inevitably arises. For Jameson, the proper

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23 Studlar 1988, p. 179.
24 Mulvey 1975.
political use of pleasure lies in its allegorical function, insofar as specific pleasures mobilise a desire for utopia in general, that is to say, for revolutionary change. What appears to me to get lost in the idea of cinema as linking back to ‘regressive’ perceptual modes is this proleptic demand or desire for social transformation.

It often appears today, for example, that to talk about certain kinds of European cinema and pleasure in the same sentence is to commit some kind of category mistake. Our conception of pleasure is so inextricably bound up with consumption and immediate gratification that to suggest that one actually enjoys the stillness, the long slow lingering shots of Tarkovsky or Angelopoulos is thought to be perverse in the extreme. Certainly, European cinema of this *auteur* tradition is not as ‘immediately’ enjoyable in the sense of Hollywood rapid editing or a Tarantino quickfire dialogue, insofar as it requires a different temporal mode. The pleasure of this kind of European cinema eschews the more ‘culinary’ delights, in Brecht’s phrase, and requires a different kind of engagement. This is a kind of filmmaking that does not provide us with immediate gratification or mere diversion, but requires an active engagement if we are to derive any pleasure from it at all and, for this, regressing into pre-Oedipal states is not a great help.

**Sexual fetishism and the eroticisation of the image**

I suggested above that the crucial element for a more mediated account of the cinema was already present in the original theory with the idea of fetishism in both its sexual and economic form. I now want to develop this argument through a consideration of fetishism within psychoanalysis and Marxism. I will initially address the theorisation of fetishism and discuss how sexual and economic fetishism can be seen to function in relation to cinema separately. I will then consider the point at which these two traditions converge, that is to say, in their respective theories of subjectivity. Fetishism provides us with a pivotal form of mediation for understanding how subjects both engage with and are caught up within filmic representation. Sexual fetishism provides an account of the play of desire within cinema and, at the same time, of how the institution of cinema, and particularly Hollywood cinema, has become peculiarly fetishised within our culture. Commodity fetishism, on the other hand, is central to our understanding of how ideologies work and how cultural representations are so effective.
There are three main conceptions of fetishism: anthropological, economic and sexual.\(^2^6\) Both Marx and Freud carried over from anthropological notions of fetishism the characteristic of the fetish object possessing ‘magical’ properties as well as the metonymic substitution of the part for the whole (the shoe or a lock of hair for the desired person). Indeed, Freud came to theorise fetishism quite late in his career and his initial thoughts on fetishism were little more than an extension of anthropological ideas to the domain of sexuality. He first mentioned fetishism in the ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’ (1905) and noted that a certain degree of fetishism was present in every love relationship. Fetishism involved the replacement of the love object (the person) with another object that is related to the first but entirely unsuited to serve as a ‘normal’ sexual object. There is contiguous relationship between the love object and the fetish and, crucially, an overvaluation of the sexual object is then extended to everything associated with it. Fetishism only becomes a psychological issue, suggested Freud, when the fetish object becomes detached from the particular person concerned and becomes the sole object of desire.\(^2^7\)

What is missing from this early paper are the two essential characteristics that we now associate with the psychoanalytic view of fetishism, that is to say, the fetish as a substitute for the mother’s absent penis and the mechanism of disavowal. In his 1927 paper ‘Fetishism’, Freud sought to provide a more theoretically and clinically coherent account of his earlier observation that ‘the choice of a fetish object is an after-effect of some sexual impression received as a rule in early childhood’.\(^2^8\) In the ‘Three Essays’, Freud had left the question of this early ‘sexual impression’ open. Twenty years later, he would be less circumspect, unequivocally arguing that the meaning and the purpose of the fetish remains constant: the ‘fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and . . . does not want to give up’.\(^2^9\) In other words, the fetish arises as a response to castration anxiety, the fear that the little boy experiences at the first sight of his mother’s genitals and the thought that his own penis will be cut off. The fetish remains as a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a constant protection against it. The process by which this takes place is ‘disavowal’ and, here, Freud makes an important distinction between disavowal and the

\(^{2^6}\) Gamman and Makinen 1994.
\(^{2^8}\) Freud 1991b, p. 346.
psychoanalytic understanding of ‘repression’. Whereas repression is constitutive of the unconscious and involves a defence against internal drives and unconscious wishes, disavowal involves a defence against external reality. Disavowal is an ‘active’ process that entails the subject sustaining a belief that they simultaneously deny: ‘It is not true that after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up’.30 In other words, the disavowal of external reality is always accompanied by its opposite, its acceptance. The subject simultaneously knows that women do not have a penis and denies this fact. Disavowal allows the subject to sustain that paradoxical position of knowing that something is not true or real but all the same believing it to be so. In the final phase of his development of fetishism, Freud came to see it as a specifically male perversion. Fetishism, he writes, ‘may be counted as one of the perversions, is, as is well known, based on the patient (who is almost always male) not recognizing the fact that females have no penis’.31

It was Christian Metz, in his seminal Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier, who first drew out the significance of fetishism for cinema. Metz argued that it does not matter if one takes the castration scenario of psychoanalysis as a symbolic drama, as in Lacan, or perhaps more literally, as in Freud, what is essential is the disavowal of knowledge and the substitution of belief. This primary instance of disavowal provides a lasting structure as ‘the affective prototype of all the splittings of belief which man will henceforth be capable of’.32 Metz saw fetishism functioning through specific cinematic techniques of disavowal, such as the familiar trope of film as ‘only a dream’, the use of voice-over or the device of the film within a film. He also suggested that the technical equipment of cinema – the camera, the film stock, or the projector – often became fetish objects for cinephiles and film theorists alike and, in this sense, the technical equipment operates as a fetish for the cinema as a whole.33 What Metz stressed, and what is often erased from his work today, as with Baudry, was the institutional context for his psychoanalytic account of fetishism and cinematic spectatorship. The primary identification in cinema is not with what is seen on the screen but with a structure of seeing

30 Freud 1991b, p. 353.
32 Metz 1982, p. 70.
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that allows for the investment of desire. Cinephiles fetishise the technology of film-making and projection in relation to an overall system of production; a system of production that is absent and disavowed but, at the same time, immanently present. Metz’s deployment of fetishism was highly tendentious insofar as he erased the question of sexual difference. The film spectator for both Baudry and Metz was always implicitly male and this led critics such as Laura Mulvey to construct a theory of cinematic spectatorship around the ‘male gaze’ and the woman as the spectacle or object of that gaze.34 As Metz’s feminist critics rightly pointed out, however, the concept of fetishism was formulated by Freud precisely in relation to the disavowal of sexual difference and it does not make sense, psychoanalytically speaking, extracted from this problematic.35 Furthermore, as with Freud’s early ‘economic’ model of the psyche, the apparatus within Baudry and Metz’s work was seen to be a balanced, regulated and controlled system that worked to fix spectators in specific positions. This produced a static and closed model of how cinema and film operates and a passive spectator. In short, the apparatus was exemplary of what Constance Penley called a ‘Bachelor Machine’, that is, a self-enclosed signifying system constructed through the exclusion of feminine identity.36

Elizabeth Cowie has persuasively argued for a more complex understanding of fetishism in the cinema than either Metz or his early feminist critics proposed.37 On the one hand, Cowie can be seen to continue Metz’s line of thinking on fetishism and, on the other, to avoid the pitfalls of passive spectatorship and the male gaze. Fetishism arises as a result of a process of disavowal that is related to fantasy and the subject’s remodelling of reality. In this sense, fetishism is not about particular objects or images or representations but, as Metz argued, a general structure of seeing, that is, a general structure of representation. The structure of fetishism in psychoanalysis involves three steps: first, a process of disavowal (for psychoanalysis, this is the disavowal of sexual difference and the trauma of the real); second, a process of displacement through an overinvestment in the object that has been displaced from its ‘proper’ use, which now appears to have magical properties; third, there is a process of substitution by which some ‘original’ object is replaced by another to constitute the fetish. For Cowie, fetishism is

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34 Mulvey 1975.
35 Rose 1986.
36 See Penley 1989.
at work in filmic representation through these three processes of disavowal, displacement and substitution, for example, through the film’s *mise-en-scène* and the way in which objects are foregrounded. It is also present through repetition and visual emphasis, when objects are displaced from their proper function and become over-valued in the narrative. Following Metz, Cowie argues that cinema disavows its own preconditions, making present what will become absent again in the next moment. A narrative film must also deny its own knowledge in order to generate narrative suspense and expectation. These processes produce a doubling of meaning and eroticise representation to the extent that any object can become a sexual signifier. Cowie concludes that a film:

\begin{quote}
\textit{does not produce a fetish object, or even a series of objects in some sort of hierarchy which may be taken up by (male) viewing subjects already psychically constructed to fetishise. There is no such simple meeting of fetishist and fetish in the cinema. Rather, insofar as it presents to us objects in a relation of substitution and displacement, cinema fetishises them.}^{38}
\end{quote}

Moreover, this process is open to both male and female spectators and does not inevitably assign the cinematic gaze to the male spectator. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the idea of fetishism is inseparable from the mechanism of disavowal and disavowal is at the very heart of the construction of sexual difference and the constitution of subjectivity. Disavowal is a core psychic structure of which fetishism is a specific instance and, contrary to Freud, fetishism is a symptom for both men and women. The disavowal of ‘the mother’s difference at the heart of castration is a fantasy both the boy and the girl may subscribe to’.\textsuperscript{39} As Metz, Heath and the apparatus theorists argued, the notion of fetishism is crucial to the function of cinema, but not in the way that they tried to deploy it. Following Cowie, we can see how the psychoanalytic conception of fetishism delineates a structure in which the subject is \textit{actively} involved in the process of constructing meaning within the cinema and that this structure, most contentiously in the present context of identity politics, is the \textit{same} for all subjects regardless of the particularities of gender, race or sexuality. What should be clear from the above account is that the psychoanalytic category of fetishism does not necessarily or inevitably

\begin{footnotes}
\item[38] Cowie 1997, p. 266.
\item[39] Cowie 1997, p. 284. For a persuasive argument for female fetishism, also see Gamman and Makinen 1994.
\end{footnotes}
40 Considering the issue of otherness and difference, Cowie writes, 'Racism similarly arises from and is justified by racial specificity produced as a difference, but it is not an equivalent issue of otherness and difference. The constitution of sexual difference in and for the human being thereby also constitutes it as a subject in discourse and in the symbolic as a subject of lack. Sexual difference is not thus determining of other relations of difference, but it is determining of the subject' (Cowie 1998, p. 298).

41 Vernet 1999, p. 91.

42 Mulvey 1996.

posit a passive spectator but, rather, one that is actively engaged in a process of disavowal as a precondition of filmic pleasure.

Psychoanalytic feminist film theorists rightly argued that sexual fetishism does not make sense without reference to sexual difference, but, from this perspective, the constitution of sexual difference, as determinate of subjectivity, remains the primary site of struggle for any politics of representation. This emphasis on sexual difference and the patriarchal gaze has, as Marc Vernet writes, tended to obscure the wider conceptualisation of fetishism in Metz. More specifically, film theorists have neglected Metz’s broader understanding of fetishism as a relationship to lack and knowledge. For Metz, the fetish is an attempt to mask an absence, ‘to return to the time when it was still possible to assume everything was in place’. As we saw above, fetishism constitutes a struggle between belief and knowledge (the belief that women have a penis and the knowledge that they do not) and is fundamentally a form of resistance to knowledge. Mulvey’s recent work on fetishism also sees it as a refusal or blockage of knowledge, a phobic inability of the psyche to understand a symbolic system of value. Fetishism involves the active belief in something that the subject knows to be untrue – as Žižek puts it, ‘I know, but all the same’ – and it is this structure of disavowal as resistance to knowledge that allows us to reconnect conceptions of sexual fetishism with commodity fetishism and Marxian notions of ideology.

Rethinking commodity fetishism

At first sight, writes Marx, there appears to be nothing particularly mysterious about products or their use-value; human beings transform nature into products to meet human needs. The mystery only arises when that product is turned into a commodity and endowed with value. From a Marxist perspective, fetishism is inseparable from the production of labour, insofar as products are turned into commodities: ‘The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore in the fact that the commodity reflects the social
characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things’. Fetishism, thus, arises from the specific social character of labour in producing commodities and the way in which this is erased within the present mode of production. The value of a commodity does not reside in its utility but in the magnitude of labour time to produce it, and this is realised only through its exchange. It is ‘through being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values’, but, in the process, a social relation between producers takes on the appearance of an objective relation between things, between products. This is the mystification of the commodity-form – the transformation of a social relation between producers into a relation between things. As with Freud, fetishism for Marx ‘arises from the form itself’. In contrast to psychoanalysis’ focus on the investment of excessive value in the object, though, Marxism is concerned with the failure of the ‘real’ value of the object to be inscribed upon it and with the process through which the phantasmatic value of exchange comes to be established in its place. The fundamental issue for both Marx and Freud is the hidden power of the form to captivate individual subjects.

Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital* identifies it as a direct consequence of the process of production and exchange, but this remains distinct from questions of consumption. The extension of fetishism into the realm of consumption as well as the way in which the commodity-form structures non-economic relations in general largely derives from Lukács’s account of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács took Marx’s insight into the ‘phantom objectivity’ of the commodity-form to be ‘the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects’. In doing so, he broadened the concept to encompass, on the one hand, a philosophical account of alienation as the structuring of consciousness in accordance with Marx’s division of the commodity and, on the other, Weber’s account of rationalisation as the strictly instrumental organisation of work on the basis of rational technology and calculation. Thus, for Lukács, reification involves both an objective and subjective process; objective in terms of the transformation of social relations into commodity relations, and subjective in terms of the

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44 Marx 1990, p. 166.
45 Marx 1990, p. 164.
46 Lukács 1971, p. 83.
estranagement of human activity and desires, as they appear to take on their own independent form like any other commodity. And, following Marx, this appearance is not false, it is a real relation, albeit one that conceals the material relations of production behind it. As the division of labour and commodity relations intensify through the universalisation of commodity production, the subject is increasingly atomised, fragmented and alienated from their own sensuous activity and experience: ‘Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man’.47 The significance of Lukács’s extension of reification has been to encompass every aspect of daily life, as the commodity-form extends its reach from the instrumentalisation of labour through the commodification of non-working time to the structuring of consciousness and the psyche.48 Beyond Marx’s original definition, commodity fetishism is now seen to include the consumption of commodities and their investment not just with value but with all kinds of ‘mystical’ qualities and attributes. The commodity has life because of labour but ‘since labour is hidden life seems to inhere in the object itself, as a mystic, aesthetic glow, which speaks directly to the beholder’.49 This is the ambiguity of the commodity as ‘its impoverished body becomes the vehicle for the valorisation of spirit’50 and the subject loses itself in the ideal objectivity of the commodity-form.

The fetishism of cinema

I suggested above that cinema, and especially Hollywood cinema, holds a particularly fetishised place within our culture. We have already seen how the notion of sexual fetishism offers an explanation of individual spectators’ libidinal investments in specific films and narrative structures as well as the erotisation of the image in general. Indeed, as Jameson writes, advertisers have always been true Freudo-Marxists, in the sense that they have long

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47 Lukács 1971, p. 93.
48 Mike Wayne highlights the reductionism of Lukács’s argument here, which tends to obscure the fact that, although fetishism and reification are part of the very structure of capitalism, they ‘do not constitute a fixed state of affairs within capitalism, nor a unilinear and symmetrical process progressively and inevitably entrenching itself in all social, economic, political and cultural practices’ (Wayne 2003, p. 188).
50 Stallabrass 1996, p. 159.
known that the image must be eroticised for it to work.51 Through advertising, it is the image that turns commodity production into a cultural phenomenon, as consumers buy products as much for their image as for their use-value. It is the image, therefore, that at once connects and separates culture from the economy. The image directs us towards the eroticisation of products at the same time that it regrounds us in the economic, as advertising and the entertainment industry are now one of the US’s most profitable exports.52 As with sexual fetishism, commodity fetishism can be seen to work at a number of different levels of analysis within cinema. I will consider four such levels of analysis that will move us from the intrinsic properties of the film itself to the position of cinema within a globalised media industry. First, there is the fetishism that is intrinsic to the narrative of the film, that is to say, the ideological content of specific films. Second, film increasingly functions as a vehicle for the direct promotion of other commodities. Third, Hollywood cinema fetishises a particular form and experience of cinema that, due to its high production costs, few other national cinemas can emulate. Finally, Hollywood cinema, as an integral part of a globalised media industry, promotes a particular way of life and mode of subjectivity. These are, of course, all interrelated functions of contemporary cinema but, for analytical purposes, I will treat them separately here.

Film and reification

In the first instance, the theory of commodity fetishism is useful insofar as it provides an explanation of how the cinema and media in general has such powerful ideological effects. This is not to say that commodity fetishism is a theory of ideology, but, as Mike Wayne suggests, that as a theory it ‘explains why ideological production (ideas and values which systematically legitimise the dominant social relations) is effective’.53 The science-fiction blockbuster The Matrix (Larry and Andy Wachowski 1999) is instructive in this sense, as it deals explicitly with the issue of representation and ideology, while at the same time masking its own ideological operation. The Matrix is a global artificial intelligence system that has taken on a life of its own and now sustains itself by feeding directly off the bodies and minds of human beings.

52 Jameson 2000, p. 53.
As with Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, the products of human labour have taken on an existence of their own, with their own independent development and momentum. Moreover, these alien forms have turned against their producers, perpetuating human existence only to the extent that they are required to maintain the Matrix itself. On the one hand, therefore, the film could be seen as an exemplary representation of the process of commodity fetishism and to offer a critique of contemporary capitalism, particularly the use of advanced technology to increase surveillance and control over our lives. On the other hand, the film can be seen as itself part and parcel of the ideological mystification of our relationship to technology today. The Matrix is shown to be the extension of contemporary computer networks; the film at first appears to be set in the present, the year 1999, but it is actually two centuries later, 2199. In place of the material reality of people’s lives (humans have been reduced to pure sources of energy, living in an embryonic state with the machines sucking out their life force) the Matrix provides the virtual reality of ‘daily life’ or the mundane everyday reality of the late twentieth century. For all its high-tech postmodern glossiness, The Matrix is, in fact, a rather old-fashioned film. The Matrix is quite simply ‘false consciousness’, the illusion or false representation masking the desolate reality of exploitation and the misery of human existence. This is explicitly stated in a central scene of the film, when the leader of a band of rebel hackers, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), offers a potential recruit Neo (Keanu Reeves) two options: if he takes one drug he will see the world as it really is, a post-apocalyptic wasteland; if he takes the other, he will fall asleep and wake up as if nothing has happened. Neo’s choice is between seeing ‘the desert of the real’ and joining the struggle against the system or remaining within the illusory representation of reality but at least being happy and content in his ignorance.

The problem with The Matrix, for me at least, is that it locates the fundamental struggle as one between humans and technology and this struggle is seen as primarily a question of consciousness. Thus, if people can only be awoken from the false reality of their everyday lives – with the guidance of Morpheus and a few coloured pills – they will see the world as it is and rebel against it. The difficulty with this, as with the theory of false consciousness itself, is that it presupposes a position outside of representation, of social reality, from which the subject can judge the veracity of representation. This utopian space is located within the film as Zion, the last enclave deep within the bowels of the earth, where humans live beyond the reach of the machines and the
Illusory reality of the Matrix. This would suggest that (i) the Matrix is not as totalising and powerful as we were originally lead to believe, and (ii) that social reality is somehow nothing more than a fantasy. The reification of social relations may produce a phantom objectivity but, as Marx pointed out, it is no less real for all that. Ideology is not simply a question of consciousness, it is not just an issue of having a true or false knowledge of reality, it is also a question of what people do. People do not simply think or know what they are doing, they are actually doing it. As Žižek puts it, people are fetishists in practice, not in theory; ‘what they “do not know”, what they misrecognise, is the fact that in their social reality – in the act of commodity exchange – they are guided by the fetishistic illusion’. This illusion is not simply a false representation of reality, it is not an illusion masking the true state of things but, rather, the unconscious fantasy that structures and maintains social reality. For Žižek, this unconscious fantasy always masks a deeper and more intractable problem, that is, the encounter with the Lacanian ‘Real’ or what Žižek designates as the fundamental social antagonism at the root of all societies and which cannot be assimilated into our social reality. If ideology is an illusion, the misrepresentation of reality (as in The Matrix), it can only be so in a double sense – that is to say, both an ideological representation and an illusion that structures our relationship to the real. This second illusion Žižek calls the social-ideological fantasy and the function of this ideological fantasy is ‘not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us ... social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel’. By destroying the Matrix, Morpheus and his band would abolish social reality itself and plunge the remaining human race into the uninhabitable desert of the Real. Fetishism constitutes, as Étienne Balibar puts it, ‘the way in which reality (a certain form or social structure) cannot but appear’ – if we suppress that appearance, we abolish social relations themselves. What Marxism proposes is not merely a critique of representation but of the underlying structure itself that constitutes exploitative and oppressive social relations.

There is no privileged position outside of commodity exchange from which the true nature of reality is transparently revealed. By posing the dilemma as one of consciousness, The Matrix elides the underlying social relations and material practices that structure our relationship to technology. The issue is

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54 Žižek 1989, p. 31.
55 Žižek 1989, p. 45.
not technology *per se* and whether or not we can control it, but whether we can control the people and corporations who currently control and direct the use of technology. The critique of and struggle against this system will not come from without, from some enclave which manages to preserve human relations and values, but from within the system itself. By presenting the fundamental struggle within the film as one between humans and technology the film only serves to further mystify the nature of the system we live within and how we might resist its reifying logic.

*Film as commodity promotion*

Let me now turn to the second way in which fetishism is useful in an analysis of cinema, that is the rather more obvious and cynical way in which Hollywood cinema is structurally tied to the commodity system as a direct vehicle for the promotion of commodities and companies. The use of film for the promotion of other goods and products is hardly new, but it is arguable that this has undergone both a quantitative and qualitative shift in the past decade or so.57 As the profit potential for fully integrated companies is significantly greater than that for the individual components, there was a marked increase in cross-selling and cross-promotional activity in the 1990s.58 For instance, in the early 1990s, Disney productions and Steven Spielberg films (most memorably in the final scenes of *Jurassic Park* (1993) in which the dinosaurs destroyed the shop in the visitors’ centre) displayed with a knowing postmodern irony an array of film-related products that viewers could buy as they leave the cinema. This kind of self-reflexive irony is often read as a sign of critique by postmodernists but, as Stallabrass observes, it is a rather old diversionary trick within advertising to suggest a certain quality and complexity to the product that is not in fact there.59 Indeed, at the same time, Disney was ironically quoting earlier productions and its own merchandising it signed a ten-year deal with McDonalds to promote their new films while Pepsi formed a strategic alliance with Lucas’s *Star Wars* franchise. This kind of cross-promotion is familiar territory; what has begun to change is that the separation between advertising and entertainment has increasingly become blurred in

57 See, for example, Gaines and Herzog 1991 for an analysis of the relationship between Hollywood and promotion of consumer goods, especially to women, in 1930s North America.

58 See Herman and McChesney 1997 for an analysis of media conglomeration in the 1990s.

the cinema. While Disney, Spielberg and Lucas retained some commitment to making watchable movies, this is more than can be said for films such as *Space Jam* (Joe Pytka 1996) or the second and third parts of *The Matrix*. *Space Jam* was a Warner production starring the basketball player Michael Jordan and an array of cartoon characters from the Warner stable. The film was primarily an advertising vehicle for Jordan himself, who had just broken his own exclusive advertising deal with Nike, and his main sponsors (including Nike, McDonalds and Hanes). It was only secondarily considered to be a movie by its producers, although no one thought to let on to the audience at the time.

If *Space Jam* was a particularly bad movie, it is by no means an exception. More recently, *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis 2000) starring Tom Hanks as a latter day Robinson Crusoe, Federal Express engineer Chuck Nolan was essentially an advertising vehicle for Federal Express. Returning from a business trip to Moscow, where he had been teaching the ex-Communists a thing or two about capitalist efficiency, Nolan is marooned on an island with only an endless supply of FedEx parcels for company. Needless to say, Federal Express were the financial backers of the film. Similarly, there appears to have been no particular filmic reason for the making of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West 2001) except the promotion of the computer game, on which it is based, four wheel drives and mobile phones.

On the basis of the box-office success of *The Matrix*, two sequels were made. The first, *The Matrix Reloaded* (Larry and Andy Wachowski 2003), was a pretty dismal affair, as it lacked the novelty of the original and was reduced to interminably long action sequences. *The Matrix Reloaded* was critically panned and I have yet to hear or read a good word about it. This is to seriously underestimate the purpose of the film, however, as *The Matrix Reloaded* grossed more than half as much profit again as the original film and served an entirely different function. The two sequels released in quick succession were primarily advertising vehicles for *The Matrix* franchise, a franchise that has now extended to include a series of video shorts, *The Animatrix*, a computer game and tie-ins with Heineken, Samsung and Coca-Cola, not to mention the exclusive lines in shiny black leather clothes and sunglasses. These films develop cross-promotion and the practice of product placement within film to the point of becoming extended advertisements in their own right; advertisements, moreover, that millions of us actually pay to go and see. Any distinction between culture and the economy, entertainment and consumption, is simply erased in such films.
Fetishism and form

If *The Matrix* is indeed a rather old-fashioned film, as I suggest above, then how can we account for its huge box office success? It took over $170 million at the domestic box-office alone and was one of the top-grossing films of 1999. This has to do with the fetishism of the form itself and, more specifically, of new technology within advanced capitalism. The success of *The Matrix* depended less upon the narrative and more upon its special effects and, as Adorno noted many years ago, the fetishisation of seamless technical perfection.60 The success of this film was, in no small measure, a consequence of our fetishisation of technical virtuosity and style. *The Matrix* won four technical Oscars including ‘Best Visual Effects’ and ‘Best Editing’ and its airborne fight scenes, slow-motion bullet-dodging shoot-outs and time-bending sequences were all widely trailed as ground-breaking special effects. *The Matrix* is a good example of what has been described as the New Hollywood, that is to say, big budget productions that are designed around a ‘concept’ rather than narrative complexity. As Thomas Schatz writes, the blockbuster is ‘increasingly plot-driven, increasingly visceral, kinetic, fast-paced, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly “fantastic” (and thus apolitical), and increasingly targeted at younger audiences’.61 The decline of narrative is often overstated and it remains important for hooking spectators into a film but, at the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult with films such *The Matrix Reloaded* not to see the narrative, insofar as there is one, as really quite secondary in relation to the ‘concept’ and special effects. New Hollywood is transforming our experience of film, and the fetishisation of high production values and technologically-driven effects gives it an unassailable position in the global media market.

Cinema as consumption

Finally, let me say something about commodity fetishism at a more structural level and how the commodity-form promoted by Hollywood cinema structures our subjectivity. While the media today is still primarily national and local, the combined effects of integration, market deregulation, new technology and cross-border advertising has been to increase the power and reach of the global media giants. Through a combination of vertical and horizontal

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60 Adorno 1978, p. 284.
61 Schatz 1993, p. 23.
integration, the major film companies now have an unprecedented control of film from the point of production through to consumption. The film companies have long owned the distribution companies, but now also build and own the multiplexes through which their films are shown. The major companies also own the video chains who will stock the films after cinema distribution and the commercial television stations who will have showing rights to these films after the video market is exhausted. Not content with this, film companies have now merged with the music industry which will distribute their sound tracks and publishing companies which can promote the books of the film and other spin-offs.62 The combined effect of this level of integration has been to increase demand for Hollywood films. Herman and McChesney note that Western-European audiences tend to prefer domestically-produced programmes, but they expect these programmes to compete with the production values of Hollywood cinema. Very few national cinemas or media are in a position to do this and, consequently, the global market disproportionately favours the large-budget productions of Hollywood.63

I would wish to underscore here that my critical remarks should not be taken as some kind of knee-jerk anti-Americanism or reductive opposition between US and European/world cinema. Indeed, there is an argument that Hollywood is no longer a national cinema in the traditional sense, as it is primarily directed at a global audience and its reliance on a domestic market has been greatly reduced. According to Frederick Wasser, this transition occurred in the 1970s when European film producers such as Dino DeLaurentiis entered the US film industry and started producing films with European funding. DeLaurentiis pioneered a financial technique of ‘global presales’ whereby foreign banks advanced funding on future projects against the written guarantee of the distributors. But, as Wasser writes, ‘it was hard to anticipate the market for an unmade film. Therefore, it was imperative to put together a film package that resembled previous successes as much as possible. This meant a heavy reliance on action genres and big stars’.64 The transnationalisation of Hollywood, as Wasser calls it, did not so much open it up to the influence of foreign ideas and influences as lead to an increasing standardisation of form, with an emphasis on the cinematic spectacle, and sky-rocketing fees for the biggest stars.

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62 Herman and McChesney 1997.
63 Herman and McChesney 1997, p. 42.
64 Wasser 1995, p. 351.
Fredric Jameson has suggested that one way of looking at globalisation is as essentially a cultural import-export business. Globalisation is simply a code for the systematic transmission of North-American values and culture. ‘American mass culture’, writes Jameson, ‘associated as it is with money and commodities, enjoys a prestige that is perilous for most forms of domestic cultural production’. These new forms of cultural imperialism are not merely incidental by-products of economic expansion but crucial aspects of the process itself. Since the end of the Second World War, the US has actively pursued a policy of undermining national cultural production. Through world trade agreements such as GATT, NAFTA and MAI, the US has systematically eroded the cultural subsidies of national states as well as the attempt by European states and Canada to maintain a distinctively national cultural production. As Jameson puts it, ‘[t]he point is that the GATT talks were designed, at least in the eyes of the American state lobbyists, to dismantle all these local national subsidies as forms of “unfair” international competition’. What the US lobbyists tend to ignore is the structural inequality between their own economy and other national economies and the asymmetry of power between the US and the rest of globe. There is simply no national culture that can compete against the US at a global level. For Jameson, the destruction of national film production and the triumph of Hollywood cinema is not merely an economic triumph, it is also, more significantly, a formal and a political one. The current dominance of Hollywood cinema is a form of cultural revolution in the sense that it ‘trains’ subjects to become good consumers. Consumerism, writes Jameson, is ‘the very linchpin of our economic system, and also the mode of daily life in which all our mass culture and entertainment industries train us ceaselessly day after day, in an image and media barrage quite unparalleled in history’. Herein lies the structural importance of cinema today. As a form, it promotes a culture of consumption that is restructuring our daily lives and producing that impoverished form of subjectivity otherwise known as the consumer. To say this, of course, is to lay oneself open to the charge of ‘passive’ spectatorship, where we began, but, as Julian Stallabrass has persuasively shown, the question ‘is not so much about our gullibility, but about our ability to resist pervasive and ubiquitous environments, created with the particulars

66 Jameson 2000, p. 54.
68 Jameson 1998, p. 64. For an account of the systematic training of US citizens throughout the twentieth century to be good consumers, see Michael Dawson 2003.
of our physiology and psychology in mind, and geared to giving coherence
to only certain kinds of activity’.

So far, I have discussed psychoanalytic and Marxist conceptions of fetishism separately, although I suggested at the outset that the notion provides the necessary mediation between the psychic and institutional aspects of cinema. This is not a question, I have argued, of the content of the individual sexual fantasies that operate in cinema or of the ideological scenarios represented in specific films. It is, rather, to do with the form of fetishism as a structure of disavowal and its constitutive role in the formation of subjectivity. The question of subjectivity has generated an extraordinary amount of debate over the last thirty years. In the heyday of structuralism, it was seen to provide the point of convergence between psychoanalysis and Marxism; two decades later, it was considered a sign of their absolute irreconcilability. A more dialectical approach would refuse both the forced synthesis of earlier Freudo-Marxisms and the absolute polarisation of post-Marxism. Sexual and commodity fetishism delineate structures that are constitutive of subjectivity, the sexed subject of the unconscious and the subject of praxis for Marxism. These are not the same subject but neither are they so radically separate that there is no mediation between them.

Fetishism and subjectivity

One of the principal routes through which psychoanalysis entered film studies was the poststructuralist critique of the subject and the perceived absence within Marxism of a theory of subjectivity. This has now become such a commonplace within cultural studies that what was historically distinctive about the Marxist conception of subjectivity has been completely erased. In a short book on the philosophy of Marx, Étienne Balibar has argued the case for a Marxist philosophy of representation and subjectivity. Far from lacking a theory of subject, Marx revolutionised the way we think about subjectivity by ‘decentring’ the subject in an entirely unique way. Balibar’s argument rests on the distinction between ideology as a theory of the state and the constitution of state power and fetishism as a mechanism of subjection. Ideology is essentially concerned with the constitution of consciousness and the domination...
of ideas, it is ‘the alienated existence of the relation between peoples’. The problem that Marx faced and for which the concept of ideology proved inadequate was how to account for the interpenetration between ideas and the practical existence of the working class. For Balibar, this is where the notion of commodity fetishism supersedes the earlier discussion of ideology in Marx by providing a theory of subjectification. As we saw above, commodity fetishism names the process through which a definite social relation between producers takes on a phantasmatic relation between things. But, as with Freud’s psychic reality, this phantom reality is not any the less ‘real’ for being phantasmatic – it is real for the subjects that have to live it. Thus, argues Balibar, there is an entirely new conceptualisation of social objectivity in Marx that does not depend on the prior givenness of an autonomous subject, consciousness or rationality. On the contrary, subjectivity is realised as an effect or result of social processes. There is no transcendental or given subject; subjectivity and consciousness are constituted in the very activity and practice of constituting the social itself:

The only ‘subject’ Marx speaks of is one that is practical, multiple, anonymous and by definition not conscious of itself. A non-subject in fact, namely ‘society’, i.e. the whole set of activities of production, exchange and consumption the combined effect of which is perceptible to each person outside himself, as a ‘natural’ property of things. And it is this non-subject or complex activities which produce social representations of objects at the same time as it produces representable objects.

For Balibar, fetishism constitutes subjects as part of the phantom objectivity of the social alongside commodities and in relation to them. By rethinking the constitution of social objectivity, Marx revolutionised our concept of the subject, producing the non-subject of advanced capitalism, a subject that is nothing other than practice itself.

Similarly, Mike Wayne has recently argued that commodity fetishism provides a distinctively Marxist theory of the subject, that is, the subject as commodity and the commodity as subject. Commodity fetishism designates the process through which autonomous human beings are subjected to the external powers of some thing or someone else. This is what Wayne, with

71 Balibar 1995, p. 47.
73 Wayne 2003, p. 185.
echoes of Žižek’s ‘substanceless subject’, calls the *subjectless subject* of Marxism. Like Lacan’s early notion of the subject based on the ‘L schema’,\(^\text{74}\) the ‘subjectless subject’ is not an entity in its own right so much as the point of intersection between, or outcome of, four related processes: immanence, splitting, inversion and repression. These four processes define the different functions of commodity fetishism, one consequence of which is the constitution of the subject as commodity. As with Balibar, Wayne emphasises the *spectrality* of Marx’s view of commodity fetishism, its inversion of reality and the creation of a phantasmatic appearance, as well as its tendency to dematerialise the commodity, erasing its social relations and leaving us with the pure immanence of the commodity itself.

It is tempting to suggest that the concerns of psychoanalysis and Marxism meet with the idea of fetishism and a non-essentialist theory of the subject and, on this basis, propose a direct correspondence or homology between the two. This would produce the kind of synthesis proposed by an earlier generation of Frankfurt theorists.\(^\text{75}\) Indeed, for Adorno, the structure of fetishism provides the pivotal mediation between capitalist production and the individual psyche, in the sense that every psychological satisfaction depends on the social substitution of exchange-value over use-value.\(^\text{76}\) For Adorno, sexual and economic fetishism are essentially the same thing and he goes as far as to argue that commodity fetishism in the field of art finds its ‘exact correlative’\(^\text{77}\) in the psychological economy of the self. I suggested above that to conflate psychic reality with material reality is a category mistake. For Freud, psychic reality is as ‘real’ as the materiality of our social world, in the sense that it has real effects on us as subjects, but it is not of the same order of materiality. Adorno’s reading of psychoanalysis tended to emphasise its more biological aspects, particularly in relation to the drives, and he played down the psychic aspects of the Freudian unconscious.\(^\text{78}\) The psychoanalytic subject is the subject of the unconscious, it is the subject of lack and this is emphatically not the subject of social practice or the ‘subjectless subject’ of Marxism. There is no straightforward way of mapping the structure of sexual fetishism onto commodity fetishism, but this does not mean that they are irreconcilable concepts. I have suggested that the two traditions of theorising fetishism

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\(^{74}\) See Lacan 1988, Seminar II, Chapter XIX.

\(^{75}\) See Adorno 1967 for such an attempt.

\(^{76}\) Adorno 1978, p. 279.

\(^{77}\) Adorno 1997, p. 13.

\(^{78}\) See Homer 1999 for a more extended discussion of Adorno’s use of psychoanalysis.
converge on the issues of the investment of value in the object and the constitution of subjectivity through representation. Representation is the mediating factor between the psychical reality of the unconscious and the material reality of the social. The politics of representation over the past two decades has focused primarily on subjectivity and identity at the expense of the economic; it has stressed the fluidity and indeterminacy of subjectivity in opposition to any stability or commonality of experience. The concept of fetishism and the mechanism of disavowal provide us with an explanation of how different modes of subjectivity, psychic and social, are constituted through representation and at the same time, as this is a question of form rather than content, this is a universal process. By holding onto these notions, I contend, we avoid the kind of over-valorisation of representation in postmodernism and retain the idea of underlying structures as constitutive of subjectivity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced a particular encounter between Marxism, psychoanalysis and film theory. In returning to this moment, I have not sought to resurrect the original paradigm, the problems with which are well documented, but I have sought to question what has become the established and settled view on this body of work. What began in the 1970s as a critique of the excesses of Screen theory rapidly developed into an outright rejection of Marxism and, subsequently, psychoanalysis. Taking up the concept of fetishism, I have sought to show how its theorisation, both within psychoanalysis and Marxism, does not lead to the perceived closure of the apparatus model or the positing of passive spectators. On the contrary, the sexual subject of psychoanalysis is only attained through an active process of identification and disavowal, while the ‘subjectless subject’ of Marxism remains an ideal form that capitalism strives for but can never fully achieve as it is always faced with resistance from the materiality of the body and the social.79

Neither Marxism nor psychoanalysis leave us with passive spectators, but both do insist that our subjectivity is constituted through structure regardless of the particularities of individual identities. In the present climate of identity politics, the idea that there is a single structuring principle that constitutes us as subjects or cinema spectators is probably the most discredited idea of

the whole Screen project. At a time when the global reach of North-American culture is greater and deeper than ever before and the space for cultural resistance is constantly threatened and eroded, this would appear to be a case of disavowal indeed.

References


Paul Burkett

Entropy in Ecological Economics: A Marxist Intervention

Introduction

One of the liveliest debates in ecological economics concerns the significance of the second law of thermodynamics, also known as the entropy law. This article critically surveys this debate and develops a Marxist perspective on the economy-entropy relationship.

Entropy is a measure of the total disorder, randomness or chaos in a system: increased entropy implies greater disorder. The second law says that the entropy of an isolated thermodynamic system is strictly non-decreasing, that is, that energy is only transformed from more ordered to less ordered forms. Heat, for example, can only dissipate: it will not flow spontaneously from a cold to a hot object or area in an isolated system.1 If one interprets the orderliness of energy as a measure of its availability or usefulness to humans, then the entropy law implies that all energy transformations convert energy into less available and less useful forms. Energy cannot be transformed into work without some of the energy

1 Fermi 1956, p. 30; Van Ness 1983, p. 54.
being dissipated as unrecoverable heat. An engine cannot operate at one hundred per cent efficiency, that is, on a cycle whose only effect is to convert energy into work: a refrigerator will not operate unless it is plugged in.

The economic importance of the entropy law was first argued systematically by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Herman Daly. The first section outlines their analysis, including their application of the entropy law to the materials (not just energy) used in human production. The second section sets out four ‘tracks’ or sub-controversies within the ensuing debate, respectively concerning whether: (i) the purposeful character of human production negates the applicability of the entropy law; (ii) the economically relevant concept of entropy is definable apart from human purposes and technologies; (iii) solar energy can be used to achieve a complete, or practically complete, recycling of material resources; (iv) market prices already reflect (or can be made to reflect, using government policies) all economically relevant entropic phenomena. While pointing out the insights generated by each of the four tracks, I argue that the entropy debate suffers from the absence of a class perspective on nature and human production. From a Marxist standpoint, entropy as order or usefulness is indeed an anthropomorphic category, but this needs to be developed in terms of the class relations that shape the productive use of nature. The neglect of class is reflected in the uncritical views on market valuation of nature espoused in the entropy-economy debate. The failure to root the market in production relations also explains the debate’s reliance on artificial dichotomies between allocation and scale on the one hand, and between material conditions and human values and purposes on the other.

The third section amplifies the Marxist view by considering capitalist relations as material and social relations. This opens up a dialectical perspective on entropy encompassing the close connections between wage-labour, market valuation and the qualitative deterioration of natural wealth. Since this approach is materialist, it recognises that the entropy law does apply in terms of any given quality of materials and energy available for human production. But it also suggests that, short of human extinction, capitalist reproduction in no way hinges on the maintenance of natural wealth of any given entropy level. In other words, capitalistically-induced crises in the conditions of human development do not necessarily mean crises of capitalist reproduction. Capitalism’s ecological-entropic dynamics thus pose a challenge to all who would champion ecological values: to envision new communal and non-
market institutions to regulate the use and valuation of natural wealth. And
the most effective answer to this challenge is not to superimpose subjectively
determined ecological values on idealised models of capitalism, but to develop
and concretise these values through a critical engagement with the struggles
of workers and communities to defend and improve their conditions in
opposition to capitalism’s exploitation of social labour and nature. The fourth
section summarises the whole argument.

I. Entropy and the economic process: Georgescu-Roegen
and Daly

Georgescu-Roegen and Daly begin with the observation that production
depends upon materials and energy that are provided by nature. The ‘economic
process... neither produces nor consumes matter-energy; it only absorbs
matter-energy and throws it out continuously’.\(^2\) Then, appealing to the second
law of thermodynamics, they argue that ‘matter-energy enters the economic
process in a state of \textit{low entropy} and comes out of it in a state of \textit{high entropy}’.\(^3\)
Production combines human labour with low-entropy forms of matter and
energy to produce useful goods and services, but only at the cost of a ‘one-
way’ conversion of materials and energy from more ordered (and thus more
useful) forms into less ordered (and less useful) forms. The increase in entropy
occurs both in production itself (dispersal of heat and material pollutants),
and through the disposal of products once they are used. From this perspective,
‘the Entropy Law is the taproot of economic scarcity’.\(^4\) The total supply of
‘low-entropy matter-energy... exists in two forms: a terrestrial stock and a
solar flow’, both of which are limited even if particular sources of low-entropy
matter-energy are ‘renewable on a human time scale’.\(^5\) Low entropy is thus
‘the ultimate supply limit, the source of absolute scarcity’.\(^6\)

The key assumption of this analysis is that the entropy law applies not just
to energy but also to matter, that is, that ‘\textit{matter, too, is subject to an irrevocable
dissipation}’.\(^7\) Indeed, given that the earth is open to massive solar energy
inflows but basically closed materially, it is not surprising that low-entropy

\(^2\) Georgescu-Roegen 1973, p. 50.  
\(^3\) Georgescu-Roegen 1973, p. 51 [emphases in original]. See also Daly 1974, p. 15.  
\(^4\) Georgescu-Roegen 1975, p. 353.  
\(^5\) Daly 1992a, p. 21.  
\(^6\) Daly 1992a, p. 25.  
\(^7\) Georgescu-Roegen 1975, p. 352 [emphasis in original].
matter, not energy, emerges most clearly as the ultimate constraint on human production.

Specifically, Georgescu-Roegen and Daly develop a two-step argument on the applicability of the entropy law to material production. The first step is to reiterate that production of goods and services requires not just energy but also qualitatively diverse materials – materials whose usefulness for production and consumption hinges on their specific patterns of material order or non-randomness. This dependence of production on low-entropy matter is irreducible insofar as ‘at the macro-level no practical procedure exists for converting energy into matter or matter of whatever form into energy’.8 Indeed, all production involves a conversion of energy into useful work, and such a conversion must always employ some material tool or apparatus possessing specific, non-random properties. ‘We can never handle energy without a material lever, a material receptor, or a material transmitter. We ourselves are material structures without which no biological life can exist’.9 In short, ‘we have to spend some work and materials in order to tap a store of available energy’.10

The second step concerns the inevitable dissipation and dispersal of matter into less ordered and less useful forms. The materials used in production are subject to wear and tear not only by organic decomposition and corrosion by natural forces but also by the various kinds of friction produced by the material mechanisms needed to convert energy into work. As Georgescu-Roegen puts it, ‘friction robs us of available matter’:11 All over the material world there is rubbing by friction, cracking and splitting by changes in temperature or evaporation, there is clogging of pipes and membranes, there is metal fatigue and spontaneous combustion. Matter is thus continuously displaced, altered, and scattered to the four corners of the world. It thus becomes less and less available for our own purposes.12 Friction also explains why ‘available energy cannot be completely converted into useful work’, but is always partly ‘converted into irrecuperable heat’.13

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8 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1040 [emphasis added]. See also Daly 1992a, p. 25.
9 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1027.
11 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1033 [emphasis in original].
12 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1034.
13 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1033 [emphasis in original].
Georgescu-Roegen is so concerned about the prior neglect of material entropy that he proposes a fourth law of thermodynamics.\textsuperscript{14} This law has three alternative formulations, the common basis of which is the inevitability of friction, corrosion and decomposition: (1) ‘A closed system cannot perform work indefinitely at a constant rate’; (2) ‘In a closed system, available matter continuously and irrevocably dissipates, thus becoming unavailable’; (3) ‘Complete recycling is impossible’.\textsuperscript{15}

Daly shares the view that ‘terrestrial low entropy takes two forms: material and energy’, both of which place an absolute limit on human production.\textsuperscript{16} However, he goes further than Georgescu-Roegen in articulating a vision of a ‘steady-state economy’ that would enable humanity to more sustainably accommodate itself to these entropic limits. Such an economy ‘is defined by constant stocks of physical wealth (artefacts) and a constant population, each maintained at some chosen, desirable level by a low rate of throughput – i.e., by low birth rates equal to low death rates and by low physical production rates equal to low physical depreciation rates, so that longevity of people and durability of physical stocks are high’.\textsuperscript{17}

By ‘throughput’, Daly means ‘the extraction (depletion) of low entropy resources’ and their use in production and consumption, which results in ‘an equal quantity of high entropy waste (pollution) at the output end’.\textsuperscript{18} In a steady-state economy, this throughput is ‘minimized subject to the maintenance of a chosen level of stocks’.\textsuperscript{19} Toward these ends, Daly would impose quotas on both resource depletion and aggregate human births (based on ‘ecological and ethical criteria’), and then allow the market system, ‘by auction and exchange, to allocate depletion quotas and birth quotas efficiently’.\textsuperscript{20} This strategy reflects the view that, whereas the market ‘solves the allocation problem by providing the necessary information and incentive . . . What it does not do is solve the problem of optimal scale’, the problem being that there is no market for the most basic common pool resource: total available

\textsuperscript{14} ‘The point I can hardly overemphasize is that thermodynamics has remained a science concerned only with what happens to energy alone. It has completely ignored what happens to matter’ (Georgescu-Roegen 1981, p. 54). See also Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1032.
\textsuperscript{15} Georgescu-Roegen 1981, pp. 59–60.
\textsuperscript{16} Daly 1992a, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Daly 1974, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Daly 1974, p. 20.
low-entropy matter-energy. It is thus necessary to impose quantity constraints on resource extraction. To enhance flexibility, however, Daly’s quotas would allow non-renewable resources to be exploited ‘at a rate equal to the creation of renewable substitutes’. Meanwhile, renewable resources are to be ‘exploited on a profit-maximizing sustained yield basis’, meaning that ‘harvesting rates should not exceed regeneration rates; and . . . waste emissions should not exceed the renewable assimilative capacity of the environment’.

Georgescu-Roegen criticises Daly’s steady-state proposal for downplaying the fact that ‘even in a steady-state the “transactions” between the economic process and the environment must necessarily consist of some available matter . . . in order to compensate for the matter dissipated continuously and irrevocably’. The crucial error consists’, says Georgescu-Roegen, ‘in not seeing that not only growth, but also a zero-growth state, nay, even a declining state which does not converge toward annihilation, cannot exist forever in a finite environment'. From this perspective, ‘the most desirable state’ from the standpoint of entropic sustainability ‘is not a stationary, but a declining one’.

Georgescu-Roegen’s critique of Daly is based on a misunderstanding: Daly’s steady-state economy does not assume that entropy remains constant. Rather, it only insists that matter-energy throughput, and accompanying increases in entropy, be minimised. Indeed, at one point Daly seems to anticipate Georgescu-Roegen’s critique:

Over short periods of time the throughput cost of maintaining the constant stock [of wealth] may decrease due to improvements in maintenance efficiency, but over the long run it must increase because as better grade (lower entropy) sources of raw materials are used up, it will be necessary to process ever larger amounts of materials using ever more energy and capital equipment to get the same quantity of needed mineral. Thus a steady-state economy,

21 Daly 1991, p. 35.
22 Ibid. For a detailed presentation of the steady-state economy proposal, see Daly 1992a, Chapters 2–4.
23 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1039. This is just an application of the general dictum that ‘In the context of entropy, every action, of man or of an organism, nay, any process in nature, must result in a deficit for the entire system’ (Georgescu-Roegen 1975, p. 354). ‘Every time we produce a Cadillac,’ for example, ‘we irrevocably destroy an amount of low entropy that could otherwise be used for producing a plow or a spade. In other words, every time we produce a Cadillac, we do it at the cost of decreasing the number of human lives in the future’ (Georgescu-Roegen 1973, p. 58).
as here defined, does not imply constant throughput; . . . nor does it imply eternal life for the economic system. It is simply a strategy for good stewardship, for maintaining our spaceship and permitting it to die of old age rather than from the cancer of growthmania.26

The apparent disagreement between Daly and Georgescu-Roegen seems to reduce to the different time frames employed by the respective authors in defining practical sustainability, with Georgescu-Roegen insisting on a much longer-run perspective. Certainly the current practical importance of Georgescu-Roegen’s dissent from the steady-state proposal appears to be minimal. Even though Georgescu-Roegen’s own policy programme takes the form of a set of programmatic goals, and does not outline any means for achieving them, the goals themselves are in the same anti-growth spirit as Daly’s steady-state economy. They mainly involve various limits on the economy’s matter-energy throughput.27 The only difference is that Georgescu-Roegen insists on not just a stabilisation, but a large absolute reduction, of this throughput – a difference which, given the current system’s addiction to growth, is surely of little immediate significance.

II. The entropy-economy controversy: four trails to a dialectical perspective

The debate over the Georgescu-Roegen/Daly analysis can be divided into four crucial tracks or issue areas, all of which point to the need for a structural class perspective on entropy and economic valuation.

Entropy and the purposefulness of human production

Khalil argues that the entropy law only pertains to ‘mechanistic systems’ not designed or driven by ‘purposeful agency’.28 Insofar as the economy ‘is about
the production of goods by purposeful activity’, it follows that ‘the economic process is not governed by the entropy law’. More precisely, the purposeful character of human production means that the usefulness of matter-energy is determined not only by its degree of orderliness, but also by the technologies employed. Hence, ‘resources are not absolute à la the entropy law, but relative according to the technological potency of the purposeful agency of production’. There is thus no one-to-one correspondence between rising entropy, in the purely physical, objective sense, and resource degradation in the sense of reduced economic usefulness. The latter can only be ‘defined in relation to the organization which is undertaking the activity’, and this ‘organization could as well reverse the deterioration, after some innovations in technology and institutions are introduced’.

This analysis could have opened up an interesting debate on the historical relativity of entropy as an economic concept. Unfortunately, this useful element of Khalil’s argument was fogged over by his assertion that the entropy law is wholly inapplicable to purposeful processes, including human production. Here, Khalil drew an analogy between human production and the Carnot reverse cycle – named after the early nineteenth-century French engineer, Nicolas Sadi Carnot. The Carnot cycle involves a piston-cylinder engine that uses the temperature differential between two heat reservoirs to keep itself going by sequentially using heat to do work (lowering the piston) and work to transfer heat (raising the piston). This cycle produces not just greater entropy (outside the limiting case of 100 per cent efficiency) but also positive net work or ‘free energy’. ‘In fact’, says Khalil, ‘the Carnot cycle is designed purposefully to produce free energy’, which ‘sets it apart from the non-purposeful, mechanistic entropy law’. This is shown, he suggests, by the theoretical possibility of a one hundred per cent efficient Carnot cycle that does not increase entropy at all. Since human production is also purposeful, Khalil concludes that ‘the economic process should be conceived after the Carnot cycle, and not the entropy law’.

29 Khalil 1990, p. 164.
30 Ibid.
32 The temperature differential between the two reservoirs is maintained by the recirculation of heat from the cold to the hot reservoir, using the work done by the engine. For details, see Fermi 1956, pp. 31–5 and Van Ness 1983, pp. 36–40.
33 Khalil 1990, p. 170 [emphasis in original].
34 Khalil 1990, p. 171.
The effect of this argumentative strategy is to conflate the anthropomorphic relativity of entropy as economic usefulness with a blanket denial that entropy plays any role in determining the productive usefulness of matter and energy. Not surprisingly, the responses to Khalil’s article focus on the second element in this conflation, ignoring the conflation itself. After all, Khalil’s misapplication of the Carnot cycle provides a more inviting target than having to grapple with the more difficult historical questions raised by entropy’s relativity with respect to human purposes.

The counterattack begins with Lozada, who describes Khalil’s argument as ‘basically an “ultravitalist” attempt to deny that living, purposeful beings are completely subject to all laws of elementary matter such as the entropy law’. Khalil mistakenly treats the entropy law as if it assumes away all purposeful conversions of energy into work; but all the law says is that energy cannot be converted into work with one hundred per cent efficiency. The one hundred per cent efficient Carnot cycle is only an ideal benchmark for gauging the efficiency of real world engines: ‘No Carnot engine has ever existed nor will ever exist, because the Carnot cycle is reversible and therefore requires perfectly frictionless machinery and infinitely slow operation’. Similarly, Williamson argues that the Carnot cycle ‘incorporates both the first and the second laws of thermodynamics’, even though it ‘does indeed describe (and quantitatively so) the way in which a purposeful agency may be interposed in an otherwise spontaneous (or natural) process so as to produce useful work’. The one hundred per cent efficient Carnot cycle merely defines ‘the upper limit to the potency which any purposeful agency can achieve’. Khalil’s error, in Williamson’s view, is to interpret this upper limit as implying that ‘purposeful agency in economic activity may be of unlimited potency’.

More interestingly, Biancardi, Donati and Ulgiati criticise Khalil’s ‘risky thesis’ that ‘the Carnot cycle . . . has the same form as the economic process’. ‘Economic production is actually characterised by physical and/or bio-chemical

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36 Lozada 1991, p. 159.
37 Williamson 1993, pp. 70–1 [emphasis in original].
38 Williamson 1993, p. 71 [emphasis in original]. The same conception of the Carnot cycle is held by Georgescu-Roegen, who describes it as ‘a theoretical limit independent of the state of the arts’ (1975, p. 355; see also Georgescu-Roegen 1979, pp. 1032–3 and 1981, p. 54). Allowing for Georgescu-Roegen’s greater emphasis on the friction factor, this view is quite standard among thermodynamic theorists (Fermi 1956, pp. 46–8; Van Ness 1983, pp. 39–40; Biancardi, Donati and Ulgiati 1993).
40 Biancardi, Donati and Ulgiati 1993, p. 9 [emphasis added].
processes which may or may not be cycles, depending on whether or not heat engines are used.\textsuperscript{41} Hence ‘each economic process can be regarded as an irreversible transformation’, i.e., one that – unlike the Carnot cycle – never ‘returns to the starting conditions’ including the initial stock of resources.\textsuperscript{42}

Such irreversibility highlights the fact that, unlike Carnot’s ideal frictionless engine which is conceptualised as a closed thermodynamic system, the human economy, from a biospheric standpoint, an open system that metabolically co-evolves with its natural environment. True, the earth as a whole can, if one ignores the relatively minor amount of matter that enters or escapes its gravitational field, ‘be regarded as a big (closed) Carnot engine with the sun (a heat-reservoir at a higher temperature) and the outer-space (a heat-reservoir at lower temperature)’.\textsuperscript{43} But the interaction of the economy with the terrestrial environment is one in which the former constantly draws matter and energy from, and emits matter and energy waste into, the latter. It is precisely through this irreversible metabolic interaction that human life (like other forms of life) consumes the low-entropy matter-energy needed for its reproduction and development. Indeed, an entire neo-Darwinian evolutionary wing of the entropy literature tries to explain the expansion and decline of different species, eco-systems, and even economic systems in terms of their relative efficiency in absorbing low-entropy matter-energy and expelling high-entropy matter-energy.\textsuperscript{44} For present purposes, the crucial point is that, once the open-system character of human economy is recognised, Khalil’s analogy between the ideal Carnot cycle and purposeful economic activity breaks down.

This crucial form-divergence between the (irreversible) economic process and the (reversible) Carnot cycle clearly leaves quite a bit of space for various degrees of tension between human production and its environmental conditions. Is this indeterminacy not somehow connected with the relativity of matter-energy usefulness with respect to the purposeful character of production to which Khalil’s analysis points? Presumably, the degree to which an economy accelerates entropy depends on the particular purposes driving production. This naturally points to the social (production and exchange) relations that

\textsuperscript{41} Biancardi, Donati and Ulgiati 1993, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Mayumi 1993, p. 353.
\textsuperscript{44} See, for example, Binswanger 1993 and Rebane 1995. The concept of entropy has, of course, been used in various, often contradictory, ways across the natural and social sciences. See Proops 1987 and Mayumi and Giampietro 2004 for surveys that do much to alleviate the resulting confusion.
shape and constrain productive priorities, and that determine the way natural resources are valued economically. Khalil does not address this crucial area, given his conflation of entropy’s relativity with its (supposed) inapplicability. This enables his critics to take the easy way out as well by merely re-asserting the entropy law without reconstituting the entropy-economy dynamic in social-relational terms.

Khalil’s critics thus fail to notice that the purported inapplicability of the entropy law to purposeful processes presumes that human purposes themselves are not material in character. Instead, they ascribe to Khalil the fantastic view that the productive power of human technology is unlimited in material terms. In this way, both Khalil and his critics skate around the issues of the quality of resources and the quality of the human need satisfaction (human development) enabled by production as a social and entropic process.

The relativity of entropy

A year or so after Khalil’s contribution, an article by Jeffrey Young focused the debate more clearly on the relativity of entropy as an economic concept. If Young’s contribution is less widely known than it should be, this is mainly because he prefaces his arguments on relativity with the controversial claim that entropy applies only to energy and not to matter – a claim which, if true, would imply that the earth, due to its openness to solar energy inflows, is not subject to the entropy law. Young’s notion that the entropy law ‘can only be extended to matter by analogy’ rests on the presumption that entropy is only definable for homogenous entities (entities measurable in common units – such as BTUs for energy). In short, his claim is that there is ‘an aggregation problem in applying entropy to matter which does not exist for energy. Without some neutral aggregation principle it is impossible to tell whether a resource system is becoming more or less orderly if there is more than one type of material resource’.

Young’s critics make short work of this claim. Daly points out that ‘Physicists routinely apply entropy to matter, and although this extension may involve some difficulties, it is far more than a mere analogy’. Townsend observes that

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45 Young 1991, p. 169 [emphasis in original].
47 Daly 1992b, p. 91.
entropy is a concept that applies as readily to matter as it does to energy. Students of physics, chemistry, and engineering routinely calculate the changes in entropy resulting from phase changes in ordinary materials, such as the fusion of water from a solid to a liquid. A cursory glance at texts on thermodynamics ... reveals that the concept of entropy characterizes spontaneous changes in all systems, regarding matter and energy equally.48

Part of the problem is that Young’s argument conflates the problem of aggregation with that of conceptualisation. After all, there are serious aggregation problems in all kinds of scientific theories including mainstream economics with its notions of aggregate real output, employment and price level. Would Young abandon the concept of real GDP because one cannot add apples and steel in purely physical terms?

At a more basic level, Young should have noticed that non-homogeneity of energy (not just of matter) is implied by the entropy law itself, since this law makes no sense unless we have already defined more and less ordered forms of energy. From a dialectical perspective, energy, too, is non-homogenous insofar as different energy sources are more or less ordered and available, due to their embodiment or immersion in different quantities and forms of matter. In this respect, energy and matter cannot be validly separated. (It follows from this perspective that it is equally invalid to treat the scale of matter-energy use in isolation from its productive allocation.) Having come this far, Young could then have simply pointed out that any economic interpretation of ‘more and less ordered’, or of ‘available’, must be anthropomorphic, whether we are talking about energy or matter – and regardless of whether we are dealing with particular sources of matter-energy or matter-energy in the aggregate. This would have pre-empted Daly’s query as to ‘why his [Young’s] arguments’ concerning the economic relativity of entropy ‘do not apply to energy as well as to matter’.49

Despite these problems, Young and his critics manage to clarify the anthropomorphic element in any application of the entropy law to the economic

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49 Daly 1992b, p. 91. Because he shares Young’s distaste for dialectics, Daly provides no explanation as to how this inconsistency in Young’s analysis arises. In a more extreme vein, Townsend (1992, p. 98) interprets Young’s argument for the relativity of entropy as ‘but another example of a perpetual motion machine or sorting demon’. Like Khalil (1990), but from the opposite direction, Townsend conflates the relativity of entropy as an economic factor with the simple denial that ‘all processes ... operate in accordance with the principles of thermodynamics, and consequently, come at the expense of energy – in the second law sense’ (1992, p. 98).
process. Incorporating entropic dissipation of matter and energy into a simple Ricardian growth model, Young argues that there are two kinds of technological change that can operate as ‘a counterforce to diminishing returns’. The first kind is ‘resource augmenting technological change which increases the output per unit of matter and/or energy input; but this only causes ‘dissipation to proceed at a slower pace’. However, the second kind of technological change ‘create[s] resources out of noneconomic material’ by discovering new matter-energy stocks or new uses of previously known stocks. It is this second kind of technological change that most clearly poses the question: ‘Is [entropy] not in fact an anthropomorphic concept intimately associated with what is useful and, therefore, defined by current technology?’ Young answers affirmatively, using his model to demonstrate that ‘it is very possible for entropy... as disorderliness or unavailability, to be decreasing even though the system is closed’. In short, ‘available matter is dependent on the existence of appropriate technologies. It is not a purely physical concept’. Given this technological relativity, Young concludes that ‘the entropy law is not particularly relevant to the economics of long-run resource scarcity’.

Young is right to raise the question of the anthropomorphic relation of entropy to economic usefulness. However, Georgescu-Roegen and Daly themselves do not assume a simple one-to-one correspondence between economic usefulness and low entropy. Rather, they treat low-entropy matter-energy as one condition for the production of useful goods and services – with human labour, ingenuity and tastes also playing essential roles. In no way do they reduce production to pure entropic terms.

Thus, in his response to Young, Daly is able to grant the point that matter-energy usefulness is anthropomorphic, while arguing that the ‘absolute scarcity’ of low-entropy matter-energy still imposes an ‘optimal sustainable scale’ on ‘the economic subsystem as a part of the overall ecosystem’. Here, Daly clarifies the distinction between low entropy in the purely physical sense and

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50 Young 1991, p. 176.
51 Young 1991, p. 177.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Young 1991, p. 178.
55 Ibid.
57 Burkett 2003, pp. 140–1.
58 Daly 1992b, p. 94.
low entropy as usefulness, with the latter, more purposeful concept determined in part by science and technology (‘knowledge’):

If we discover a novel resource, b, or even if we just discover more deposits of the same resource, a, the result is the same – namely, we must redescribe the state of the system, taking account of the new knowledge. That new description, based on new knowledge, would record a stock of low-entropy materials greater (and likewise in the case of energy) than in the previous inventory. This does not mean that the economic process is not entropic or even that knowledge is anti-entropic – it only means that our description of the initial stock of low-entropy materials was incomplete in the light of new knowledge. Perhaps the upward bookkeeping revision of inventory of low-entropy materials might be greater in a given year than the physical increases in entropy from resource extraction and use. That hardly reverses the entropic direction of economic activity.59

Moreover, new knowledge may itself lead to increased entropic degradation (as when the discovery of the usefulness of certain gases for aerosol spray cans worsened the greenhouse effect). It may also ‘reveal new limits’:

The hole in the ozone layer is new knowledge. To suppose, as is usually done, that new knowledge will always expand the resource base and never contract it is to overspecify the content of new knowledge, which must always be something of a surprise – and not always a pleasant one.60

The basic insight generated by the Young-Daly exchange is obvious: by recognising the role of human knowledge in determining the economic limits (or lack thereof) imposed by the entropy law, both authors point to the historical contingency of the natural limits to human production. But neither author considers the implication that the social (class) relations of production, and historically specific resource-allocation mechanisms, help define these effective limits and determine the extent to which they tend to be exceeded. Both authors treat production, knowledge and economic limits as if they develop in a social-relational vacuum. Historically contingent natural limits are posed, but no tools of social-relational analysis are provided with which

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59 Daly 1992b, p. 92. Townsend makes essentially the same point, referring to ‘improvements in efficiency that alter the rate of entropic change of the system without increasing the availability of resources. These may be presumed to have existed, whether or not people possessed knowledge of them’ (Townsend 1992, pp. 98–9).

60 Daly 1992b, p. 92.
to critically analyse this contingency in particular economies and societies. The anthropomorphic character of entropy in the sense of economic usefulness is recognised, yet neither author considers the extent to which usefulness is largely defined by instrumental and/or functional goals connected with the social relations of production.61

For example, neither author asks whether a system of production driven by the quantitatively unlimited goal of capital accumulation has a specific tendency to accelerate entropy and overstretch its natural environment and, if so, whether this tendency in any way threatens the reproduction of such a system. How is it possible for capitalism to reproduce itself despite its continuous degradation of the natural conditions of human development? To address these issues, one must analyse the tensions between nature as a condition of capitalist production and nature as a condition of human development, and this requires that capitalist relations be clearly specified both materially and socially.

The recycling controversy

Georgescu-Roegen’s fourth law rejects ‘the axiom that recycling of matter can, in principle, be complete’ because recycling ‘must necessarily involve some material instruments’.62

Because there are no perdurable material structures these instruments will necessarily wear out. They will have to be replaced by others produced by some other instruments, which will also wear out and will have to be

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61 Similarly, Mayumi observes with regard to the entropy of matter: ‘The proper initial state... is deeply related to our multi-dimensional value system: to what state should we transform the degraded matter?’ (Mayumi 1993, p. 3560). Mayumi and Giampietro apply the same reasoning to energy: ‘The definition of what should be considered “useful energy” in ultimate analysis depends on the goals of the system operating within a given context’ (2004, pp. 15–16. See also Giampietro and Pimentel 1991). Norgaard also argues that ‘alternative measures of the amount of entropic change seem inextricably linked to human values. Better knowledge of this phenomena may shed light on our understanding of objectivity in economics’ (Norgaard 1986, p. 327). But such knowledge and understanding could presumably include some awareness of how social relations of production shape the economic valuation of matter-energy both qualitatively and quantitatively. And although many ecological economists recognise that ‘no definite [i.e., transhistorical] law exists that relates economic value and common thermodynamic functions’ (Amir 1998, p. 213), the discipline on the whole has tended to treat market valuation as a natural and self-evident phenomenon (Burkett 2003).

replaced, and so on, in an unending regress. This regress is a sufficient
ground for denying the possibility of complete recycling.63

It is true that ‘if we have enough energy, we could even separate the cold
molecules of a glass of water and assemble them into ice cubes’, but ‘in
practice... such operations are impossible... because they would require a
practically infinite time’.64 This problem applies in particular to those ‘elements
which, because of their nature and the mode in which they participate in the
natural and man-conducted processes, are highly dissipative’ and/or ‘found
in very small supply in the environment’.65

While taking an agnostic stance on the hypothetical possibility of complete
matter-recycling, Daly is ‘prepared to believe in common-sense evidence that
for all practical purposes complete recycling is impossible’.66 Like Georgescu-
Roegen, he points to ‘the physical fact that enormous amounts of energy, as
well as of other materials, are required to recycle highly dispersed matter’.67
It thus ‘remains clear that complete materials recycling would require ruinous
amounts of energy and time’.68 In sum, recycling cannot remove ‘the inevitable
cost of arranging greater order in one part of the system (the human economy)’,
namely, ‘creating a more than offsetting amount of disorder elsewhere (the
natural environment)’.69 Even with maximum recycling, ‘absolute scarcity’
eventually ‘makes growth impossible’.70

The critics of Georgescu-Roegen’s fourth law recognise that complete
materials recycling would require extremely large inputs of low-entropy
energy and the conversion of this energy into higher entropy forms. They
only question whether complete recycling is impossible abstracting from energy
constraints. Biancardi, Tiezzi and Ulgiati for example, argue that ‘complete
recycling is physically possible if a sufficient amount of energy is available’.71
However, ‘such an expenditure of energy would involve a tremendous increase
in the entropy of the environment, which would not be sustainable for the
biosphere’.72 Similarly, Kümme1 suggests that ‘dissipation of matter’ can ‘in

63 Ibid. See also Georgescu-Roegen 1981, pp. 60–1.
64 Georgescu-Roegen 1975, p. 356.
65 Ibid.
66 Daly 1992b, p. 92.
67 Daly 1992b, p. 93.
68 Daly 1992b, p. 91.
70 Daly 1992a, p. 43.
71 Biancardi, Tiezzi and Ulgiati 1993, p. 5.
72 Ibid.
principle, . . . be avoided at the cost of increased energy input and heat production’, even though the cost ‘may become forbiddingly high, if one would try to recollect the last atom’.73

By highlighting the entropic (energy) implications of material recycling operations, these analyses provide a useful antidote to the treatment of recycling as a kind of ecological panacea. But there is still a serious difficulty with these criticisms: they downplay the crucial roles of friction and matter-dissipation in Georgescu-Roegen’s fourth law. In this regard, Biancardi, Tiezzi and Ulgiati try to translate friction and matter-dissipation into pure energy terms by asserting that the ‘wasting and mixing of material’ during recycling merely ‘involves a passage from an ordered energy form (mechanical, electrical, chemical) to a less ordered one (heat)’.74 This assumption occludes the qualitative material requirements of human production in Georgescu-Roegen’s argument. Along the same lines, Kümmel argues that any ‘emissions of noxious substances can be transformed into emissions of heat’, so that matter-dissipation is already ‘included in the Second Law’.75 But this logic seems to neglect the limits that friction and matter-dissipation themselves place on the conversion of matter into pure energy, not to mention the adverse material effects of waste heat on the eco-systems into which it is emitted.76 Georgescu-Roegen’s dictum that ‘matter matters too’ is not so easily dismissed.77

By contrast, two letters to the editor by Converse emphasise the material requirements of recycling operations, thereby opening up some important ecological issues.78 His first letter uses mass-transfer theory to argue that any attempt to ‘separate a homogenous mixture into its components requires that one of the components move across a phase boundary or membrane that is able to reject the other components’.79 Since the required membrane area approaches infinity as the full removal of the single component is approached, ‘complete separation of a mixture is impossible, even though it is not denied by thermodynamic considerations’.80

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73 Kümmel 1994, p. 195. See also Månsson, who argues that ‘it is technically quite possible to achieve recycling in the weak sense of reproducing certain objects using material from any source’, even though the energy-entropy cost ‘may sometimes be too high’ (Månsson 1994, p. 192 [emphasis added]).
74 Biancardi, Tiezzi and Ulgiati 1993, p. 5.
75 Kümmel 1994, p. 195.
76 Huesemann 2001, p. 276.
77 Georgescu-Roegen 1979, p. 1039.
Converse’s second letter theorises recycling technologies that use ‘holding tank[s] into which waste is discharged, transformed by the application of energy, and then recycled’.81 Although he describes such operations as ‘complete recycling’, they are not really complete insofar as at any given time, the ‘concentration of waste’ in the holding tanks themselves is not ‘driven to zero’.82 Indeed, Converse’s analysis is more accurately read as setting out the limits of expanded recycling operations consistent with any given quality of natural wealth. As he says, ‘There is, of course, the problems of sequestering anthropogenic waste in the man-made holding tank from the general environmental holding tank and achieving acceptable costs’.83 These difficulties are clearly accentuated insofar as there is a growing amount of throughput to be recycled, especially if the throughput is of the high-dissipation type, in which case a growing share of resources (including environmental space) will need to be allocated toward the manufactured holding tanks for any given environmental quality goals.84

Even Ayres, who is generally optimistic on recycling possibilities, admits that ‘even the most efficient conceivable recycling process will generate wastes’.85 He suggests that the ‘wastebaskets’ in which these effluents accumulate can themselves be treated by recycling processes ‘given the postulated availability of energy’.86 But ‘the wastebasket[s] can never be eliminated altogether’ and their size will be a positive function of the amount of material throughput employed in production, the degree of recycling efficiency and the diffusiveness of the materials to be recycled.87

All of this suggests that a ‘sustainable society’ cannot rely on recycling alone, but must also reduce its reliance on matter-energy throughput while shifting its production toward ‘materials that yield wastes that can be tolerated at a finite level in the environment’.88 Ayres thus emphasises the need for a ‘dematerialisation’ of production through a movement toward services combined with greater ‘re-use, renovation, recovery and recycling’.89 On this

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82 Ibid.
83 Converse 1997, p. 2.
84 For a good discussion of this point, see Mayumi 1993, pp. 359–61.
85 Ayres 1997, p. 286.
86 Ibid.
89 Ayres 1997, p. 286.
basis, he rejects Georgescu-Roegen’s hypothesis that the ‘economic system is . . . doomed to “run down” as the low entropy material resources on earth are dissipated and become unavailable’.90

However, Ayres’s projection optimistically presumes that increasing services production does not itself require a growing material base, that is, that there is no ‘finite upper limit to the service output of a given material’.91 As Ursula Huws observes, the current production of ever greater amounts of information and entertainment (the main locus of today’s service economy) is dependent on the growing matter-energy throughput associated with computers, scanners, printers, mobile phones, media players, disks, etc. which are subject to more and more rapid rates of obsolescence – not to mention ‘the many components and accessories involved in their manufacture’.92 The recycling of these high-tech instruments, parts, and auxiliaries is at best a highly partial operation that leaves in its wake degraded environments (and poisoned recycling workforces) especially in the Third-World regions and other poor areas where such ‘wastebaskets’ are normally located.93 In sum,

the propagation of information processing machines may increase the consumption of available matter and/or energy in the economy, instead of decreasing it. This may result in the intensification of underground materials’ pollution, from which the said information society is hoped to be free.94

The recycling optimists also have not adequately confronted the inapplicability of ‘recycling’ to biological and eco-system resources.95 Craig, for example, recognises ‘our inability to recreate biological and ecological elements of our life-support system’.96 He observes that:

Ecologists know how important it is to keep ecosystems intact. Once dismantled, they are at best difficult and usually impossible to reassemble. . . . Once lost, a species is gone forever.97

Yet the same author asserts that ‘the theoretical limit’ to materials recycling ‘is minute’.98 Such a dichotomy between recycling and eco-system reproduction

90 Ibid.
91 Ayres 1997, p. 286.
92 Huws 1999, p. 49.
94 Tsuchida and Murota 1987, p. 27.
96 Craig 2001, p. 381.
97 Craig 2001, pp. 376, 381.
is completely foreign to Georgescu-Roegen’s fourth law analysis, which recognises ‘that what is true for one dead lake is not true for all dead lakes’: ‘To suggest . . . that man can construct at a cost a new environment tailored to his desires is to ignore completely that cost consists in essence of low entropy, not of money, and is subject to the limitations imposed by natural laws’.99

As Lawn points out, that recycling may ensure ‘a large quantity of low entropy’ on the source- or supply-side of productive throughput is only one side of the sustainability equation.100 One must also avoid compromising the environment’s ‘limited sink and life-support services’.101 The relegation of ever-more environmental space to recycling holding-tank status obviously would not bode well in this connection. In addition, any large-scale conversion of natural eco-systems into recycling wastebaskets is likely to vitiate the aesthetic quality of life. Daly, for example, recognises that in Ayres’s recycling/dematerialisation scenario, ‘the materials and energy intensity of an average dollar’s worth of GNP forever declines, approaching zero’.102 But he still finds the scenario unattractive: ‘We will all eat high-tech sandwiches consisting of ever thicker slices of information (much of it indigestible) between increasingly thin slices of silicon’.103 Many will share his revulsion.

The limitations of recycling have led some to argue that ‘modern science and technology have very limited potential to alleviate . . . environmental problems’, and to find the solution in a rejection of the ‘materialistic values’ that are purportedly ‘the root cause of the environmental crisis’.104 However, this parachuting in of exogenous values only highlights the failure of the entire recycling controversy to take seriously the social character of economic activity. With production treated as a social-relational black box, it is not surprising that ecological economists have debated the limits of recycling in alternately thermodynamic and moralistic terms. Employing a material-social dualism in which the social side takes the form of exogenous ethical values, they have not provided any social-form analysis of material production itself. Yet any serious consideration of recycling possibilities must include the role

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100 Lawn 1999, p. 7.
101 Ibid.
102 Daly 1992a, p. 205.
103 Daly 1992a, p. 205.
of the social relations of production, and corresponding priorities, in enabling and delimiting the set of feasible options. Otherwise, there may be a tendency to limit these possibilities to whatever technologies are available on the market at any given time. This would be tantamount to constraining recycling techniques to those consistent with the competitive maximisation of private profit.

Ayres, Ferrer and Van Leynseele, for example, emphasise the potential for ‘double dividends’ from recycling, meaning ‘increased profits for the firm combined with environmental improvement’.\(^{105}\) The determination of which forms of recycling are ‘economic’, and the levels of different throughputs to be recycled, are taken as given from the market. That the general failure to recycle throughput might be rooted in production relations (for example, competitive employment of wage-labour for maximum monetary accumulation) is simply not addressed. In this way, technocratic recycling optimism can lead to a position similar to that of neoclassical economics, for which market incentives generally reflect (or can be made to reflect, using an appropriate system of resource-property rights) the environmental costs of economic activity and thereby promote environmental sustainability.

**Entropy and the market**

Indeed, some neoclassical economists have explicitly argued that, insofar as entropy determines the usefulness of matter and energy in production, then it should already be reflected in firms’ costs and thus fully accounted for by standard supply and demand theory. Even if the increases in entropy resulting from production are not privately priced, they can be treated under the familiar category of ‘external costs’. Such gaps between private and social costs can be corrected by taxing the externality-producing activities. Alternatively, property rights can be assigned to, and markets created for, the externalities within some aggregate constraint on their levels. In either case, so the argument goes, entropy as such adds nothing substantial to the analysis.

Burness, Cummings, Morris and Paik, for example, argue that in a market system, ‘energy is valued only in terms of its inputs to the production of goods and services that satisfy the wants of individuals’, so that ‘the value of energy or the value of any other factor of production or consumption good

\(^{105}\) Ayres, Ferrer and Van Leynseele 1997, p. 557.
derivates from its productivity or usefulness in this regard.\textsuperscript{106} They apply the same argument to ‘sources of low entropy’ in general:\textsuperscript{107}

So long as markets are reasonably competitive, the thermodynamic laws are indeed reflected in markets. Marginal costs of the outputs of land (including low entropy resources), labor and capital will reflect the opportunity cost of these factors: in the case of gas, the marginal value product of gas in producing work must be reflected in its cost as an input in home heating. As the scarcity of ‘work’ increases, the opportunity cost of gas for home heating will rise and, ceteris paribus, one would expect a shift in factor combinations away from the use of gas in nonwork types of uses. Increases in the scarcity value of work lead to increased capital intensity, thereby altering systems to the end of performing more work for a given entropic change as well as reducing rejected heat.\textellipsis Of course, distortions in the rate of extraction of exhaustible resources due to market imperfections\textellipsis are reasonably well-known in economics, and policies recommended by economic studies point to the obvious need for prices which reflect scarcity.\textsuperscript{108}

Similarly, Young suggests that

if entropy became an important constraint in a given system, then price would rise as the finite stock runs out. As technology redefines the system boundaries, price would signal any change in relative scarcity from one state of the world to another. In an ideal world of perfect markets, and all that this implies concerning government regulations and property institutions, price would be a superior indicator of scarcity since it incorporates both entropic constraint (foregone future use) and the effects of the technological redefinition of the system.\textsuperscript{109}

In this view, the Georgescu-Roegen/Daly application of the entropy law to economic processes is merely ‘a rephrased expression of the exhaustible resources problem in the economics literature’.\textsuperscript{110} Insofar as entropy is just another term for changes in matter-energy ‘endowments’ that influence production costs, it ‘adds nothing to traditional models based on the tension between depletion- and pollution-induced scarcity and certain scarcity mitigating factors’.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{106} Burness, Cummings, Morris and Paik 1980, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Burness, Cummings, Morris and Paik 1980, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{109} Young 1994, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{110} Burness, Cummings, Morris and Paik 1980, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{111} Young 1991, p. 179.
If entropy adds nothing to economic analysis, it follows that the adoption of an explicitly entropic approach must be based on value judgements, not scientific criteria. For neoclassical economists, market prices reflect (or can be made to reflect) the preferences of individuals and the costs of serving these preferences. The imposition of additional, entropically-informed, values must therefore involve an overriding of ‘consumer sovereignty’. As Burness, Cummings, Morris and Paik put it:

But unless one wishes to argue for a fundamental change in our system of values, it is not clear that thermodynamic considerations are inappropriately reflected in prices... Within a value system where consumer preferences play the role of guiding output/input decisions, it is simply not clear as to how thermodynamic concepts... are to be used in enriching the promulgation of public policy.112

Any concern with entropy as such is, in short, a ‘concern with ethical issues rather than... the allocative efficiency of markets’.113

Responding to this argument, Daly reasserts the relevance of the entropy law as the ultimate basis of resource scarcity.114 The neoclassicals err in assuming that relative scarcity (scarcity of particular resources compared to other resources) is the only kind of scarcity that matters. For Daly, the absolute scarcity of total low-entropy matter-energy places ‘a previously neglected aggregate constraint on the physical scale of the economy’.115 Daly does not deny that market prices reflect (or can be made to reflect) relative scarcities. The problem is that this ‘optimality of allocation is independent of whether or not the scale of physical throughput is ecologically sustainable’.116

Absolute scarcity must therefore be registered through ‘a collectively enacted constraint on the aggregate flow (throughput) of matter and energy from the ecosystem through the economy, and back to the ecosystem’.117 This constraint, taking the form of quotas on resource-depletion and human births, would reflect the fact that ‘we collectively value sustainability, a value which, like that of justice, is not expressible at the level of individual choices in a competitive market’.118 Once the quotas are in place ‘the market will, at the

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113 Burness and Cummings 1986, p. 324 [emphases in original].
114 Daly 1986.
115 Daly 1986, p. 320.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
micro level, come up with a different set of prices which now reflect the social value of sustainability’.\textsuperscript{119}

Daly is right to reject the facile identification of environmental efficiency with market efficiency. Unfortunately, he does not inquire into the social-relational origins of the dualism between allocation and scale, that is, between private and collective values. How is it that people have become so alienated from nature that their dominant form of exchange, the market, places no value on environmental sustainability? Daly’s failure to address this question weakens his response to the neoclassical critics in two closely related ways.

First, he treats the allocation/scale dualism as a stark dichotomy rather than a dialectical unity-in-difference, and this leads to problems. Consider Daly’s attempt to specify the allocation/scale relationship in micro/macro terms:

\begin{quote}
The market is sensitive to scale issues at the micro level, but is insensitive to the macro level scale of the whole economy relative to the ecosystem.

The fact that the market can substitute relatively abundant resources for relatively scarce ones is a great virtue, but does not remove the entropic constraint. Substitutability among various types of low entropy does not mean that there can be a substitute for low entropy itself.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

The problem is that, precisely because markets are ‘sensitive to scale issues at the micro level’, there does not have to be a substitute for low entropy as such in order for markets to promote its economisation. As emphasised by Young, low-entropy matter-energy can only exist in particular, more-or-less useful, forms.\textsuperscript{121} If specific low-entropy resources become relatively scarce, this should encourage greater efficiency in the use and recycling of these resources. Whether such market-driven responses are ecologically adequate is an issue to be investigated; but Daly’s analysis provides no tools for such a critical investigation. Indeed, he says that prices \textit{will} adequately register the social value of sustainability once his resource-depletion and birth quotas are implemented.

Speaking of which, the resource-depletion quotas would necessarily take the form of specific limits on the use of particular forms of low-entropy matter-energy. For non-renewables, Daly’s quotas would be geared to the availability

\begin{footnotes}
\item[	extsuperscript{119}] Ibid.
\item[	extsuperscript{120}] Daly 1986, p. 320.
\item[	extsuperscript{121}] Young 1991 and 1994.
\end{footnotes}
of renewable substitutes, which would obviously differ from case to case. Even renewables quotas would differ according to their differential regeneration rates. Resource-depletion quotas would thus be allocational by their very nature, even prior to their allocation by the market. (Such quotas are a standard weapon in the arsenal of neoclassical environmental micro-economics, after all.) The market’s reallocation of both birth quotas and resource-depletion quotas among different households and firms would also place its own stamp on the overall rate and pattern of low-entropy matter-energy depletion. Here, too, a social-relational perspective on material production and productive priorities is needed to specify and evaluate the system’s likely ecological impacts.

Second, Daly’s treatment of the economy as a social-relational black box is shown by his failure to provide a systemic explanation of environmental crisis. His analysis posits that markets are only allocational devices that do not determine the scale of production; but this leaves the scale itself unaccounted for. He is thus forced to appeal to exogenous values, especially consumerism and ‘growthmania’, to explain the failure to control matter-energy throughput.122 The path to a sustainable system is likewise sought not in a transformation of socio-economic relations, but rather in a change of values guided by ‘traditional religions’ which ‘teach man to conform his soul to reality by knowledge, self-discipline, and restraint on the multiplication of desires’.123 In this respect, the neoclassical critics are right: Daly merely adds another layer of exogenous, subjectively determined preferences to the given consumer preferences of mainstream theory.124

III. A Marxist approach to the economics of entropy

For Marxists, the economy’s production relations shape its relations of exchange and distribution, as well as the priorities served by production. Accordingly, a Marxist analysis of the economy-entropy nexus begins by specifying these production relations materially and socially.

122 Daly 1974, pp. 17–9.
123 Daly 1992a, p. 44. See also Daly and Cobb 1989.
124 The same is true of Georgescu-Roegen who, while treating economic history in terms of the ‘entropic degradation of matter-energy’, ascribes the acceleration of this process to such subjective factors as ‘addiction to industrial luxuries’ and high present-future discount rates (1973, pp. 54, 58). See also Georgescu-Roegen 1973, pp. 377–8.
Capitalism, nature and the market

Capitalism is defined by the complete social separation of the producers from necessary material conditions of production, starting with the land, and the recombination of the ‘freed’ labour-power and material conditions as wage-labour producing commodities for a profit. Only under capitalism does capital (the advancement of money to obtain more money) dominate and constantly reshape production, as opposed to operating on the edges of production in the sphere of exchange. For present purposes, two aspects of this system are absolutely crucial.

First, the dominant position of the market in capitalist society is an outgrowth of the wage-labour relation. With workers socially separated from productive wealth, their reproduction requires that they sell their labour-power for a wage used to purchase means of subsistence on the market. True, markets and money have existed for millennia as means of exchanging surplus products among different households and communities. But the generalisation of profit-driven production for the market, the never-ending pressure of competition on the producers, and the constant need for money in order to live, all owe themselves to the commodification of ‘free’ labour-power and its employment by autonomous enterprises controlling the (now ‘separate’) conditions of production. It is on this basis that the commodification of the means of production develops historically. In short, what neoclassical economists call the market system is best viewed as an outgrowth of the alienation of the producers from the material conditions of production. Alienation from nature and generalised marketisation of exchange are two sides of the same coin.125

Second, capitalism’s reproduction requirements are autonomous from the sustainable reproduction of labour-power and natural conditions considered as ecologically co-evolving entities.126 For capitalist production, all that matters

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125 Precapitalist societies have their own forms of alienation from nature (and consequently their own forms of environmental crisis). In all class societies, the producers’ access to natural conditions is restricted by the requirements of exploitation. Under feudalism, for example, much of the land and its products was reserved for the lords and their retainers. But, under capitalism, the producers’ restricted relation to nature takes the form of an historically extreme social separation from material conditions of production and correspondingly extreme dominance of production itself by capital (money-making).

126 This is not true of precapitalist systems, where socio-economic reproduction is typically more dependent on the reproduction of particular (local and/or regional) eco-systems, precisely because of the non-separation of producers and production conditions compared to capitalism. For further discussion, see Burkett 1999, Chapter 5.
is that labour-power and material conditions be separately available in forms that can be combined as commodity production by wage-labour. Given this precondition, capitalist reproduction does not depend upon any particular limit to the entropy level in its matter-energy environment.

**Nature, entropy and capitalist valuation**

As Marx demonstrated, capitalism reduces the substance of economic value to the abstract (homogenous, socially necessary) labour time objectified in commodities. This value-substance is specific to capitalism because it depends on the social separation of labour-power from other ‘inputs’ and its employment by competing enterprises as wage-labour. There is an obvious tension between this reduction of value to abstract labour and the fact that wealth production requires not just labour but also other forms of low-entropy matter-energy. This contradiction explains capitalism’s unique tendency to freely appropriate natural conditions as valueless goods.\(^\text{127}\) To have value, labour must be objectified in use-values whose production requires specific forms of low-entropy matter-energy. Yet, from the standpoint of the system as a whole, these requisite natural resources have no value.

Saad-Filho has demonstrated that the formation of commodity values (reduction of concrete labours to abstract labours) occurs partly through the formation of market prices (and of price-value deviations).\(^\text{128}\) This is one way of establishing the necessity of money as a form of value under capitalism. It is thus important to consider the adequacy of money prices as social representatives of natural wealth. After all, even if *values* do not adequately reflect nature’s productive contributions, are not these contributions captured by market rents – at least insofar as natural resources are both scarce and (under an appropriate property rights regime) monopolisable? This question is considered later in terms of the adequacy of market regulation as a way of constraining resource-exploitation. Here, we draw attention to certain qualitative characteristics of money vis-à-vis natural wealth from an entropic perspective.

To begin with, money, unlike low-entropy matter-energy, is quantitatively unlimited. Capitalist production, driven as it is by the goal of maximum monetary accumulation – a goal forced on any recalcitrant enterprises by the

\(^{127}\) See Burkett 1999, Chapter 6.
\(^{128}\) See Saad-Filho 2002, Chapter 5.
pressure of competition – thus has an in-built tendency to overstretch its limited natural conditions. At the same time, monetary values, like the labour values they represent, are reversible. And although the values of commodities may go up or down depending on developments in the productivity of labour, the general tendency is for values to fall (see below). Such quantitative reversibility does not, of course, apply to the increases in environmental entropy brought about by production.

Nor are these the only entropic contradictions of capitalist valuation. Money, like value itself, is a completely homogenous entity: its main function is to operate as pure quantity (to reduce all differences among commodities to purely quantitative differences). The natural conditions of production, on the other hand, are hardly homogenous – and hardly commensurable. Production depends on the qualitative variegation of low-entropy matter-energy. In addition, monetary values are completely divisible, unlike natural wealth which is composed of highly interconnected and interdependent material, biological and thermodynamic systems of varying entropy levels. Finally, monetary claims on wealth – currency, bank accounts, stocks, bonds, and so forth – are highly mobile, directly contradicting the locational specificities often characterising natural eco-systems, mineral deposits, and so on.

In sum, money and capital values are homogenous, divisible, mobile, reversible and quantitatively unlimited, by contrast with the qualitative variety, indivisibility, locational uniqueness, irreversibility and quantitative limits of low-entropy matter-energy. It follows that production driven and shaped by capitalist valuation is fundamentally antagonistic towards the natural conditions of human production and human development.

Capitalist throughput, recycling and entropic degradation

The anti-ecological character of capitalist production should not be identified with a simple maximisation of matter-energy throughput. Capitalism has its own rules governing waste and recycling. Competition among firms penalises any ‘above normal’ throughput by not recognising the labour time objectified in it as socially necessary, value-creating labour. The labour objectified in ‘normal’ waste does enter into commodity values, but this ‘normal’ waste does not include any discarded materials or instruments that could have been profitably employed under current material-social conditions. Individual enterprises also have a motive to reduce matter-energy waste to sub-normal levels in order to enjoy lower unit costs and thus surplus profits and/or rising
market shares. This incentive encompasses the development of more efficient and profitable methods of recycling the matter-energy by-products of production.129 Insofar as supplies of low-entropy matter-energy yield rents to their sellers, the firms employing these supplies have an obvious incentive to economise on their use.130 Contrary to Daly, the scale of capitalist matter-energy throughput cannot be analytically divorced from the system’s allocational mechanisms, that is, from market valuation.

But the scale/allocation dialectic is a two-edged sword. Although capitalism’s competitive allocation in its own way limits matter-energy waste and promotes recycling, it does so within a general tendency toward the conversion of matter and energy into commodities on an ever greater scale. Capitalist production is driven by the goal of monetary value accumulation; and since value must be represented in use-values (commodities) embodying both labour and natural resources, this accumulation translates into a processing of growing quantities of low-entropy matter-energy. Competition also presses individual firms to increase the productivity of their labour forces, which means increases in the matter and energy processed per hour of labour (reductions in the unit values of commodities). Although firms feel a competitive pressure to keep matter-energy throughput at or below the competitive norm, the norm is itself a function of the more basic pressure and profit incentive to boost output per labour hour (hourly throughput). Throughput is accelerated further insofar as the antagonism between managers and workers at the point of production dictates the installation of more mechanised, matter-energy intensive technologies to wrest control of the labour process away from skilled workers.

Market allocation hardly ensures an ecologically sustainable level and pattern of matter-energy use. Individual firms may economise on particular resource-inputs as their prices rise, but rising resource prices only encourage the search for additional exploitable supplies of the resource in question and for substitute resources. In cases where scarce resources are monopolisable, private profit maximisation cannot be relied upon to ensure sustainable extraction or harvesting rates – especially insofar as future profits are discounted in favour of current profits.131 Indeed, the competitive search for resource rents is a prime mechanism by which capitalism overuses, homogenises,
divides and relocates various animate and inanimate forms of low-entropy matter-energy.132

That the system’s allocation and scale mechanisms are both objectively anti-ecological helps explain why market-driven recycling and waste-management have themselves produced a ‘fresh expenditure of energy and materials’, thus becoming ‘a constitutive part of the problem’.133 The same goes for capitalist efforts at ‘environmental restoration’, such as the replacement of harvested forests with tree farms, strip-mined lands with ecologically impoverished ‘parks’, and plundered maritime eco-systems with artificial fisheries – all designed to create opportunities for the profitable processing of additional low-entropy matter-energy into commodities.

While ecological economists blame materialistic and consumerist values for the system’s production and disposal of ever greater quantities of anti-ecological goods and services, the firms selling them know that they (and the wants they satisfy) are produced for one reason and one reason only: to make a profit. The notion that the capitalist economy can operate with a quota on its total use of low-entropy matter-energy is likewise a pipe-dream. Any market economy in which production is motivated by profit must rely on growth, since money-making only makes sense if the amount of money made is greater than the amount of money advanced. As Altvater observes:

The ‘steady-state principle’ is thus rational within the ecological system. . . . And yet, what is rational in the ecological system is irrational in terms of market economics: an economy without profit. The logic of the market makes it necessary to aim for a money surplus, without which a microeconomic unit (a firm) has to admit defeat and declare itself bankrupt. . . . High rates of profit and accumulation (in terms of values or prices) usually indicate a high throughput of materials and energy: that is, in a closed system, high rates of entropy increase.134

In sum, capitalism’s ‘normal’ matter-energy throughput is driven first and foremost by the anti-ecological imperative of maximum capital accumulation. This imperative is enforced by the system’s monetary forms of valuation – forms which themselves encourage the entropic degradation of matter and

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133 Altvater 1993, p. 213. See also Fairlie 1992.
energy. It is only within these broader systemic parameters that recycling and anti-waste incentives operate.

_Capitalism, environmental crisis and ecological values_  
Given the divergence between capitalism’s reproduction requirements and the conditions of sustainable human development, it is important to distinguish two kinds of environmental crises stemming from this system’s use and abuse of ever greater quantities of low-entropy matter-energy. The first type involves crises of capital accumulation, as the demand for materials (including energy sources) periodically outstrips supplies – leading to rising costs, falling profits and even physical disruptions of production due to the non-availability of essential raw and auxiliary materials. Such materials-supply disturbances reflect an inner tension between the value-creating and material dimensions of capitalist production. With booms in production driven by competitive monetary accumulation, materials shortages become inevitable especially when the production of these materials, dependent as it often is on specific natural conditions and/or large fixed investments, cannot be rapidly increased over short periods of time. This applies especially to agricultural and mineral products. Materials shortages are hastened by labour productivity growth, which increases the pressure on supplies of low-entropy matter-energy per value of money capital invested.135

Materials-supply disturbances tend to be periodic and do not in and of themselves pose a serious threat to the reproduction of the system. As long as sufficient low-entropy matter-energy is available to reproduce exploitable labour-power (and to objectify its labour in vendible commodities), capital can continue to accumulate on the basis of an entropically degraded environment. Indeed, the production of goods and services designed to manage and cope with environmental degradation can itself be a profitable area of capital investment. Witness the rapid growth of the waste management and pollution control industries, or the massive profits earned from the newfangled pharmaceuticals peddled to asthmatics suffering from urban air pollution. Global warming creates a booming market for air conditioners.

Capitalism’s ability to survive and even prosper on its own money-making terms despite its degradation of nature makes it essential to recognise a second kind of environmental crisis: the crisis in the quality of natural wealth as a

condition of human development. Unlike materials-supply disturbances, this crisis is permanent and ever intensifying. It is reflected in trends such as global warming, declining diversity of plant and animal species, the build-up of carcinogens and other poisons in the environment, the greater and greater reliance on pharmaceuticals and other drugs to mentally and physically cope with life, and ongoing mass hunger and disease in peripheral countries side-by-side with the worsening human obesity crisis in the United States.136 And it cannot be resolved, or even temporarily softened, without a direct infringement on private profit and competition in favour of human-social needs as the main priority behind the organisation of production.137 The crisis in the natural conditions of human development implicates the fundamentally anti-ecological characteristics of capitalist production and market valuation. To effectively limit entropic degradation would require an economy not shaped by money and monetary prices, one not based on the goal of ever-growing capital values. This necessarily involves non-market systems of egalitarian user rights and responsibilities that respect the communal character of natural wealth as a condition of human development within and across generations.

We will not get from here to there by superimposing subjective ecological values on abstract-ideal models of the capitalist system – models that ignore or downplay the connections between wage-labour, the dominance of money and markets over material and social life, and the system’s destructive ecological-entropic dynamics. What is needed is a critical engagement with the ongoing struggles of workers and communities everywhere to defend and improve their material-social conditions, and to forge new forms of human development. The new socio-economic institutions and ecological values needed to effectively limit entropic destruction can only develop out of collective struggles to disalienate the conditions of human production, to convert them from conditions of exploitative money-making into conditions of sustainable human development. A red and green political economy can, however, assist this process by analysing capitalism’s specific ecological-

136 In addressing this crisis, Marx focused on the degradation of soil fertility and unhealthy circulation of matter produced by the urbanisation of manufacturing and industrialisation of agriculture, the combined effect of which is to ‘simultaneously undermin[e] the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker’ (Marx 1976, p. 638). See Burkett (1999, pp. 119–32) and Foster (2000, Chapters 4 and 5) for detailed reconstructions of Marx’s analysis.

137 In classical-Marxist terms, this permanent environmental crisis reflects the tension between capitalist production relations and the sustainable development of human-natural productive forces (Hughes 2000, Chapter 5).
entropic contradictions and the ecological and social viability of non-capitalist forms of resource allocation, demonstrating the latter’s greater consistency with the socio-ecological values generated by worker-community struggles.

Conclusion

After sketching the Georgescu-Roegen/Daly argument on the economic relevance of the entropy law, the ensuing debate was surveyed along four distinct tracks. Each of the four tracks was found to shed important light on the economy-nature relationship. At the same time, their analytical power is limited by their failure to consider the social relations of production as a factor shaping the use (and abuse) of natural conditions. The absence of a dialectical material-social perspective is reflected in the uncritical, unsystematic stances on market valuation held by the various participants in the entropy debate, as well as in their common appeal to exogenous human purposes and values.

From a Marxist perspective, the inadequacies of the market as a form of entropy valuation, both allocatively and scale-wise, are rooted in the separation of producers from natural conditions that is central to the wage-labour relation. While recognising the objective reality of the entropy law, this viewpoint also reveals the crucial divergence between capitalism’s entropic requirements and the entropic requirements of sustainable human production and development.

Capitalism experiences periodic economic crises rooted in the tensions between capital accumulation and its natural (human and environmental) conditions. But the crucial insight of the Marxist perspective is that, even apart from accumulation crises, capitalism’s ecological-entropic dynamics produce a never-ending crisis in the natural conditions of human development. This permanent crisis can only be overcome through an explicit communalisation of production and its material conditions by the producers and their communities. Rather than preaching autonomous changes in human values, Marxism challenges each and every one of us to join in the struggle for collective-democratic forms of production and resource-allocation more appropriate to human development as a material-social process.
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Intervention

Marcus Taylor

Opening the World Bank: International Organisations and the Contradictions of Global Capitalism

In Historical Materialism 11.2, Paul Cammack opened a welcome chapter in the analysis of the World Bank. By advancing what he terms a ‘new-materialist perspective’, Cammack re-affirms the expediency of employing categories of Marxist thought in order to pierce the realm of ‘global governance’. In brief, Cammack’s position is that, in order to secure the conditions for the expanded accumulation of global capital, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are involved in an explicit project to assert their autonomy from all particular national state and capitalist interests. In accomplishing this project, which Cammack dates to the 1989 Concordat between Bank and IMF, the intellectual production of these institutions (and particularly that of the World Bank, on which Cammack focuses) represents

1 The author wishes to thank Werner Bonefeld, Adam Morton, Susanne Soederberg and Guido Starosta for their constructive criticism of an earlier draft.
the step-by-step construction of a totalising blueprint for a global capitalist society.\textsuperscript{3} Concurrently, the establishment of the Comprehensive Development Framework by the Bank is presented as a step towards the further entrenchment of client countries into the disciplines of global capital through Bank and IMF tutelage.\textsuperscript{4}

Although this interpretation of the fin-de-siècle status of the two leading international financial institutions touches on many pertinent facets of their current operations, I suggest that the ‘new-materialist’ understanding is deficient in several important respects.\textsuperscript{5} In particular, Cammack tends to view global capitalism as driven by the systemic ‘logics’ of accumulation and legitimation. From this framework, the World Bank is derived in a structural-functionalist manner as an autonomous institutional fix necessary to safeguard the aforementioned ‘logics’ of global capitalism. The end result of Cammack’s theoretical framework is to endow the organisation with an independence, omniscience and power that it simply does not possess, primarily owing to the exclusion of contradiction and struggle from his representation of the Bank.

In contrast, by viewing the World Bank as an historically developed moment of capitalist social relations, it is possible to understand how the World Bank embodies the inherent contradictions of the latter. As such, the Bank does not resolve the contradictions of global capitalism but reproduces them in new and developed forms. This facilitates an explanation of why the Bank is permeated by the incongruities of capitalist development on a global scale, as manifested in its contradictory policy prescriptions and practices that have emerged in a fragmented form as a reactive mediation to the struggle-driven and crisis-torn course of uneven capitalist development. Contrary to understanding the Bank in the closed manner of structural functionalism, opening the World Bank in this way aids our understanding of the possibilities and limits to struggles that target international financial institutions.

\textsuperscript{3} Cammack 2003, pp. 45–8.
\textsuperscript{4} See Cammack 2002.
\textsuperscript{5} William Brown 2003 has already highlighted Cammack’s neglect of the Bank’s role in constructing the political scaffolding for processes of primitive accumulation (that is, the ‘good governance’ agenda).
I. Relative autonomy and the World Bank

The central concept of Cammack’s ‘new materialism’ – pivotal for his explanation of the character of the international institutions – is relative autonomy. For Cammack, relative autonomy is the capacity of political institutions to ‘stand at a distance’ from capitalist interests.6 His argument is that, in order to promote the conditions for capital accumulation at a global level, the World Bank and IMF have attempted to secure their relative autonomy from all particular interests.

[W]here capitalist enterprises compete globally, and where the terrain of the ‘global capitalist economy’ is shared between a multitude of competing politically independent territorial states, the contradictions generated by the development of capitalism will demand management across the world market as a whole by authoritative institutions with autonomy both from particular capitalist enterprises and from particular capitalist states.7

In short, just as structural-functionalist analyses suggest that the anarchy of capitalist production demands an autonomous state, Cammack establishes that the contradictions of global capital require autonomous international organisations that can uphold the ‘logics’ of the global capitalist system. On the one hand, Cammack stresses the ‘logic of accumulation’ as imparting a need to close the gap between the ‘character of existing capitalist interests’ and a ‘presumed optimum configuration to secure competitiveness in the world market’.8 On the other, the ‘logic of legitimation’ results from the ‘imperative to reproduce the hegemony of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat’.9 The role of the ‘relatively autonomous state’ – including institutional forms such as the World Bank – is, according to Cammack, crucial to maintain the social and political mechanisms by which the latter two ‘logics’ are underpinned. Cammack, however, stresses that there is no guarantee that an institution will successfully achieve the relative autonomy that is systemically functional.

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6 Cammack 2003, p. 41.
7 Cammack 2003, p. 43.
8 Even within the confines of structural-functionalist analysis, this is an odd formulation. It appears to confuse competitiveness (the struggle between individual capitals) with profitability (based on the extraction of surplus-value from labour-in-general) by capital-in-general.
9 Cammack 2003, p. 42.
Relative autonomy thus appears as a crucial theoretical component in Cammack’s ‘new materialism’ and one which underscores the character of his subsequent analysis. However, to suggest that the Bank is institutionally autonomous from the US and other leading shareholders and capitalist interests is not a statement derived from theoretical acumen but simply describes surface appearances of the Bank’s institutional structure and quotidian operations. In this respect, Cammack’s approach is notable for its similarity to contemporary liberal-institutionalist perspectives on global governance.10

Much like Cammack, liberal institutionalism grounds the principle of relative autonomy in functional imperatives: to function adequately, the World Bank is required to operate in an autonomous, impartial and rule-bound manner in order to provide satisfactory solutions to global development quandaries.11

Although Cammack presents an interpretation of the Bank’s relative autonomy which is similar to that of mainstream theory, he offers a profoundly different interpretation of its purpose. From the liberal perspective, the utopia of an integrated global marketplace presents a bountiful future of harmonious positive-sum games conducted by utility-maximising individuals leading to economic growth, poverty reduction and – as predicted by neoclassical trade theory – a convergence of global income levels. For Cammack, in contrast, the promotion of global accumulation represents the expansion of a class relationship predicated on exploitation, domination and the production of a massive global reserve labour army. At issue in reconstructing a Marxist approach to the World Bank, however, is not merely to invert the conclusions of mainstream social science, but to explode their theoretical foundations by explicating the real relations that are hidden by surface appearances.

The functionalist character of Cammack’s relative-autonomy theory imparts significant weaknesses rendering it unsuited to this task. An immediate question concerns how it is possible to know whether the World Bank has achieved the relative autonomy that Cammack suggests global capital needs. Given Cammack’s emphasis on the necessity of relative autonomy for systemic reproduction, one can only conclude that the continued existence of the system implies that autonomy must have been sufficiently attained. This ahistorical form of argument, common to structural-functionalist analyses, stands on a

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11 Despite political differences, this is the position adopted by both Woods 2003 and Cammack. Gilbert, Powell and Vines 2000 provide the clearest interpretation of the World Bank in this manner.
profundely circular basis. By assuming what he needs to prove (that is, that relative autonomy is necessary for the system to function), the argument rapidly breaks down into tautology. As a result, Cammack never explicitly specifies the extent to which contemporary international financial institutions (IFIs) have become ‘relatively autonomous’, despite this being the cornerstone of his theory. Instead, he presents multiple caveats indicating the improbability of a successful bid for relative autonomy and the unlikelihood of a single hegemonic perspective emerging even if this were to happen, while at the same time proceeding in his analysis precisely as if the IMF and World Bank have achieved autonomy and enjoy a common unitary perspective. In this manner, the rhetoric of relative autonomy acts as a cloak in which virtually any empirical perspective can be wrapped without actually providing substantive explanatory power.

A more historically-grounded perspective would show that the dynamics of co-operation and conflict between Bank and leading shareholders cannot be ignored under the guise of a functionally derived autonomy. Quite the contrary, such relations are intrinsic to global capitalism and are underscored by cycles of global crisis that condition state relations to the Bank. Cammack is ambiguous on this point, with his analysis at times recognising these dynamics, yet ultimately suppressing them under the theoretical dogma of a functionally-determined need for autonomy. Given that the 1990s have been a decade wrought with crisis, such dynamics do not lie far below the surface of the World Bank’s recent history. Particularly evident has been the US Treasury’s pressure upon the IMF and the World Bank to resolve the 1994–5 Mexican Peso Crisis and East-Asian Crisis in manners acceptable to the US executive and Wall Street. Furthermore, it is hard to ignore the immense pressures placed upon Bank President James Wolfensohn by the US to fire Chief Economist Joe Stiglitz and to moderate the content of the World Development Report 2000–1, which led to the resignation of project leader Ravi Kanbur. Moreover, the recent pressure upon the Bank to fundamentally restructure the International Development Agency (IDA) branch of the World Bank in the image of the Bush administration’s Millennium Challenge Account is an issue yet to be resolved.

14 See Wade 2002.
15 See Pincus and Winters 2002 and Soederberg 2004. Indeed, Cammack does not
The outcomes of such struggles are formed through institutionally embedded mediations between Bank and states, as well as between internal Bank factions. Empirical accounts, moreover, suggest that confrontations normally lead to some form of accommodation and compromise. What is at stake theoretically, therefore, is not the question of relative autonomy that preoccupies both liberal institutionalists and Cammack alike, but the nature and dynamics of global capitalism, which simultaneously drives these struggles and conditions the terrain upon which they are played out. As elaborated below, structural-functionalist notions of the ‘logics’ of accumulation and legitimation cannot adequately capture the complexity of these dynamics.

II. Hegemony and the World Bank

In contrast to mainstream international-relations theory, the relative autonomy concept employed by Cammack does enjoy the advantage of introducing the notion of ‘capitalist interests’ that he suggests exert influence upon – or even ‘capture’ – international financial institutions. Although Cammack leaves the theoretical underpinnings and empirical elaboration of this conceptualisation in a frustratingly underdeveloped state, it is nonetheless useful to address the general theoretical tenets. In Cammack’s usage, the notion of capitalist interests relates to competing fractions of capital as defined by specific sources of revenue derived from particular locations in the accumulation process. In this respect, Cammack notes the competition between: ‘industrial, commercial and financial capital; sectors and concerns with different levels of insertion and competitiveness in domestic and global economies; and the implications of these variations for class relations and orientations towards class politics’. Owing to competition between these capitals, each may have ‘competing projects focused specifically upon the governance of global capitalism’, although we are given no indication of how these interests are organised or the institutional channels through which they exert themselves upon the Bank.

For the purpose of analysing global capitalism and the international institutions, this neo-Gramscian influence is to be welcomed for re-asserting the importance of production and intercapitalist conflicts in the analysis of

touch upon the widely recognised influence of the US executive within the IDA owing to this institution’s dependence upon direct state funding.

17 Cammack 2003, p. 41.
18 Ibid.
global power relations and the institutional forms they assume. However, the analysis provided is partial. To its strength, the analysis focuses upon how capitalist social relations give rise to political struggles between capitals over regulatory and distributive issues, and how these struggles can become articulated at an international level. At issue for Cammack, therefore, is how the governance of global capitalism is determined through, on the one hand, political struggles over the ‘strategic projects’ that are directly related to the particular material interests of specific capitals; and, on the other, the ability of institutions to resist the latter in order to serve the presumed functional requirements of the system.

Notably, while Cammack highlights the agency of ‘capitalist interests’, he surprisingly (and unjustifiably) ignores the impact of other social actors, including those commonly labelled as ‘global civil society’ or the ‘antiglobalisation’ movement. Indeed, Cammack reduces struggle to the level of intercapitalist conflict without examining the much wider scope of struggles that have impacted upon the World Bank in recent years and that have thrust it into a defensive re-examination of some of its lending philosophies and operating principles.19 Even on its own terms, therefore, Cammack’s usage of relative autonomy restricts our understanding of the Bank within a remarkably narrow set of relationships.

Aside from this serious omission, however, it is notable that Cammack’s theorisation does not proceed beyond a radical pluralism in which competing capitalist interest groups are understood sociologically as enjoying divergent resources that give rise to politicised competitive struggles. It is therefore a prime example of the Weberian pluralism identified by Peter Burnham as a common weakness of neo-Gramscian analysis.20 This over-politicisation of the dynamics of global capitalism results from a refusal to examine the contradictory social form of global capitalist relations, the inherent crisis tendencies they engender, and the manner by which they simultaneously give rise to and condition a multiplicity of social struggles.

The heart of the problem is that, despite assertions to the contrary, the levels of analysis employed in the neo-Gramscian approaches on which Cammack draws are not dialectical in a Marxist sense.21 Marxist dialectical

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19 There is a growing literature on the interactions between the World Bank and social movements; see O’Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams 2000 and Bond 2004 for different angles.
21 See, for example, the levels of analysis outlined in Cox 1996, p. 101, and repeated
analysis moves between different levels of abstraction in order to locate the
determination of social forms in the concrete practices of human beings within
historically specific social relations.\footnote{See, for example, Postone 1993.} Whereas the ‘new materialism’ operates
at the level of surface appearances – depicting global capitalism as the pursuit
of accumulation by established interests who must concurrently secure their
hegemony within this process – the old materialism allows us to comprehend
how the social and material reproduction of global capitalist society is mediated
through abstract yet dominating social force (the movement of value) that
imposes itself in a seemingly objective fashion upon all social actors.

On this basis, the central contradiction of capitalist development is the
subsumption of material production (the creation of useful things) within
the contradictory and struggle-driven dynamics of value (the alienated
social form of capitalist production). The most explicit manifestation of this
contradiction is the subordination of social needs to the appropriation of
profit, although its more developed forms are the uneven and crisis-prone
trajectory of accumulation. Whilst Cammack makes rhetorical gestures towards
the contradictory trajectory of global capitalism, the latter forms no part of
his substantive analysis except as a foil under which to smuggle in the
functional necessity of relative autonomy. In this vein, he posits the World
Bank as a potential functional solution to the contradictions of global capital,
rather than a developed expression of them. The World Bank, however, is
singularly unable to overcome these contradictions, not least because they
are not reducible to the formal problems of a ‘lack of competitiveness’ of
specific capitalist interests, nor the ‘need for hegemony’ of a particular social
class. Rather, they are fundamental social contradictions that exist at the very
heart of capitalist development and structure the social and material terrain
within which the World Bank exists.

III. The World Bank and the contradictions of global capitalism

The subsumption of the World Bank into global capitalist social relations
imparts a complex and contradictory character upon the Bank. In contrast to
Cammack’s vision of the World Bank as the ‘relatively autonomous’ avatar
of the ‘logics’ of global capitalism, it is important to emphasise that the Bank

in Bieler and Morton 2003. Similar to Cammack, these authors present a systemic
analysis in which different levels of analysis – social forces, state forms and world
orders – are understood as different yet interrelated structures within a system.
is wracked by contradictions. As observers of the World Bank from a variety of political and intellectual perspectives have highlighted, during the 1990s the organisation has been plagued by contradictory goals, tendencies towards repeated bouts of expansion beyond its capacities, conflicts between departments and with the US Treasury, sub-standard research, weak lending philosophies, the personal failings of its management, and a marked failure to make any serious impact on economic and social crisis in the global South.23 These pervasive irrationalities of the World Bank’s institutional form, its development practices and its intellectual production must be comprehended not primarily as a result of a lack of ‘relative autonomy’ from specific interests, but on the basis of the contradictions of global capitalist social relations within which the World Bank is subsumed.

As an international organisation established to channel money capital to promote capitalist development in the South under the aegis of US-led liberal internationalism, the contradictory nature of global capitalist development quickly enveloped the Bank. In spite of the early optimism that the modernisation of the South would be a relatively quick and harmonious process, capitalist development proved to be dramatically uneven and gave rise to a multiplicity of new problems and struggles. The Bank responded by expanding repeatedly its operations and objectives, therein augmenting its involvement in the contradictory dynamics of capitalist development in the South.24 Through this historical process, the World Bank became integrally involved in a paradoxical project of fostering capitalist development in the global South while concurrently attempting to assuage the contradictions inherent to the latter.25

Within this context, the Bank is under considerable pressure to make its forms of intervention pertinent to the struggle-driven dynamics of uneven development in the South. This is a key medium through which the contradictions and social conflicts over capitalist development and restructuring become expressed within the Bank. Unlike the IMF – which in the current era has remained much truer to its neoliberal fundamentals – the World Bank

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24 Such changes were particularly evident in the period of Robert McNamara’s presidency at the Bank (1968–81). The latter was a period of dramatic institutional expansion as the organisation attempted to mediate the effects of uneven development in the South that were exacerbated by an incipient crisis of overaccumulation at a global level.
is a vast organisation that is much more firmly embedded in the South, owing to a plethora of institutional linkages and long-term projects involving governments, NGOs, and the private sector. In response to the unfolding of contradictions within specific national states and at a global level, the Bank is constantly impelled to re-assess its practices and underlying philosophies within a conflict-driven institutional process.

In the contemporary period, this dynamic has assumed a particular form within the Bank. Specifically, despite the neoliberal belief that subordination to global monetary disciplines would secure an era of harmonious prosperity in the South, the promised rewards of structural adjustment following the 1982 debt crisis largely failed to materialise. In contrast to the world of prosperity under the tutelage of liberated market forces, as predicted by the ideologues of the Washington Consensus, two decades of neoliberal restructuring were widely recognised as being characterised by profoundly uneven development, including increased inequality at the global level and, if China is excluded from the sample, increased global poverty. Indeed, if all ‘developing countries’ were ordered according to economic performance and poverty reduction, then those with the strongest adherence to the major tenets of the Washington Consensus (many Latin-American countries and some in Africa) would be placed far down the list. In contrast, those countries heading the list (China, India, East and South-East Asia) have, in different ways, deviated widely from the Washington approach. Moreover, the 1990s were marked by the spectre of intense financial volatility that brought drastic economic and social devastation to many of the Bank’s most acclaimed success stories (for example, Mexico 1995, S.E. Asia 1997, Brazil and Russia 1998; Argentina 2001).

That the Bank is actively attempting to find ways to re-invent its practices is an indication of the degree to which alternative policy packages need to be developed in face of growing contradictions in the global South and the political repercussions that these instil. Market-driven restructuring heightened the conflictual tendencies inherent to capitalist social relations and has induced strong pressures upon national states to actively intervene in the relations of social reproduction. In this manner, from the late 1980s, governments across the global South have faced the recurrent necessity of re-inventing adjustment policies in order to address issues of governability in a period of escalating

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26 See Wade 2004.
social polarisation. A major trend in Latin America, for example, has been to introduce various forms of ‘neoliberalism with a human face’, many of which foreshadow the World Bank’s current discourse by almost a decade. The latter include, for example, the Chilean ‘Growth with Equity’ strategy, Carlos Salinas’s ‘social liberalism’ in Mexico, and more recently, the attempts of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio da Silva (Lula) to counter rampant social deprivation within the context of neoliberal style macro-economic management. Each has involved novel attempts at modifying the institutional form of the state in order to mediate the social struggles engendered in the conflict-ridden project of societal restructuring.  

IV. The Bank as a reactive mediator

Such developments imposed mounting pressure for a change in the operating practices of the Bank in order to project a renewed relevance of Bank doctrines to the concrete problems faced by governments in the South. Despite various forms of institutional inertia – including pressure from leading states and interest groups – such pressures have eventually led to a partial and fragmentary reconfiguring of Bank doctrines. Far from being a smooth incremental rationalisation of its instrumentally designed neoliberal project, the Bank has been forced to rethink reactively its development prescription as it is carried by the force of events. This rethinking has involved embracing new elements into its policy prescription, many of which have theoretical bases and substantive implications that differ from the standard neoclassical approach and inject substantial tensions into the Bank’s overall prescription.

Cammack is drawn to seeing these shifts purely in terms of their instrumental disciplinary content without any recognition that they have emerged as a fragmented reaction to crisis, that they have provoked intense conflict and compromise between different factions of the Bank and between the Bank and US executive, and that they necessarily introduce tensions into the World Bank’s philosophy and operations. In this vein, it is important not to take the Bank’s self-representation as the pre-eminent global development leader at

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27 See Green 2003. Post-Pinochet Chile is a good example of an attempt at a ‘Third-Way’ neoliberalism in Latin America; see Taylor 2003. Likewise, Morton 2003 and Soederberg 2001 provide interesting accounts of ‘passive revolutions’ in 1990s Mexico.

face value. Notably, Bank research is often characterised by manifold weaknesses that frustrate its ability to decisively influence ongoing policy debates. See, for example, Nustad 2002 and Fine 2001, Chapters 8 and 9. Similarly, it is suggested that Bank theorisation and prescription frequently lags several years – and sometimes as much as a decade – behind significant issues thrown up by restructuring processes in the South. This is because knowledge production at the Bank commonly involves selecting prototype programmes from among those that have already been instigated by governments in the South, removing their social, geographical and historical specificities and linking them to its wider comprehension of capitalist development.

The ideological propagation of the Bank therefore assumes the form of an attempted rationalisation of processes that are often well-developed in many countries. It constitutes an endeavour to give ideological coherence to pre-existing forms of restructuring by tying them to a wider body of ‘scientific knowledge’ that is backed up by the financial clout of the organisation. These points can be briefly concretised through an analysis of the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), the institutional form through which the Bank currently processes all borrowing agreements with the world’s heavily indebted poor countries.

V. Perspectives on the Comprehensive Development Framework

The introduction of the CDF as a model of development practice has been achieved through a remodelling of structural adjustment lending by the IMF and World Bank under the new motif of ‘Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers’ (PRSPs). The latter envision a clear yet complementary division of labour between the IMF and World Bank, a relationship that World Bank President James Wolfensohn referred to as ‘breathing in and breathing out’. Whilst the IMF will concentrate on a familiar range of macro-economic policies and objectives, albeit with each reform rationalised in terms of its projected effect on poverty reduction, the World Bank is now responsible for overseeing the ‘social and structural’ policies of participating countries. It is for performing

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29 See, for example, Nustad 2002 and Fine 2001, Chapters 8 and 9.
31 Wolfensohn 1999, p. 2. This metaphor served to gloss over the very real tensions between the two IFIs, demonstrated most publicly in a spat between IMF staff and World Bank Chief Economist Joe Stiglitz.
these functions within the formation of national PRSPs that the World Bank has unveiled the CDF.

The CDF represents a management tool for this purpose. First, it offers guiding principles for all development practice, including enhanced country ownership of development goals and actions and more strategic partnership amongst stakeholders. Second, it highlights the areas of ‘social and structural’ policy that must be addressed in all national development programmes. The latter policies are to be formed with respect to the World Bank’s new development ‘matrix’ that identifies fourteen broad areas that the Bank suggests comprise the hitherto undervalued institutional, human and physical dimensions of development strategy. The latter range from ‘good governance’ and the rule of law, through to social safety nets, education, health, rural and urban strategies and environmental and cultural dimensions.\(^{32}\) Together, they form an ambitious policy agenda covering a holistic range of issues that widens the scope of policy and institutional reform well beyond the original ‘Washington Consensus’.

From the prism of his ‘new materialism’, Cammack analyses the CDF in terms of its disciplinary aspects.\(^{33}\) At one level, he sees the CDF as giving the World Bank increasing scope for an unprecedented level of intervention in the affairs of sovereign states. At another, the CDF is argued to present a Trojan horse through which externally designed policies can be smuggled into the South under the guise of ‘country ownership’, despite each country in theory designing and implementing the programme of reforms through consultative engagement with civil society and the private sector. For Cammack, therefore, Wolfensohn’s claim that the establishment of the CDF is merely ‘a tool to have greater co-operation, transparency and partnership’ can be dismissed as a façade. In the terms of ‘new materialism’, the matrix allows the Bank to serve its ‘logic of accumulation’ function by increasing the coercive powers of the Bank to force borrowing countries to adopt reforms that serve the interests of established capitalist interests. Simultaneously, the ‘logic of legitimation’ can be served by shrouding the former function under the guise of country ownership and consultative development.

At first glance, and despite not presenting any case-study referents, Cammack’s account appears plausible, owing to the undeniable surveillance and disciplinary aspects present in the CDF. In holding the purse strings and

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\(^{32}\) Wolfensohn 1999, pp. 5–10.

\(^{33}\) See Cammack 2002.
wielding veto powers, the IMF and World Bank exercise considerable clout over client countries. Put simply, no borrowing country would produce a final draft that, in its general tenets, deviates far from established Bank prescription. The Bank and IMF conveniently ignore these power relations and Cammack is right to criticise them. Nonetheless, the genesis and workings of the CDF are far more complex than Cammack’s approach allows for. When viewed against the backdrop of the widespread failure of neoliberal-style capitalist development and the mounting critique of World Bank programmes in the 1990s, the introduction of the concepts of ‘country ownership’ and ‘participatory development’ must be taken more seriously.

On the one hand, ownership – whereby countries are expected to ‘determine the goals and the phasing, timing and sequencing of programmes’ – explicitly aims at improving the viability and efficiency of programme designs through a specialisation of functions. As Cammack rightly stresses, accepting the CDF framework necessarily involves acceptance of the larger paradigm of economic liberalisation monitored by the IMF. To overemphasise this aspect, however, is to miss how the Bank has recognised the imperative of giving governments greater leeway in mediating specific national and subnational contradictions within the context of the crisis-prone uneven development of capital. In this respect, ownership indeed provides the grounds for national governments to take the lead in establishing policies and programmes with respect to local conditions and idiosyncrasies – including the trajectory of social struggles and the specific concrete tensions that restructuring had engendered – that the World Bank is singularly unable to address.

Similarly, civil-society groups and community groups are included within the deliberation process to overcome the weaknesses encountered in previous Bank-funded development projects. A shift towards more participatory development projects had begun in the 1980s as a response to widespread recognition that externally imposed and expert-orientated forms of research and implementation showed serious shortcomings in terms of high project failure rates. Participatory development, therefore, is based on the principle that recipient groups and communities are in a privileged position to know their own needs, allowing accurate information regarding the kind of micro-projects necessary to promote capitalist development to float upwards through

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34 See Pincus and Winters 2002.
35 See Cammack 2003, p. 53.
the deliberation process. This is intended to lead to better-targeted projects that will have greater chances for success.

Without doubt, these processes do not occur within the pluralist framework that the Bank proclaims. Power relations permeate all participatory development initiatives and the spheres of influence for subordinate groups are clearly demarcated to micro-levels. Nonetheless, participatory development, even in this constrained manner, goes far beyond Cammack’s formalistic notion of ‘gaining consent’. Furthermore, the Bank’s actions have opened up new areas for struggle as different groups contest what it means to be ‘included’ and ‘empowered’. Emerging empirical case studies provide support for an interpretation of ownership and participation not as a mere smokescreen but as a contradictory attempt at incorporating diverse social groups into a constrained realm of decision-making in order to promote both efficiency and legitimacy.

To end, the CDF presents not the resolution of the contradictions of global capitalism but merely an institutionalised expression of them. It is not simply an audacious attempt by the World Bank to become the ‘mother of all governments’, as Cammack alleges, but an expression of the World Bank’s rearguard reaction to the contradictions of uneven development manifested at a plethora of different levels. Far from a show of strength, the CDF recognises the failure of previous Bank approaches as well as the very real limits that constrain its operations.

VI. Conclusion

In contrast to Cammack’s presentation of the functionally necessary relative autonomy of the World Bank that, if successfully achieved, enables it to manufacture a linear stream of intellectual production and disciplinary relations, this intervention has argued that the Bank’s institutional crystallisation within global capitalist social relations imparts a necessarily contradictory character upon the institution. The latter manifests itself in its policy prescription, substantive actions and the struggles between states and between social actors over the institutional form and policy content of the Bank. Recently, the World Bank has been seeking to re-invent its current role in the governance of global
capitalist development in accordance with the crisis-laden trajectory of global accumulation. It is doing this not as a ‘relatively-autonomous’ institution with a functionally determined mission, but as an institution operating within the reified forms of global capitalist social relations, which appear as objective and dominating realities beyond conscious control, and pressured by a range of struggles – including interstate, intercapitalist, and local and global social movements – that are inherent to those very relations.

The importance of this alternative perspective is not merely analytical but political. If we accept Cammack’s vision of an instrumental pact between international financial institutions to pursue a relatively-autonomous path toward global capitalist governance that incrementally improves its global prescription and mechanisms of enforcement, then we are faced with a seemingly omnipotent structure of global governance able to impose a comprehensively delineated neoliberal policy package through its comprehensive mechanisms of surveillance and discipline. Significantly, Cammack has no place for struggle in his analysis beyond that of intercapitalist competition. On the other hand, by understanding the World Bank as an institution laden with contradictions, driven by the manifest failures of global capitalist development over the last two decades and threatened by a plethora of struggles ranging from those of dominant member states, to those of global social movements and localised struggles in client countries, then a far less disempowering comprehension of the Bank is attainable. Understanding the dynamics of the World Bank is, of course, no substitute for changing them, but one hopes that it can play a role towards this purpose.

References


Review Articles

Global Finance. New Thinking on Regulating Speculative Capital Flows
Edited by WALDEN BELLO, NICOLA BULLARD AND KAMAL MALHOTRA

Irrational Exuberance
ROBERT J. SHILLER

KAVALJIT SINGH

Reviewed by ANASTASIA NESVETAILOVA

Although the three books under review share a common concern about the heightened financial instability and crisis in today’s economy, they differ significantly in their understanding of global financial instability. Shiller offers an unusually heterodox – for a professor of economics – insight into the dynamics of the speculative stock-market boom in the American economy during the 1990s. Yet, although his study of the irrationality of speculative manias, their causes and aftermaths is compelling, he fails to maintain a critical line of inquiry in his suggestions on how to find an alternative mechanism of international financial management. Singh’s Taming Global Financial Flows offers a radical account of the post-Bretton Woods financial revolution that has brought instability and crises to all parts of the globe, but has affected the developing world most painfully. The accessibility of material and Singh’s skilfull synthesis of theory and practice of global finance explain why the volume has quickly become one of the core undergraduate texts for the students of international political economy (IPE).

The collection edited by Bello, Bullard and Malhotra is of equal interest to advanced students of IPE and professional audience. The contributors present an orderly selection of research papers on the globalisation of finance and key aspects of (international) financial regulation. Like the two other texts, the essays are concerned with the perils of modern financial sophistication and attendant crises of global financial capitalism.
At the same time in its normative stance, the volume is more in tune with Singh’s radical critique of financial capitalism than with Shiller’s positivistic observations about the irrationality of financial markets.

Although the scholars adopt diverse normative positions and target different levels of readership, they address several common themes. First, the three volumes analyse the post-Bretton Woods evolution of the international financial system and identify key institutional and structural changes in the organisation of the capitalist economy that account for recent outbreaks of financial crises. Second, the authors, though to varying degrees, point out the perils unleashed by the ascent of global financial capitalism and, specifically, by the disjointed development of the financial sector in relation to the real economy. Third, the volumes also attempt to evaluate the viability of recent proposals for reform of the international financial system. In what follows, this review essay draws upon key common themes covered in the three texts and elaborates on their broader conceptual and policy implications.

**Finance and ‘new economy’ euphorias**

The first thread uniting the three texts reviewed here, as well as many other contemporary analyses of global finance, is the reference to the apparent supremacy of finance vis-à-vis other elements of the capitalist system in driving the present-day economic development (Bello et al., p. 2). The end of the Bretton Woods régime, the IT revolution, the collapse of the Soviet empire and the spread of the neoliberal ideology across the world have facilitated an unprecedented upsurge in economic integration generally, and in the volume and speed of international financial trade in particular (see Singh). The defeat of inflation across the globe, the extraordinary economic performance of the Asian ‘tigers’ up until 1996–7 and, importantly, the ostensibly stable foundations of the 1990s technological and investment boom in the USA, were key components of the ‘new economy’ paradigm. The latter conveyed that achieving economic growth, high employment and low inflation – aims that economic theory previously considered as irreconcilable – was now a feasible economic target. As Shiller argues (p. 96), the general trend over the twentieth century has been a rise in the standard of living and a decline in the impact of economic risks on individuals. By many measures, the world has been gradually growing into a new and better era. Yet, along with such records, this transition has brought along unforeseen and formidable dangers. In the realm of finance herd instincts, speculative motives and short-termism not only constrain the policy scope of national governments but also deeply affect the lives of ordinary citizens in all parts of the world through increasingly frequent financial crises, currency collapses and economic recessions. Not only the traditionally vulnerable ‘emerging economies’ but also many sectors at the very heart of the capitalist system – the US corporate economy – suffered from the exigencies of financial speculation in the late 1990s. Thus, on the one hand, considering the magnitude of recent outbreaks
of crisis in Latin America, East Asia, Eastern Europe and the USA itself, it is tempting to view the heightened fragility of global finance as a prelude to a crash that would make 1929 look like a footnote in history.

On the other hand, however, a longer insight into the evolution of capitalism prevents many observers from making bold statements about the novel role of finance in today’s economy. Arrighi, for instance, points to the existence of long capitalist cycles, and compares the perceived centrality of today’s finance to economic development with the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was playing an equally crucial role. The language and concepts have changed, but the idea that finance capital constitutes a new, latest, highest phase/stage in the development of capitalism is at least as widely held today as it was a century ago. Therefore, those who believe that global finance is a truly new, latest phase of capitalism are too short-sighted to ‘detect a long-term cyclical dynamic within historical capitalism’.

Shiller continues this cautionary line of critique, explaining how the claims about ‘new eras’ of economic prosperity engender overly optimistic expectations on behalf of investors, that in turn facilitate the snow-ball effects of stock-markets booms, speculative bubbles and their inevitable crashes. Indeed, he writes, as early as 1925, there were claims that ‘there is nothing now to be foreseen which can prevent the USA from enjoying an era of business prosperity which is entirely without equal in the ages of trade history’ (p. 104). Shiller further cites Moody’s 1928 article about the stock market: ‘in fact, a new age is taking form throughout the entire civilized world; civilization is taking on new aspects. We are only now beginning to realise, perhaps, that this modern, mechanistic civilization in which we live is now in the process of perfecting itself’ (p. 105). One of the most serious dangers of such overly optimistic perceptions about ‘new economic era’, Shiller writes, is that it concentrates attention on the events currently prominent in the news and very little attention is paid to ‘what-ifs’.

Analysing the most recent ‘new economy’ boom in the USA, Shiller identifies several groups of forces – structural, cultural and psychological – that have facilitated the stock-market boom of the 1990s. Among the most significant factors, he lists the internet revolution, Ponzi mentality and herd instincts prevalent in investor circles, the role of the media in propagating the new stock-market culture, and the ideas of the ‘new economic age’ that, as he writes, are responsible for much of the irrational exuberance. Analysing the history of stock-market crashes and socio-economic factors that have preceded them, Shiller warns that the sense of ‘victory’ of capitalist economies that developed during the 1990s is not likely to persist indefinitely (p. 208). Hence the author does acknowledge that the most salient characteristic of ‘new era’ thinking is that it ‘occurs in pulses’ (p. 96).

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So what is new about the global financial capitalism of today? Bello et al. offer some satisfactory answers to this question. To them, like to Shiller, the significance of the current stage of financial ascendance goes beyond the rapid internationalisation of capital markets and an expansion of global liquidity. New financial capitalism came about through disintermediation, increased securitisation, arbitrage activities and ‘over the counter’ trading that together seriously impede the efficiency of measures on financial regulation and crisis prevention (pp. 2–5). But the most serious consequence of the current phase of financial ascent is that it severely suppresses the traditional ‘real’ economy of production, jobs and trade.

The subject of the disjuncture between real and financial economies, or a relative autonomy of finance, is rather well rehearsed in political economy, especially in its Marxian tradition. Capitalism has always been about making money with money, and, historically, there has always existed a delicate balance of power between the financial sector, the real economy and the state. But the breakdown of the Bretton Woods régime in 1973 induced the empowerment of finance vis-à-vis the traditional (national) economy and the state. This shift had led to an explosive growth of new financial instruments and markets, coupled with the rise of highly sophisticated systems of financial co-ordination on a global scale. As many radical analysts maintain, the elusive world of finance has effectively become a kind of free-floating signifier detached from the real economic processes to which it once referred.

By providing economic incentives to gamble, the global finance capital diverts funds from long-term productive investments. It encourages banks and other financial institutions to maintain a régime of higher real interest rates that significantly reduced the ability of productive industries and enterprises to access credit facilities. Herd instincts and ‘irrational exuberance’ of investors aggravate uncertainty and volatility in interest and exchange rates. This volatility is detrimental to various sectors of the real economy, particularly trade. It also undermines efforts by governments to support full employment and reduce inequality (Singh, p. 13). Since 1980, the global stock of financial assets (shares, bonds, banks deposits and cash) has increased more than twice as fast as the GDP of rich economies, from $12 trillion in 1980 to almost $80 trillion today (Singh, p. 12). The values of the price-to-earnings ratios in the US corporate sector during the late 1990s were well over forty – far outside the historical range (Shiller, pp. 12–13). Therefore, it is this disciplining effect of global finance, exercised over developed and developing countries alike, that leads many to believe that ‘the financial system has achieved a degree of autonomy from real production unprecedented in capitalism’s history, carrying capitalism into an era of equally unprecedented financial dangers’.

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4 Harvey 1990, p. 194.
The imperialism of finance was consolidated by neoliberal governmental policies.\textsuperscript{5} Connected to depressive macro-economic trends, this régime transformed emerging economies’ debt into a trap, aggravating the economic, social and ecological situation of most non-OECD countries.\textsuperscript{6} Relying on its own institutions and networks, global finance attempts to obtain protection against risks, transferring the consequences to others and socialising its losses in times of turbulence and crisis. Doing so, it can deepen and create new crises and, thus, jeopardise growth and employment. At the same time, the actual benefits realised by finance during the last two decades are conspicuous: everywhere, the rise of real interest rates transferred large resources into the financial sector. While one should never underestimate the suffering of the unemployed and homeless, or of the developing countries, perhaps the biggest cost stemming from the rise of finance is the increase in the national and international financial fragility.\textsuperscript{7} This observation brings us to the next item on the authors’ agenda in their studies in international financial volatility: stock-market bubbles and financial crises.

\textbf{A post-Bretton Woods financial crisis}

Although the three volumes approach the phenomenon of financial crisis from diverse analytical frameworks, it is the rejection of orthodox economic understanding of the crisis as a result of government policy flaws and corrupt corporate systems that unites them. From his study of economics, psychology and behavioural finance, Shiller observes that the US stock market of the late 1990s displayed the classical features of a speculative bubble: a situation in which temporarily high prices are sustained largely by investors’ enthusiasm, rather than by consistent estimation of real value (p. xiii). He compellingly demonstrates that the investment boom of the late 1990s in fact disguised a huge technology and financial bubble. It incorporated all major elements of the latter: the emergence of new and potentially transforming technology; a climate of relatively easy credit conditions; investor and consumer optimism; an efficient supply machine, capable of creating new companies; and, not least, ‘suspension of normal valuation and other assessment criteria’. As a result, today investors, companies and economies are struggling with the aftermath of what might have been the biggest of such bubbles.\textsuperscript{8}

The system-wide nature of the present crisis implies that, along with the scandalous bankruptcies of the dot.com companies and plummeting asset values, the creditworthiness of the capital market-based capitalism came under intense scrutiny.

\textsuperscript{5} See Gill 2002.
\textsuperscript{6} See Serfati 2000.
\textsuperscript{7} See Duménil and Lévy 2001, p. 581.
\textsuperscript{8} See Wolf 2002.
The principles of ‘money-manager’ capitalism, the flaws of which were depicted much earlier by the likes of Galbraith and Minsky, seem to be in shatters. The tendency for speculative bubbles to grow and then contract, Shiller continues,

"can make for very uneven distribution of wealth. It may even cause many of us, at times, to question the very viability of our capitalist institutions. It is for such reasons that we must be clear on the prospect for such contradictions and on what should be our individual and national policy regarding this prospect. (p. 204.)"

Such a radical conclusion is remarkable for a professor of economics, and Shiller’s illuminating analysis explains why his book has become a frequent reference in mainstream publications such as *The Economist* and *Financial Times*.

The two other texts, although much more critical of the very nature of capitalist institutions than Shiller’s, discuss similar features of speculative finance in relation to the developing economies. Singh approaches the problem of financial revolution and crises from a framework of Marxian political economy. Like Shiller, he recognises the far-reaching dangers of financial speculation and the ascendance of global finance. Yet, to him, the major cause of the current financial crisis is not confined to the conjunctural changes in the economy. Rather, he argues, the problem is rooted in the inherent tendencies of the capitalist system itself: overcapacity and overproduction, and the growing domination of finance capital over the real economy. The ‘casino capitalism’ of today is awash with the examples of financial volatility and crises, and the emerging economies of the developing world are most susceptible to financial crises and economic recessions. The latter, Singh argues, are caused mainly by the abundance of fictitious capital and the shortage of long-term productive investments. Specifically, Singh identifies several features that have marked the global financial crisis of the 1990s. First, the frequency of crises has increased sharply all over the world, yet it is the developing economies that suffer most painfully in times of financial panics. There, the costs of financial liberalisation and an open capital account are huge because volatile capital flows can cause sharp swings in real exchange rates and financial markets; thereby exacerbating systemic fragility of finance and the real economy (p. 58). Second, the cumulative costs of these crises are enormous in terms of bank defaults, closures, losses in output, unemployment and poverty levels. Third, in the economy integrated through interwoven financial and trade networks, a crisis that had initially started in one country can easily spread to other countries and regions. Therefore, it is clear that global financial liberalisation has enhanced systemic financial fragility; and that, without exception, the real economy is the worst victim (pp. 49–52).

Bello and his co-authors concur with Singh’s vision of the growing disjuncture between finance and production, and the corresponding dangers of global arbitrage
games: ‘Diminishing, if not vanishing returns to key industries have led to capital being shifted from the real economy to squeezing “value” out of the financial sector’ (p. 6). The rise of finance may be related to the crisis of dwindling growth or even deflation that has increasingly overtaken the real sectors of the global economy. This crisis has its roots in overcapacity or underconsumption, which today marks global industries from automobiles to energy to capital goods (p. 5).

In order to illustrate the severity of the disembeddedness of global financial flows, Bello et al. provide detailed case studies of Mexican and East-Asian crises that both display distinctive features of a ‘post-Bretton Woods financial crisis’ (p. 10). In contrast to orthodox economic focus on the flawed domestic systems of economic management, the contributors examine the supply structure of international financial flows into the crisis-hit countries. Specifically, they analyse the massive inflows of foreign funds into these economies in the form of bank credit, speculative investment and currency speculation (p. 1). Back in the 1980s, they argue, the ravaged state of the real economies in the Third World was not perceived as a critical barrier to further capital flows by Northern financial interests; and international capital markets started pouring money into Latin America. After years of net outflows, net capital inflow into the region came to $7 billion in 1991, rising to $31 billion in 1992 and $32 billion in 1993. Inevitably, as the inflow of portfolio investments ceased, the countries faced a severe crisis of investment confidence and currency collapses (p. 8).

In the mid-1990s, Thailand also illustrated the fatal flaws of a development model based on huge and rapid infusions of foreign capital. Just as in Mexico, there emerged a basic contradiction between encouraging foreign capital inflows and keeping an exchange rate that would make the country’s exports competitive in world markets. The former demanded a currency pegged to the dollar at a stable level in order to draw in foreign investors. With the dollar appreciating in 1995 and 1996, so did the pegged South-East-Asian currencies – and so did the international prices of South-East-Asian exports. This process cut deeply into the competitiveness of economies that had staked their growth on ever-increasing exports (p. 14).

These structural problems were exacerbated by the predominance of speculative investments in East Asia. Shiller, for example, notes that the stock market was already down from its peak by December 1996, before there was any hint of a crisis. It appears that the collapse of a speculative bubble in East Asia preceded the crisis and was part of the ambience that produced the crisis (Shiller, p. 130). Together, the intertwined elements of Ponzi schemes that have become the primary mode of operation of the international financial markets, and the deepening disjunctures within contemporary capitalism point out that crises are an expression of structural tendencies in the global financial capitalism. The historical ‘boom and bust’ nature of capitalism’s evolution has been aggravated by the policies of financial deregulation, by the emergence of new financial instruments and by improvements in communications and information
technology. As a result, crises of volatility are now structurally inherent in the global political economy; and therefore they have to be dealt with as such, not simply as blips in what is otherwise a smooth path (Fortin in Bello et al., p. 36).

**Searching for an alternative**

In the search for a solution, the diversity of authors’ opinions becomes most explicit. Despite his compelling disclosure of the dangerous speculative spirits of contemporary financiers, Shiller’s focus on the *ad hoc*, behavioural aspects of modern finance in explaining speculative bubbles prevents him from recognising crises as an inherent feature of financial capitalism *per se*. The author does not stray far from the prevalent neoliberal doctrine in his suggestions for a better financial system. Speculative markets, he argues, perform critical resource-allocation functions, and the experience of a speculative bubble should not distract policy-makers from such important tasks: ‘Policies that interfere with markets by shutting them down or limiting them, although under some very specific circumstances apparently useful, probably should not be high on our list of solutions to the problems caused by speculative bubbles’ (p. 233). Instead, he suggests, a good outcome can be achieved by designing better forms of social insurance and creating better financial institutions to allow real risks to be managed more effectively. Overall, Shiller concludes, ‘most of the thrust of our national policies to deal with speculative bubbles should take the form of facilitating more free trade, as well as greater opportunities for people to take positions in more and freer markets’ (p. 233).

These remarks are disappointing to an inquisitive reader, mainly because the end of the 1990s has witnessed a vivid failure of the existing principles of the Washington Consensus in managing the international financial system. First of all, the analogies between commodities and financial markets, on which the proposals for increased transparency and competition are based, are fallacious because commodity markets are qualitatively different from financial markets. Whereas, in commodity markets, one good is exchanged for another, in financial markets, a product is exchanged for a future promise. Money and financial instruments are not only at the very core of every single transaction in a market economy, but, because they have no intrinsic value, they are also peculiarly susceptible to swings of confidence.¹ That is the reason why banks and financial institutions are hesitant in long-term, strategic lending (Singh, p. 44). Monetary and financial failures, in turn, entail tangible consequences for the economy and people. A reformed financial system therefore should be modified to serve the needs of real economy, and particularly those sections of society who have been marginalised by the market forces.

¹ See Eatwell and Taylor 2000, p. 12.
Second, the much debated and as yet largely futile plans for a New International Financial Architecture (NIFA) correspond to Shiller’s sentiments about the need for a more competitive and open structure of international finance. A new financial order would require a re-emergence of a mechanism of world economic governance. It should bring into play a new balance of power between USA, Europe and the developing countries, but also between the markets, the central banks and the state. Meanwhile, however, the main ‘architects’ – namely the US treasury and the IMF – remain firmly opposed to such solutions.10

Moreover, while NIFA may temporarily moderate the manifestation of the deep-seated contradictions of global capitalism based on free capital mobility, upon closer inspection, this building would aggravate more than it placates the underlying conflict in global capitalism. A growing imposition of restrictions on policy autonomy may result in increased economic problems and higher levels of repression in the developing world. In addition, the NIFA would reinforce, rather than alleviate, the vested interest of the USA in promoting financial liberalisation that lies in its low level of domestic savings.11 Even the seemingly successful experience of capital controls in Chile, Soederberg continues, should make its supporters hesitant to embrace country-level capital controls without addressing the underlying policy structures associated with national accumulation régimes and their relationship with the existing power relations in the wider global political economy. If these concerns are left unattended, capital controls can be used as a policy device to reproduce existing power structures that are founded on income polarisation as opposed to striving towards long-term economic stability and social justice.12

In this instance, one substantive problem with reform proposals listed in the volumes lies in their conceptualisation of finance vis-à-vis the real economy. Singh and Bello see footloose finance as the root cause of financial fragility. But, like many other critics of financial globalisation, while disclosing many intricate aspects of modern capitalism, they tend to underestimate the importance of the real productive activity in determining the impact of volatility. As Coates reminds us, underneath the movements of capital lies the world of global labour; beneath the global circuits of financial capital lie the circuits of industrial production itself. Finance is not suddenly globally mobile simply because of the IT revolution. Technological change facilitates capital mobility; the enhanced capital mobility, however, has social rather than technical roots.13

Accordingly, changes in the financial system and the real economy are always interrelated in fuelling booms and slumps. In this instance, an account of crisis offered by Brenner14 can provide a much more nuanced and fuller picture of the interrelationship

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13 See Coates 2000.
between finance and the real economy. Brenner views finance not as a disembodied force, but as an integral element of the financial system, one that reflects and affects the real economy.15

Historically, the relationship between finance and the real economy has been a reciprocal one. A strong financial sector tends to coincide with a weak real economy, and vice versa.16 In this vision, rather than seeing the 1990s merely as an era of financial instability, a more accurate way to characterise the world economy at the turn of the twenty-first century, would be as a period of sluggish growth or atrophy. It is because ‘the architects’ attach so little importance to productive activity that they miss one of the most elementary points about the relationship between finance and the real economy. Increasing regulation is, at best, secondary to the problems facing the world economy, because it does not address the fundamental problem of economic atrophy and financial accumulation. The scandal of the dot.com investments is not what is illegal: the scandal is what is legal. Moreover, reforms can easily worsen the problems they are meant to alleviate. The fear of new regulatory measures and monitoring procedures can simply strengthen risk aversion, preventing the flow of money into new territories and sectors and holding back economic development still further.17 As is notorious, the market always has a lot of innovative ways to bypass regulations and control.

In this regard, ‘a primary challenge and objective for sustainable development over the medium-to-long term will be to subordinate macro and other economic policy making to human development and social policy goals’ (Malhotra, p. 43). Specifically, Global Finance signals out two crucial requirements to enable this fundamental renewal of governance of the global economy. The first is the subordination of global-level governance mechanisms to those at the local, regional and national levels, following the principle of subsidiarity. The second, which needs to happen at all four levels simultaneously, is the subordination of the financial ‘bubble’ economy to the real productive economy. In this respect, ‘deglobalizing the domestic economy’ through the policies of regionalism and national-level introduction of capital controls are recommended as vital precautions against the increasingly frequent and destructive speculative crises that affect developing countries most painfully. At the same time, Malhotra admits, merely resorting to national – or even regional – level regulatory and other measures will, of itself, be inadequate. This is because international financial liberalisation results in major increases in risk to both the national and international real economy of each country; as a result, an effective policy towards capital markets will need to be global in nature (p. 54).

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15 See Hardy 2003, p. 126.
The rest of the volume reviews the viability of a new global financial architecture and possible alternatives to Washington Consensus. At the level of international institutions, a new role for the UN in regulating global finance is discussed (Fortin, Chapter 3), as well as the need to re-establish the objectives and functions of the Bretton Woods institutions (Leaver and Seabrooke, Chapter 7). Valuable insights into policy measures on how to manage international debt crises and tame footloose capital flows are drawn from the discussions on Tobin tax, a foreign exchange transactions tax and international debt workout mechanisms.

It remains to be seen whether such analytical elaborations will be realised in practice; the previous experience of financial regulatory measures does not provide much optimism in this respect. At the same time, the synthesis of the views from academic and economic practitioners in *Global Finance* provides a solid start for mapping the ways in which to strengthen macro-economic and financial policies in the emerging markets, and, crucially, to acknowledging the necessity of systemic, institution-building character of the international aspects of financial reform.

**References**


‘How Does One Become Guy Debord’?

The highest aspiration of the revolutionary, it has been argued, is to be put out of business altogether. That is, the aim of a radical politics is to eradicate the very conditions that necessitate its emergence, and thereby dissolve the exceptional nature of its own stance. From this perspective, the contemporary fascination and nostalgia for the Situationist International (SI) might be seen, ironically, as symptomatic of the ultimate failure of their enterprise.1 The situationists, for their part, anticipated with dread the dangers of ‘recuperation’ into the Spectacle, the all-encompassing surrogate that they believed late capitalism was substituting for autonomous human experience. Here was a movement heavily steeped in aesthetic concerns that sought to challenge the very discursive and institutional specialisation of art itself. They understood from the beginning that their success could be guaranteed only in so far as they managed to engineer their own self-liquidation, and here it is tempting to see their self-destructive drinking binges and Debord’s eventual suicide as a distorted expression of the broader logic of the movement.

By contrast, the erection of a whole academic sub-industry around the SI threatens to see them immortalised and turned into something of a fetish: the obsession with the last of the real revolutionaries, the authentic expression of radical Sixties’ counterculture at its purest. The tenor of such a retrospective fascination with the situationists might be taken as a painful measure of the isolation of cultural studies

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1 As evinced, for example, by the recent publication of two biographies of Guy Debord and a burgeoning secondary literature. See Hussey 2001 and Jappe 1999.
from the political as such. Sentimental nostalgia for an age in which revolutionary social and cultural aspirations still seemed possible functions, in this context, to compensate for an admission of impotence in the present. Often implicit in this approach is the assumption that the situationists must have known, deep down, that their demands were too utopian to stand any chance of being realised. In this light, their project looks like a glorious last stand, prior to the inevitable triumph of consumer capitalism and onset of postmodern cynicism.

Yet, what if we refuse to view their failure through the lens of such nostalgic inevitability, and stubbornly persist in the notion that the situationists genuinely believed it possible to realise their ‘impossible’ demands in full? What if we refuse to accept the current trend to develop cults of personality around the heroic failures of Debord and his comrades, and, instead, see the exaggerated presence of the SI in the contemporary cultural imagination as symptomatically masking a more fundamental repression still working to deny us consciousness of the real historical possibilities of revolutionary change? In this case, rather than seeking to isolate and fetishise the uniquely individual characteristics which defined the situationist ‘moment’, we would need to critically assess the obstacles preventing the radical self-dissolution they desired. This would involve a greater critical scrutiny of the specific context which gave rise to the articulation of such a project, and necessitate a more engaged evaluation of the specific tactical and strategic positions they adopted.

*The Tribe* and *The Consul* are two texts which help us to place the specific social milieu from which the situationists emerged, since both are compiled from interview transcripts (with Jean-Michel Mension and the late Ralph Rumney respectively), two men who had early formative allegiances with Debord’s circle. The texts are the first two offerings from Verso’s imposingly titled series ‘Contributions to the History of the Situationist International and Its Time’, although it is evident from the conversational format that such a ‘history’ is of a proudly subjective and anecdotal variety, so those looking for rigorous analytical argument should steer clear. Rather, we are presented with a series of personal reminiscences, glimpsed nostalgically though an alcoholic haze, all of which makes for a lively and evocative, if somewhat insubstantial, read. We get little snippets, for example, of Rumney’s acquaintance with a fascinating array of individuals from Edward Thompson to Félix Guattari, William Burroughs to Georges Bataille, but we get only general hints of the parameters of Rumney’s own work. What does emerge however, from these patchworks of memories, is a vivid sense of the lived experience that colours the emergence of situationist ideas. Mension’s replies, in particular, provide us with an insight into life as a member of the group of hard-drinking, intellectually precocious young malcontents affectionately known as ‘The Tribe’, from which would emerge the breakaway Letterist International under the stewardship of one Guy Debord. Life at ‘Moineau’s’ (the low-life ‘dive’ which was to be the group’s unofficial base) comes across as unmistakably ‘bohemian’ in character,
although they would, no doubt, have responded indignantly to the suggestion that they could be categorised so conventionally. However, the whole litany of ‘undesirables’ with whom they consorted could scarcely be described otherwise: adolescent runaways, drunks, women of ‘ill-repute’, impoverished artists and *philosophes*, petty thieves and the like.

In this respect, then, Elizabeth Wilson’s cultural history of bohemians, which traces the emergence and development of this category, provides a valuable context in which the origins of situationist thought can be usefully related. Thus, texts that might first appear to be largely inconsequential recollections can be reconstructed into something more substantial. Rumney poses a question at once ‘profound and also banal: how does one become Guy Debord?’ (p. 111), which is, as he implies, a deceptively simple thing to ask, since it leads us into a philosophical minefield loaded with explosive questions of identity, subjectivity and agency. In this light, the texts of Mension and Rumney should perhaps be seen less as answers to such a question, than as a preparatory assembling of materials from which any attempt at an answer would have to be reconstructed.

There is a sense, of course, in which Debord’s own suicide represents an admission of defeat in precisely this search. We might say of Debord, what Wilson says of bohemia, namely that his existence was ‘above all a quest, less an identity than a search for identity, less a location than a utopia’ (p. 11), since he understood that, for as long as it is doomed to be conducted under the auspices of the impoverished bourgeois concept of the isolated ‘individual’, the human subject’s pursuit of full self-realisation was impossible. Any authentic search for self-definition for Debord is obliged to proceed from the negative, from a gesture of collective refusal. That is to say, before one can become what one is, one must act in solidarity with others in their rejection of the false trappings of identity which class society would inflict upon us. For Debord, this negative search for an identity meant, above all, an all-out refusal of conventional bourgeois values. In this respect, he is typical of the whole bohemian sensibility:

Bohemia first emerged as a counter-space in opposition to the repressive authority of bourgeois society. . . . It presented itself as the absolute opposite of bourgeois society, and a site of political dissidence challenging the oppressive powers of the state, and a stronghold of artistic values against the philistine. It was the ‘Other’ of bourgeois society, that is to say it expressed everything that the bourgeois order buried and suppressed. In that sense it was an image of utopia. (p. 240.)

Wilson locates the emergence of bohemia as a product of the cleavage between artistic production and industrial capitalism that had led the romantics to articulate an alternative way of life, privileging aesthetic considerations over the philistinism of
bourgeois commerce. The point is not that all artists are *ipsa facto* ‘bohemian’, but that the latter category developed out of the increasing social marginalisation of the artist, to the point where the very life of the artist seemed to become a provocation to the bourgeois conception of social order. The artist demonstrates a freedom and willingness to explore and experiment with meanings, identities and behaviours that transgress conventional boundaries. Hence, the bohemian is defined as such not by the product of her labour but by the adoption of the *ethos* of the artist, by embodying a refusal to abide by the privileged values of industry, restraint, order, responsibility and so forth. For Wilson, Oscar Wilde’s famous comment that he put only his ‘talent’ into his work, saving his ‘genius’ for his life, seems to be the apotheosis of the bohemian attitude.

The implicit periodisation her work contains seems to have the high-water mark of ‘bohemia’ coincide with the symbolist/aesthetic movements, albeit continuing to receive a powerful echo in the twentieth-century *avant-gardes*, especially dada and surrealism. In nineteenth-century France, in particular, there existed a particularly militant strain of splenetic aesthetic resistance against bourgeois society. Figures such as Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont) and Arthur Rimbaud both seemed to embody a spirit of furious adolescent rejection of the world, of absolute moral resistance, and of uncompromising experimentation in life and art. Wilson sketches the significance of Rimbaud’s life as an ideal paradigm of the bohemian life, which appears to embody absolute and unconditional freedom. His celebration of sexual licence and freedom from ‘work’, his contempt for authority, and his advocacy of achieving a systematic ‘derangement of the senses’ (including the use of intoxicants and narcotics), made him an exemplary figure among successive generations of young people keen to rebel against their bourgeois upbringing. From this perspective, the demand that the power of the aesthetic is released from its traditional social quarantine in institutions such as art and literature involves nothing less than a life-transforming ethical imperative, a revolutionary commitment to a world where, in the words of Lautréamont, ‘[P]oetry must be made by all. Not by one’.

Just as the bohemian tradition embraced the freedom of extremity and excess as a defence against social respectability, so the normal fabric of the situationists’ existence incorporated alcoholic binges, drug-taking and sexual promiscuity. It can be seen as a community governed by an ethics of inversion. For example, in opposition to a society that judged the value of the individual’s output in terms of commercial success, the whole idea of selling their artistic labour on the market or working diligently to accrue a regular income would have appalled their bohemian sensibility. As Wilson observes, the emergence of such values enacts a dialectical reversal: to ‘succeed’ in a society governed by bourgeois norms is proof of failure while, conversely, to remain marginal, to ‘fail’ in conventional terms, is ‘the most reliable proof of the artist’s originality and genius’ (p. 18). ‘If someone had said “I want in whatever way to be a
success”, Mension claims, ‘then that someone would have been tossed instantly out of the back room onto the street’ (p. 129). Which is not to say that poverty was actively sought out, but, rather, that there prevailed a thoroughly phlegmatic approach to the whole question of their material conditions. A good example of this attitude is given by Bernard Kops, an acquaintance of Rumney’s, who describes how each time they met, Ralph had

laughingly suffered a sort of metamorphosis: an enormous change of fortunes. We heard around that he was shacked up in a Venetian palace. With Ralph anything was possible. Nothing came as a surprise. One winter day stands out. A taxi pulls up, and Ralph, unusually flustered, jumps out and hurries towards us. ‘Can you lend me a fiver, quick!’ he begs. ‘What? Money is such a rare commodity, and this amount is a week’s survival for us’. ‘I’ve got Peggy Guggenheim in the taxi and I’ve got to pay the cabby’. ‘But she’s the richest woman in the world’. ‘I know but she never carries any cash with her’. I moan and hand over our day’s takings, our worldly wealth, the last of our cash. We are now skint, but we laugh. What else can you do? Ralph was operating again. (p. 28n.)

Rumney’s sojourn from a comfortable English middle-class background, through periodic skirmishes with bohemian impoverishment, through to his relationship with a millionairess’s daughter (Pegeen Guggenheim), all seem to have been met with the same kind of blasé equanimity. This was nothing so ‘bourgeois’ as the financial stability of regular employment, but a kind of blithe self-assurance that money would turn up somewhere along the line, without concerning oneself unduly about it in the meantime.

Such an outlook is strikingly different from that born of the experience of unrelenting material hardship, in which case work is less a boringly conventional lifestyle choice than an absolute necessity. It is notable that while ‘bohemia’ admits of a strange mixture of class backgrounds, from ruined aristocrats, ‘exiled’ or dissident bourgeois, and all kinds of lumpenised elements, there are, as Wilson observes, ‘few . . . from working-class or proletarian backgrounds’ (p. 22). Of course, as we shall see, this gives rise to a contrasting political mindset, which Marx, for one, was keen to distinguish. For while bohemian communities can exhibit very sincere and intense desires to establish a progressive alternative to the status quo, they very often fail to ground this struggle in the material forces capable of delivering it, and hence underestimate the need to overthrow the rule of capital itself. That being said, the trap of vulgar sociological determinism must be avoided; it is not as though the political character of the situationists could be ‘explained’ simply by allocating the appropriate class designation (impossible here, in any case, given the composite de-classed nature of bohemianism). If the label ‘bohemian’ does indeed accurately convey something of
the social make-up of situationist circles, it must also be stressed that here was a bohemianism of a very particular character. For, just as, while Owen and Fourier were utopians, not every utopian has the historical significance of an Owen or a Fourier, so not every ‘bohemia’ expresses the ferocious intransigence of the SI.

As Wilson’s historical study recognises, the idea of bohemia encompasses a whole series of contrasting and incompatible definitions. From *La Bohème* of nineteenth-century Paris to the Greenwich Village of the beat generation, through the aristocratic demeanour of the ‘decadent’ aesthetic, the concept of bohemia clearly spans a disparate series of social and political locations. If, as Wilson argues, the bohemian is a mythical figure who ‘personifies the ambivalent role of art in industrial society’ (p. 3), then, surely, it is a myth stretched to breaking point, expected to yoke together such figures as Lord Byron and Viv Stanshall of the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, Alma Mahler and Marianne Faithful? Equally, if the label is not entirely inappropriate for Debord, it will certainly not suffice, since there is a world of difference between the ‘shabby chic’ lifestyle choice preferred by disaffected aesthetes, and the situationists, for whom separation from bourgeois society was not a fashion-trend but, rather, as Mension recalls, ‘a case of all-out war’: ‘We rejected a world that was distasteful to us and we would do nothing within it’ (p. 129). This, clearly, is not a bohemia which is content to hide away in the dark corners of society, but one with a violent and nihilistic desire to smash the whole edifice in preparation for its total reconstruction.

**Bohemian rhapsody?: the politics of bohemianism**

Although the co-existence of capitalism and bohemia has not always been entirely comfortable, there is a danger of a general sentimentalising of the latter’s transgressive power as, for the most part, bourgeois society has been quite able to tolerate the marginal presence of bohemia, precisely because it was marginal to the real centres of power. Indeed, a thrill-seeking bourgeoisie could vicariously enjoy experiences of the ‘exotic’ through safely contained bohemian types. In certain conditions, the romantic idealisation of the rebellious outlaw can serve to mask a structural complicity between the ostensibly opposed stances of ‘bourgeois’ and ‘bohemian’. The tendency within contemporary theory to celebrate such marginality as valuable in itself can be read as a reflection of the marginal status of today’s intellectual given the relative absence of mass movements in the recent period – a politically isolated situation which, as I have indicated, can result in a wistful nostalgia for the ‘last’ available pockets of genuine resistance. Ironically, such a tendency towards retrospective idealisation has been a perennial feature of the bohemians themselves. As Wilson observes:

> Successive generations of bohemians elegiacally recalled a golden age of authenticity. . . . Bohemians always believed that they were the last of the
real bohemians, and that Bohemia had been killed, either by the rapacious commercialism of contemporary entertainment, which had destroyed real art, or because Bohemia had been too successful in eroding bourgeois morality. (p. 9.) Bohemianism, it seems, has always been about to disappear amidst either glorious failure or ignominious success. Either way, it has always made the very questionable assumption that cultural resistance can only be a guerrilla operation, confined to making the occasional foray from the fringes. Stage a confrontation too openly, it believes, and your forces inevitably suffer a heavy defeat or desert to the enemy.

Wilson’s evident sympathy for bohemia is predicated upon precisely such a nostalgia. As a privileged (if impossible) location for dissident ideas and practices, it is seen to constitute a utopian space that has largely proved powerless to prevent itself from being swallowed up. The values that once flourished in protective isolation, she argues, have become devalued once commodified for the mass market as rock-star lifestyles, advertising images and high-street shops selling bondage gear. Yet this nostalgia for a time when circumstances were apparently more favourable for ‘cultural’ dissidence at the margins tends to mask the importance of major political struggles which have been obliged historically to conduct their battles, not from a position of defending marginal territory (or minority rights), but for a comprehensive shift at the very epicentre of social power-structures. The situationists, for their part, understood far better than the practitioners of cultural studies (and, in this respect, they are much closer to the critical-Marxist tradition) that, although aesthetic/cultural autonomy is by no means immediately identical or reducible to political autonomy, nevertheless the political and economic emancipation of the working class is a necessary precondition for making the ideal of a free and democratic culture into a concrete reality.

Similarly, they were acutely sensitive to capitalism’s capacity to ‘recuperate’ apparently dissident cultural identities into the Spectacle’s empty glamour and consumerist pseudo-choices. In their Hegelian advocacy of the Aufhebung of art’s domesticated institutionalisation, they recognised that only a decisive revolutionary transformation of society as a whole could end its subservient condition. Thus, if the current reception of the situationists typically sees them figured as the epitome of radical Sixties’ ‘counter-culture’, and works to concentrate on their ‘cultural’ analysis at the expense of the political dimension, then this process violates the whole logic of Debord’s position. Equally, some commentators have prematurely conflated the two, as though a cultural politics displaces or makes obsolete more traditional forms of political struggle. Andrew Hussey, for example, argues:

The appeal of ‘Situationism’ in the early 1990’s was for me more political than cultural; more precisely, this was not nineteenth-century Marxism which
argued revolution in the name of classes which no longer existed, but a harder, more vicious and more aristocratic way of challenging the organisation of the world.2

The working class, having been assimilated into capitalist society and thus having disappeared as a revolutionary force, Hussey argues, it is now up to intellectuals or small groups of *enragés* to keep the revolutionary flame burning in the guise of a militant cultural politics which could give the passive masses a kick start. As a political position, this seems reminiscent of the ultra-leftist individual terrorism of the Baader-Meinhof group or the Angry Brigade. If the expected spark does not ignite, such a movement can just as easily topple back into reaction or despair. This is not atypical of a bohemian politics, the burning ‘revolutionary’ enthusiasm of which was, as Wilson notes, ‘liable to sour into gloom or cynicism’ (p. 24) if revolutions failed or were betrayed.

As a matter of fact, however, Hussey bases his argument on a serious misrepresentation of the situationists’ position. The perspective that the working class had ceased to exist was explicitly refuted by the SI, which would criticise Marcuse for precisely this argument: ‘If the May revolutionary crisis demonstrated anything, it was in fact the opposite of Marcuse’s thesis: it showed that the proletariat has not been integrated and that it is the main revolutionary force in society’.3 Their consistent support for rank-and-file working-class militancy and anti-imperialist uprisings demonstrates that the SI was clear from the beginning that the struggle for ‘cultural’ liberation could not take place in isolation from political struggle of the more conventional kind. Which is not to say that their specific tactical and strategic analysis was always correct. Their absolute, quasi-religious faith in workers’ councils placed inordinate significance on the ‘spontaneity’ of the proletariat. They believed it was necessary to separate a revolutionary kernel of Marxist ideas from Bolshevik methods of organisation and the theoretical legacy of Lenin. Following Georges Sorel, Debord argued that such ideas represent an illegitimate importation of Jacobin ideas into the workers’ movement, that is, ideas which were allegedly only appropriate to a *bourgeois* revolution. From this perspective, any group which promotes to role of leadership is inevitably guilty of putting itself in command and reducing the masses to pawns who can be shoved around, manipulated and exploited. Hence, the SI’s tracts and declarations are riddled with provocations and insults aimed at left activists of one variant or another: ‘ridiculous leftist droppings – all these little Maoist, Trotskyist, and Guevarist piles’ and so forth.4

The unstoppable power of the revolutionary will posited by their account neglects the importance of objective factors which necessitate detailed planning and skilled
tactical deployment. The cardinal sin of the SI is to think or act ‘bureaucratically’, a term of abuse which is applied not only (with considerable merit) to the Soviet bloc or leaderships of reformist parties and trade unions, but also somewhat indiscriminately to institutions that the working class struggled hard to establish and shape. Indeed, the concept of an ‘institution’ as such is intrinsically suspect for the SI, since, in their eyes, truly revolutionary methods imply ‘a rejection of all authority, all specialisation, all hierarchical dispossession; a rejection of the state and thus of parties and unions’.5 The idea that leadership can be a positive asset, as well as a bureaucratic constraint, is ruled out from the beginning. It can be said that a revolutionary vanguard aims to reach a point at which the masses reflect on their own struggle and say ‘We did it ourselves’ (a conception which would coincide with Lenin’s remarks on the ‘withering away’ of the state). That such a manifestly non-coercive conception of leadership – as facilitation – was ruled out for the situationists from the beginning, can be seen as both the understandable product of historical circumstances, and also of the residual anarchistic pull of the bohemian milieu in which their ideas were generated.

**Where have all the bohemians gone?**

‘Are we all bohemians now?’ asks Wilson (p. 9). Perhaps another way of asking this might be, ‘has the Spectacle managed even to safely recuperate the ideas of its most militant antagonists, the SI? Of course, there has been no shortage of critics who would rush to answer in the affirmative, proclaiming the death of the *avant-garde* just as they loudly proclaim the obsolescence of Marxism. For, if we are all just de-classed consumers, then bohemian sub-cultural ‘resistance’ is all just part of capitalism’s great web of diversity, and can therefore be re-packaged and sold back to a grateful mainstream. Analogously, academic cultural studies has found that the SI’s ideas, once hollowed-out and decontextualised, can be usefully appropriated. Here, as Esther Leslie observes, such ‘theorists’ can ‘dip in to Situationist theory eclectically, perhaps using the Situationist notion of “drifting” alongside Benjamin’s *flâneur* to examine a practice such as skateboarding, or excerpting willy-nilly Debord, Baudrillard and Foucault to theorise the birth of the modern spectator’.6 If this (pseudo-)choice is all that is available to us – on the one hand seeing bohemia in general (or the SI in particular) as radicals of sepia-tinged era long since past, or, on the other, utilising their ideas only in a severely bowdlerised form – then it would appear that such movements have absolutely lost their critical edge. But are other options available?

For Wilson, the thaw in postmodern triumphalism has brought about renewed hope that the impulse of radical bohemia has not been totally destroyed:

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5 Vanegeim 1969b.
6 Leslie 2002, p. 49.
Groups and individuals in the West (let alone in the rest of the world – which is another story) struggle to protest and strive to find effective ways to force change. As the millennium approached new forms of protest did seem to be emerging – for example in Seattle. . . . Although these protests were in some respects incoherent and inconclusive, they signalled the emergence of new forms of political organization, since they were orchestrated internationally by Internet and e-mail. On the other hand, the protests took the rather traditional and bohemian (certainly anarchist) form of spectacular demonstration, with performance and theatre playing a role. In this context the myth of Bohemia is neither part of a dead past, nor does it gesture towards a utopian future. (p. 247.)

It is hard to resist the feeling that Wilson is being at once too sanguine and too limited in the scope of her ambitions here. It is simply not enough to applaud anticapitalism as temporarily renewing a space on the cultural margins for the emergence of alternative values, if those practices leave in touch the recuperative power of the mainstream. Not, of course, that we should denigrate the enormous potential significance of the emergence of these movements. But nor should we underestimate the urgency of the contemporary moment. It is sobering to remember that, while the anticapitalist practice of ‘culture-jamming’ might indeed carry a faint echo of situationist strategies of détournement, its goal of parodying of familiar capitalist logos is nevertheless a million miles away from the negation of the social totality sought by Debord.

For a committed anticapitalist readership, Wilson’s terminology and overall approach obscures vital questions. Are these ‘new forms of protest’ capable of breaking out of their marginal location, reaching out to mass forces in opposition to capital in its full global dimensions? Or are we now witnessing the final death-throes of bohemian radicalism, somehow lingering on in a world where it has long since become obsolete? The indeterminate, class-free rhetoric of ‘groups and individuals’ delivers no answer, but merely suggests a confused nominalism. Likewise, to invoke ‘new forms of political organization’ simply on the basis of the application of new technologies is to risk a crudely deterministic analysis. Of course, the development of new technologies of communication brings with it new possibilities, and may help to shape new political forms, but the specific outcomes of this process cannot be determined in isolation from the wider economic and political context. After all, while email and the internet have brought undoubted opportunities for a layer of antiglobalisation activists to share information and co-ordinate their protests, barely two per cent of the world’s population of over six billion people have domestic internet access. The struggle to liberate the means of expression and communication for all remains, of necessity, a political struggle.

This much was understood by the situationists. Perhaps their legacy is best respected by refraining from becoming fixated upon the biographical-circumstantial details of
their lives, or making Debord into an icon (the troubled genius), but instead keeping alive the attempt to criticise oppressive social forms in the name of the autonomy of a liberated humanity, and critically evaluating the political methods most appropriate to realise this end. Thus, there is still much to be gained from a thorough analysis of situationist theory (especially the work of Debord) from a Marxist perspective. Whatever the merits of their entertaining vignettes, *The Tribe* and *The Consul* can only gesture towards the importance of such an undertaking, the format of the series not allowing for any more expansive argument. This, despite the fact that Mension, a ‘Trotskyist’ militant by 1968 (a member of Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR)), speaks of Debord’s ‘real contribution’ to revolutionary theory, which in his view ‘surpasses Marx on several counts’ (p. 125). Such remarks are begging to be followed up and elaborated. Greater specificity here could surely take us into the heart of a debate that could prove very instructive for the further development of a Marxist cultural criticism. It could certainly help to explore the distinction, yet necessary interrelation, between the spheres of cultural and political agency. Wilson’s engaging yet problematic survey of bohemia only circles around such complexities, without ever grasping them directly, perhaps because it a task that much contemporary theory, with its present ‘culturalist’ bias, is ill-equipped to address.

**References**


Dead Lively

The analysis of mass culture has much to offer of profound significance to historical-materialist thought, not least because what Marx referred to as the ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ involved in the fetishisation of commodities seem particularly materialised in our relationships with the products of popular culture. However, while popular culture is undoubtedly an important area of enquiry, the precise methodology with which to analyse it is less clear. Indeed, as Esther Leslie remarks in her prelude to Hollywood Flatlands, from a historical-materialist perspective, cultural studies, as commonly practised, can appear something of an ‘ill-discipline’ (p. 4). That is because its outlook remains evaluative and therefore idealist, rather than analytical and therefore materialist. Her explicit target in this respect are ‘the professionals of popular culture’, who promote a ‘phony war between high culture and popular or low or mass culture’ (p. 4), a war which serves to maintain, even when it reverses them, value judgements that mystify our political relations with cultural products. Under such binary reversals, the newly elevated masses, the popular or the low, do not question the existence of the élite, the select, or the lofty, so much as usurp their place. Wagner is kicked off, Kylie is put on, but the pedestal remains, supporting a new content with the same old form. The logic of the previous formation is thereby maintained, along with the false split between the perceived immanent value of élite art practice and the transcendent value inherent to mass entertainment, a split that mystifies their shared historical origins as well as their relation to both capitalism and the commodity-form. Indeed, beneath the dense vocabulary of much contemporary criticism, there seems to be little logical advance on Matthew Arnold.

While not saying so explicitly, Leslie’s analysis suggests that cultural studies compounds the error when it accuses revolutionary cultural critics of also maintaining a belief in this evaluative binary. However, unlike the postmodern ironists, the Left is seen as always coming down on the side of the high over the low in the application

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of its theory. Marxism thus stands accused of being so mesmerised by the ideological role of mass culture that the possibilities and pleasures borne by this culture are all subsumed under the critique of its homogenised and hegemonic political functions. Consequently, Marxism is presented as an overwhelmingly iconoclastic if not miserabilist practice which thinks *a priori* that the ideological price to be paid for commodity pleasures is too high. Like every puritanism, it just does not understand or approve of fun.

Through a mixture of original archival research, close textual analysis and theoretical explication, Leslie challenges such mixtures of fallacy and distortion, not least by revealing the historic amnesia of the postmodern orthodoxy. She describes how, far from denouncing mass culture, key artistic, critical and revolutionary figures were actively engaged in the analysis of animation from its very beginnings. Not only does Leslie demonstrate how *avant-garde* art practice and commodity production overlapped and influenced one another in the production of the cartoon film, she further describes how the cartoon film influenced both artists and revolutionary critics in return, and how all these practices only make sense when viewed as part of the same social weave – the lived experience of industrial capitalism at a particular historical conjuncture. As one would expect from Leslie, she engages deeply with both Walter Benjamin’s and Theodor Adorno’s extensive thinking on and around this topic, revealing a far more polyvalent analysis of commercial cartoons than the one suggested by the customary ‘Fear and Loathing in Frankfurt’ approach to critical theory. Although cartoons, like all mass culture, were implicated in the pacification of revolutionary social change and offered a clear example of the interpenetration of commercial and (bourgeois) aesthetic criteria, the sheer energy of the estranged and fantastic ontology of the cartoon world nevertheless harboured utopian possibilities of transformation. *Hollywood Flatlands* details the responses of Siegfried Kracauer, Sergei Eisenstein and even Leni Riefenstahl to the phenomenon of animation, accompanying them with more surprising encounters, as in Leslie’s presentation of Goethe’s colour theory. Likewise, the animation industry’s history of technical innovation, labour disputes and commercial development is clearly set out. Thus, while the precise cultural object of the book is the cartoon film, Leslie’s analysis develops a number of wider historical trajectories, not least of which is the mapping of the effects of massification on aesthetic, economic and political criteria as played out in the historical development of the animated film form. In so doing, she offers a far more politically nuanced notion of the pleasures and problematics of the cartoon experience than those provided by the

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2 This paradoxical orthodoxy, which combines the fetishisation of the contemporary with the homogenisation of the historic specificity on which such newness supposedly rests, would appear central to a number of the foundational texts of postmodernism, not least Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). One of the most sustained Marxist critiques of this denial of reality and concomitant historical amnesia remains the work of Alex Callinicos, in particular *Against Postmodernism* (1989) and *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (1995).
high/low binary, a split which is, after all, more Manichaean than Marxist and whose politics are conservative-idealist rather than revolutionary-materialist. Indeed, the urge to assign value which lies at the heart of such cultural binaries misses the main point, which is the recognition of how the two cultural realms are in fact formally related and co-dependent.

In order to undermine this drive to evaluation, Leslie offers a number of examples of how artistic, commercial and theoretical production have historically addressed and shared the same ontological concerns. For example, and long before the emergence of any postism, ‘the flattening of surfaces and the denial of perspective troubled simultaneously New York art critics and New Yorker cartoonist, not to mention myopic Mister Magoo’ (p. v). Likewise, the challenge to represent the speed of modern life and the growing domination of the image in our surface-dense kino-culture of mass production and mass consumption seems fundamental to all these different attempts at mapping modernity’s animated flatlands. Leslie thus identifies the cartoon as a privileged site of analysis, to the extent that both its form and content unmask the social negativity, the sadism, violence, mad productivity and endless competition that characterise the modern world. At the same time, in their mutability and resistance, as well as in the manner in which they relate to the sheer force of mechanical production which both drives and is revealed through these struggles, cartoons seem to develop potential avenues whereby these forces may be countered or negated.

A number of points follow from this. Not least of these is a demand that an understanding of the popularity of popular culture, of its penetration into the lived experience of a society, cannot be ‘explained’ merely from the standpoint of the hegemonic desires of the ruling class. Neither can popular culture be reduced to its (often ambiguous) code, for this misses our ideological relation to the form involved in its transmission as well as how this form develops historically and reflects material conditions. The political game of mass culture is not static, but constitutes a process that is materialised by cultural forms which, just like their narrative contents, at one and the same time tell the truth and attempt to mystify our social relations. The ideological possibilities of a photograph viewed in the privacy of the bourgeois interior are not the same as those of a massive moving image viewed publicly, nor is the materiality of the photographic moving image the same as the physics-defying vivacity of the cartoon. In philosophical terms, it is not merely their epistemological but their ontological claims that make the products of mass culture both meaningful and ideological. These meanings cannot be reduced to a notion of intravenous propaganda, to be either wholly resisted or passively accepted, since this would be to miss the vacillation between a cultural product’s ontological truth content – that which ensures

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3 For an explanation of the origins of this conceptual vacillation between bourgeois ideology and proletarian worldview in Marx, see Balibar 1994.
the engagement of its audience by saying something profoundly recognisable about their world – and its epistemological partiality, caused by the class distortions that continually expose the product’s universal claims as ideology.

This means that ideological lies can only function by addressing shared material truths, however distorted these truths may appear. Hence, even here, in an entirely drawn world, fantasy begins as a reaction to, not an escape from, history. The problem lies, however, in whether the restorative function of such representations, the respite they offer from the trials of the world, stays true to their revelation of social antagonism and alienation, or whether the ‘pleasure’ offered by mass culture claims as such to ameliorate (and hence mystify) these problems. Rather than help us to eliminate our pain, it allows us to put up with it. Of particular concern in this regard is the precise ideological value of cartoon violence. Leslie begins her ‘Preclusion’ with a vivid example of this vacillation between truth and mystification: a cartoon shown in Paris as early as 1908, called Fantasmagorie, which presents, for just under two minutes,

an illogical narrative of cruelty and torture executed by people and things at war with each other. But the violence is painless, dreamlike, as if it were more of a utopian transfiguration of actuality’s discord. . . . Animation, the giving of life, battles with annihilation, and always overcomes, always reasserts the principle of motion, of continuation and renewal. (p. 2.)

What remains hopeful in this endless process of deletion and negation, of the interaction between contrary and contradictory forces, is that the struggles do not simply cause destruction so much as perpetuate movement. The subjects of the Sisyphean struggles and disproportionate punishments that are the mainstay of so many cartoons just keep on going. No negation is final and, while aggressors never win, they too never stop, propelled by this contradictory motive force. As in Hegel’s definition, here ‘contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only insofar as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity’.4 Unlike the contradictions expressed in the Kantian antinomies, which, it could be argued, form the unacknowledged model for much of the binary thinking Leslie castigates, dialectical contradiction does not index the collapse of one’s model and the limit of one’s thinking. Hegel refuted Kant’s claim that we can never know the thing in itself, inasmuch as thingness is not a static concept but a dialectical one in which relationships provide the lived environment wherein ontological borders and boundaries are fought over and framed. Identity is not opposed to non-identity but instead actively partakes of and requires this ontological violence.5 Contradiction is, therefore, not merely a marker of a living historical system, but logically necessary to it, however difficult this attention

5 For a clear description of the relation between identity and non-identity in Hegel, see Pippin 1996.
to social totality and antagonism makes it to construct individual, particular or static objects of cognition.

Throughout Leslie’s study, there is not only an application of a dialectical sensibility to the historical trajectory of the animated film but a sense that cartoons, qua material objects, are themselves distinctly dialectical phenomena in which both physical laws and cultural norms are applied, ignored and negotiated in equal measure. While dialectical method and meanings are addressed, including through an interesting discussion of Lenin’s reading of Hegel and the increasing importance the former began to place on negation, it is through a more general application of dialectical logic that Leslie’s main engagement with dialectics takes place. Its strongest manifestation is to be found in the implicit critique of binaries and dualities which underpins her accounts of the historical and theoretical problem of animation. Here, we cannot forget the question of the negation of the negation. Any mechanical reduction of dialectical negation to a push-me-pull-you binary misses the three-dimensional dynamic of a system in which any and all binary struggles can be further negated by outside forces, a dynamic that is put to work in Leslie’s own writing. Another vector of mediation, a force perpendicular to the usual plane of struggle, is required to both integrate and differentiate the relationship between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideological services performed by a given aesthetic form as well as to realise the historical forces at work in aesthetic expression. It is a sense of this third term, this added dimension, which pervades Leslie’s analysis and makes her account theoretically astute, as exemplified by her subtitle, which, from the outset, declares the book’s aim: to account for the historical weave of artistic, commercial and theoretical production. Leslie’s analysis of these phenomena is overlaid with more sociological descriptions of the three main countries involved in the rise of animation – the USA, USSR and Germany. This goes a long way to bolstering Leslie’s approach, while the mass element of mass-produced and mass-consumed cartoons articulates a variety of political implications for capitalism, socialism and fascism respectively. Élitism and populism are thus equally criticised for not beginning with the dialectical priority of the totality of social relations, a priority that places cultural products and ideological notions of high and low under material rather than ethical descriptors. Likewise, binary approaches fail to notice the revolutionary and reactionary potential of mass culture, which, after all, is a facet of the same social formation that is capable of producing the more easily valorised products of high modernism and the avant-garde.

After both a prelude and a preclusion in which some of these wider issues are brought to the fore, Leslie begins by mapping the relation between a set of artistic movements, such as dada and constructivism, and the animated film, foregrounding a number of profound similarities between commercial cartoons and modernist art practice. The inclusion of numerous illustrations and a number of full colour prints aids this task. It is not merely ways of seeing that are at stake, but ways of being. Not
least, as in Hans Richter’s abstract animated films, Leslie identifies the extension of a problem posed in the fine arts but answered by the motion picture: the representation of time. The absence of photographic realism inherent to animation helps purify this representation, ridding it of any static referent. Leslie even reports avant-garde painters such as Richter, along with Viking Eggeling and Walter Ruttmann, voicing their hopes that ‘animation could be, above all, painting’s salvation rather than film’s’ (p. 46). At the same time as broadening the possibilities of abstraction and offering new painterly techniques, there existed a worry that such formalism could cease to constitute enquiry and merely degenerate into a new decorativeness.

Leslie notes that film critics thought that the multiple anarchies expressed by animation up to around 1928, anarchies in which the laws of nature and culture were equally bent and broken, primarily suggested a cinema of ideas. The radical possibility of the cartoon form lent ontological weight to the content, such that the cartoon film was an important object of critical study and debate. So, for example,

In a special programme on 1st November 1929, the rather dandyish London Film Society, under the direction of Ivor Montagu, and before an audience that included Eisenstein, John Grierson and Aldous Huxley, showed Jean Epstein’s The Fall of the House of Usher, John Grierson’s Drifters and Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin together with Disney’s The Barn Dance. (p. 29.)

Colour, sound and music were all explored in cartoon form long before their inclusion in the live action film. However, the precise materiality of that inclusion carried particular implications for the commercial viability of the form. Noise rather than speech, and creatures rather than humans predominated, both factors which helped facilitate cartoons’ appeal to an international market. Furthermore, the character rather than narrative-led nature of cartoon production enabled and encouraged exercises in branding and marketing decades before the appearance of Star Wars or Lord of the Rings products and promotions. As Leslie reveals, as early as ‘February 1930, Walt Disney agreed a contract with the George Borgfelt Company for the international licensing, production and distribution of Mickey Mouse merchandise’ (p. 31).

From the beginning of the 1930s, however, the gags became milder, the narratives linear and ‘where once gravity-defying tricks were the essence of cartooning, a realist injunction was now invading the look’ (p. 32). The mad world of possibility was brought into line and the revolutionary utopian urge reduced to getting by. In Dumbo, for example, ‘the circus, Adorno’s home of anti-art, is turned into a sadistic arena where power parades its ability to buy off dissent, and injustice rules. There is no escape from the system, only conformity and the hope of triumphing within its terms’ (p. 201). Even flying elephants, it seems, end up as wage-labourers. However, it was not merely the commercial cartoon that offered itself up to the requirements of the commodity-form. For example, after seeing Ruttmann’s Opus II of 1929 – an abstract
geometric animation composed to a sharp mechanical rhythmic form – the film critic Bernhard Diebold remarked both on the modernist, alienating credentials of the piece and on the possibility of their negation:

the new ‘eye music’ would not be easily assimilated by ‘the public’, but it would be more readily accepted by them if ‘clever business people’ would choose the painted film as a vehicle for advertisements, for the public would appreciate the ‘compromise’ between art and business. (p. 47.)

It was, of course, Walt Disney who most clearly understood this compromise – how to turn eye-music into eye-candy – and Disney and reactions to Disney quite rightly occupy the bulk of Leslie’s study. However, a simple description of Disney’s output, charting the growing dominance of commercial over creative priorities, would miss a number of crucial articulations between (i) ‘Disneyfication’ as a method of mass production and consumption, (ii) the mixture of violence and cutesification offered by its content, and (iii) the commodity-form. Returning to Marx’s own account in Capital, for all its exchangeability and its quantification of labour, the commodity-form does more than de-couple use-value from exchange-value. Beneath the quasi-materialist claims made for capitalist exchange by bourgeois ideology remains a metaphysical belief in the transcendent value of a commodity beyond its status as organised matter. In this regard, capitalism’s notion of value is inherently idealist. The process that grants a commodity the possibility of exchange-value over and above its use-value, as well as the precise level of exchange-value, together with how live human labour comes to be homogenised and fetishised at the same time through such objects, suggest a process that animates and materialises this hidden value. First, in the obvious sense of the circulation of commodities, their literal movement and exchange; but, second, in the more Frankensteinian sense of the reanimation of dead matter. Long before both Pinocchio and the Sorcerer’s Apprentice, Marx offered his own anthropomorphic narrative of cartooning, of the workings of capital in which dead things come to life:

The form of wood is altered by making a table out of it. Yet for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than ‘table-turning’ ever was.6

This reminds us that Marx’s analysis of commodity production is not merely concerned with the quantification or distribution of production, as with the bourgeois materialism

of ‘political economy’. Beyond the objective notion of value promoted by bourgeois ideology, Marx is aware that commodities are fetishised, over-valued such that they become ensnared in social relations as much as social relations are objectified through the production, circulation and consumption of these objects. The capitalist obsession with brand identity is an obvious index of this concern. Therefore, while, under the capitalist mode of production, relations between people do come to be expressed as relations between things, it is equally true that relations with things come to be expressed as relations with people. Hence, the disintegration of the distinction between the subject and the object works both ways. This is especially true in the cartoon world, where Marx’s table would have little difficulty in expressing ‘itself’:

In Disney, the peacock, parrot, nightstand and dancing flame are at one and the same time animal/object and human. And, at one and the same time, we know that they are drawings and not living beings and that they are projection, and yet we sense them as alive, moving and even thinking. (p. 236.)

It is in this sense that so many of the ontological processes exposed in the cartoon world – its plasticity, the endlessness of its deathless yet violent chases and conflicts, its drive to an equivalence in which objects can become beasts, beasts men and vice versa – materialise the dynamics of commodification. Leslie suggests that part of our profound fascination with animation is because, as with commodification itself, it is a force that makes dead things come alive. The Victorian fascination with ghosts and spirits, the cyborgs and robots that dominate contemporary popular culture and the talking animals and living objects of cartoons all attempt to metaphorise these same processes. The spectres that pepper Marx’s work allude to this constant urge within capital to humanise the inhuman, to animate the dead objects of production, to return the Geist to the machine. Leslie cites Benjamin’s claim that the film apparatus as both mechanism and process can itself be understood as an attempt to re-invent the equilibrium between a live humanity and the manmade world of dead things: ‘This equilibrium necessarily contributes some sort of subjectivity or agency to the cinematic apparatus. It is fetishized, anthropomorphized’ (p. 105). The commodity-form, therefore, is anthropomorphic and objectifying, it embeds us as well as alienates us, it reifies as well as subjectivises, and it fetishises the quantifiable dead labour of production with the unquantifiable value of the breath of life. These are the ideological paradoxes made visible and materialised in the cartoon world.

For Walter Benjamin and friends, the cartoons depict a realist – though not naturalist – expression of the circumstances of modern day life: the cartoons make clear that even our bodies do not belong to us – we have alienated them in exchange for money, or have given parts of them up in war. . . . The animal-human beasts and spirited things insinuate that humanism is nothing
more than ideology.... The cartoons are object lessons in the actuality of alienation. (p. 83.)

While the 'Disneyfication' of these creatures works to mystify their struggles, we can recognise ourselves in their sheer relentlessness. Often, we see them 'at work' and their labour ensures there is something human about these beasts, while their alienation renders their existence beastly. We recognise this over-lively world of talking cats, mice, dogs, rabbits and ducks, not to mention more mythic beasts and even objects, because it shares the paradoxical ontology of alienated labour. Leslie quotes Marx's description of this fusion of animal and human bodies as central to the understanding of the fetishised worker's body under capitalism:

The result is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions – eating, drinking and procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment – while in his human functions he is nothing more than an animal. (p. 84.)

However, recognition is not the same as redistribution, and whether the distorted truthfulness of animation in particular and popular culture in general can be employed for revolutionary ends remains an open question. If popular culture appeals to a plebeian mass rather than proletarian class, the political consequences of such consciousness are unclear. Leslie's own conclusion in this regard is to offer, more in hope than anticipation, a tentative 'maybe'. As she is more than aware, the gap between mass culture's utopian profliacy, fuelling a desire for radical transformation, and it merely idealising and ossifying existing social relations is paper-thin. Once again, pleasure is the issue as the attempt to expose the mystifications of commodities always risks coming under their spell. Such are the dangers of Disney's mousetrap.

In the end, the extent to which one feels that Leslie's study refutes the proclivity of cultural studies to binaries and antitheses somewhat depends on how much one believed in this tendency in the first place. Indeed, despite the sophistication and erudition of her argument, her original critical motivation against unnamed professionals seems to construct something of a straw target. From a position cognisant of the full breadth of cultural theory, one could argue that there are many critics of popular culture who, while not Marxist, are undoubtedly disciplined and sophisticated thinkers. Indeed, if the ideological role of form is to be more fully understood, the work of these 'formalists' needs to be more openly engaged with. In film studies, for example, a long tradition of theorists, including André Bazin, Rudolf Arnheim, Stanley Cavell, Vivian Sobchack and even Gilles Deleuze and Fredric Jameson, have all developed notions regarding the 'lifelikeness' of film, ideas that would seem of particular relevance to Leslie's discussion of the animation of the apparatus and the 'life' of commodities. A more direct engagement with film studies would undoubtedly have been productive. Likewise, the contemporary relevance of animation's potential combination with live
action film demands more attention. Indeed, while Leslie quotes Viktor Shklovsky wondering, as early as 1923, whether ‘perhaps the animated film can be combined with the photographic film’ (p. 18), the conjunction remains undeveloped. With the growing importance of CGI and computer games, the analysis of this conjunction in historical-materialist terms seems particularly urgent. Also, Leslie’s discussion of the rise of television and Disney’s diversification after the War is somewhat hurried compared to her synoptic analysis of the inter-war period. Finally, her lack of engagement with Picasso and Matisse, in terms both of their own investigations of form and line, their own cartoon quality and the commercialisation and massification involved in the popular promotion of their work, also seems a missed opportunity.

Of course, these criticisms are in some sense the unavoidable result of the breadth of her engagement, which undoubtedly suggests many more areas of analysis than could possibly be developed by a single book. Having said that, Hollywood Flatlands employs methods and concepts of great value to the development of a study of mass culture amenable to historical materialism, and can thus be considered as a strong basis for future research. It would be a great pity, then, if people from a more strictly cultural-studies background were put off by Leslie’s opening polemical statements which, while obviously providing an impetus for the work, seem mostly unnecessary to the development of her argument. Indeed, this disjunction raises the question as to exactly who these remarks are meant to address, as they seem a little too ‘in-house’ to Marxist thought in the speed with which they construct and dismiss their theoretical other. It seems odd that a theorist of such dialectical subtlety would appeal to what is in itself an evaluative rather than analytical binary without reason. This raises the suspicion that, while the binary thinking she explicitly castigates emanates entirely from the field of cultural studies, it is the binarism of much that passes for dialectical thought that is equally her implicit target. After all, a less parodic version of this enemy reminds Marxist criticism of its real difficulty with pleasure, which, for many on the Left, still remains something of a political issue rather than a political weapon. For example, even accepting the tactical reason behind Lenin’s famous warning against the distracting if not disarming pleasures of Beethoven during revolutionary times7 and the diagnostic nature of Adorno’s rage against the culture industry, it is not unreasonable to identify in both a certain relegation and mistrust of pleasure. Pleasure is, at best, associated with a hedonism unjustified under current material conditions of exploitation and, at worst, is regarded as a politically-crippling obsession. In taking this stance, the wider subjugating effects of pleasure (real, imagined or perverted), that is its proper material analysis, are, if not abandoned, subjected to a degree of

7 The source of this story, in which Lenin praised the beauty of Beethoven’s Appassionata sonata but also described the dangers of listening to such music as it sapped revolutionary zeal, is Zetkin’s Reminiscences of Lenin, cited in Jameson 1988, p. 61.
ascetic condemnation that is not without its own mystifying effects. To link salvation to renunciation is to appeal to theology, not politics.

Materialist cultural studies are not an indulgent luxury, but a theoretical necessity to the understanding of consumer capitalism. They should not be seen as negating the centrality of alienated labour and class antagonism, but as extending that logic. Leslie’s study shows that it is not enough to merely cast light on the capitalist underpinnings of the commercial animated cartoon and postulate the lack of political and economic agency that the consumers of such things experience. This is a truth that taken on its own unfortunately demonstrates nothing. However, in the importance that Leslie attaches to the concrete materialisation of ideology in both the formal and aesthetic features of particular cultural commodities, in this case the animated cartoon, she clearly reveals what in her opening remarks she loathed to make explicit. Any description of the appeal of mass culture that claims it is merely an epiphenomenon of the capitalist mode of production has misunderstood the notion of dialectical totality inherent to historical materialist thought and remains as guilty of binary mystification as the most bourgeois practitioners of cultural studies.

References


Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity – Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance
JAIRUS BANAJI
Reviewed by Peter Sarris

The history of the Mediterranean world in late antiquity, roughly from the third century AD through to the seventh, has, in many ways, been transformed over the course of the past forty years. A period once regarded as no more than an unedifying postscript to the classical glories of Greece and Rome has, instead, come to be seen in ever more positive terms. This academic phenomenon has been particularly pronounced within the English-speaking world, where the development of the field can largely be ascribed to the work of two scholars: A.H.M. Jones and Peter Brown. The publication in 1964 of Jones’s monumental study *The Later Roman Empire – A Social and Economic Survey*, described at the time as ‘the Jones report on the later Roman empire’, substantially opened up the field to an Anglophone readership. 1 Jones’s ability to paint ‘broad-brush’ history without losing control of the specificity and variety of the facts in which his analysis was rooted bears favourable comparison with such triumphs of continental scholarship as Marc Bloch’s *Feudal Society*. At the same time, what proved to be Jones’s novel emphasis on the success with which Roman emperors of the fourth century overcame the social, economic and military crises that had beset the Empire in the third cast the development of late-antique state structures in a radically different light. Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* – first published in 1971 – pioneered a parallel reconsideration of the cultural history of the world that was once Rome. Just as, on Brown’s model, late-antique intellectual and religious evolution represented the culmination of the Classical past, so too did late-antique political culture represent a building upon, rather than an abandonment of, what had gone before, a process that was to find its fullest flowering in the sophisticated urbanity of the palatial culture of the Abbasid Caliphs of eighth-century Baghdad. Brown’s enticing account turned inside-out his readers’ mental parameters of the late-antique world, just as the Islamic conquests of the seventh century had overturned that world’s political and military frontiers.

1 Brown 1967, pp. 327–43.
Since the 1970s, it has been Brown’s cultural emphasis, rather than Jones’s social, economic and institutional one, that has most influenced scholarship, and which has most set the tone for late-antique studies. This has, at least in part, been due to wider historiographical trends. The emergence of the ‘linguistic turn’ as an obligatory point of reference for historians, and the vogue for varieties of structuralist and poststructuralist forms of analysis, led to a more general veering towards cultural history on the part of professional historians in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the ascendancy of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s created an atmosphere that was deeply inimical to the study of economic history, with its supposedly necessarily positivist assumptions.

This relative neglect of late-antique economic history can certainly be seen to have hindered historical-materialist approaches to the period. Given the character of late antiquity as an age of transition, the question of the development of late-antique state structures, governing classes and social and economic systems is necessarily of great comparative interest to historians operating within the historical-materialist tradition. It represents a potentially fruitful field of research for those concerned with constructing a taxonomy of historical societies, for those interested in understanding how and why societies change, or for those concerned with the related issue of ‘modes of production’.

In a sense, this is one of the major reasons why the publication of Jairus Banaji’s *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity – Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance* should be so warmly welcomed – it marks a major and significant return to late-antique economic history. Moreover, it is the work of a scholar of broad ranging and sympathetic interests, one who knows precisely what is important and why. Banaji reconnects us to Jones. Indeed, what appears to have led Banaji in this direction was his encounter in the early 1980s with the greatest work of one of A.H.M. Jones’s most gifted and stimulating pupils, Geoffrey de Ste Croix, whose *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* Banaji describes himself as having read ‘with, like everyone, obvious awe, but with a sense of latent dissatisfaction at what seemed, still, a traditional picture of late antiquity’.

For de Ste Croix, the history of the later Roman Empire was characterised by an ever more pronounced intensification of the exploitation of the peasantry, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of the Mediterranean world at this time. On de Ste Croix’s model, this intensity of exploitation rendered the rural population at best apathetic to the fate of Rome. Whether or not one agrees with de Ste Croix’s analysis of the response of the peasantry to the foreign invasions of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, there is, in fact, little if anything in Banaji’s book that contradicts de Ste Croix’s core claim as to the intensification of exploitation. Rather, if de Ste Croix’s work spurred Banaji on to undertake his study, the real
historiographical contention at the core of Banaji’s account can be seen to focus elsewhere and, in particular, on the writings of Max Weber and his followers.

Banaji’s starting point is the claim that, while late-antique studies have indeed been revolutionised over the course of the past forty years, studies of the late Roman economy, insofar as they have appeared, have rather lagged behind, and have still tended to take a distinctly negative view of the economic character of the Mediterranean world at this time. Banaji accounts for this thus:

This persistence of the old pessimism is linked, on my view, to two other factors which have been of considerable importance: on the one hand, the sheer strength of primitivism in continuing to influence the ways we think about ‘ancient’ (and medieval?) economies, and, on the other, the powerful influence of Max Weber in constructing an internally coherent economic explanation of decline which seemed to elide the late-antique world into an emerging medievalism. (p. vii.)

The influence of ‘primitivist’ approaches to the study of ancient and medieval economies and societies is described by Banaji with particular vividness, thus to him it represents

the deadweight of other, earlier generations who looked on the past with the patronising attitudes of a world in unbridled expansion. The triumph of capitalism was also the downgrading of every preceding epoch with its supposedly increasingly primitive forms of technology and social interaction, and its inability to achieve a rational organization of the world. (p. 1.)

For Banaji, Weber stands as the most influential exponent of this sort of approach, and, in the second chapter of the book, he guides the reader through a detailed critique of Weber’s writings on the late Roman economy. On Weber’s model, the history of the late Roman Empire was characterised by the emergence of essentially proto-feudal autarchic large estates which undermined networks of market exchange and heralded the progressive ascendancy of natural economy, culminating in ‘the collapse of an administrative apparatus and monetary-political superstructure less and less adapted to the sub-structure of natural economy’ – essentially, what historians used to describe as the ‘Fall of the Roman Empire’ in its social, economic and institutional aspects (p. 209). The primary appeal of the Weberian model, according to Banaji, lay in its internal logic and cogency rather than its ability to make sense of the facts; indeed, Banaji states, ‘his method was antithetical to historical detail’ (p. 31).

As Banaji explains, the extent to which Weber’s model was, in effect, irreconcilable with the historical evidence was pointed out as early as 1932, when a young Finnish scholar by the name of Gunnar Mickwitz published ‘a book on the fourth century which was destined . . . to refute the whole orthodoxy of the monetary collapse’ that stood at the core of Weber’s account (p. 31). If Weber is the ‘villain’ in Banaji’s study,
Mickwitz is undoubtedly the hero: a young scholar whose work would ‘transform the terms of the problem’, but who was destined to die a premature death.\(^5\)

As with Weber, Banaji provides a detailed account of Mickwitz’s writings as sophisticated as it is complex, and Banaji revels in complexity. It might be suggested that the book would have benefited from the adoption of a plainer style. It is not a study one could easily place in the hands of undergraduates. The most important and, undoubtedly, correct of Mickwitz’s contentions, and the one that most informs Banaji’s own approach, is that there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever for a late Roman regression to a natural economy. Rather, the evidence of the law codes, documentary papyri and numismatic findings demonstrate that, on the contrary, the fourth century AD in particular was characterised by a profound monetisation of the Roman economy – indeed, monetisation to a perhaps unprecedented extent. In purely monetary terms, this was the result of the introduction in the early fourth century of a stable gold coinage – the ‘dollar of the middle ages’ – known in Latin as the *solidus* and in Greek as the *nomisma*. The extent to which the late Roman world was awash with such coinage, and the evidence for it having been used as a unit of account in day-to-day, low-level commercial and economic transactions is, as Banaji emphasises, totally incompatible with a ‘primitivist’ understanding of the late-antique economy. Where Banaji begins to develop his own highly significant analysis is in viewing this late Roman monetisation as more than a purely monetary phenomenon. Rather, he ties it in with processes of élite formation that were to transform the political economy of the Roman Empire over the course of the fourth century.

In the third century, the Roman Empire had suffered a profound military crisis. This crisis was the result of the emergence of more formidable tribal groupings amongst the ‘barbarian’ peoples along Rome’s northern frontier, and the ascendancy of an expansionist and bellicose foe in the form of the empire of Sasanian Persia to Rome’s east. The insecurity caused by foreign invasion led to political turmoil, administrative dislocation and monetary chaos (evident from major debasement of the coinage). In the late third century, however, a series of ‘soldier emperors’ epitomised by the figure of Diocletian (284–305) had been able to restore some measure of security to the Empire, and set about overhauling its governmental structures. The provinces of the Empire were broken up into smaller administrative units subject to much greater central supervision than had ever been the case before. This required the creation of a substantial centrally appointed bureaucratic cadre recruited from amongst the ranks of the local, city-based, élites of the Empire. At the same time, the army was dramatically expanded in size and its officers were provided with considerable administrative responsibilities in the imperial localities.

\(^5\) See Préaux 1941, pp. 298–300.
This concerted expansion in the number of highly-remunerated, centrally-appointed, bureaucratic and military posts sparked off a process of élite formation across the Mediterranean as a whole, best characterised as the emergence to the fore of society of a new late-antique service aristocracy. The highest-ranking members of this new élite were to dilute and ultimately side-line the influence wielded by the scions of the ancient Senatorial families of Rome, and were to establish themselves as the supreme agents of power and authority both at the Imperial court and at the grass-roots of society.

By far the most impressive aspect of Banaji’s book is the way in which he is able to draw together this process of élite formation with the monetary history of the Roman Empire. The new service aristocracy of the fourth century was establishing its social hegemony at a time when the monetary system of the Empire was being revolutionised by the circulation of the new, stable, gold coinage. Indeed, as agents of the government, members of the service aristocracy presumably had more ready access to this coinage than did others. Certainly, Banaji provides compelling evidence that the fourth century saw a series of concerted efforts by members of this emergent élite to maximise the proportion of their salaries paid to them by the state in coin, and minimise the practice of payment in kind, which was more popular with taxpayers, and which the Empire had come to rely upon amid the troubled conditions of the mid-third century. Banaji identifies the greater monetisation of the fiscal system and of Imperial salaries as a direct result of pressure exercised by members of the élite. It provided them with something that payment in kind could not, or at least could not quite so easily, produce – accumulable and hoardable wealth. As Banaji puts it ‘the triumph of the solidus was the economic reflection of their social dominance . . . the pressure for adaeratio (i.e. commutation) came from the ruling professional groups’ (pp. 36–7).

Banaji then proceeds to examine the impact of this new élite and of the new coinage on society more generally and, in particular, agrarian society. The process of élite formation and the monetary reforms of the late third and fourth centuries applied to the late Roman Empire as a whole. As such, the early chapters of Banaji’s book should be read as a study of the Empire in toto. Over the course of the fifth century, however, the governmental structures and political power of the Roman Empire in the western Mediterranean and in Rome’s northern provinces, such as Britain, Gaul and Spain, faded away. Instead, one witnesses the emergence in the west of the post-Roman ‘barbarian’ successor-states, or more properly, successor-kingdoms (for the most part, ‘state structures’ failed to survive this transition). As a result, the second part of Banaji’s study is entirely concerned with the eastern provinces of the Empire that

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6 See Wickham 1984.
remained under Imperial control (Greece, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Anatolia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt). Indeed, the focus is almost entirely on Egypt – the only region of the late Roman world for which there survive extensive documentary sources in the form of papyri. On the basis of the Egyptian papyri, Banaji attempts to chart the process whereby

in the eastern provinces the advent of the late empire revolutionized provincial landholding, signalling the rapid decline of the elites which had dominated urban and agrarian life for the most part of the earlier period. (p. 101.)

Since at least the publication in 1931 of E.R. Hardy’s *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt*, it has been widely known (amongst late Roman historians at least) that the papyrological evidence from fifth- and sixth-century Egypt records the existence of a number of large estates, the best documented of which are those belonging to the Apion family in the vicinity of the Middle Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. Banaji provides a brief overview of the historiography of these estates, from Hardy’s model of them as proto-feudal, and Rouillard’s argument for their being significant but not preponderant in the context of the late Roman agrarian economy of Egypt as a whole, to Gascou’s claim that they were not so much ‘private estates’ as the product of Imperial policy – essentially tax-collecting institutions (pp. 89–100).

In the chapter that follows, Banaji identifies these estates as, for the most part, the property of members of the new service aristocracy, and examines the process by which members of the new elite sidelined their social rivals, such as local town councillors [curiales] or members of the urban aristocracy of Alexandria, who would appear to have been highly significant landowners in Middle Egypt in the third century (p. 111). This fact may have been associated with the commercial involvement of members of this Alexandrian elite in the wine-trade. Certainly, their estate managers would appear to have imposed highly intensive forms of labour organisation on their landholdings, typified by those of a third-century Alexandrian landowner recorded in the ‘Heroninos’ archive of the Appianus estate, whose agricultural workers were housed in labour-barracks termed *epoikia* in Greek. Given the high level of labour inputs demanded by viticulture, such an organisation of labour would certainly have been sensible. Banaji also notes the active interest in estate management evident on the part of the landowners themselves: they were not simply distant absentees (p. 113). Members of the non-Alexandrian civic élites, by contrast, would appear to have primarily been rentiers, leasing out their land to tenant farmers, rather than living off the produce furnished by directly managed estates. One should note, however, that this distinction is at times hard to draw. As Banaji notes, in the fourth- and fifth-century documentation, leases almost take on the appearance of labour contracts,

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7 See Rathbone 1991.
detailing individual tasks to be undertaken and completed (p. 112). Thus he comments on how

the contract POxy XLVII 3354 is of the type usually called ‘a vineyard lease’,
though strictly this is an inaccurate description since the peculiarity of such agreements was the fact that the owners were ‘leasing’ not the land itself but the jobs connected with it, so that the lessees were as much workers as self-employing contractors. (p. 112.)

Over the course of the fifth century, curial landowners – the more localised city-based elite – almost disappear from the papyrological record. Thus Banaji notes that curiales or, in Greek, politeuomenoi or bouleutai constitute 52 per cent of identifiable landowners for the third century, 44.5 per cent of those for the fifth, and 14 per cent of those for the sixth century (p. 115). Members of the new service aristocracy, by contrast, comprise 30 per cent of identifiable landowners or landowning families for the sixth century, and 56 per cent of those for the early seventh – the last years of Roman rule in Egypt. Banaji thus provides clear statistical evidence for the extent to which members of the new service aristocracy of the fourth century came to win mastery of local landed society: ‘their organized, professional existence gave them a massive superiority over the other strata, who, despite their private accumulations of wealth, remained serialized and incapable of resistance’ (p. 37). However, Banaji is careful not to overstate this phenomenon, and places considerable emphasis on regional variation in patterns of landownership even within Egypt, with the area around Oxyrhynchus, for example, emerging as the region where aristocratic control of the late-antique countryside was at its most intense (pp. 149–52).

Having established the trajectory of social relations, Banaji then turns to the economic organisation of the great estates of the service aristocracy of the fifth and sixth centuries. Two points of great significance emerge from this analysis. First, he argues that the estates were highly commodified and monetised enterprises (pp. 171–89). Given the close association between members of the new elite and the monetary reforms of the fourth century that Banaji establishes, this should not occasion surprise. The greater monetisation of the Imperial economy resultant from these reforms clearly facilitated a far higher degree of monetisation on élite-owned estates than may have been practicable hitherto. Second, so monetised were the estates that the agricultural workers employed to cultivate them, bearing the legal designation of coloni adscripticii in Latin, or enapographoi georgoi in Greek, were essentially wage-labourers, rewarded for their commodified labour in the form of a wage reckoned in coin. They were not slaves, nor were they tenants. As on the Appianus estate in the third century, they were housed in estate-owned labour settlements styled epoikia or choria (pp. 190–212). As Banaji states, ‘the peasantry employed on such estates was a largely proletarianized labour force’ (p. 181). He then proceeds to provide evidence to the effect that this was
also true beyond Egypt. Banaji is anxious not to overstate this wave of aristocratic accumulation: free peasant communities survived, as too did remnants of the civic élites. The late-antique countryside remained, on his model, a highly variegated one, made up of ‘landscapes of diversity’ (p. 6). However, within these landscapes, the large estates of the new élite constituted a highly commercial and dynamic sector. They made a major contribution to the economic growth that Banaji believes to have characterised the history of the eastern Mediterranean in the period from the fourth century through to the seventh.

In his concluding comments, Banaji returns to the question of ‘primitivist’ approaches to the study of the late-antique economy, and makes two points to which historians operating in a historical-materialist tradition need to pay careful attention. First, he notes that ‘late antiquity throws up a social formation combining aristocratic dominance with free labour on a model that conforms to none of the historical stereotypes distinguishing the classical from the medieval and modern worlds (aristocrats + slaves, aristocrats + serfs, capitalists + wage labourers)’ (p. 217). Second, he remarks ‘That modern capitalism would transform… (market) relations in ways that were unimaginable to antiquity has misled historians into supposing that capitalism was not something the ancient world could ever known in any fundamental sense’ (p. 221).

Banaji has thus produced an enormously important piece of work, of great potential significance not only to our understanding of late antiquity, but also of precapitalist social and economic systems more generally. That is not to say, however, that Banaji’s study is entirely unproblematic. The complexity of Banaji’s prose style has already been alluded to, but there are also certain issues of substance to which the reader needs to be alerted.

First, Banaji’s notion of a late-antique economic boom that continued in the east through to the seventh century is perhaps slightly flawed. From the 540s onwards, the Empire was subject to repeated outbreaks of bubonic plague, which Banaji simply never mentions. Second, one should note that there is something slightly peculiar about Banaji’s handling of the historiography of the great estates of late Roman or Byzantine Egypt. In his doctoral thesis, on which the book is based, Banaji placed great emphasis on the publication in 1949 of Johnson and West’s Byzantine Egypt – Economic Studies. Along with Germaine Rouillard, Johnson and West helped to fundamentally re-orientate study of the late Roman Egyptian countryside, drawing the attention of historians away from the phenomenon of the great estates, and instead emphasising the continued existence in fifth- and sixth-century Egypt of substantial and prosperous autonomous peasant communities, recorded, for example, in the extant papyri from the settlement of Aphrodito. Indeed, to Johnson and West, these free peasants represented the backbone of the late Roman agrarian economy. This
concentration on the free peasantry of Egypt, rather than the great estates of the region, continues to characterise modern American studies of the subject. Yet, in the book, the section on Johnson and West appears to have been dropped, although they are briefly mentioned on page 93, in a way that suggests (incorrectly) that they have been discussed earlier. One suspects that a couple of pages of the manuscript may simply have gone astray. If so, this is a shame. If, however, they have been missed out deliberately, it would be helpful to know why.

Nor does Banaji really get to grips with the ‘Gascou thesis’ in a concerted fashion. On Banaji’s model, the great estates of late Roman Egypt were the product of autonomous social processes, in particular, the process of élite formation resultant from the administrative reforms adopted by Emperors in the late third and early fourth centuries. As already noted, to Gascou, by contrast, they were essentially the product of Imperial fiat – they were tax-raising institutions essentially established for the purposes of the state. Banaji’s and Gascou’s accounts are poles apart. Yet, after describing Gascou’s study as ‘the most important contribution to have appeared’ since the 1940s (p. 93), Banaji fails to provide a detailed critique of Gascou. Essentially, Banaji should have submitted Gascou to the sort of critical analysis to which he subjects Weber. This does not quite happen, although important corrections to Gascou there certainly are. This is regrettable, as such a critique would not be difficult. At the core of Gascou’s argument, for example, is the assertion that the ‘rents’ [phoroi] collected by the managers of the Apion estates around Oxyrhynchus from the inhabitants of the estate labour settlements [epoikia] represented not the private income of the Apion family, but rather a ‘rent-tax’ much of which was destined for imperial coffers. Yet the papyrological support for this assertion is very thin. On the contrary, the Apion estate accounts are very careful to distinguish between rents [phoroi] and taxes [demosia or the synteleia kephales] collected from estate employees.

In the final analysis, the claim that the great estates of late Roman Egypt were ‘semi-public’ bodies rests primarily upon a misreading of the fact that amongst the documentary papyri of the Apion archive, one often finds deployed a terminology that bears close resemblance to that used by the Imperial authorities in public and administrative contexts and a keen awareness of legal vocabulary and form. This tendency has led Gascou to confuse essentially private activities for public arrangements. Yet this practice is entirely explicable both lexically and sociologically. The late-antique magnate élite, as already seen, consisted of individuals intimately associated with governmental service, as indeed would also appear to have been true of many of the individuals employed as estate overseers and administrators. It would only have been natural for such individuals to deploy, with regard to their private economic transactions, techniques and terminological forms derived from their experience of Imperial administration. One should also remember that many of the documents we possess
were written by men whose native tongue is likely to have been Coptic, individuals who may have had a natural tendency, when writing Greek, to fall back upon well-known phrases and formulations.

There are also some rather more substantive problems with Banaji’s account. Given the emphasis Banaji places on the commodified nature of the labour provided by the ‘proletarianised’ inhabitants of the estate labour-settlements, he at times appears strangely uninterested in the actual character of their labour, or, to a lesser extent, the sometimes non-economic means by which agricultural workers were drawn onto the emergent large estates. Of the emergence of the late-antique service aristocracy, he comments, ‘these economic and social changes were accompanied by considerable violence against the masses – a process of which there is scarcely any direct expression in the surviving late Roman sources’ (pp. 47–8). Yet, to give just one example, in the fifth century, the Egyptian Abbot Shenoute wrote an open letter to a landowner by the name of Kronos, denouncing him for the injustices he was inflicting on the peasantry through his corralling of them onto his ‘plantations’.

Likewise, Banaji states of the agricultural workers of the great estates that ‘Given the high degree of formality that is evident at every level of late-antique society, and not least in economic relations, it is certainly disappointing that almost no evidence survives as to the kinds of contracts through which these rural labourers were “attached” to their employers’ (p. 5). Yet the documentary papyri, not least those belonging to the Apion estate, provide just that. Amongst the papyri there survive a number of contracts of surety, whereby landowners sought guarantors that those employed by their households would perform the tasks to which they had agreed. A number of these contracts of surety concern agricultural workers and record in some detail the terms on which labour was employed. A good example of such a contract is to be found on P.Oxy XXVII 2478, dating from the year 595/6. The contract records that a certain Zacharias had agreed to ensure that an agricultural worker by the name of Pambechius, an inhabitant of an Apion-owned epoikion, would reside and remain on the landowner’s orchard, which he was to cultivate. Pambechius was further obliged to meet such rental charges to which he was liable, would pay his taxes through the landowner, and would provide the labour services customarily provided to the estate.

In technical terms, the Greek verb used to describe Pambechius’s residence on the estate [parameinai] would suggest that the direct contract between Pambechius and the Apion household, which the contract of surety recorded, was of the type known as the paramone contract, or the ‘contract of personal attendance’, which had an ancient pedigree in the Near East. Certainly, the terms of the contract would appear to have been highly generalised, especially in relation to the labour component, but this, in

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8 See Barns 1964.
9 See Samuel 1965.
a sense, was the point: by couching contracts in such generalised terms, the managers of the Apion estates were maximising their options – it enabled them to deploy labour as and when they wanted it.

Where were Pambechius’s labour services to the estate primarily focused? Here, once again, Banaji fails to highlight an aspect of the topic to which he has given attention in the past. The estate accounts that survive from late Roman Egypt, such as P.Oxy LV 3804, record that the rural properties of families such as the Apions were essentially bipartite in character. The estate employees were settled in labour settlements associated with allotments of land described as *ktemata*. The peasants would appear to have had access to such allotments in return for the payment of rent. In addition to this, however, they would also appear to have been obliged to cultivate a centrally-managed estate ‘demesne’ described in the Apion papyri as the *autourgia*, which would appear to have been the main source of the marketable surplus off which members of the landowning family lived. Certainly, the revenues derived from the *ktemata* would appear to have been extremely modest, and were primarily hypothecated to support the costs associated with the valorisation of the ‘demesne’. This is an extremely important feature, which Banaji does not mention – thus the word *autourgia* is entirely absent from the glossary with which he provides the reader.

The bipartite character of the large estates of Byzantine Egypt is, itself, of two-fold significance. First, the Imperial legislation we possess on the agricultural workforce of late Roman great estates – peasants bearing the legal status of *coloni adscripticii* – would suggest that a similar bipartite structuring of estates was replicated on elite properties across the empire as a whole. Thus, in 539, in an Imperial constitution noted by Banaji, the Emperor Justinian defined the *adscripticii* as ‘the inhabitants of the estate labour settlements and the workers of the fields’ (pp. 206–12). Bipartite estates also appear in the documentary evidence for the eighth- and ninth-century west, particularly Gaul or Francia. Their attested existence in the late Roman period may suggest that these eighth- and ninth-century estates represented a survival from the late-antique past, rather than a novel creation of late Merovingian or early Carolingian social conditions. Alternatively, their appearance in the late Roman sources may simply indicate that large landowners were always inclined to impose bipartite arrangements on estates when they had sufficient power to do so. Either way, our view of early medieval social development in the west is altered.

Second, the extent to which the structure of Egyptian great estates would appear to have been replicated on aristocratic properties across the Mediterranean world raises another issue. Banaji remarks at one point of the late-antique service aristocracy as a whole, that

It would be entirely appropriate to refer to the great estate owners of the eastern Mediterranean in late antiquity as a new aristocracy – a group
Banaji thus argues that the emergence of the late-antique service aristocracy not only led to a concentration of landed wealth across the Roman world in the hands of these new masters, but also the widespread introduction of new, highly commodified forms of estate management. Greater concentration on the structure of these estates might have led Banaji to address in a more concerted way an issue on which, once again, he wrote very interesting work as long ago as 1976.

The late Roman evidence would suggest a fundamental transformation of the character of the estates off which members of the governing classes of the Roman world lived. As already noted, the local élites of the pre-Diocletian era would appear to have been primarily reliant on the leasing out of their land to tenant farmers. They thus operated within a variant of what is generally understood amongst historical materialists as the ‘feudal mode of production’, in which the peasant or the peasant family has effective possession of the subsistence-producing holding. On the bipartite estates of the late-antique service aristocracy, this was not the case. Although granted access to certain allotments, the very fact that the peasants, pace Banaji, also received a cash wage would suggest that these landholdings were not ‘subsistence-producing’. Rather, the peasants were employed on the autourgia as a centrally directed waged labour force. On this model, late antiquity was characterised by a mode of production which simply cannot be described as ‘feudal’ in the accepted historical-materialist sense of the word. Banaji reaches towards this point in his conclusion, but he never quite makes it. This may be because Banaji no longer regards the ‘mode of production’ to be a useful heuristic or analytical tool – and certainly he hints at this in places (pp. 217–18). But for those who do, this point needs to be emphasised. The late Roman sources provide further evidence for the unsatisfactory nature of the concept of the ‘feudal mode’ as a generalised means of describing precapitalist economies and societies. They also alert one to the extent to which modes of production do not necessarily follow quite the sort of linear progression that some of us, at least, once thought they did.

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11 For a definition of ‘mode of production’, see de Ste Croix – ‘how the dominant propertied classes, controlling the conditions of production, ensure the extraction of the surplus which makes their own leisured existence possible’ (1983, p. 52).
References


Washed out by the boundless waves of constant changes, interwar Japan was filled with foreign objects and ideas that replaced the familiar cultural order and urban landscape with an incessant flood of things modern. Caught within the tight grasp of this historical condition of relentless transformation, it appeared that nothing fell outside its powerful influences; the spell of the age entirely transformed every facet of human life – from the sight of a familiar street-corner to the inner landscape of the individual. The popular experience of fascination, bewilderment and confusion in such a dramatic transformation was naturally reflected in the nature of the knowledge produced, allowing us a glimpse of the lived experience of those who were involved in this turbulent historical time. The residue of an awareness of oneself unaffected by such intense alienation gave rise to the ghost of erased specificity and foregone possibilities of a life filled with meaning, inclined to fix the temporal scheme of the world to its own modality of the imagined past.

In *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Harry Harootunian takes up the ambitious task of locating various texts produced by Japanese intellectuals during the interwar years in the context of the historical transformation described above. The historical drama is depicted in 414 pages of careful study of texts produced by Tosaka Jun, Gonda Yasunosuke, Kon Wajiro, Kuki Shuzo, Watsuji Tetsuro, Yanagita Kunio, Orikuchi Shinobu, Miki Kiyoshi and others, who are seen in a comparative perspective to major European, especially German, thinkers of the same time period, including Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and Siegfried Kracauer. Like its twin-volume published in the same year, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*, this volume assumes its readers to be well-versed in theory, as well as Japanese intellectual history – which may make this significant book less accessible to a broader readership. Viewing history from a vantage point distant from those involved in the immediate turmoil, Harootunian sees rising capitalist consumer culture – and the plural temporalities it unleashed – as making many Japanese intellectuals of the time uneasy, producing unsettling feelings of ‘unevenness’ or fragmentary and fleeting senses of the present, and eventually leading
them to redeem the disappearing sense of the ‘everyday’ in the knowledge they produced. The author argues that the development of such troubled knowledge, which sought to repress signs of divisions and conflicts, contributed to the ‘crisis of representation’ in the 1930s, and invited calls for a ‘political resolution’ to this cultural crisis. It is this attempt at a resolution that he sees as the core of fascism. Seen from this perspective, Harootunian concludes that modern Japanese history was in the process of being overcome by the dynamic forces of modernity rather than – as Japanese intellectuals proclaimed at the opening of the WWII – ‘overcoming modernity’.

Doing justice in reviewing this complex and sophisticated inquiry into the question of modernity is not an easy task. Therefore, I will only attempt to engage with the main argument Harootunian presents in Overcome by Modernity from the perspective of my primary interest in rethinking the problematic of the Japanese experience of modernity, especially the question of modernity and fascism, and more generally that of culture and politics. While Harootunian conceptualises modernisation as an integral human process beyond the conventional segregation between the subjective/conceptual and the objective/material, this intent is circumscribed by his reluctance to step outside the realm of the discursive. Throughout, history is largely approached from a perspective that focuses on the reflection of experience in the knowledge Japanese intellectuals produced in this critical period. This methodological stance is closely related to the author’s ambivalence about Marxism in general, and to its dialectical epistemology and historical materialism in particular. It results in what appears to be a phenomenological study of Japanese modernity that locates texts in neither the historical context of their production nor the specific topographic make-up of the discursive terrain of the time. By excluding the historical context from his analytical scope, particularly the extra-discursive forces that operated beneath the formation of interwar Japanese discourse, the volume gives an impression of attributing too much credit to texts themselves, while knowledge-production as historical practice is diminished.

In this brief review, I will discuss the general argumentative traits of the volume before turning to those issues of primary interest to me – methodological questions; the relation between fascism and modernity; and the status of writing in history.

**Responses to the assaults of capitalism**

Harootunian is one of the most influential figures in the field of Japanese studies. In the late 1980s, he introduced poststructuralist-informed approaches that virtually transformed the orientation of the field. Since this incursion, the field began opening itself up to more theoretically rigorous approaches, partially integrating itself into other disciplines, such as postcolonial studies and cultural studies. More generally, this field became conscious of the political dimension of knowledge creation, which led to a critical self-examination of the field itself. Harootunian’s 1988 Things Seen and
Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism, for example, takes a Foucauldian approach to history as the process of discursive formation in the broadest meaning of the term. In this work, Harootunian explores the ideological operation of thinking and acting in discourse that subjugate the subjects to a particular set of values and view of the world. This penetrating study of the ideological operation of culture and language, or the significance of what Foucault described as the discourse of power and the power of discourse in a humanly configured world, has convincingly shown how the structure of our cognitive and perceptual framework has its own built-in biases. Harootunian is critical of an objectivist/positivist epistemological standpoint that views the historical world as existing ‘out there’ as observable facts, and, instead, sees the subject of knowledge-creation, as well as knowledge created, as equally involved parts in the process of history-making. On this account, Harootunian’s critical epistemological position may be described as constructivist, a position in which the spheres of human life are understood as the result of a mutually constitutive process between the subjective and the objective. In Overcome by Modernity, Harootunian seems to be also attracted to Marxist-informed approaches, as seen in his acknowledgement of intellectual debts to Benjamin, Kracauer and Bloch among others, from whom he gains additional insights mainly on the cultural effects of capitalism. With this move, the historical turmoil generated by the maturing process of capitalism in Japan came to be incorporated into the analysis of the interwar Japanese knowledge production. Let us first see briefly what the author lays out in the book.

In the first chapter of Overcome by Modernity, ‘The Fantasy of Modern Life’, Harootunian shows how the arrival of modern life was inseparably mingled with the formation of mass culture in the Japan of the 1920s and 1930s. He argues that glittering material objects, independent women and urban city scenes with cafés, bars, shops, cinemas and people displaying a new mode of fashion items all symbolised modern life and served as objects of desire that ‘figured first in discourse, as fantasy, before it was ubiquitously lived as experience’ (p. 13). Those symbols of the modern inscribed with desirable images of wealth, progress and the sophistication of modern Europe were vigorously portrayed and elaborated in the emergent mass media, such as newspapers, radio and popular magazines, and disseminated nation-wide in the rising tide of popular commercial culture. Harootunian argues that many Japanese intellectuals saw the arrival of the modern with ambivalent feelings, either as a fascinating encounter with the new, as expressed in terms of ‘constant eventfulness’, or as a rude intrusion into the stable social order and cultural values which induced ‘the spectacle of endless consumption’ (p. 16). He introduces a number of examples that encapsulate this ambivalence. For one, Gonda Yasunosuke, a leftist social and literary critic, celebrated the new modern life with his ‘philosophy of fun’. Likewise, Kon Wajiro, a sociologist of contemporary Japanese culture, focused on the material changes of modern life and saw the arrival of the ‘pleasure of daily life’ in which people could take multiple
subject positions displaying elements of a modern persona (p. 19). On the other hand, women adapting to new ways of life – called moga (modern girls) – were typically seen, as in the writing of the Marxist/anarchist critic Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke, as a threat symbolising the modern life and commercial culture that was eroding Japanese cultural tradition. Others raised more serious concerns about the powerful intrusion of this new culture, as exemplified in the warning voices of Abe Jiro – a romantic, idealist philosopher and novelist – on ‘the growing importance of desire (materiality) and the eclipsing of spirituality’ (p. 20), and of Aono Suekichi – a proletarian writer and Marxist critic – on the manifest signs of ‘psychological unhappiness’ of the salaried-men because of their unfulfilled desire and a loss of aspiration as a social class (p. 26). More substantial discussion follows in Chapter 3 entitled ‘Perceiving the Present’, where Harootunian depicts the Japanese experience of modernity through the prism of writings by Murayama Tomoyoshi, Hirabayashi, Tosaka Jun, Gonda Yasunosuke and Kon Wajiro. Irrespective of their differing focuses and judgements, Harootunian argues that these authors together constituted the ‘discourse of the modern’ in which ‘modernity was seen as . . . the specter of unrelieved uncertainty . . . no longer anchored in fixed values but in fantasy and desire’ (p. xix).

After laying out how modernity was perceived and discussed by interwar Japanese intellectuals, Harootunian discusses in the next two chapters – ‘The Persistence of Cultural Memory’ and ‘The Communal Body’ – opposite streams of knowledge that arose in reaction to the rude intrusion of the modern. Referring to the phrase originally used by Claude Lefort, he argues that the perceived sense of the ‘threat to unhinge older, fixed social relationships and subjectivities’ in the 1920s led to the rise of the ‘discourse on the social’, which was motivated to depict a coherent view of society either by articulating timeless notions of Japanese culture or poetising and aestheticising everydayness (p. 214). In these chapters, Harootunian discusses exemplars of this secondary discourse – Kuki Shuzo’s theory of iki as the Japanese aesthetic principle; Watsuji Tetsuro’s philosophy of culture and climate [fudo] and his notion of ethics based on social relations – that served as vehicles to constitute idealised and timeless notions of Japanese culture. Similarly, the two influential ethnologists, Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu, are also criticised for creating a culturally embodied space outside of modern temporality, the former with notions of the countryside and jomin [‘the ordinary and abiding folk’], and the latter, the ‘auratic experience of the “other place” with the imagined past (p. 32). In these works, argues the author, the metaphysical inclination tacitly displaced the empirical and performative present, and ‘favored a hermeneutics’ that suggested unchanging substance beneath the ephemeral surface.1 The crux of Harootunian’s argument is to link this abstraction of knowledge

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1 As for the work of Kuki, Watsuji, Yanagita and Orikuchi, I simply agree with the author’s argument on their culturalism and aestheticism, although the orientation of their writings could be seen as being just as much derived from their personal inclinations as reactionary responses.
with the problem of the discursive space under capitalism. Not only the ‘discourse of the modern’, but the ‘discourse on the social’ is equally permeated by the ‘market’s capacity to effectively freeze the moment of history, replacing lived temporality with the procession of the timeless commodity’ (p. 32). ‘By rejecting an outer and objective domain already in process of becoming reified’, he argues, ‘discourse [on the social] began to identify the place of creativity that produced enduring meaning and cultural values capable of fixing stable social relationships’ (p. 32).

Naturally, there would be more than one way of approaching how to depict the Japanese experience of modernity. Personally, I expected to see more about how each intellectual encountered and struggled to come to terms with modern subjectivity, as well as with events happening that are reflected in their writings. The former could be seen in the agony of a torn modern existence in the work of the avant-garde artists, and an inner quest for truth and justice in many liberal and socialist writings, including those by Abe and Hirabayashi. The general absence of a reflection on personal struggles, either existential or political, in the volume makes history appear as a mechanical process progressing along its predetermined course to which Japanese intellectuals rather passively subordinated themselves or reacted in troublesome ways. Harootunian is perhaps right in criticizing the now infamous 1942 symposium ‘Overcoming Modernity’, which is also the title of the second chapter of the volume, as little more than the manifestation of a range of troubled knowledge that was devoid of temporality and historicity. The symposium, argues the author, ‘merely overdetermined the memory of the past of capitalist modernization and the vast material and spiritual transformation lived and experienced by the Japanese’ (p. 94). It seems that, however, this same problem is just as equally haunting us in contemporary settings, in Japan and elsewhere, with the recurring memory of things lost and the desire for anchoring our floating selves onto a concrete foundation. One may wonder if Harootunian would also describe our present state in terms of being ‘overcome by modernity’, which connotes a certain passivity and powerlessness on the part of those who are subsumed. Overall, since the volume mainly locates texts along the author’s assumed argumentative line based on the relation between capitalism and the resultant ontological – if not psychological – inclination in knowledge-production of the time, it gives the reader an impression of glossing over other important factors and conditions faced by these Japanese intellectuals. These important missing factors include a discussion of the Japanese nation-state – both as a violence-prone machinery of control as well as a cultural bulwark against the intrusion of external forces – and that of the role of human agency in the making of history. The absence of these factors are closely related to the methodological position Harootunian takes in his book, a position of a distance to the modern. I find it particularly hard to place Orikuchi in this broad narrative line, since, as Harootunian recognizes, his text is as much a product of a search for alterity and expressions of indeterminate self, as is Orikuchi himself.
that separates knowledge-production from its immediate historical context where dynamic material and discursive forces are at work – the conditions which those influenced by Marxism would see as an indispensable part of the configuration of the intellectual outcome.

**Modernity in reflection**

The author’s widening of scope to include Marxist-informed insights is a welcome move, opening up a passage to explore the territorially-segregated academic terrains between the material, political-economic and institutional (the conventional territory for historical materialism and structuralist Marxism) on the one hand, and the subjective, discursive and cultural (the focus of poststructuralism and constructivist approaches) on the other. At the same time, this ambitious project necessarily imposes on the author the difficult task of negotiating between the two, each of which has its own set of assumptions. According to what Harootunian lays out in his short and condensed ‘Preface’, this difficulty seems to be resolved by curtailing the adaptation of Marxism to the subjective effects of capitalism in knowledge-production, by which the author claims to trace the historical experience of modernity, or rather, reflections of it. Noteworthy here is that the dialectical relation the Japanese intellectuals had with the object of their inquiry – the historical and cultural conditions of their time – is left outside of his theoretical concern. He argues:

This book is concerned with Japan’s entry into the heroic phase of capitalist expansion . . . and with how Japanese reflected on the experience of ‘modern life’ in the crucial decades between the two world wars. It is not concerned with retrieving the experience of modernity as lived by Japanese during this period, as if the real, as such, could be transparently presented in the narrative of social history, but rather with how that experience was thought about and discussed, and how contemporaries recalled what they lived through. (p. 11.)

Presumably, experience as such cannot be retrieved in language in the first place, but by drawing a clear boundary between modern experience and the text, and by focusing on the way the former is represented in the latter, the author’s discussion of the ‘Japanese experience of modernity’ risks a form of reductionism that excludes the historical and material context from his methodological scope. This positioning of the author may or may not be related to his scepticism with regards to conventional Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to modernisation that, in his view, tend to reduce the problematic of modernity to the developmental and systemic failure of institutional bodies from their objectivist and teleological perspective of history. Harootunian instead proposes an alternative approach that explicitly focuses on ‘the problem of
politics and culture and their often mutual implications’ (p. xv), a problem that tended to be excluded in past studies. In his own words:

While these two narratives [modernization theory and the Marxist theory of modernization] have jointly contributed immensely to our understanding of Japan’s modernity, it has been at a price of privileging certain forms of historical inquiry, economistically driven social/political history, and marginalizing others. It has been accomplished by emphasizing the primacy of structures, institutions, and movements over thought and experience, as if they were lived separately. In this book I focus explicitly on the problem of politics and culture and their often mutual implication during the interwar period. (pp. xiv–xv.)

In this passage, Harootunian drops Marxism altogether by isolating its tendency to privilege the analysis of ‘structures, institutions, and movements’ and opposes that against the analysis of ‘thought and experience’ which he claims to focus on. What I am concerned with here is not so much the author’s polemical enforcement of the juxtaposition between the two, but with the possibilities he forecloses by making such opposition. For example, it is possible to argue that one can only have ‘thought and experience’ by means of language, a socio-cultural institution endowed with a structure, territorial boundary and symbolically ascribed meaning which is disseminated, exchanged and reproduced by means of the everyday practice of human agents. In this view, the material order, symbolic meaning and human agents constitute a structurally co-ordinated cultural-discursive space that is capable of maintaining historical continuity while being open to change. Such a holistic notion of culture and language, however, does not seem to be a part of Marxism the author is willing to accept.

The inquiry into politics and culture is a familiar path that is also taken by Marxist-informed critical theorists, including the Frankfurt school. The members of the Frankfurt school discuss the cultural and political dimensions of capitalism with the use of a dialectical conception of history and some key analytical categories, such as abstraction, alienation and reification. These categories immediately locate one’s argument in the general understanding of capital as the central structuring agent of modern society and the subject. Although Harootunian uses them throughout the volume, he also erects a notion of ‘unevenness’, a descriptive category devoid of materialist and structuralist connotations, which is given a more central position in his argument. According to the author, the term ‘unevenness’ designates both ‘permanent imbalance between various sectors of the social formations’ (p. xvi), and different temporalities generated by the same development (pp. xiii–xiv), with a clear emphasis given to the latter. While the categories of alienation and reification maintain the understanding of the causal/historical relation between the
material dimension of capital and the subject, the term ‘unevenness’ shifts its focus to the subjective terrain, where the effect of capitalism is perceived in terms of the conflicting temporalities. For many culturally-inclined Marxists, the production of knowledge is a constitutive part of history, and experience is not strictly outside of knowledge. On the other hand, by focusing on the reflection of the experience of modernity in the texts produced, and describing them in terms of the expression of a perceived sense of ‘unevenness’, Harootunian nullifies a dialectical relation between the knowledge producers and the knowledge produced, and the aspect of writing as practice, that are essential in Marxism. As a result, the author’s account of the Japanese experience of modernity appears as a collection of decontextualised texts that are put together along the historical narrative he intends to construct.

**Fascism and modernity**

Setting his objective as an inquiry into ‘the problem of politics and culture’, Harootunian approaches the problematic of fascism in terms of the structural breakdown of the material and imaginative orders or the ‘crisis of representation’, the simultaneous collapse of political, economic and discursive representational structures that ‘invariably worked to yoke modernism (seeking to solve the question of representation) to fascism (aiming to resolve the problem of political representation)’ (pp. xxvi–xxvii). Fascism, here, is understood as a failed attempt to resolve the state of representational paralysis that, in the sphere of imagination, progressed along with the increasing discursive failure in articulating experience. According to the main argument of the volume, this state can be seen as an end result of the gradual subsumption of the lived experience of people beneath the fantasy discourse of capitalism that invited Japanese intellectuals to create a new mode of knowing. Although the author does not mention much about the Japanese Emperor and the cultural system of *kokutai* (the national body), under whose banner wartime discourse was unified, it is suggested that fascism involves the transcendence of internal conflicts and divisions by the idealised notion of ‘Japanese culture’. In the fleeting sense of the world and the unsettling existence felt by the Japanese, argues the author, a means was found for articulating their ontological instability in terms of a national crisis with a metaphysical and anti-modernist bent, in other words, by transposing this fundamentally cultural problem into a political one (pp. 71–4). Together with Harootunian, I view fascism most significantly in terms of some fatal structural malfunctioning, the systemic collapse of the mediating mechanism that links the individuals (human consciousness) to society (human organisation). However, by excluding an analysis of institutions and structures, whether they be political or discursive, as well as that of political and historical development in the decade of the 1930s, the author’s account of fascism appears to attribute too much responsibility to interwar knowledge-production. Perhaps clarification of the
structural relation between the maturation of capitalism (economics), the widespread cultural condition of alienation (discursive) and the rise of a fascist régime (politics) in conjunction with the discussion of the representational crisis would have helped in alleviating this tension.

Harootunian does not necessarily provide a satisfactory explanation of the factors responsible for causing the ‘crisis of representation’ and fascism, beyond offering a number of descriptive accounts which are assembled by gathering fragments of insights made by others. There are a couple of factors which I especially wanted to see incorporated in the discussion. For one thing, as Karl Polanyi and others argued, fascism arose as a counter-revolutionary movement initiated by the élite who, in alliance with the militarist segment of the state, exercised coercive measures against society to crush the threat of communism in the 1920s and 1930s. In the Japanese context, the early leftist movements of the 1910s were shattered by the state-initiated murder of the socialist-anarchist leader Kotoku Shusui, while the movements by urban workers and rural tenants led by Marxist-Leninists in the 1920s suffered from internal divisions under the oppressive measures of the militarist state and its ideology of kokutai. Omitting such state violence and ideological manipulation, as well as the ultimately unsuccessful resistance against them in interwar Japan, an explanation of fascism would risk depicting politics without power struggles and knowledge-production free from politics. In particular, the dilemma of many Marxists, anarchists and liberal progressives who converted in the early 1930s from a leftist political position to a conservative-nationalist one cannot be understood outside the highly politicised climate of the time. Likewise, the rapidly shifting current towards aesthetics and metaphysics in the subsequent ‘period of cultural renaissance’ (1933–7) offers us a precious example that reveals the political forces behind knowledge-production. Secondly, it is possible to argue that the folk knowledge produced by ethnologists like Yanagita and Orikuchi is better described under the rubric of cultural nationalism and/or fundamentalism, rather than fascism, because of their relatively straightforward inclination to transcend the representational distance between word and meaning, whereas fascist discourses cannot be reduced to any singular ideological element. As

2 For example, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, Harootunian describes fascism in terms of its ‘micropolitics’ or ‘molecular focuses in interaction’ which ‘spreads like cancer’, without an example to show how this explanation of fascism can make sense (p. xxviii). Similarly, based on Slavoj Žižek’s argument, he also claims that fascism ‘derives its force and relevance from liberal democracy’s own internal antagonisms’, without satisfactorily explaining how this is the case. He then moves on to another large claim, that fascism is a product of the failure of capitalism: ‘When confronted with prospects of its own failure and impending dissolution, capitalism must negate itself from “within” if it is to survive, which means pass into fascism’ (p. xxix). Readers are left to speculate about the relations among these rather diverse characterisations of fascism, while the author extends the characterisation of fascism in a number of directions.

3 See Polanyi 1944.

4 On the development of leftist thoughts in prewar Japan, especially that of Marxism, see Hoston 1986, who lays out the main debates, problematics and dilemmas involved.

5 In this vein, Barshay 2002 argues in his review of Overcome by Modernity that Harootunian, in his explanation of fascism, attributes too much to folkish knowledge produced by Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu. In his reading, the folk discourse is ‘a tendency to see society as
demonstrated in various parts of the world, fascist discourses are typically characterised by contradictory features, such as unifying/fragmentary, national/international and conservative/progressive inclinations. In Japan, too, each of the following ideologies contributed its share to the rise of fascism in the 1930s: *nokonshugi* to revitalise the Japanese countryside; the Showa restorationist action-oriented right-wing ideology; romantic and ironic literary theory idealising Japanese culture; the universalist expansionism of pan-Asianism; and so on. This co-existence of a wide-range of ideologies and the aggregation of them under the singular banner of the Emperor deserve closer attention.

What underlay the diversity of ideologies that contributed to fascism was the state of the discursive in which differing thoughts could no longer present themselves as true differences. As Yasuda Yojuro, the leader of the Japan Romantic School, claimed, the discursive terrain of the 1930s was so thoroughly washed out by the dehistoricising and dematerialising forces of modernity that it was already creatively exhausted and unable to generate any new insights. Simultaneous with this imaginative closure was the structural breakdown of cognition, or the increased epistemological opacity that no longer clearly marked a boundary between the subjective and the objective (in a similar manner, the contemporary world is plagued by virtuality). This is a situation not dissimilar to the one which Lukács described in terms of the reification of consciousness in which commodity fetishism comes to affect all spheres of human life, abstracting and replacing the empirical-historical world with its phantasmagoric replicas. By focusing so closely on the ontological effect of capitalism on knowledge producers, Harootunian, in my view, understates the deterioration of reason in a capitalist society that is increasingly inclined to subsume the empirical beneath its idealist gaze. In such a reified discourse and consciousness, the dialectical epistemology between the subject and the object is transcended, and thus the perceptive parameters no longer prevent the objective world from dissolving into an endless extension of phenomenological surface devoid of depth. In such a distorted structuring frame of cognition, differences can exist only nominally, being reduced to formalised signs freed from their representative functions, either politically or linguistically. In this sense, the final movement calling for the centralisation and condensation of the discursive, and the aggregation of all perceived differences – the origin of the word ‘fascism’ appropriately designates the ideology of ‘binding together’ – only constitutes the last addition to the already troubled politico-cultural structure. This process of

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6 See Yasuda 1971.
7 See Lukács 1971.
nullification of differences is, at least for me, at the crux of modernity leading to fascism. It is rather obvious that such a discursive condition is prone to violence.

**Writing in history**

The reading of Tosaka Jun’s work and the assessment of its historical significance, to which Harootunian pays much respect, seem to reveal the most about the ultimate limitation of the author’s approach to the interwar Japanese experience of modernity. In my view, at least, the work of Tosaka, a Marxist/historical-materialist philosopher, does not fit the general picture the author draws, and the charge laid against Tosaka that he idealised the everyday and spatialised temporality seem unwarranted. Harootunian claims that Tosaka ‘identified everydayness with the materiality of the commonplace, the [modern] things colonizing the life of ordinary people, customs that were always changing’, and thereby, he conceived everydayness in spatial terms. According to the author, Tosaka spatialised temporality in his effort to create an alternative notion of culture and history, one that embodies contingency, heterogeneity, and the actuality of the present (‘the now’) (p. 128). Part of the difficulty here is the way an existing conceptual categories limit our thoughts and possible debates, especially when one thematises ‘everydayness’ as such in writing. From Harootunian’s point of view, it may appear that Tosaka’s work has a certain form of ‘essentialism’ in his ‘hermeneutical’ view of culture, by virtue of which ideas and patterned behaviours are dialectically linked to the material ground, where the former are actually formulated and ‘embodied’ in relation to the latter. Tosaka conceived history and culture in terms of common practice among the people that is always modifying itself – as seen in the emergence of new ‘customs’ as a result of the adaptation to new materials and ideas – and through which society incorporates change while maintaining aspects of the past. This formulation would be problematic when seen from a strict anti-essentialist point of view. However, one should also remember that language cannot operate without the presence of meaning, or even ‘narratives’, implicit in its symbolic structure, which safeguards its representative function by generating something more than what signifiers simply designate. As Harootunian acknowledges, Tosaka was concerned about the erosion of meaning in the discursive and the increasing abstraction of knowledge that divorced people from their productive relations and lived experience. One may wonder whether an articulation of the actuality of everyday practice of the people, as an effort to counteract what Horkheimer and Adorno conceived in terms of the self-alienation of knowledge, must always end up with the essentialisation of cultural space and freezing of historical time.

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In his ‘Nichijosei no genri to rekishiteki jikan’ (‘The Logic of Everydayness and Historical Temporality’), Tosaka explains temporality in terms of the logic of everydayness ‘grounded upon everyday reality’ and the ‘practice of working individuals’, which he sharply distinguishes from one based on a teleological view of history, because of the former’s openness to the possibility for change by means of practice. To make his argument concrete, Tosaka explains the actuality of the present in conjunction with the reason he chose to write at the very moment he was writing. This is because:

while postponing to read a book until tomorrow would not make much difference to me, postponing this essay until tomorrow would be dangerous, because there may be a friend visiting me tomorrow. Thus, I have no option other than prioritising to finish this essay today – under the given circumstances of this day, the value of the above mentioned two tasks is reversed. The present-ness of today, the nature of now-ness, each separately constitutes its own order of values suited to its own vision.

The friend who may visit him tomorrow could be either a true friend or an agent sent by the state, given that this work was written at the time many leftists, irrespective of whether they were Marxist or liberal intellectuals, socialist activists or anarchists, fell subject to various oppressive measures. Tosaka emphasised the irreplaceable value of the present moment he lives in, as the only temporality in which he can possibly be involved in ‘history in the making’ as an active agent. For Tosaka, this sole moment that history opens itself up to his participation could not be replaced by the possibility of tomorrow – a temporality devoid of actuality – for he was ‘commanded’ to write by the historical condition of that very moment. By writing from within a particular time and space, intellectuals are always and already subjected to a set of given conditions, and in this sense, it would be misleading to think that the authors are completely free in their professional engagements. Simultaneously, by accepting these conditions, their writing comes to be endowed with particular historical significance and gains actuality.

While devoting a large amount of his work to the inquiry of ‘abstract’ philosophical principles, Tosaka was also emphatic as regarded the significance of the practical problems of people’s daily lives, and saw the linking of the two as the foremost task of philosophy. As argued above, most of us would hear the phrase such as ‘people’s daily lives’ with negative connotations suggestive of an idealistic construction of the images of a people. This caution rightly points to the inherent danger in modern discourse where inclinations for eliding the representational gap between language...
and life is immanent, driven by desires to ‘grasp’ life/experience that cannot be attained by means of knowledge. These aesthetically-inclined desires tend to intensify as discourse alienates its empirical base and thereby loses its ability to articulate experience. As this happens, words like ‘ordinary people’, ‘everyday’ and ‘experience’ come to function as loci towards which these desires gravitate, ultimately rendering these words overdetermined and unusable. In my view, at least, Tosaka’s attempt to theorise experiential aspects of life was precisely for the purpose of breaking this impasse, in order to regain these categories by locating them in a different set of theoretical parameters, outside metaphysically- and aesthetically-inclined discourse. This effort was complementary to his materialist inquiry into truth, consciousness, materiality, time and space, and so on, on the basis of which Tosaka analysed problems of contemporary society at the most fundamental – and thus ‘philosophical’ for him – level. Such an effort was diametrically opposed to the regressive intellectual trend that had long abandoned responsibility to be accountable for what must remain outside human consciousness. What Tosaka hoped for was to open up an alternative discursive space outside this transcendental-idealist gaze, a space where individuals actively participated in history in their everyday lives. Until his death in prison, he was one of the few who managed to keep this spirit of resistance alive.

Under conditions that seem to demonstrate similar problems of representational crises encompassing all spheres of our life, today we are once again hearing calls for a ‘political solution’ to the state of structural disarray. Harootunian does not give us any clues about what we could do under such difficult historical conditions, and this silence typically conveys the weight of historical structure that hovers above the scholarly discourse of our times. While feeling the pressure of this weight of history, we should not completely give in to it, for the present historical moment also invites our participation. Critical consciousness may paradoxically find a freedom in historical engagement, in freely choosing to be responsible for our future, which would ultimately liberate us from the self-destructive pursuit of modern consciousness.

References


Peter Thomas

Das Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus/
The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Editorial Introduction

Historical Materialism has previously published information about the Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus (HKWM) of the Berliner Institut für kritische Theorie (InkriT), edited by Wolfgang Fritz Haug and published by Argument Verlag.1 Originating from the project to publish supplementary volumes to the German translation of the second edition of the French Dictionnaire critique du marxisme (1985) edited by Georges Labica and Gérard Bensussan, it has developed into an international enterprise involving over eight hundred Marxist intellectuals from all continents. The status of a translation has been definitively surpassed: while the French work was contained in one (significant) volume, upon completion the HKWM will comprise fifteen volumes (six have already been published; Volume 6/II: Imperium bis Justiz is scheduled to appear at the end of 2004). Correspondingly, the range of

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concepts treated has been significantly expanded to over 1,500. These include not only ‘classical’-Marxist concepts such as ‘Materialism’, ‘Mode of Production’, ‘Ideology’, ‘Base and Superstructure’, ‘Surplus-Value’ and ‘Revolution’. Also treated are Marxist interventions into the Western philosophical vocabulary (‘Transcendence/Immanence’, ‘Metaphysics’, ‘Concept’), aesthetic and cultural categories (‘Literary Criticism’, ‘Interpretation’, ‘Epic Theatre’, ‘Comedy’, ‘Kitsch’, ‘Irony’), socialist-feminist concepts (‘Gender Relations’, ‘Domestic Labour’, ‘Free Love’), significant traditions within Marxism (‘Leninism’, ‘Trotskyism’), though not individuals, unless they have given rise to a practical or theoretical tendency, such as the ‘Della Volpean School’), and a further array of concepts which, though originating outside of Marxism, have become important for left-wing politics and movements (‘Meritocracy’, ‘Gene Technology’). Much more than a dictionary of definitions, the range of concepts, the rigour of scholarship and the sense conveyed of a living and evolving Weltanschauung recalls the encyclopaedic projects of the Enlightenment, an essential reference work for all concerned to further the contemporary revival of Marxism as a scholarly research programme and political praxis.

In this issue, Historical Materialism begins a collaboration with the HKWM which will see the publication of one translated article in each issue. The final pages of the journal will thus constitute a growing archive of central concepts of the Marxist tradition, allowing readers of the journal to benefit from the first regular presentation of the HKWM to the Anglophone Marxist community. Historical Materialism further hopes, in collaboration with our publishers, Brill Academic Press, to assist in the translation of the entire HKWM project into English, initially in an electronic form available on the internet with regular updates of new English translations of articles, and culminating in the paper publication of the full dictionary upon completion of the German edition. Further information regarding subscriptions to support this ambitious undertaking will be published in Historical Materialism as it becomes available.

The translation into English of a German project, itself originally a translation from the French, is not, of course, an experience entirely foreign to Marxism. Just as Marx’s intellectual development benefited not merely from multilingualism but also, crucially, the different times at which new conceptual registers were integrated into his overall project, so the commencement of the systematic translation into English signals another decisive stage in the progressive internationalisation and strengthening of the HKWM project. It played an important role in bringing together Marxists from different traditions
in the immediate post-unification period of the early 1990s, when wholesale abandonment of Marxism was the order of the day in both East and West Germany. Confronted by ideological and institutional hindrances at home, a first phase of international expansion witnessed the entry of contributors from outside the German-speaking world, whose articles were translated by the HKWM editorial board; publication remained solely in German. A second phase of on-going translation into English contemporaneous with the continued production of the German edition will offer two related benefits:

(i) First, and most obviously, the availability to Anglophone Marxists (and by extension, given English’s status as the lingua franca of our times, to a broader section of the international Marxist community) of an indispensable reference work for Marxist theoretical research which far surpasses other existing dictionaries in English in terms of philological accuracy, scholarly depth, length of individual entries and range of concepts treated. This is in accord with Historical Materialism’s intention to play a leading role in encouraging the formation of international networks of Marxist theoretical exchange and debate. The collaboration between the journal and the HKWM project thus forms a central element of the translation programme which is being actively pursued both in the pages of the journal and the Historical Materialism book series published by Brill.

(ii) Second, and equally importantly, it provides the opportunity for those without first-hand knowledge of the German edition to gain a clearer idea of the form and procedures of an HKWM entry and to consider the possibility of active participation in the project. For the HKWM is not merely a reference work. With regular meetings of the editorial board at the Institut für Philosophie of the Freie Universität of Berlin, a ‘virtual workshop’ via email for discussion of articles and proposals, and a yearly international InkriT conference in Germany (conducted in both German and English – see details below), it is also an evolving project which lives from the integration of new voices into an on-going dialogue of Marxist theoretical renewal. It is hoped that regular publication of articles in English translation will lead to an increased participation of Anglophone Marxists not simply as readers of the HKWM, but also as contributors.

The article ‘Dialectics’ by Wolfgang Fritz Haug published below can be regarded as an example of the historical-critical, philological and dialogical form to which all HKWM entries aspire. As will be seen, entries in the HKWM
are organised according to principles distinct from those both of existing Marxist dictionaries in English and of comparable works of contemporary bourgeois scholarship, and which therefore call for some brief, introductory explanation.

On the one hand, an HKWM entry places a much stronger emphasis upon philology than is the case, for instance, in the important Dictionary of Marxist Thought edited by Tom Bottomore, the most significant comparable work in English. In the HKWM, quotations from and references to the pre-Marxist history of a concept, its role in the works of Marx and Engels, and subsequent elaboration within the various traditions of Marxism – but also in bourgeois scholarship – are all carefully recorded, in order to assist further independent work. Comprehensiveness is aimed at in the non-partisan treatment of conflicting tendencies and lines of development of a concept in the various Marxist traditions, but more important is that entries convey a sense of the unfinished history of these concepts, their contemporary vitality and relevance to ongoing debates both within and outside Marxism. Marxology plays the role here of handmaiden to the true ‘Queen of the Sciences’, intervention into the social reality and political struggles of the past and present. Furthermore, many concepts stemming from the political vocabulary of the present are treated in the HKWM for the first time in a scholarly dictionary. In short, as in the present article, the emphasis is less upon a definition of a concept than presentation and critical assessment of its historical determinateness, development, efficacy and prospects for future deployment.

On the other hand, there is a significant political and philosophical difference between the organisation of an HKWM entry and one from, for instance, such a monumental twelve-volume work as the Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Edited by Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer and Gottfried Gabriel, begun in 1971 and expected to be completed by the end of 2004, the internationally acclaimed Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie is, as Haug wrote in his Foreword to Volume 1 (1994) of the HKWM, ‘a virtually unattainable example in respect of its erudition’. The difference between the two works, however, does not consist in scholarly or philological standards. Rather, the historical-critical framing problematic which introduces an entry in the HKWM indicates an awareness drawn from the Marxist tradition that an attempt to comprehend history is simultaneously an intervention into it, the adoption of a position in the present and a proposal for the future. An HKWM entry, therefore, before embarking upon a ‘rescuing critique [rettende Kritik]’ of the ‘tradition of the
oppressed’ (Benjamin), attempts to outline clearly and succinctly the contemporary relevance, potential and necessary ‘incompletion’ of a concept. Rather than being a failing, the acknowledgement of such incompletion turns out to be precisely the strength of the distinctive HKWM historical-critical method, for, at the same time as it gathers together for critical study the strengths and weakness, successes and failures, of the past, it invites us to enter into the heart of the unfinished and always contested theoretical and practical dialogue which will be Marxism’s future.

For further information about the project and guidelines for authors, please contact Thomas Weber at <hkwmred@zedat.fu-berlin.de> or go to <www.hkwm.de>.

**Berliner Institut für kritische Theorie (InkriT)**
**IX. Internationale Konferenz**
**KAPITALISMUS ZWISCHEN KONSUMISMUS UND KRIEG**
**CAPITALISM BETWEEN CONSUMISM AND WAR**
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Dialectics

G: Dialektik. – R: dialektika.
S: dialéctica. – C: bianzheng fa.

The ‘Algebra of Revolution’ was the name given to the Hegelian dialectic by Alexander Herzen, and the materialist dialectic is often called, particularly following Lenin, the ‘living soul’ of Marxism. Dialectics is a key to the philosophic thought and the linguistic-aesthetic production of Brecht, who named it the Great Method. What dialectics means is contested, and the dispute concerning dialectics has always been at the same time a struggle over the correct way to proceed.

‘In its mystified form’ – that is, the Hegelian – ‘dialectics became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things’; in the form which Marx gave it and which he named in the Afterword to the second edition of Capital (1873), ‘its rational form’, ‘it is a scandal and an abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors’. It is ‘a scandal and an abomination’ because it is subversive, because it brings movement into the dominating order as the order of domination, ‘because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every form in the flux of movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary’ (MECW 35, 20; trans. modified). – Dialectics practised in this sense also became a ‘scandal and an abomination’ to the ruling order of state socialism.

It appears almost impossible to speak about dialectics without speaking un-dialectically, and thus, as the dialectician Brecht warned, to transform ‘the flux of the things itself into a static thing’ (Journals 6.1.48; trans. modified). On the other hand, if dialectics is meaningful, it is quite impossible to speak correctly about the things themselves without speaking about them dialectically, and thus to bring the fixed things back into flux. The possible meaning of dialectics must therefore be demonstrated by what all of the articles of a Marxist dictionary can contribute to dialectics in practice, how, that is to say, dialectics appears in the presentation of ‘the things themselves’.

Marx practised dialectics at first negatively against metaphysical thinking, by which he understood a static mode of thought which assumes fixed divisions, which is dualistic, and which attributes to things a fixed being, instead of comprehending them in movement and transition, in conflict and interaction. His version of dialectics opposed any form of thought which, particularly when it turned its attention to human things, did not direct its attention to their becoming and passing away, conflicts and contradictions, relations of domination and their subversion. Three aspects in particular are to be considered: 1) in terms of the history of philosophy, it is necessary to think the breaks and continuities in relation to the previous traditions of dialectical thought; 2) in terms of epistemology, it is necessary to examine what dialectics concretely achieves for the theoretician and scientist Marx; 3) in terms of the history of its effects, it is necessary to think the nearly complete reversal, the lack of dialectics, which, taking up above all Marx’s talk of ‘laws’ of dialectics, occurred in the official main currents of Marxism, and to contrast it with examples of liberating productivity.

Overall, we are concerned to present the dialectic of the versions of dialectics in the history of Marxism.

1. Marx took up dialectics from Hegel, but also directly from ancient philosophy, which was the subject of his dissertation.
1.1 Heraclitus, who declared the uncreatedness of the world, universal becoming and passing away and the unity of opposites, is commonly regarded as one of the pre-Socratic dialecticians. This would not have seemed to be the case to the ancients, however. The aphorisms of Heraclitus appear like dark puzzles in direct opposition to common sense, closed off from any discussion or dialogue (durchsprechen, ‘talking sth. through’); while this was exactly what the word ‘dialectics’ meant: the word ‘dialectics’ is derived from the Greek verb ἔλογο (to talk) and the preposition διά (through); the middle form διάλεγονθαι means just as much as to discuss or dialogue, the mutual discussion of something, ‘often used in conversation, thus practising dialectics, by Socrates and his students’ (Benseler); from this is derived the adjective διαλεκτικός, (‘to dispute, pertaining to dialectics, proficiency or skill in dialectics’, (ibid.)).

1.2 Socrates, or rather, Plato in the form of the Socrates of his dialogues, practised διαλεκτική τέχνη (Phaidros, 276e) as a competence in conversation, conducted in the form of a question and answer game aimed at consensus [homologēn] regarding truth. This version of dialectics was directed against rhetorikê τέχνη as a form of public speaking. Rhetorikê τέχνη was concerned immediately with the means of speech, in order to win votes from the assembled masses in the institutions of the attic democracy: πείθειν τὰ πλῆθη (Gorgias, 452e). Rhetoric aimed at obtaining power by persuading the masses (for money). The speech of a demagogic argumentative technique, i.e. public speaking which strives after leadership of the people [the demos], otherwise named eristic [τέχνη εριστική]. Its mission was the correct organisation of the polis.

Plato spoke out against this argumentative technique with the claim to overcome, by means of dialectics, political conflict and thus also eristic itself. He named this project Philosophy. One can, therefore, speak exactly of a birth of philosophy from the spirit of dialectics. – Of course, it is assumed, that dialogue (talking-through) must not fail to be appropriate to the matter under investigation. Nietzsche named that the ‘optimism of dialectics’ (KSA 7, 134). The ‘discoverability’ assumed here implies a coherent composition of ‘things’ and of the relation of thought to them: ‘Hence the metaphysics of logic: identity of thought and being’ (ibid.). – It is to be observed, however, how this doubled coherence (without the detour via labour and socially transformative praxis) could be claimed by Plato only by force. The ‘technical’ dialectic fell prey to a dialectic of technique and was transformed into its opposite. Certainly, Plato sought to realise a re-organisation of thought with the help of the ‘what is’ question, which was supposed to lead to a non-contradictory sphere of ideas. But thus arose, out of dialogue oriented towards consensus, a view which, imposed in an authoritarian way, was ‘un-dialectical’ or even inexpressible. What should have ended the argument once and for all was transformed into an institution of the war of position. Nietzsche characterised this way the fourth (and last) period in the genealogy of Greek philosophy: ‘Dialectics as the great security. Without knowledge, no competence. Philosophy becomes reformatory and imperative and aggressive’ (KSA 7, 388).

1.3 In the first book of the Metaphysics, Aristotle credited Plato, in opposition to the Pythagoreans, with the ‘introduction of the Forms . . . due to his inquiries in the region of definitions: ἡ τῶν εἴδων εἰσαγωγή διὰ τῶν ἐν τοῖς λóγοις εἰγεντο skêpsin (Met 1.6, 987b 31 et sq.). He added: ‘the earlier thinkers had no tincture of dialectic, but gár protoi διαλεκτικοί ou metéichon (ibid.). But in the fourth book he threw the Sophists and Dialecticians together in the camp opposed to Philosophy: διάλογοντι δὲ peri ἡπάνθθν, ‘They talk about everything’, ‘sophistic and dialectic turn on the same class of things [peri mên gár tò autò génos] as philosophy, but this differs from dialectics in the nature of the faculty [tò trópò tês dunátoste] required and from sophistic in respect of the purpose of the philosophic life [tès δὲ τῶν ἔντω ἔκ τρείσεσθ’] (Met IV.2 1004 b 17). Dialectics, which was supposed to remove ambiguity, now symbolised ambiguity itself. The opposition to rhetoric was undone. – During the Hellenistic period, dialectics was ranked among the seven
liberal arts. In the early middle ages, the formula \( \text{grammatica} + \text{rhetorica} + \text{dialectica} = \text{logica} \) had currency (\( \text{HWPh} \ 2, \ 166 \)).

1.4 The birth of modern experimentation-based science and its philosophy in the post-medieval world had to destroy this articulation. For, Francis Bacon claimed, the demonstrations ‘we have in logic \([\text{in dialectics}]\) do little else than make the world the bond-slave of human thought, and human thought the bond-slave of words’ (\textit{The New Organon} I, Aph. 69, 66). ‘On the basis of the consideration that logic is supposed to operate essentially formally and not materially, and should deduce definite and not merely probably correct conclusions, the designation of logic as dialectics has been given up since the seventeenth century’ (W. Risse in \textit{HWPh} 2, 167).

1.5 Nevertheless, even Kant still encountered dialectics in the sense of a ‘general logic’ which was misused falsely as an instrument to produce objective claims and which thus became a deception (\textit{CPR}, B 85). The Socratic differentiation between dialectics and rhetoric was not honoured by Kant. Rather, he explained ancient Greek dialectics without further ado as a ‘logic of illusion’, ‘a sophistical art of giving to ignorance, and indeed to intentional sophistries, the appearance of truth’ (B 86). In opposition to this, Kant’s critique had as its object ‘the safe-keeping of the pure understanding’ or the ‘critique of this dialectical illusion’, which was produced by the border-crossing or ‘unrestrained use’ of the understanding (B 88). For him, it was the (unhistorical) dynamic which represented ‘ideas of pure reason, which become dialectical only through heedlessness and misapprehension’ (B 708). For example, ‘unity of nature’ is a ‘regulative principle’ of reason; ‘to take it as being a constitutive principle . . . is simply to confound reason’ (B 721). However, Kant now transformed the expression ‘dialectics’ from the name of an illusory logic to that of a theory of illusion, insofar as, because of the nature of our capacity for knowledge, this is natural and inevitable (B354) (and inasmuch as it is so, it is transcentental), and has to be brought under control. Kant distinguished the transcendental illusion from empirical illusion (for example, the optical A295) and from logical illusion, which consisted in the ‘mere imitation of the form of reason’, and was thus ‘the illusion of fallacies’ which disappeared as soon as one came upon it (B353). Not so the transcendental illusion, which was based on the ‘delusion’ that subjective necessities are objective (ibid.). Kant named this element of his theory of knowledge the ‘transcendental dialectic’.

1.6 Hegel sublated formal logic once more into a material logic, demolished the Kantian divisions and transformed dialectics into the ‘moving soul’ of thought. He articulated dialectics doubly, at the same time subjectively and objectively, in terms of the experience of consciousness and the development of the thing itself (which were, for Hegel, in the last analysis, one and the same thing). In the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, consciousness develops through experiencing itself in the thing: actively extending, it fails in its particular intention and through this experience it is forced to undergo a ‘leap of levels’. ‘Dialectics’ signifies here no mere method in the possession of an unchangeable subject. Rather, it indicates the progression through contradictory stages of experience, in which the subject ‘forms’ itself. What is valid for thought is also valid for the object which it investigates: the claim of dialectics consists in developing the ‘Idea’, that is, ‘the rational factor in any object of study’, ‘out of the concept, or, what is the same thing, to look on at the proper immanent development of the thing itself’ (\textit{PR}, N2, 14). ‘The Dialectical principle constitutes the life and soul of scientific progress, the dynamic which alone gives immanent connection and necessity to the body of science’ (\textit{Enz}, §81).

What needs to be examined is what that concretely means ‘in practice’, if it is supposed to be more than the ‘metaphysics of logic’ which \textit{Nietzsche} detected in \textit{Plato}: on the one hand, Hegel was concerned with ‘those common dialectics of life, coming into being, growth, passing away and re-emergence from Death’, as happens ‘in almost all realms of natural and intellectual life’ (his examples are drawn from life cycle of plants: bud, bloom, seed etc., and also seasons as symbols of stages of life – \textit{Ästh} [Bassenge 1955], 352 et sq.). The graphic nature of the content predestined this
natural-cycle paradigm for a popular reception. On the other hand were the schemata which seemed to be perfectly suited for the (superficial) intellectual reception: the game of thesis, negating antithesis, and the synthesis that negates this negation and sublates the opposition.

Beyond organic images and triadic formulae, however, Hegel was also concerned with the shadow which thought itself throws on the object, because, fixated with the mobility of the thing and in its isolation, it fails to recognise their connections. Hegel can therefore say: ‘But it is far harder to bring fixed thoughts into a fluid state than to do so with sensuous existence’ (PS, Preface, 20). (This is the keyword for Marx’s definition of dialectics as comprehending ‘every form in the flux of movement’ (MECW 35, 20)). While Hegel defined the Science of Logic in the Preface to the first edition (1812) as ‘metaphysics proper or purely speculative philosophy’ (SL 27), and in the Introduction as ‘the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind [Geist]’ (50), as ‘the realm of shadows, the world of simple essentialities freed from all sensuous concreteness’ (58), the Preface to the second edition (1831) hints at a paradigm change in the late Hegel (which, however, was not further developed in terms of content): as thought forms are the material of logic, language now becomes the matter of discussion. Spontaneously a ‘natural logic’ prevailed whose ‘use of categories . . . is unconscious’ (35). On this terrain, into the instinctive efficacy of thought, is enmeshed in the bonds of its categories and is broken up in to an infinitely varied material’ (37). Hegel now articulates the programme of the 1831 Logic in this way: ‘to clarify these categories’ (which ‘as impulses’ ‘are only instinctively active’ and initially ‘enter consciousness separately and so are variable and mutually confusing’), and through these categories ‘to raise mind [Geist] to freedom and truth’ (37).

Dialectics would now be, therefore, according to this immanently transforming view of the late Hegel, the liberation of thought out of the immobility of its supposition of an essence and out of its unconscious inhibition in the categorial net of language, thus becoming an adequate mental agility.

1.7 Against Hegel’s dialectic of Absolute Knowledge, Feuerbach claimed to reintroduce dialectics back into the dialogical situation [ins Dialogische des Durch-Sprechens]: ‘The true dialectic is no monologue of the solitary thinker with himself, it is a dialogue between me and you’ (Grundsätze einer Philosophie der Zukunft, §62). Plekhanov responded to this rather unconvincingly that, firstly, dialectics in Hegel did not ‘have the meaning of a monologue of the single thinker with himself’, and secondly, that Feuerbach had ‘correctly determined the point of philosophy with his anthropological materialism, but not its method’, an omission which, according to Plekhanov, was supposed to have been filled by Marx and Engels (26). However, neither of the keywords materialism and method are to be encountered in Marx’s change of terrain as it is expressed in the Theses on Feuerbach.

2. Marx inherited the Hegelian legacy on the condition of a radical critique and re-articulation. In opposition to all speculative dialectics he was concerned with ‘scientific dialectics’ (1865, MECW 20, 29). Proudhon’s attempt ‘to present the system of economic categories dialectically’ was criticised by Marx because of its speculative philosophical foundations. ‘In place of Kant’s insoluble “antinomies”, the Hegelian “contradiction” was to be introduced as the means of development’. The categories for Proudhon had been transformed into Ideas, instead of comprehending them as ‘theoretical expressions of historical relations of production’ (ibid.). Marx translated dialectics into history, whereby all preconceived notions were abandoned. This categorical claim of a rational secularisation of dialectics makes Marx’s relation to Hegel, his stimulator, problematic.

2.1 At the time of his dissertation, Marx was still under the spell of Hegel. ‘Death and love are the myth of negative dialectic, for dialectic is the inner, simple light, the piercing eye of love, the inner soul which is not crushed by the body of material division’ (MECW 1, 498). – The break with Hegel was, therefore, experienced as a liberation, after which the situation appeared, at least
that Lange, under the influence of Darwinism, ‘subsumes all history under the phrase “struggle for life”’, understood nothing about Hegel’s method ‘and, therefore, second, still less about my critical manner of applying it’ (MECW 43, 528). Lange praised Marx for the fact that he moved in the empirical matter with a rare freedom, without suspecting, as Marx noted, ‘that this “free movement in matter” is nothing but a paraphrase for the method of dealing with matter – that is, the dialectical method’ (ibid.). Thus, in the face of the emerging social Darwinism, the difference from Hegel was reduced to the critical application of his method = dialectics.

When one investigates the writings, or rather the passages dedicated to the critique of Hegel, above all in the 1844 Manuscripts (MECW 3, 326 et sqq.), Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’. Introduction (MECW 3, 3–129), or less directly, in the Introduction of 1859 (Gr 100 et sq), taking into account also the Theses on Feuerbach and The German Ideology, one discovers that Marx carried out, in a series of phases, a complete change of terrain, an epistemological revolution, in which nothing of the old remains or, rather, ought to remain. Marx even says exactly this in the Afterword to the second edition of Capital, where he claims that his version of dialectics is ‘not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite’ (MECW 35, 19). In this context, however, he appears to say that this ‘direct opposite’ consists in the fact that, against Hegel’s transformation of the thought process ‘under the name of “the Idea” . . . into an independent subject’, Marx opposes a materialistic gnoseology, for which ‘on the contrary, the ideal is [supposed to be] nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought’ (ibid.). This introduces more confusion than it removes, because everything which goes beyond mind as the decisive instance of practical realisation — labour, activity, praxis — that is to say, exactly that which since the Theses on Feuerbach had been for Marx’s thought the specific terrain of praxis in the ensemble of social relations, remains excluded. Strictly taken, this formulation cannot be differentiated either from
the sensualism of Feuerbach or from the mechanical materialism of a Hobbes, or even from the criticism of a Kant. Because Hegel turns thought into the ‘ demiourgos of the real world’ which ‘is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea”, the dialectic ‘with him . . . is standing on its head’, Marx continues, clothing his critical appropriation in the only apparently clear metaphor of ‘inversion’ (ibid.).

Alongside this are further unclear formulations. The Russian reviewer Kaufman remarked that, ‘At first sight, if the judgement is based on the external form of the presentation of the subject, Marx is the most ideal of idealist philosophers’ (qtd in MECW 35, 17, trans. modified). Marx responded by claiming that it was necessary to differentiate between research and presentation, while admitting that the latter could give the impression that one was dealing with an a priori construction (ibid., 19). But it is neither explained why the presentation is allowed to be like an a priori construction, nor whether dialectics is merely a question of presentation or if it also plays a part in research. On the basis of such unclear formulations, the question of Marx’s relation to Hegel, which is so important for an understanding of Marx’s version of dialectics, has lead to the formation of controversial and opposed interpretative traditions. Against the popular interpretation of explicit formulations, it has continually been attempted to make explicit the operative dialectics which are contained, above all, in Marx’s scientific masterpiece, Capital.

3. In order to treat Marx’s version of dialectics, one must examine: 1) for what it is necessary; 2) what it concretely achieves; 3) what its forms of articulation are; 4) where its boundaries are and what, consequently, its epistemological status is.

3.1 If Marx described the achievement of his version of dialectics in passing as the interpretation of ‘every form in the flux of movement’, then corresponding to that is the problematic to which it is supposed to respond: the question concerning the connection of that which at first appears to be without connection, the connection at the point of origin of the phenomena which appear as disparate in the result. The most general problem of the critique of political economy: the dissolution of the ‘mutual independence and ossification of the various social elements of wealth’ (MECW 37, 817). As a goal of knowledge, this is not, at any rate, specific to the critique of political economy. Rather, classical political economy also sought ‘to reduce the various fixed and mutually alien forms of wealth to their inner unity by means of analysis and to strip away the form in which they exist independently alongside one another’. Classical political economy also wanted ‘to grasp the inner connection in contrast to the multiplicity of the forms of appearance’ (Marx 1972, 501 et sq.; trans. modified). The difference lies in the mode of comprehending and resolving the question of connection. Classical bourgeois economy resolved it in the form of the analytic reduction of ‘all independent forms and titles under cover of which the non-workers participate in the value of the commodity, to the one form of profit’, which in its turn was reduced to surplus-value (ibid.). Marx observed that classical political economy occasionally contradicted itself in this attempt: ‘It often attempts directly, leaving out the intermediate links, to carry through the reduction . . . It is not interested in elaborating the different forms genetically’ because it ‘conceives . . . production designed to appropriate other people’s labour not as a historical form but as a natural form of social production’ (ibid.). In this formulation the specificity of the Marxist critique of political economy is indicated: genetic reconstruction instead of analytic reduction, historicisation of forms instead of leaving them unanalysed in their natural apparent immediacy. The primary question of knowledge is that of the ‘genetic presentation, of grasping the real, formative process in its different phases’ (ibid.).

3.2 Many passages support the view that when Marx called dialectics a ‘method of development’, he used the term ‘development’ in the sense of a presentation of the results of research. Research attempts by means of critique ‘to take a science to the point at which it admits of a dialectical
of the negation of the negation for the supersession of the capitalist mode of production as the expropriation of the expropriator (MECW 35, 751).

3.4 In the Introduction of 1857, Marx noted warningly that he was dealing with dialectics ‘whose boundaries are to be determined, and which does not suspend the real difference’ (Gr 109). Viewed from the position of Hegel, that is tantamount to a step backwards in the direction of Kant, for whom the ‘real difference’ – particularly of ‘the thing for us’ and ‘the thing in itself’ – cannot be abolished and is epistemologically fundamental (cf. Colletti). Historical-materialist dialectics are thus supposed to guard against falling back into the speculation of a philosophy of identity.

The question of the function and status of dialectics for Marx became an issue of controversy for the first time through the attacks of Dühring, who reproached Marx with having fabricated the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation, ‘in default of anything better and clearer’, with ‘Hegelian verbal jugglery’ like the negation of the negation (qtd in MECW 25, 120). In Anti-Dühring, Engels declared that ‘Herr Dühring’s total lack of understanding of the nature of dialectics is shown by the very fact that he regards it as a mere proof-producing instrument’ (MECW 25, 125). ‘Only after [Marx] has proved from history that in fact the process has partially already occurred, and partially must occur in the future, he in addition characterises it as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law’ (ibid., 124). – Engels here appears to restrict the status of dialectics to a retrospective interpretation of scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, he adds: ‘Even formal logic is primarily a method of arriving at new results, of advancing from the known to the unknown – and dialectics is the same, only much more eminently so; moreover, since it forces its way beyond the narrow horizon of formal logic, it contains the germ of a more comprehensive view of the world’ (ibid., 125). – For the Engels of Anti-Dühring, dialectics provides, therefore: 1) retrospective interpretation of scientific results; 2) the function of a heuristic guide, comparable to

presentation’. Excluded, on the other hand, is the application of ‘an abstract, ready-made system of logic to vague presentiments of just such a system’ (MECW 40, 261). Dialectics finds expression, then, in the construction of the presentation, in the sequence of the treated categories and in the transitions from one to the other. – A by-product of his ‘dialectical method of development’, Marx noted, was that ‘it is constantly setting traps [for its bourgeois critics], which will provoke them into an untimely display of their idiocy’ (MECW 42, 390). Of course, even Marxists are not immune to blundering into such traps.

3.3 That commodity production forms an inner unity which is torn apart and therefore moves and reproduces itself in ‘external antithesis’ (MECW 35, 123), that such contradictions are comprehended as the driving force of development, for example, by making themselves a ‘form of movement’ (cf. MECW 35, 113), are forms of articulation of dialectics often used by Marx. Especially important is the figure of ‘transformation’ [das Umschlagen]. In these terms Marx analysed, for example, how ‘the laws of appropriation . . . become by their own inner and inexorable dialectic transformed into their very opposite’ through the repetition of the valorisation process and in the transformation into capital of at least a part of the surplus-value, in which ‘each single transaction invariably conforms to the laws of the exchange of commodities’ (MECW 35, 582, trans. modified): under capitalist conditions, appropriation in virtue of one’s own labour becomes appropriation of the ‘unpaid labour of others’ (ibid., 583). – Rosa Luxemburg praised this analysis as ‘a masterpiece of historical dialectics’ (GW 5, 222), which required ‘the powerful dialectic of a scientific analysis’ (ibid., 397). – In a letter to Engels, Marx pointed out that in the third chapter of Capital, Volume I, in the transition from craftsman to capitalist, he cited ‘Hegel’s discovery of the law of the transformation of a merely quantitative change into a qualitative one as being attested by history and natural science alike’ (MECW 42, 383). In the 32nd chapter of Capital, Volume I, Marx used Hegel’s formulation
*Findekunst*, the form in which Aristotle had comprehended Plato’s dialectics; 3) the initiation of a Weltanschauung. Engels did not make the relationship of the three functions explicit.

The scientifically most important function appears to be the heuristic, which equips the researcher with determinate investigatory questions and expectations, which of course are to be worked out according to all the rules of historical experiment-based science. Nevertheless, Engels himself exceeded these limits of dialectics and thus inadvertently ushered in the process of the de-dialecticisation of the Marxist version of dialectics.

4. The formulation of the ‘application’ of dialectics, also used by Marx, was extended by Engels to the systematisation of that which, from the 1880s, was called ‘Marxism’. The materialist conception of history and its specific application to the modern class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie was only possible by means of dialectics’ (*MECW* 24, 459), he explained in 1882 in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. In his ‘Outline of the General Plan’ of *Dialectics of Nature* he had affirmed dialectics already in 1878 ‘as the science of universal inter-connection’ and had codified three ‘Main laws: transformation of quantity and quality – mutual penetration of polar opposites and transformation into each other when carried to extremes – development through contradiction or negation of the negation – spiral form of development’ (*MECW* 25, 313).

4.1 Instead of leaving things ‘in their isolation’ (*MECW* 24, 299), dialectics showed them in the context of their coming into being and efficacy. Thus far, Engels respected the limits of dialectics which had been indicated by Marx, but only immediately to exceed them: ‘Nature is the proof of dialectics’ (ibid., 301). After the death of Marx, Engels explained in 1885 that he had taken advantage of his retirement to study mathematics and the natural sciences in order to ‘convince myself also in detail – of what in general I was not in doubt – that in nature, amid the welter of innumerable changes, the same dialectical laws of motion force their way through as those which in history govern the apparent fortuitousness of events; the same laws which similarly form the thread running through the history of the development of human thought’ (*MECW* 25, 11). Dialectics was turned into a universal law of being. Nothing was changed by the fact that Engels affirmed, after just as before, that for him ‘there could be no question of building the laws of dialectics into nature, but of discovering them in it and evolving them from it (ibid., 13). In his studies of dialectics in nature, only long after his death fabricated as a ‘Work’, Engels specified the criterion to the point that ‘an external side by side arrangement is as inadequate as Hegel’s artificially constructed dialectical transitions. The transitions must make themselves, they must be natural. Just as one form of motion develops out of another, so their reflections, the various sciences, must arise necessarily out of one another’ (ibid., 529). With that, dialectics was closed up into a universal cosmology.

4.2 Dialectics was regarded by Engels henceforth as the science of the ‘two sets of laws which are identical in substance, but differ in their expression in so far as the human mind can apply them consciously, while in nature and also up to now for the most part in human history, these laws assert themselves unconsciously, in the form of external necessity, in the midst of an endless series of apparent accidents. Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflection of the dialectical motion of the real world’ (*Ludwig Feuerbach, MECW* 26, 383).

4.3 A consequence in terms of the theory of knowledge of the thesis of the ‘two sets of laws’, of which the second was the reflex of the first, was the appearance of the *Abbildtheorie* [theory of the image]. Moreover, dialectics had thus become an evolution-ary Weltanschauung, involving universal development and relativity, and departing from the ‘great basic thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes, in which the apparently stable things, no less than their mental images in our heads, the concepts, go through uninterrupted change of coming into being

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and passing away, in which, for all apparent accidentality and despite all temporary retrogression, a progressive development asserts itself in the end” (MECW 26, 384). Engels adds that these ideas have, since Hegel, ‘so thoroughly permeated ordinary consciousness that in this generality they are now scarcely ever contradicted’ (ibid.; trans. modified).

5. Among the Marxists of the first generation after Marx, the positions of Kautsky, Bernstein, Plekhanov and Labriola are the most important.

5.1 Georg Lukács accused Karl Kautsky of ‘the deformation of revolutionary dialectics into a peaceful evolutionism’ (Werke 2, 591). If Steinberg could say that Kautsky had ‘consequently banished the “Hegelianism”’ from his presentation of the ‘economic doctrines’ of Marx, he could do so because by Hegelianism he understood the ‘dialectical structure of Marx’s argumentation’ (XVII in Kautsky). Kautsky’s ‘non-dialectical mode of presentation’ (ibid.) constituted, according to Steinberg, the secret of the wide international reception of his book. Lukács struck upon the matter more accurately: Kautsky had declined into a vulgar Hegelian evolutionism.

‘Undialectical’ evolutionism was manifested already in Kautsky’s The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx: exemplary, for instance, is the transition from money to capital. For Marx, an abyss of discontinuities must be leaped over, since this transition is the ‘product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older forms of social production’ (MECW 35, 179) in which alone the condition for the possibility of the appearance of the free wage-labourer ‘comprises a world’s history’ (ibid., 180). Kautsky, on the other hand, simply claimed: ‘It develops with time’, etc. (52). The analysis of the form(s) of value, and the genetic reconstruction of its sequence, a classic example of dialectical presentation in Capital, Volume I, escaped Kautsky.

5.2 Bernstein made explicit that which Kautsky had only performatively implied: ‘Hegelian dialectic’ was regarded by him as ‘the treacherous element in Marxist doctrine, the pitfall that lies in the way of any logical consideration of things’ (36). Against the late Engels, he problematised the metaphor of ‘placing the dialectic upon its feet’ with the not to be simply dismissed argument that, if one followed ‘the laws of dialectic, as laid down by Hegel, one ended up ’once again enmeshed in “the self-development of the concept”’ (ibid.). He was aiming to criticise Marx, but managed only a caricature of his version of dialectics (cf. 35).

5.3 The Italian philosopher Antonio Labriola, who became important for Gramsci, saw the key to understanding Marx’s break with Hegel in a change of terrain to a ‘philosophy of praxis’, which he comprehended as the ‘central point of the historical materialism’ of Marx. The way of Marx’s philosophy of praxis, which leads ‘from labour, which is knowledge through action, to knowledge as abstract theory’ contains ‘the secret of a formulation of Marx on which so many a head has broken themselves, namely, that he inverted the Hegelian dialectic’ (318). – In other places, however, Labriola described the theory of historical materialism as the ‘dialectical view or the evolutionary or genetic Anschauung, or however one wants to describe it’ (348), and in Capital he praised ‘the particular agility and souplesse of spirit, namely the aesthetic of dialectics’ (337). Apparently, he saw no further need for clarification regarding the combination of these diverse approaches. Nevertheless, with the determining status of praxis, in the sense outlined in Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, the course had been set for a reception of dialectics that was as much non-metaphysical as it was anti-naturalistic.

5.4 In Russia, Georgii W. Plekhanov, who exercised a decisive influence upon Lenin’s philosophical formation, resumed Engels’s arguments in the sense of a philosophy of dialectical materialism. He saw the essential difference of dialectics with the vulgar theory of evolution in Hegel’s thesis of sudden transformations in development (28). In Mutationstheorie (De Vries, 2 Vols, Leipzig 1901-1903), Plekhanov saw the ‘dialectical leap’ now also recognised by biology, though misunderstood in a teleological sense, and celebrated as
dialectical the neo-Lamarckian doctrine of the ‘Sensibility of Matter’, because it represented, ‘properly understood, only a translation into modern biological language of Feuerbach’s materialist doctrine concerning the unity of being and thought, of object and subject’ (29). ‘In Hegel’s system’, Plekhanov explained, ‘dialectic coincides with metaphysics. For us, dialectic is buttressed upon the doctrine of nature. In Hegel’s system, the demiurge of reality... is the absolute idea. For us,... only an abstraction from the motion by which all the combinations and all the states of matter are produced’ (118). Plekhanov still saw, at least, that movement (‘fundamental fact of being’) (113)) is a contradiction only as a concept in the context of a system of co-ordinates (112), and thus that one of the fundamental problems for the necessity of dialectics must be sought exactly in the non-identity of thought and ‘being’.

6. For the second generation of Marxists, who emerged around the turn of the twentieth century (Luxemburg, Pannekoek and Lenin, among others) and for those of the third generation, who were drawn to Marxism through the experience of the October Revolution (Gramsci, Mariátegui, Lukács, Korsch, Bloch, etc.), until the generation of Brecht and Benjamin, the reception of dialectics carried a left-wing, revolutionary sense. For Adorno, confronted by the totalitarian horrors of the century and the increasingly apparent failure of the revolutions which followed in the wake of 1917, dialectics withdrew into a negative Hegelianism of ‘inner resistance’, while at the same time, in the lands of command-administrative-socialism, a version of dialectics converted back into metaphysics was enforced by the official ideology.

6.1 Rosa Luxemburg condemned harshly ‘applications of historical materialism which did not use Marx’s dialectics’, without however defining what was meant by ‘dialectics’ more exactly. It was precisely in economic history that she saw those who regard themselves as being outside of ideology producing ‘that raw derivation of the most abstract ideological forms directly out of the soup-tureen’ (GW 1/2, 470). In Sismondi she praised ‘the broad horizon of the dialectical approach’, because he historicised the capitalist mode of production, comparing wage-labour with other forms of unfree labour and declaring that it was possible that an age would arrive which would feel just as barbaric as this one (Accumulation, 183). Dialectics, for Luxemburg, was not something which could be formulaically applied, but rather, the sense for – that is, the heuristic orientation towards – contradictoriness. Thus she opposed the romanticisation of the village community: ‘The Russian peasant beaten by his own neighbours in the service of Tsarist absolutism with birch-rods – that is the cruellest historical critique of the narrow restraints of primitive communism and the most obvious expression of the fact that also this social formation is subject to the dialectical rule: reason becomes unreason, and a good deed becomes a curse’ (GW 5, 687). Against Tugan-Baranowski who, among others, declared Marx’s analysis of accumulation to be contradictory, Luxemburg responded: ‘One only needs, however, to translate into historical dialectics the apparently rigid contradiction, as it corresponds to the spirit of all Marx’s theory and way of thinking, and thus the contradiction of the Marxist schema becomes the living mirror of the global career of capital, its fortune and end’ (GW 5, 518). It is a matter here of the ‘dialectical contradiction, that capitalism needs non-capitalist social organisations as the setting for its development, that it proceeds by assimilating the very conditions which alone can ensure its own existence’ (Accumulation, 346). Marx’s accumulation schema thus posited, ‘precisely in its insolubility, the exactly posed prognosis of the economically inevitable downfall of capitalism as a result of the imperialist process of expansion’ which, though, as she immediately added, thus avoiding an economic theory of collapse, ‘is a theoretical fiction, particularly because the accumulation of capital is not a merely economic, but rather, political process’ (GW 5, 519).

Nevertheless, Luxemburg demonstrated herself to be an important dialectician more
in her practical theory than in her theoretical praxis: for example, in her mediation or doubled supersession of revolutionism and Realpolitik in the concept of revolutionary Realpolitik, or of necessary centralism and its anarchistic rejection in the orientation to the ‘self-centralism’ of the masses. (cf. GW 1/2, 429).

6.2 Anton Pannekoek also reclaimed dialectics for the revolutionary Left in 1909. His discourse, though, did not actually order the positions dialectically, but rather as a dichotomy: ‘The proletarian point of view is materialist, the bourgeois, ideological. But dialectical and materialist belong just as much together as ideological and undialectical. For the proletariat, material powers which lie outside the domain of any individual dominate development; for the bourgeoisie, the creative power of the human spirit. Material reality is dialectical because it can only be grasped fully as a unity of opposed concepts’ (60). – Lenin opposed Pannekoek and at the same time joined him in such dichotomous thought paradigms.

6.3 For the young Lenin, the ‘dialectical method’ of Marx and Engels was ‘nothing else than the scientific method in sociology, which consists in regarding society as a living organism in a state of constant development’ instead of ‘as something mechanically concatenated’ (LCW 1, 165). When he later invoked ‘the materialist dialectic, the doctrine of development’, which, he claimed, had been used by Marx (cf. SR, LCW 25, 471), it was not differentiated in the slightest from the conventional rhetoric of the Second International, from Karl Kautsky to Otto Bauer.

Following Engels’s notion of ‘two sets of laws’, Lenin interpreted its reflex category causally: ‘dialectics of things produces dialectics of ideas’ (PN, LCW 38, 196). Dialectical thought comes at best onto the traces of the connection of movement and efficacy of things, but the nature of this connection does not make it easy. The mistake lies not in the answer, but rather, in the question: in the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx, from the standpoint of praxis, had blown open the philosophical grammar of the ‘two sets of laws’ and of that which Descartes called commercium mentis et corporis. Labriola was correct: whoever misunderstands this demolition, also misunderstands Marx’s version of dialectics.

Lenin summarised practical dialectics in four laws. 1) Comprehensiveness (almost Kantian in the sense of a regulative idea: ‘That is something we cannot ever hope to achieve completely, but the rule of comprehensiveness is a safeguard against mistakes and rigidity’). 2) Examination of the object ‘in its development, in its “self movement” (as Hegel sometimes said), in its transformation’ (noticing that this rule could not be applied meaningfully to an isolated object, Lenin replaced it with the thought that the object could change ‘its connection with its environment’). 3) ‘a full “definition” of an object must include the whole of human experience, both as a criterion of truth and a practical indicator of its connection with human wants’. 4) Never to forget, ‘that “truth is always concrete, never abstract”, as the late Plekhanov liked to say after Hegel’ (LCW 32, 94). – These rules obviously do not amount to concrete methodological steps, more a general framework of orientation, almost a disposition.

The theoretician Lenin, who, as such, remained the student of Plekhanov, fostered the re-Hegelianisation of Marxist dialectics. Not so much through his insistence on organising ‘the systematic study of Hegel’s dialectic from a materialist standpoint’ (LCW 33, 254), but rather, through remarks formed through taking up formulations from Marx, Plekhanov, and Lenin, such as the following: ‘Marx applied Hegel’s dialectics in its rational form to political economy’ (PN, LCW 38, 178). Or even through his explanation in the fragment ‘On the Question of Dialectics’: ‘Dialectics is the theory of knowledge of (Hegel and) Marxism’ (ibid., 362).

An evolutionist paradigm can be observed when Lenin comes to speak of Marx’s Capital: in his analysis of commodity exchange as the cell of bourgeois society, Marx showed, precisely, ‘the germs of all the contradictions’ and, further, ‘the development (both growth and movement) of these contradictions and of this society . . . from
Dialectics has here lost all reference to the unexpected or the discontinuous, and denotes exactly a type of knowledge, derived from the ‘philosophy of history’, regarding the predetermination of the future. Reading Hegel’s Logic, Lenin coined the concept ‘the logic of capital’, which was later to form the foundational category of a tradition of interpretation of Capital. In Capital, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and theory of knowledge of materialism (three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing) which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further (ibid., 319). Especially full of consequences was the following notice: ‘Aphorism: It is impossible completely to understand Marx’s Capital, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s Logic. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!’ (ibid., 180). Here is one who, in the exuberance of a reading of Hegel, feels himself to be the first (or rather, the second, after Marx) to catch a glimpse of a new world.

The explicitly ‘philosophising’ Lenin, however – similar to Luxemburg – is to be differentiated from the historically influential politician. His discussion of dialectics (‘dialectical logic unconditionally demands … teaches … requires’ (LCW 32, 94) is more conventional than his action. In political-tactical, as in communicative praxis, he was able to demonstrate another uncommunicable, that is, non-teachable, dialectics. Here is a masterly dialectician in the perception of the game of many-sidedness, of contradictions, of interdependency and latent potentials, of relationships of power and timely moments for intervention. The perception of unexpected applications is, though, the other side of a voluntaristic, seemingly zigzag, method in politics. After Lenin’s political art came Stalin’s politics of violence.

Under Stalin dialectics were codified into 4 ‘essential features’ or ‘guiding principles’: 1) unity of nature; 2) universal movement in the sense of becoming and passing away; 3) ‘An onward and upward movement … as a development from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher’, which, ‘rapidly and abruptly’ but not ‘accidentally’, rather ‘as the natural result of an accumulation of imperceptible and gradual quantitative changes’, lead to ‘qualitative changes’; 4) internal contradictions of natural things and the struggle of opposites as the driving force of this higher development. (Dialectical and Historical Materialism, 838 et sqq).

Mao’s writings on dialectics represent a special case. In his catechistic writing On Contradiction of 1937, he took up Lenin (though filtered through Stalin), translating him into easy to remember formulae in which he combined ‘Marxist terminology always more strongly with the content of traditional Chinese “native dialectics”’ (Klimaszewsky/Thomas 1972, 1213). This was possibly the element which encouraged Brecht to greet emphatically the publication of this text in German in 1954 and to use it for his own purposes (cf. Schickel 1968, 150 et sqq.). Contradiction was treated by Mao as a universal law of being, in which he differentiated the ‘Principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction’ (On Contradiction, Mao 1953, 34): they determined all ‘secondary contradictions’, and ‘the aspects of each contradiction develop unevenly’ (ibid., 36). Mao named above all the virulent contradiction between the old and the new, which ended with the supersession of each (a ‘universal, forever inviolable law of the world’ (ibid., 37)). The practical meaning of this was Mao’s teaching of the omnipresence of conflict between the old and the new, in which victory was supposed to be guaranteed to the latter. He illustrated the ‘law of identity and struggle of opposed aspects of a contradiction’ with the following example: ‘to consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat or the people’s dictatorship is precisely to prepare the conditions for liquidating such a dictatorship and advancing to the higher stage of abolishing all state systems’ (ibid., 45). The dialectic thus functioned as a form of rhetoric affecting the masses, legitimating contradictions between ends and means, theory and praxis.

If, however, contradictions were omnipresent, then at least contradiction in socialism became discussable. Mao did precisely
this in his 1957 text, ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People’ (Mao 1977, 384–421). In contrast to earlier formulations he now discovered that ‘the contradictions . . . between the exploited and the exploiting classes have a non-antagonistic as well as an antagonistic aspect’ (388). The contradictions between the People and Enemies of the People were construed as antagonistic. But the meaning of People and Enemy, and certainly that of contradictions, regularly changes, and Mao recounted the changes which had occurred since the 1920s. Concepts do not signify essential differences, rather they derive strategic differentiations and oppositions out of the concrete situation. Contradictions also exist in socialist societies, contradictions which in and for themselves are not antagonistic (that is to say, they are resolvable within the system), but can become antagonistic through false treatment (cf. 391). Schematically, Mao claimed that within capitalism, on the other hand, the antagonistic contradictions are irresolvable within the system (388). – In 1964, in ‘Conversation about the Questions of Philosophy’ (Mao 1974), Mao undertook a revision of Engels’s doctrine of the three laws of dialectics. The foundational theme was announced straightforward at the outset (in terms of its influence on Althusserianism, see Balibar 1977): ‘Only when there is class struggle is there philosophy. It is a waste of time to discuss epistemology separately from praxis’ (212). The juxtaposition, on the same level, of the transformation of quality and quantity into one another, the negation of the negation, and the law of the unity of opposites is “triplicism”, not monism. The most basic thing is the unity of opposites, the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites’ quality and quantity. There is no such thing as the negation of the negation. . . . in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation’. For example, slave society negated pre-class society, but was an affirmation in relation to feudalism (226). Dialectics is ‘the continual movement towards opposites’. One must therefore accept death in life and death and passing away as moments of life. 6.6 After the 20th Party Conference of the CPSU there was a discussion of contradiction in areas under Soviet influence which began from the recognition of the existence of contradictions in socialism and affirmed that they were the driving force of socialism. The law of the negation of the negation, which had been abolished under Stalin, was also reintroduced in the wake of de-Stalinisation (cf. Stiehler 1960, 3). Nevertheless, this discussion remained relatively without consequence as it was not accompanied by any politics of contradiction. The political leadership regularly supported research into dialectics which, however, was severed from reality. The triumphal tone still dominated the official ideology: ‘Materialist dialectics prove irrefutably’, declared the chief ideologue, extending one of Lenin’s phrases to the point of caricature (cf. LW 22, 108), ‘that the antiquated . . . capitalist society bears a passing character, that its dissolution by a new, more perfect social order is mature’ (Suslow 1974, 48). Official Marxism-Leninism stagnated in the shadow of such a regression of dialectics back into vulgar metaphysics. Robert Havemann found himself in 1964 ‘surrounded by fossils which have absolutely no real content any more’ (168). ‘The gentlemen who taught dialectical materialism from the professorial chairs of the Soviet Union have gone back to the positions of vulgar materialism and of mechanical materialism. All dialectics in their words is only to be regarded as a coy alibi before the classics’ (ibid., 12). – Vaclav Havel explained in 1966 that the cause for such a regression of dialectics into an ‘a priori and fundamentally abstract dialectical schema’ (174) – that is to say, into a new metaphysics – was the ‘precedence given to the theoretical principle over concrete praxis’ (176). Against the triumphal manner of speaking (‘sovereign domination and application of dialectics’ (cf. Stiehler 1960, 5)) and irreplevisable claims (‘the principle of the comprehensiveness of analysis’ (cf. Wallner 1981, 636)), he spoke out ambitiously in favour of a ‘new, higher dialectic’, a ‘dialectical dialectic’ (175), the sober, liberating truth: ‘a comprehensive Anschauung is nonsense’ (179). While the ‘passive dialectic’ (Haug 1985)
overtook the Communist project, there arose on its margins and in its gaps pluralistic dialectical thought, beginning afresh. Repressed in theory and political praxis, dialectics returned above all in literature and art.

6.7 Despite all the institutional hindrances, a series of discussions of dialectics (discussions of logic, of praxis, and of dialectics as method (cf. the overview in Bogomolow 1974)) took place throughout the history of the GDR. The final results of these debates, however, were a great disillusionment. – Initially, dialectics were defined with Lenin, briefly, as “the doctrine of development”, whose meaning, however, was “constant progress, the unsuspended development of productive powers”, etc. (Redlow et al. 1971, 182). Correspondingly, materialist dialectics was taken for a method which was inessantly perfecting itself . . ., a weapon which becomes ever more powerful with each of its deployments (Rosental 1974, 6).

But did this development therefore recognise no decline, defeat, regression, no destruction? Is not dialectics for the classics of Marxism related to the thought that nothing lasts for ever, that everything also passes away? Does there not exist, therefore, a contradiction between such optimism of progress and dialectics? – For Hermann Ley, dialectics functioned as a successor to theodicy when he said that ‘the dialectical standpoint justifies coming into being and passing away as moments of continual becoming’, and when he thought to see ‘realised dialectics’, with Engels, ‘in the transitory character of the relation of the subject to the object (635 et sqq.). As if he wanted to confirm Nietzsche’s judgement of the optimism of the dialectic, he declared that the specific achievement of dialectics was ‘that no pessimistic conclusions are presented by the knowledge of nature’ (766), etc. Wolfgang Eichhorn (I) interpreted Lenin’s paraphrase of Engels – ‘dialectics of things produces dialectics of ideas’ – in the sense of an ontology of diverse spheres: dialectical laws are the most universal, under which fall the dialectics of both spheres with a parallelism of interpellation and pre-stabilised correspondence, with the slight reservation: that they ‘must agree on the whole’ (1973, 13). For Kosing and others, this means that dialectics in general exists in two fundamental forms: as objective dialectics which are immanent in nature and society, and as subjective dialectics which reflect objective dialectics in the theory of dialectics and the dialectical method which is derived from it (1981, 32).

Here the whole was closed up into a ‘system’, in the sense ‘that the whole forms an independent phenomenon which imbues all parts and confronts them as their determining moment’ (Redlow et al. 1971, 185). – In its late phase, the leading themes of such a theory of dialectics, both scientific and in terms of the history of philosophy, went through a terrain-shift to, on the one hand, a system of thought (cf. Warnke et al. 1977 a & b), and, on the other, a theory of development (cf. Redlow/Stiehler 1977).

M. Wallner sensed the elimination of the necessary effort from such a philosophy of identity. In 1981 he went over to a long-disputed fundamental position of the ‘analytical theory’ which was predominant in the West: one must distinguish between (prescriptive) method and theory, otherwise there results ‘the construction of “ideal centaurs” which are at the same time knowledge and instructions for action’ and which imply an abstract subject ‘whose action is exclusively determined by knowledge of objectivity and which thus comports itself in reality without interest’ (633). The assumption of direct reflection was also now charged with being mechanistic because it eliminated interests, and thus the relation of the subject to the object (635 et sqq.). Methodology was ultimately seen in relation to the subject as ‘the ideal concept of activity’ (637 et sqq.).

The operative sense of ‘dialectical method’ was treated in investigations of the ‘ascent from the abstract to the concrete’ (cf. Ilyenkov 1969), of the relationship of the logical and the historical (cf. Gropp 1970, Ilyenkov 1974) and in Narski’s study of Marx’s treatment of aporia etc. (cf. Bogomolow 1972). Nevertheless, no real clarity reigned. According to E. Thomas the function of ‘the foundational laws of dialectics’ consisted in the fact that through them ‘the investigation . . . is fixed theoretically in a general form’ (1976, 161).
would perhaps be helpful to add: in a provisional theoretical framework with heuristic function. G. Pawelzig ascribed to the ‘law of the negation of the negation in Engels’s presentation of historical processes’ the functional status of taking up ‘the leading, guiding form of presentation in the structure of method when it is a matter of imparting historical understanding and thus allowing activity oriented to the future’ (1981, 133). That appears, rather, to be a didactic-propagandist (‘ideological’) function. When Götz Redlow declared that ‘the dialectical method is a universal method which in the first instance, in principle, is applicable to any and everything . . . but not in the sense of a master key . . ., since the objective universality of dialectics exists only in its concrete individuality’ (1979, 10), Wallner countered with the question: ‘How does a universally applicable method function, if not as a universal skeleton key?’ (1981, 638). That condemns all attempts ‘to represent the dialectical-materialist method as an instrument which solves concrete research tasks alongside specialised methods’ (639).

Herbert Hörz was correct when he wrote that dialectics ‘is not a method ranged alongside others, but is, rather, suitable for the comprehension of the co-action of these methods’ (1976, 344). Thus the conscious application of dialectics was finally restricted to directing ‘the selection and the combination of more specialised methods, so that as a result a methodology is established which is able to reveal the objective dialectics of the relevant field of investigation’. Wallner named this the ‘subordination’ of specialised methodologies, while conceding, however, that this is also possible ‘without the scientific application’ of the dialectical method, inasmuch as the single scientist correctly combines the more specialised methods correctly’ (ibid.). If it had become apparent that dialectics was ‘no “paralogical wonder-weapon”’ (ibid., 640), this amounted to a revaluation of the spontaneous dialectics of (competent) scientists, which is otherwise named ‘instinct’ or ‘intuition’.

7. Western Marxism. – In the emphatic moment of 1917, young intellectuals all over the world moved towards revolutionary Marxism under the aegis of dialectics. The Bolshevisation of the international communist movement presented them all, sooner or later, with alternatives: either to pay lip service to the rising orthodoxy, to fall into silence or to develop their projects outside of the countries of state socialism and the parties connected with them. For the pluralistic theoretical culture which developed outside of Stalinism the (misleading) name ‘Western Marxism’ has gained currency. Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci are regarded as its ‘real originators’ (Anderson 1976, 29; cf. Haug 1985, 234–59).

7.1 In 1919, Lukács directed his critique (which later, due to History and Class Consciousness, exercised a many-sided subterranean influence) as far back as Engels, who he accused of having ‘extended the [dialectical] method to apply also to nature . . . following Hegel’s mistaken lead’. Lukács declared himself to be firmly for dialectics’ limitation ‘to the realms of history and society’ (H&CC, 24). – Sartre, in the Introduction to his Critique of Dialectical Reason, developed the tendency of this argument regarding the effects of the regressive dialectics of Engels’s position (cf. 15 et sqq, 27 et sqq, 33 et sqq). – Lukács’s second fundamental critique was aimed against Engels’s objectivism. The October Revolution had allowed the proletariat to appear to Marxist theory as ‘both subject and object of knowledge’ and allowed ‘theory in this way to intervene immediately and adequately in the revolutionary process of society’. Inasmuch, the unity of theory and praxis was made possible for the first time, the way to theory’s knowledge of ‘its theoretical being – the dialectical method’ was open for the first time. (H&CC 3; trans. modified). This idea is lacking in Engels, according to Lukács: ‘He does not even mention the most vital interaction, namely the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process’ (ibid.). ‘The difference from “metaphysics” is then no longer sought in the necessity for any “metaphysical” treatment to leave the object unchanged, while for the dialectical method the central problem is the transformation of reality’ (ibid, trans. modified). Otherwise ‘the virtues of forming “fluid” concepts [would]
become altogether problematic' (ibid.), and dialectics would appear as ‘a superfluous additive, a mere ornament of Marxist “sociology” or “economics” . . ., as an empty construct in whose name Marxism does violence to the facts’ (H&ECC 4). – Similarly, Ernst Bloch turned against the type of ‘dialectics which have all too often become pure decoration or even a schema’ (GA 11, 391). – When he was isolated from ‘praxis’, dialectics for Lukács become a form of totality-thinking, which Althusser later challenged in his critique of the expressive totality.

7.2 Against the thesis, defended by Franz Mehring and others, which claimed that method could not be separated from analysis of the matter, August Thalheimer explained in 1923 that ‘the development of a version of dialectics is “a pressing need”, among other reasons because “the need for the creation of a comprehensive and strictly ordered world view has presented itself to the most advanced sections of the world proletariat”’. Karl Korsch, who cited these words, accused Thalheimer of positivism-idealism in 1924 and reaffirmed ‘the total error of the idea of the possibility of an independent “system” of materialist dialectics. Only an idealist dialectician can attempt to consider the totality of thought-forms (determinations of thought, categories) . . . as a particular subject matter for itself’ (17b). In 1930 Korsch extended his critique to Lenin, in whom Korsch found dialectics to be one-sidedly placed in the object and the dialectic of theory and praxis destroyed, due to the Abbildtheorie (62).

According to Korsch, Lenin saw his chief task not in dialectics but in the ‘defence of the materialist position, which has not really been seriously attacked by anyone’ (65).

‘The dialectical method used by Marx in Capital’ points, according to Korsch, to ‘the inner restlessness in all that which exists’ (1932, 177). Nevertheless, he insisted increasingly upon a clarification of the terminology of dialectics. In particular, contradiction ‘exists not as such, but rather, only through a simulated, symbolically abbreviated or unclear (due to other reasons) manner of expression’ (ibid., 197). Already himself now under the influence of logical empiricism, Korsch declared in 1932: ‘The logically and empirically flawless clarification of all these concepts which are still used unthinkingly today, and a good number of further ones, is one of the most important tasks for the future of the socialist-proletarian science which appeals to the authority of Marx’ (ibid.). – His later intellectual development saw him break with Marxism; but for his ‘student’ Bertolt Brecht, both the sense for dialectics and the sense for its non-speculative deployment remained living forces.

7.3 Brecht – Like Korsch and other Marxist intellectuals from 1917, Brecht was a Leninist. It was precisely for this reason that he understood what sort of a degeneration the ‘Leninism’ institutionalised by Stalin represented. In 1926/27 Brecht noted ‘an enormously characteristic episode: When Lenin had died, someone tried to gather together his immortal sayings and phrases. But there weren’t any. All that was found were slips of paper with practical instructions scribbled on them’; consequently, the slips of paper were to be examined, to see if ‘changes of world-historical significance’ could be made of them (GA 21, 179). In a letter to Korsch from 1934 (Brecht 1983, 185 et sqq.) Brecht announced that the ‘good old dialectic’ was ‘not yet so vanquished and antiquated’ and attributed its ‘deterioration’ to the weakness of the workers’ movement. In a similar fashion, he later gave priority of place in his critique of Stalinism to the ‘withering away of the dialectic’ (GA 23, 417).

7.3.1 Around the same time as Korsch turned away from dialectics, Brecht sketched his programme for a ‘dialectical drama’ (GA 21, 431 et sqq.). It is a philosophy of praxis under antagonistic conditions, related to that of Gramsci, which emerges and is dialectical inasmuch as it avoids speculative abstraction, closeness and over generality and not only claims agility, but makes it the very criterion of its expression. The capacity to describe something is founded upon the capacity to transform it. The idea of historical ‘necessity’ is criticised in that it conceals ‘contradictory tendencies which have been decided upon pugnaciously’ (GA 21, 523). Dialectics is necessary because of the unbridgeable
difference between thought and reality, and because of the necessity of finding an orientation for action according to this condition. ‘In reality, processes do not come to an end in reality. It is observation which requires and establishes conclusions’ (ibid., 523). 

Brecht elaborated a reversed uncertainty relation [Unschärferelation]: it is not intervention which makes an image unclear, but rather, the lack of possibility to intervene: ‘Situations and things which cannot be transformed by thought (which are not dependent upon us) cannot be thought’ (ibid., 521). – In a letter to Erich Engel in 1949 Brecht proposed ‘to study’ the materialist-dialectical ‘way of thinking as a way of life’, with the consequence ‘that dialectics must not be derived or refuted from the previous way of thinking alone, just as the new way of thinking, in any case, cannot be derived’ from previous thought forms: ‘a leap is necessary, or (possibly more auspiciously) a fall is due [einem Fall ist fällig]’ It is ‘wiser to comprehend dialectics from its political applicability, that is, to derive the new concepts [die neuen Begriffe] from attempts to grasp [aus den Griffen]’ (Brecht 1983 [619], 591).

‘Dialectical criticism’ for Brecht consisted in bringing points of view ‘into crisis’ ‘by means of their results’ (GA 21, 520; GW 20, 153). In this sense, he showed the crisis of the Soviet censorship régime, by confronting it with its results: ‘The state damages literature which is in favour of the state when it oppresses literature which is opposed to the state, it incapacitates literature’s voice, it pulls its teeth and de-realises it’ (GA 22.1, 132).

7.3.2 Norman Levine’s claim that dialectics for Marx was ‘the unifying concept, the central vision’ (1) is equally the case for Brecht. He adopted the expression ‘turning point [Wendung]’, used by Lenin in the context of self-criticism and re-orientation, in the subtitle of his Me-ti: Buch der Wendungen. In this ‘small handbook’ of dialectical morals, or rather, dialectical manners, dialectics is named ‘the great method’. Dialectics is concerned to recognise processes in things and to use them. It teaches the art of asking questions which make action possible’ (GW 12, 475).

Brecht transferred Hegel’s dictum of the identity of identity and non-identity into the impulse of things ‘to go beyond’ the categories of previous thought (ibid., 493) and into a dictum of difference: things do not remain true to themselves, concepts do not remain true to the things they sought to comprehend. ‘Things are happenings. States of affairs are processes. Events are transitions’ (ibid., 517). Brecht comprehended dialectics anti-ideologically: subversive, against every and any ideological eternity of an established order. ‘Deployment of dialectics for the destruction of ideologies’ (GW 20, 157).

Brecht felt a paradox in the liberation of the Germans from national socialism by a defeat: ‘Once again this nation is swindling its way to a revolution by assimilation’ (Journals 6.1.48). Without materialist dialectics, the situation in Germany could not be comprehended: ‘for its unity can only be achieved through continued rending asunder, it will have freedom dictated to it etc etc . . .’ (ibid.). – He noted the danger that with the swindling of the revolution emerged a perverted dialectics, transformed back into metaphysics: this pseudo-dialectic, ‘which stirs everything up in order to calm it down, which transforms the things in flux into something fixed, “elevates” matter into an idea, is just the bag of magic tricks for such shit-awful times’ (ibid.)

7.3.3 The theatre which Brecht directed in the GDR was strongly oriented to dialectics. ‘Everything connected to conflict, clash and struggle cannot be treated at all without materialist dialectics’ (GA 23, 376). The theatre ‘is able to make dialectics a pleasure. The surprises of logically progressing or leaping development, the instability of all states of affairs, the wit of contradictoriness and so forth, they are delights in the liveliness of humans, things and processes, and they raise the art of living just as much as the joyfulness of life. All arts contribute to the greatest of all arts, the art of living well’ (GW 16, 702). The reception of dialectics in the theatre was not always positive. Cautiously formulated: ‘the entry of dialectics into the theatre triggered a perceptible shock among those who accepted dialectics in other areas’ (Journals 25.12.52).

7.4 In the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci
developed his version of dialectics above all in his critique of Bukharin’s ‘objectivist disfigurement of Marx’s theory of history’ (Schmied-Kowarzik 1981, 116) and in his confrontation with the idealist dialectics of Benedetto Croce.

7.4.1 Gramsci attacked Bukharin precisely in that place where he presented the theoretical structure which had been developed by Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin, and which was later canonised by Stalin. Therefore, this critique can be understood as a critique avant la lettre of Stalinist ‘Dialectical Materialism’. Gramsci saw the foundational problem in the assumption that ‘the philosophy of praxis has always been split into two: a doctrine of history and politics, and a philosophy, which Bukharin says is dialectical materialism and no longer the old philosophical materialism’ (Q11, 22; SPN 434; trans. modified). But if the question is framed in this way, one can no longer understand the importance and significance of the dialectic’ (ibid.). Expressed in positive terms: ‘The true fundamental function and significance of the dialectic can only be grasped if the philosophy of praxis is conceived as an integral and original philosophy which opens up a new phase of history and a new phase in the development in world thought. It does this to the extent that it goes beyond both traditional idealism and traditional materialism, philosophies which are expressions of past societies, while retaining their vital elements. If the philosophy of praxis is not considered except in subordination to another philosophy, then it is not possible to grasp the new dialectic, through which the transcending of old philosophies is effected and expressed’ (ibid., 435). Gramsci saw in the pre-Stalinist ‘theoretical grammar’ of Bukharin, which posited and gave precedence to a foundational materialist philosophy which determined historical materialism, also a capitulation before common sense [senso comune]: ‘It is felt that the dialectic is something arduous and difficult, insofar as thinking dialectically goes against vulgar common sense, which is dogmatic and eager for peremptory certainties and has as its expression formal logic’ (ibid.). Referring to the third of the Theses on Feuerbach (MECW 5, 3), he continued: ‘The uneducated and crude environment has dominated the educator and vulgar common sense has imposed itself on science rather than the other way round. If the environment is the educator, it too must in turn be educated, but the Manual does not understand this revolutionary dialectic’ (Q11, 22; SPN 435).

The reclamation of dialectics, according to Gramsci, consisted in the critique of evolutionism and all views which supposed an unbroken, goal directed, predictable development, and which were not able to recognise the ‘dialectical principle with its passage from quantity to quality’, a passage which ‘disturbs any form of evolution and any law of uniformity understood in a vulgar evolutionist sense’ (Q11, 26; ibid., 426). Against the objection that if this was the case, dialectics could not even be conceived, Gramsci answered: ‘But a theory of history and politics can be made, for even if the facts are always unique and changeable in the flux of movement of history, the concepts can be theorised. Otherwise one would not even be able to tell what movement is, or the dialectic, and one would fall back into a new form of nominalism’ (ibid., 427).

7.4.2 Croce was accused by Gramsci of 1) having regressed from Marx’s real dialectics to ideal dialectics (‘in becoming does he see becoming itself or the ‘concept’ of becoming?’ (Q10.II, 1); and 2) of having gone to great pains ‘to reduce the antithesis and to split it up in a long sequence of moments, that is, to reduce the dialectic to a process of reformist evolution of ‘revolution-re-storation’, in which henceforth only the second term is valid, because it is concerned to repair continually (from the outside) an organism which does not have its own sources of recuperation within itself’ (Q10.II, 41.XVI).

Gramsci saw this liberal-conservative domestication of Hegel’s dialectics in the sense of a reformist ‘passive revolution’ (cf. ibid.) above all in the ‘dialectic of distincts’, which Croce ‘introduced in addition to a dialectic of opposites’ (Q10.II, 1). ‘The philosophical error (of practical origin) of such a conception consists in the mechanical assumption that in the dialectical process the thesis must be “conserved” by the
antithesis, in order not to destroy the process itself. The dialectical process is therefore “foreseen” as a mechanical, arbitrarily, pre-arranged repetition into the infinite. . . . In real history the antithesis tends to destroy the thesis, the synthesis is a sublation (Aufhebung). However, this does not mean that it can be established a priori which elements of the thesis will be “conserved” in the synthesis, nor that the blows could be “measured” a priori, as in a conventionally organised “boxing ring”. That this in the end actually occurs is a question of immediate “politics”, because the dialectical process in real history breaks down into countless partial moments” (Q10.1, 6).

Gramsci allowed that Croce’s ‘dialectic of distincts’ was a ‘purely verbal solution of a real methodological requirement which is to be criticised’ (Q10.II, 41.X): ‘There is a real requirement in the differentiation of oppositions from distinctions, but there is also a contradiction in terms, because there is a dialectics only of oppositions’ (ibid.). Here is disputed, above all, the Marxist differentiation between base and superstructures. Croce thought the relationship speculatively, while Gramsci comprehended it in realistic terms with the concept of an ‘historical bloc’ (cf. ibid.).

7.43 Gramsci reconstructed dialectics from active behaviour in nature and thus avoided reducing dialectics to subject-object dialectics. He sought a path between objectivism and subjectivism. He noted an indirect critique of the objectivist Plekhanov when he was writing excerpts from a neo-Thomist text in which dialectics was comprehended as a part of formal logic and rhetoric: Plekhanov, in The Fundamental Problems of Marxism, defined dialectics, departing from a classification of objectivity and disregarding the primacy of praxis, ‘as a part of formal logic, as the logic of movement in distinction to the logic of stasis’ (Q11, 41; cf. Bogomolow 1974, 236).

Regarding Lukács’s view ‘that one can speak of the dialectic only for the history of men and not for nature’ (Q11, 34; SPN 448; cf. H&CC 2A), Gramsci argued that ‘If his assertion presupposes a dualism between nature and man he is wrong because he is falling into a conception of nature proper to religion and to Graeco-Christian philosophy and also to idealism which does not in reality succeed in unifying and relating man and nature to each other except verbally. But if human history should be conceived also as the history of nature (also by means of the history of science) how can the dialectic be separated from nature? Perhaps Lukács, in reaction to the baroque theories of the Popular Manual, has fallen into the opposite error, into a form of idealism. Certainly, there are many notes in Engels (Anti-Dühring) which can lead to the deviations of the Popular Manual. It is forgotten that Engels, even though he worked on it for a long time, only left behind sparse materials for the promised work, which is supposed to prove that dialectics is a cosmic law. Furthermore, it is exaggerating to claim the identity of thought of the two founders of the philosophy of praxis’ (ibid.).

7.5 Étienne Balibar opened the dialectics conference in the research institute of the French Communist Party in 1975 with the notion, following Mao, of a double relation of dialectics to the class struggle: ‘At the same time, dialectics has the class struggle as its primary (if not its only) object . . .; and, on the other hand, dialectics is itself a product, or better, a particular form of class struggle’, namely, a revolutionary form of class struggle (1977, 21). Balibar detected two opposed ‘deviations’, whose interplay of permanent ‘transitions’ and ‘corrections’ was, however, essential for the process of Marxism: 1) objectivism (in the chief form of a dialectics of nature and of evolution and of a universal ontology; and the secondary variant of positivism, of formalism of a theory of knowledge or of a dialectical methodology); and 2) (not symmetrically opposed) constitution of a philosophy of praxis or a materialist historicism (with the weaker variant forms of subjectivism, a philosophy of freedom and of the subject, a theoretical humanism, etc.) (25).

The most important form of the philosophy of praxis is ‘not that which thinks praxis as the praxis of a subject [. . .] but rather, that which thinks praxis itself as anonymous internally split “subject” of the historical process’ (by means of categories like: relations of power, forms of organisation,
the ruling ideology and the opposed proletarian ideology) (35). The opposition of objectivism and historicism embodied in Engels and Gramsci is ‘immanent to materialist dialectics’ (40). This opposition will therefore not disappear. Its maintenance is the very life of materialist dialectics itself: no fixed definition can be given of it, however, inside materialist dialectics, there is a complex theoretical struggle for the same (41). Balibar intervened in the struggle of these opposites with two complementary corrections: first, ‘There is only objective dialectics, dialectics is the contradictory movements of the things themselves and not the things “as they are reflected in consciousness”, let alone a mere movement of thought’ and second, ‘There is only dialectics from the standpoint of praxis or rather, from a practical standpoint, a standpoint which subordinates theory to practical determinations’ (38).

Balibar regarded as foundational for materialist dialectics ‘the thesis of the “unity of opposites”, the thesis of the universality of contradiction and of the specificity of contradictions’ (60). If one grasped dialectics, on the other hand, as the doctrine of movement, etc., it remained within the criticised metaphysics and ontology. Dialectics is the theory of the emergence, development and resolution (not reconciliation) of contradictions: ‘for no contradiction is ever “stable”, “eternal”, even though the contradiction, the contradictory character of the “essence of things” is, as such, permanent, or rather absolute’ (ibid.). – ‘Specificity’ had already been demanded by Brecht: ‘For example, the dictum of “transformation” is simply castrated, if one quality is simply transformed into another. The dictum then becomes a mere platitude, that is, a trivial, ineffective truth. What is possibly needed is a conceivable, expectable incident, in which a new quality, of a quite specific type, emerges due to changes in a certain concentration; while that out of which the new quality has emerged was not able to be treated in this specific respect, that is, it was better to not name it as a quality at all’ (Letter to Erich Engel 1949 in Brecht 1983 [619], 591). To make the things under consideration ‘treatable’ in a practical-transformative sense is the meaning of Brecht’s postulate ‘to derive the new concepts [die neuen Begriffe] from attempts to intervene [aus den Griffen]’ (ibid.). – Balibar developed his version of the specificity of contraires as an interpretation of Engels’s ‘reflex thesis’ (the thesis that subjective dialectics are a ‘reflex’ of objective dialectics); that does not mean that there are two dialectics, whose relationship would have to be studied, but rather ‘that there is one, single, objective dialectic whose development of thought, of knowledge, is likewise a specific aspect and consequently a determinate effect’. Reflex signifies ‘that knowledge develops as itself an objective process’ (29). Thus Balibar could stand by the thesis of the universality of the contradiction, even though there are only ever specific oppositions or contradictions which appear only for and in praxis.

Obviously influenced by Lenin’s way of thinking, Balibar ended with the dictum: ‘Dialectics is for the theory of the proletariat the same as the party is for the praxis of the proletariat, its organisation or its “concentrated form”’ (63). The sentence became an historical signature: four years later, the practical-theoretical political culture in France in which alone such a claim could be made collapsed.

7.6 Wolddietrich Schmied-Kowarzik comprehended the ‘self-foundation of materialist dialectics’ (1981, 210) as a philosophy of praxis, which he reconstructed from Marx’s critical sublation (Aufhebung) of Hegel’s philosophy. His attention was directed to the practical-materialist ‘predominance’ of Hegel’s philosophy. His attention was directed to the practical-materialist ‘predominance’ from the Introduction of 1857, in which Marx wrote ‘The conclusion we reach is not that . . . [the determining moments] are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well [distribution, consumption]. The process always returns to production to begin
A new... A definite production thus determines... definite relations between these different moments. Admittedly, however, in its one-sided form [as a moment alongside the others], production is itself determined by the other moments (Grundrisse, 99). Schmied-Kowarzik saw here the 'central idea of Marx’s materialist dialectics' (1981, 97). Production is for him human self-production, at the same time production of human alienation [Entfremdung] and production of the tendency, to be realised practically, of the sublation [Aufhebung] of this alienation (cf. ibid., 116). With Ernst Bloch he comprehended the idea of dialectics of nature in a new way, under the condition that 'nature is posited not only as an object of social production' (206). He concluded that 'the dialectical predominance of social production, which represents always and necessarily the starting point of dialectical materialism, is itself dialectically included in the predominant dialectics of nature. The dialectics of nature, however, for its part, can only be fulfilled and defined by social praxis, that is, by a moment over which it has predominated' (210).

8. The post-Communist situation is characterised by blind dialectics, which is subject to little theoretical study or investigation. Dialectics as a foundational concept of Marxism-Leninism appears to be discredited. In the ruins of the Soviet Union, all that which was once thought remains indifferently buried, and the traditions of Western Marxism are threatened by indifference and 'constitutes the essence of Marxism'. If Marx had found this 'clue to the universe', he would have written it down on paper. 'We may conclude from this that it was not written because it could not be written'. Thompson comprehended Marx’s dialectics, in contrast, as ‘a practice learned through practising. So that, in this sense, dialectics can never be set down, nor learned by rote’ (306). – Richard Gunn called for the recognition in principal of a ‘basic distinction between concept and object, between interpreting and changing the world...; between, in short, the teleological or purposive and the causal’, and wanted to admit, at most, the conceptual as the primary field of application of dialectics, which he found, at any rate, to be ‘animistic and anthropomorphic’. Thus historical or social dialectics at the best can be understood ‘in relation to the (true or false) awareness of the concerned actors (1977, 48 et sq.). ‘A dialectical materialist monism is a contradiction in itself’ (49).

On the other side, dialectics is reduced ad absurdum as soon as it is represented (for example, by Hans-Heinz Holz (1986, 11)) as worthwhile heuristic purposes’ (6). Nevertheless, the mastery of a ‘suggestive idiom’ is something other than the deployment of a distinctive methodology, particularly since ‘dialectical accounts either restate what could perfectly well be expressed in less esoteric ways, or else they are unintelligible’ (ibid.). That there still is not a concrete, exemplary analysis of operative dialectics is taken by them as a ‘reason for holding that there is no dialectical method at all’ (ibid.). What they at best concede is ‘a way of organizing and directing thinking at a pre-theoretical level, which, in some cases, facilitates the discovery of insights that can be well expressed in terms consonant with the norms of scientific culture’ (ibid.).

That this judgement corresponds not only to a scientific or positivistic narrow concept of method is indicated by the fact that the historian Edward P. Thompson similarly judged the thesis that for Marx dialectics was a method and ‘that this method lies somewhere in the field of dialectical reason’ and ‘constitutes the essence of Marxism’. If Marx had found this ‘clue to the universe’, he would have written it down on paper. ‘We may conclude from this that it was not written because it could not be written’. Thompson comprehended Marx’s dialectics, in contrast, as ‘a practice learned through practising. So that, in this sense, dialectics can never be set down, nor learned by rote’ (306). – Richard Gunn called for the recognition in principal of a ‘basic distinction between concept and object, between interpreting and changing the world...; between, in short, the teleological or purposive and the causal’, and wanted to admit, at most, the conceptual as the primary field of application of dialectics, which he found, at any rate, to be ‘animistic and anthropomorphic’. Thus historical or social dialectics at the best can be understood ‘in relation to the (true or false) awareness of the concerned actors (1977, 48 et sq.). ‘A dialectical materialist monism is a contradiction in itself’ (49).

On the other side, dialectics is reduced ad absurdum as soon as it is represented (for example, by Hans-Heinz Holz (1986, 11)) as
‘a system of statements about the structure of the world’ and reinforced as an ‘ontological theory’, which functions secondarily as a ‘meta-theory of thought’ (cf. Narski 1973, 83). In 1990 Holz projected ‘the development of an ontological foundational model of principles, categories and guiding principles of theoretical construction’ (562). Following Stalin’s conception of the equivalence of both orders – the logical and its ‘ontological correlate’ (563) – he could say that ‘the theory of reflection [die Widerspiegelungstheorie] ... represents the foundation of dialectics out of itself’ (564). – An exceeding of the boundaries of dialectics of a different nature can be observed in the work of Peter Ruben, when, taking up the concept derived from the philosophy of nature of natura naturans, he proposed ‘to think nature in its totality as its own site of production’ and argued that ‘It is precisely that which constitutes dialectics’ (1978, 70). Since the ‘self-movement of the whole’ thus appeared as the theoretical problem of dialectics, Ruben regarded the concept of ‘inter-action [Wechselwirkung]’ as unsuitable (ibid., 82).

8.2 ‘Warning: not to be misused’ – Thus Theodor W. Adorno entitled his reflections on dialectics in Minima Moralia (Nr. 152): ‘A mode of discussion stemming from the Sophists’, whereby dogmatic assertions were shaken’, dialectics ‘subsequently developed, as against philosophia perennis, into a perennial method of criticism, a refuge for all the thoughts of the oppressed, even those unthought by them. But as a variant of proving oneself right it was also from the first an instrument of domination, a formal technique of apologetics. ... Its truth or untruth, therefore, is not inherent in the method itself, but in its intention in the historical process’ (244). Unexpectedly for Adorno, this lays the accent upon orientation and commitment. Years later, in 1966 in Negative Dialectics, the accent had slipped. Dialectics were now regarded as ‘the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to break out of the context from within. The strength required from the break grows in dialectics from the context of immanence; what would apply to it once more is Hegel’s dictum that in dialectics an opponent’s strength is absorbed and turned against him, not just in the dialectical particular, but eventually in the whole’ (406).

In the same year (1966), at the Prague Hegel conference, Herbert Marcuse presented the thesis opposed to Althusser’s, that ‘materialist dialectics is also still under the spell of idealist reason, remains in positivity, so long as it does not deconstruct the conception of progress according to which the future is always already rooted inside the present, so long as Marxist dialectics does not radicalise the concept of transition to a new social stage, that is, so long as it does not build into its theory reversal, the break with the past and the existing state of affairs, the qualitative difference in the direction of progress’ (1969, 186). Marcuse registered a structural transformation of social dialectics: ‘To the extent that the antagonistic society closes itself up into an immense, repressive totality, the social location of negation “misplaces itself”, so to speak. The power of negation grows outside of and “is today concentrated in no class” (190). Determinate negation is therefore, for Marcuse, historically overtaken (cf. 1954, 370 et sq.).

8.3 Dialectics would therefore be relevant for an orientation which combines agility and wisdom; although it does not give up its secrets in a methodological formulation, it would nevertheless be relevant as method in an elementary sense, understood as heuristics [Findekunst]. Both functions are connected to a conception of the world which allows a contradictory, moving context to be thought. – ‘Perhaps it is not too bold, in a Brechtian sense, to define the Sage as the quintessential location in which such dialectics may be observed’ (Benjamin, qtd in Ruoff 1976, 39). The ability to practise dialectics is, finally, an art. ‘Being a dialectician means having the wind of history in one’s sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one’s disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them’ (Benjamin, 473).

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Wolfgang Fritz Haug
Translated by Peter Thomas

abstract/concrete, Althusser school, analysis/synthesis, analytical Marxism, antagonism, anti-ideology, anti-philosophy, application, beginning, camera obscura, capital logic, class struggles, composition plans, concept, consciousness, contradiction, crisis, critical theory, critique, debate on positivism, Della Volpe school, development, dialectical image, dialectical materialism, dialectical theatre, dialectics of nature, doubling, empiricism/theory, ensemble of social relations, genesis, guiding thread, Hegel-critique, Hegelianism, historical-logico-image, interaction, intervening thought, language, limits of dialectics, logical-historical, Marxism, mediation, metaphysics, method, movement, negation of negation, ontology, philosophy, positivism, research/presentation, revolutionary Realpolitik, stupidity, sublation, system, theory/praxis, thought-form, Umschlag, Western Marxism, Weltanschauung

Abbild, abstrakt/konkrete, Althusser-Schule, Analyse/Synthese, analytischer Marxismus, Anfang, Antagonismus, Antidialektik, Antiphilosopie, Anwendung, Aufbauplan, Aufhebung, Begriff, Bewegung, Bewusstsein, Camera obscura, Darstellung/Forschung, Della-Volpe-Schule, Denkform, Dialektischer Materialismus, dialektisches
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Symposium: The American Worker – Alan Johnson on ‘The American Worker’ and the absurd truth about Marxism • Daniel Gaido on ‘The American Worker’ and the theory of permanent revolution • Karl Kautsky on Werner Sombart’s Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? • Paul Le Blanc on the absence of socialism in the United States: contextualising Kautsky’s ‘The American Worker’ • Loren Goldner on the non-formation of a working-class political party in the United States, 1900–45 • Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff on exploitation, consumption, and the uniqueness of US capitalism • Noel Ignatiev on whiteness and class struggle • Alan Johnson on equalitarian Marxism and the politics of social movements • Peter Hudis on workers as reason: the development of a new relation of worker and intellectual in American Marxist humanism • Archive by Franz Mehring with a literary review of Hermann Schlüter’s Die Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika and with an obituary of Friedrich Sorge • Intervention by Christopher Phelps with “Why Wouldn’t Sidney Hook Permit the Republication of His Best Book?” • film review by Bryan D. Palmer on Martin Scorsese’s The Gangs of New York • Reviews

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:1

Wal Suchting on Althusser’s late thinking about materialism • Alan Carling on The Darwinian Weberian: W.G. Runciman and the microfoundations of historical materialism • Peter E. Jones on discourse and the materialist conception of history: critical comments on critical discourse analysis • interventions by John McIroy with critical reflections on recent British Communist Party history • by John Foster on Marxists, Weberians and nationality: a response to Neil Davidson • review articles by Paul Wetherly, Paul Blackledge, Paul Burkett, Jan Dumolyn, Steve Wright • a conference report by Enda Brophy on the Operaismo a Convegno conference.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:2

Brian Kelly on materialism and the persistence of race in the Jim Crow South • Domenico Losurdo on towards a critique of the category of totalitarianism • Massimo De Angelis on separating the doing and the deed: capitalism and the continuous character of enclosures • James Furner on Marx’s critique of Samuel Bailey • interventions by Paresh Chattopadhyay replying to Mike Haynes • Mike Haynes responding to Chattopadhyay • David McNally responding to Chik Collins • Chik Collins responding to McNally • review articles by Vasant Kairwar, Pete Green, Samuel Friedman and Matthew Caygill.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:3


HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 12:4

Nick Dyer-Witheford on 1844/2004/2044: the return of species-being • Marcel Van Der Linden on council communism • Symposium: Marxism and African Realities • Liam Campling’s editorial introduction • Pablo L.E. Idahosa and Bob Shenton the africanist’s ‘new’ clothes • Henry Bernstein on considering Africa’s agrarian questions • Patrick Bond on bankrupt Africa: imperialism, subimperialism and the politics of finance • Ray Bush on undermining Africa • Alex
Nunn and Sophia Price on managing development: EU and African relations through the evolution of the Lomé and Cotonou Agreements • Alejandro Colas on the re-invention of populism: Islamist responses to capitalist development in the contemporary Maghreb • Christopher Wise on geo-thematics, and orality-literacy studies in the Sahel • Carlos Oya on the empirical investigation of rural class formation: methodological issues in a study of large and mid-scale farmers in Senegal • Franco Barchiesi on the ambiguities of 'liberation' in left analyses of the South-African democratic transition • Brian Raftopoulos and Ian Phimister on Zimbabwe now: the political economy of crisis and coercion • Interventions • David Moore on Marxism and Marxist intellectuals in schizophrenic Zimbabwe: how many rights for Zimbabwe’s Left? A comment • Ashwin Desai on magic, realism and the state in post-apartheid South Africa • Review Articles • Paresh Chattopadhyay on ‘Karl Marx – Exzerpte und Notizen: Sommer 1844 bis Anfang 1847’, in Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) vierte Abteilung, Band 3 • Nigel Harris on Trade in Early India: Themes in Indian History, edited by Ranabir Chakravarti, and Michael McCormack’s Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900 • Surinder S. Jodhka on Tom Brass’s Towards a Political Economy of Unfree Labour and Peasants, Populism and Postmodernism • Henry Vandenburgh on Habermas, Critical Theory, and Health, edited by Graham Scrambler.