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**Speculating Histories: Walter Benjamin, Iain Sinclair**

It is now widely recognised that few – quite probably no – contemporary literary authorships in English show a more sustained or serious concern with our collective relation to history, in particular urban history, than Iain Sinclair’s. Yet even historically-minded critics, some of whom are quick to notice the reactionary ‘seductive melancholia’ of W.G. Sebald’s memorial mode, have not been ready to engage in significant detail with the more critical and constructive form of historical consciousness evolved by Sinclair’s London writing.¹ Within the emerging field of Sinclair studies, there is a lack of accounts of Sinclair’s methods of historical narration, and particularly striking – in the light of Sinclair-critics’ ongoing reliance on tropes (especially the *flâneur*) derived from cultural studies’ appropriation of Walter Benjamin – is the dearth of invocations of Benjamin’s theories of history.² This depoliticising use of Benjamin’s thought is not just not particularly helpful for thinking about Sinclair, in my opinion; it is, of

¹ Cunningham 2006; compare Martin 2005.
² Compare, however, the political use of Benjamin in Murray 2006.
course, also untrue to Benjamin himself who, as David Ferris argues in his ‘Introduction: Reading Benjamin’ for the 2004 Cambridge Companion, ‘deserves to be read first and foremost as an acute reader of the means through which the past is known to us’. Before this article reads Sinclair’s New novel Dining on Stones through the historical lens of Benjamin’s 1933 essay ‘Experience and Poverty’, I therefore want to explore some of the ways in which Benjamin’s re-thinking of the historiographical method has been reflected – and extended – in Sinclair’s work.

**Momentum breaks**

Ferris points towards the fundamental affinity between Benjamin’s and Sinclair’s methods of history-writing, when he traces the use of interruption in Benjamin’s writing style back to the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ for The Origin of the German Tragic Drama, and Benjamin’s definition there of method as digression, of which the ‘primary characteristic is the renunciation of the uninterrupted progress of an intention’. For Benjamin, famously, ‘truth is the death of intention’: truth can only begin to be approached via an interrupted or fragmented relation to it; hence ‘philosophical contemplation’ is comparable to ‘mosaics’. ‘Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum.’ This helps explain what I call – in my book Iain Sinclair – the ‘relentless serialism’ of the engagement with history performed by Sinclair’s writing style. When Sinclair’s form is most closely implicated with its material – as in his novel White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings (1987), for example – it operates a mosaic method comparable to Benjamin’s, of which Ferris notes that, ‘having lost any sense of a continuous unbroken development, such a writing takes on the character of discrete moments punctuated by pauses’. The interruptive pauses marking Sinclair’s novel’s relay of east London’s micro-histories sustain the text’s contemplative momentum, just as for Benjamin – as Ferris puts it – ‘understanding is constantly spurred into action by the stopping and restarting of every sentence’. In the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’, Benjamin saw the

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4 Ferris 2004, p. 3; Benjamin 1977, p. 28.
5 Benjamin 1977, p. 36.
6 Benjamin 1977, p. 28.
7 Bond 2005.
8 Ferris 2004, p. 5.
mosaic method to encourage readerly contemplation, and that the momentum of this contemplation is not that of grasping conceptual intentionality, or of knowledge as mastery, but that of an immersion within the structure of ideas, which flits between them – rebounding internally around the structure – and momentarily alights on truth, though not as if from without or above. ‘Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it.’10 It is just such an ‘immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter’ that Sinclair’s mosaic method provokes, and which my study Iain Sinclair attempts to enact and reflect upon. 11

Benjamin’s conception of historical understanding in terms of a movement of immersion, a process which is energised precisely by fixing interruptively on minute details, enabled him to premise historical understanding on the severance of the historical fragment from the past: which is to cut into the linear narratives of bourgeois histories, and free the historical moment to be engaged with by us in the present. For Benjamin, Ferris writes, ‘understanding is in effect the blasting of the image out of its past so that it can be recognised in the present’.12 The ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ certainly recommended that the task of the historical materialist is ‘to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history’.13 But we can argue that Benjamin was also sensing that the historical image blasts itself from the past: for, if our contemplation of the past is immersive and non-intentional, our understanding can do nothing as intentioned as blasting. Sinclair indeed radicalises Benjamin’s historical contemplation without intention into contemplation without volition, as if to passivise the historical materialist. In White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings, he suggests that it is only as an effect of an ‘involuntary, unwilled’ immersion within the past, that the past comes to recognition within the present. ‘You allow yourself to become saturated with this solution of the past, involuntary, unwilled, until the place where you are has become another place; and then you can live it, and then it is.’14 For Benjamin, this ‘then’, the moment juxtaposing past and present when historical development becomes lived and transformable, is attainable by the contemplation that arrests the momentum of bourgeois historical

10 Benjamin 1977, p. 36.
11 Benjamin 1977, p. 29.
14 Sinclair 1995b, p. 31.
understanding. Hence Benjamin, just like Sinclair, was suggesting that we should allow ourselves to abdicate from the capitalist historical continuum, and lapse into an immersion that constructively arrests: ‘then you can live it’. In the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin noted that universal history – the end-point of historicism – can only confirm the invariant continuum of capitalist activity, since it clings to a method which is merely ‘additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time’. ‘Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.’

**Necropolis: reconstruction site**

The relation between construction and immersive historical contemplation is developed in Convolute N for *The Arcades Project*.

In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness *<Anschau-llichkeit>* to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary.

Benjamin’s suspicion of historiographical naturalism, or of universal history’s additive method of history-writing, which accumulates historical moments into a pre-defined epic mass, rather than grasping them as the tools for reconstructing histories, is echoed in Sinclair’s attack on Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography*. ‘The Necromancer’s A to Z’ shows how the claim to comprehensiveness, the ambition to universality and total accumulation, of Ackroyd’s history-writing – his ‘mass of data’ – is little more than a symptom of our contemporary lack of constructive historical consciousness, and our indifference to the perpetuation of the ‘homogeneous, empty time’. Lacking the ambition to immerse genuinely, and to interrogate historical fragments as montage-crystals ‘of the total event’, we turn to Ackroyd as a false hero.

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15 Benjamin 1992a, p. 254.
16 Benjamin 1999a, p. 461 [N2, 6].
of urban history-writing: a master-archivist for tourists of a historical culture which we ourselves have degraded to a substanceless necropolis – a necropolis within which careers are profitably pursued by speculators of ‘occult London’ and post-Derridean theorists of ‘hauntology’. London, Sinclair argues, lays down ‘a history that is used up, a Falstaffian past that overwhelms an anorexic present’. Ackroyd’s history book has become bloated on accumulated fragments that are ‘dead’, or burnt out, because we are failing to re-charge them through the momentum of reconstructive commentary. ‘Ackroyd’s vision is resolutely retrospective. We, his contemporaries, are the pale residue of a dying fire. There is nothing to be done, beyond listing and cataloguing, breaking open dead files.’ Reduced to the rôle of ‘a vast library, a chamber of echoes and quotations’, London, Sinclair suggests, stands as a frozen monument to the triumph of empty time: Ackroyd’s scholastic conversion of riots such as Broadwater Farm into the equivalent of ‘virtual-reality panoramas from the Museum of London’, springs from his endorsement of the pre-given, his feeling that ‘subversion may excite for a moment, but it will be crushed’.17

Ackroyd’s book then, Sinclair claims, would accumulate the city’s historical moments into an eternal historical object, a narrative of vanquishing capitalism set in stone; London represents ‘a public monument to set aside the sculptures of Henry Moore or the monstrous steel folios of Anselm Kiefer. This is a final tribute to an unworkable notion of the epic.’18 These sentences recall Benjamin’s statements in ‘Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian’, distinguishing the way in which historicism has – as Howard Caygill puts it – ‘an experience of the past, regarding it as an object eternally present’, whilst historical materialism is to set up ‘an experience with the past that is a unique and transient constellation’.19

Historicism presents the eternal image of the past whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with the past – an experience that is unique. The replacement of the epic element by the constructive element proves to be the condition for this experience. The immense forces bound up in historicism’s ‘once upon a time’ are liberated in this experience. To put to work an experience with history – a history that is original for every

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17 Sinclair 2000b.
18 Sinclair 2000b.
19 Caygill 2004, p. 90.
present – is the task of historical materialism. The latter is directed toward a consciousness of the present that explodes the continuum of history.20

We will see that the process of construction, which enacts within history the principle of modernist montage, still remains fundamental to radical history-writing in Sinclair’s new novel Dining on Stones. In Iain Sinclair, I show how his earlier fiction self-consciously operates montage technique, and comments cognitively on the montage structure of its own historical commentary, so that the narrator in White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings, for instance, can describe the methods of detection staged within the novel: “‘Our narrative starts everywhere. We want to assemble all the incomplete movements, like cubists, until the point is reached where the crime can commit itself.’”21 Sinclair’s immersive contemplation ‘starts everywhere’: it aims to make every history, every historical moment ‘original for every present’. Sinclair’s momentum of assembly darts between its historical materials, constructing affiliations between textual sources or historical contexts rather than cordoning them off within a linear array of individuated tableaux: Jack the Ripper, Holmes and Watson, the Elephant Man. This montage method of commentary enables histories to be rearranged: reconstructed. The writing evolves a ‘consciousness of the present’ which works, fleetingly, momentarily, with the past; so that, as Ferris writes, ‘history is no longer what casts light on the present, nor is it the present casting light on the past’.22 Illuminative mastery, one time overseeing another, which stabilises both, is replaced by shifting temporal interactions. In Lud Heat (1975) Sinclair identified what was already his own mode of retrospective interpretation – that, unlike Ackroyd’s retrospection, is transformative too – in a description of Stan Brakhage’s film-making, which he saw to render moments not stable and fixed, but changeable. ‘The store of diverging moments is replayed, in repose, as a different thing. The snake of time thrashing as he takes it by the tail.’23

**Candle-flame dialectics**

Sinclair ascribes a redemptive or curative purpose to contemplative immersion, because his historical attention, like Benjamin’s, is focused on social crimes. Yet, in White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings, particular micro-criminal acts such as

21 Sinclair 1995b, p. 61.
23 Sinclair 1995a, p. 56.
Jack the Ripper’s are not to be denounced – as if we were in search of a fake absolution to reflect our own supposedly stable moral authority – so much as re-defined or re-imagined, as if they were focal points of a historical energy that is to be redirected along a more positive course. “We must use what we have been given: go back over the Ripper text, turn each cell of it – until it means something else, something beyond us.” Sinclair suggests that the past is also only to be redeemed into ‘something beyond us’ – something beyond the insufficient moralities which legitimise and are legitimised by an unfree society – because the past is itself intrinsically beyond our grasp: our apprehension of historical moments can only be momentary, provisional and incomplete. But a fleeting interaction with the past, Benjamin’s ‘continually momentary rescue of knowledge’ (Ferris), remains all that can open up the work of redemption. “The geology of time is available to us now, at this moment, this afternoon, and will be gone, will be forever unreachable. Unredeemed.” This visionary afternoon in White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings is a time of Anschaulichkeit; of ‘heightened graphicness’. Sinclair’s montage technique backs up Benjamin’s assertion – made in Convolute N – that ‘the materialist presentation of history’ is ‘imagistic <bildhaft> in a higher sense than in the traditional presentation’. Sinclair’s geology of time is ‘nerved to a candle-flame consciousness’ (White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings).

The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is carried out by these means – and only by these – can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost. In this connection, see the metaphorical passage from my introduction to [Carl Gustav] Jochmann, concerning the prophetic gaze that catches fire from the summits of the past.

Within Sinclair’s most dialectically imagistic recent essay, ‘From the Thick End of a Purfleet Telescope’ (2002), for example, Wilhelm Reich’s theorisation of the use of anxiety stemming from sexual repression to bolster social conformism, is rescued from the realm of the ‘has been’ and flashed up into the contemporary landscape of commodity circulation around the M25, igniting

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26 Sinclair 1995b, p. 52.
27 Benjamin 1999a, p. 463 [N3, 3].
28 Sinclair 1995b, p. 31.
29 Benjamin 1999a, p. 473 [N9, 7].
a searing critical negation of recent attempts – such as Hardt and Negri’s – to utopianise the posthumanism of capitalism’s new technicised bodies.


Sinclair’s is arguably the most contemporary of current (and earlier) literary authorships, because of his insistence on relaying images flashing up in the now of their recognisability. Like Benjamin, Sinclair seeks to understand history in relation to present material exigencies and insecurities, and to grasp historical moments not as if they were past, or as has-been remnants viewed through the blurring telescope of an invariant linear continuum, but, instead, as startling images in which, as Ferris puts it, ‘our understanding experiences the past in the full awareness of the temporary, fleeting source of all experience: the present’.32 Sinclair’s concern with apprehending histories in relation to the present, and to the economic conditions structuring historiographic production, is stated explicitly in the *Suicide Bridge* (1979) essay on media mogul Howard Hughes, ‘The Horse. The Man. The Talking Head.’ ‘What is crucial is why certain information comes forward at certain times: why Hughes now? [. . .] When you work this tank what is feeding you your “inspiration”? Who are you working for?’ Sinclair hints that the process of working the tank, floating around in directionless bourgeois historical contemplation, can be arrested by a materialist immersive contemplation which warms itself at candle-flame moments: the moments juxtaposing past and present when historical development becomes lived and transformable.

Either the facts are all, or they are nothing. An impenetrable maze of statistics, lost in space & time; dead ends, fake corridors, pits, traps. All that matters is the energy the structure emits. Can it heat us? Is it active? Or simply a disguise for the lead sheet imprisoning the consciousness of the planet; the gas of oppression, the burnt-out brain cells, milk-centred eyes.33

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Speculative scenarios and forgotten men

Here, in Suicide Bridge, as often, Sinclair metaphorically physicalises – materialises – our false consciousness, presenting it as bodily sickness: dulled eyes and brains. The ‘structure’ of history, ‘the facts’ – which can be written either energisingly or as an ideological ‘disguise’ – is, however, idealistically detached from our apolitical consciousnesses: it is essentially free-floating, rather like early Benjamin’s ‘truth’ (‘an intentionless state of being’ into which contemplation dives in order to circulate intentionlessly). Yet, in Lud Heat, the depiction of the autopsy in Brakhage’s film The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes (1971), had supplied Sinclair with a materialist, organic model of history. Here, time was mapped onto our bodies cell-by-cell, and historical events recognised as physical events.

The doctors are splitting the seconds of flesh, are cutting through the idea that the skin is a whole, one single garment, and not an infinite net of dividing events, operating at different time-speeds, knitted together in the eye, as the film itself is held by the retention of the dying image on the retina long enough to give the illusion of seamless movement. The body is a false cloak of minutes, and here it is parted, and its lies are numbered.34 Sinclair in fact options a materialist, anthropomorphic model of time, only to seek to replace it with a transcendental model. Time-skin, previously thought of as a bounded totality (‘a whole, one single garment’), is to be reconceptualised as a boundless infinity (‘an infinite net of dividing events’).

The momentum of the surgeons’ contemplation, ‘cutting through’ from one temporal model to another, passes us from the idea of unilinear historical progression, of ‘seamless movement’ along a single continuum of moments, towards the more speculative idea of an only-illusorily unified, infinite patchwork of ‘dividing events’, the various trajectories of which are ‘operating at different time-speeds’. It is as if the doctors are operating on the hinge of traditional-Marxist, historicist progressivism and the imaginings of speculative (perhaps theological) science fiction. Sinclair has stated in interview that he is ‘not at all’35 a materialist: anyone familiar with the project will respect the defence of his transcendentalism that motivates this declaration. Yet, precisely when he passes from a materialist to a transcendental model of time, Sinclair returns us to Benjamin’s historical-materialist critique of historicist ‘reified

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34 Sinclair 1995a, p. 58.
35 Sinclair and Jackson 2003, p. 59.
historical continuity’. The ‘infinite net of dividing events’ can be reconstructed, like the ‘store of diverging moments’ that ‘is replayed, in repose, as a different thing’.

Sinclair’s transcendental view of history as a rearrangeable, transformable ‘infinite net of dividing events, operating at different time-speeds’, frequently finds expression in descriptions of a speculative mode of historical contemplation which can reconstruct the store of diverging moments, through a form of retrospective prophecy.

So what happens, & the fear, is that somehow we move just ahead of the causal tide, but are attached to it: we are pushed forward on the nose of the time-cone. Or else – by travelling the rim of an area of collapsing density we get ahead of events by one beat, cause the events to follow.

The implication is sticky. The theory forces the fact: so that the written word, or the calculation in mathematical language, if it is pure, if the pattern has charm, will remake the physical world. Which is what [Edward] Dorn did for Hughes.

For Sinclair, physicists or poets moving at a faster time-speed, ‘ahead of events’, retrospectively ‘remake’ – reconstruct – historical events. In White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings: ‘We have gone so fast that we are ahead: we are describing what has not yet happened, and what does not now need to happen. We have made arrangements to foreshorten the future.’ For Benjamin, the dialectical cultural historian, who reads what he calls the ‘after-history’ of artworks, can grasp the radical, transformative meaning of their ‘fore-history’: the capacity of historical events to explode the linear continuum of bourgeois history. In a sense, the dialectical historian too can retrospectively ‘remake’ historical events, in that she determines how they operate as sites of historical reconstruction: ‘For the dialectical historian concerned with works of art, these works integrate their fore-history as well as their after-history; and it is by virtue of their after-history that their fore-history is recognizable as involved in a continuous change’.

In his introduction to the 2001 Penguin Classics edition of Arthur Conan Doyle’s A Study in Scarlet (1887), Sinclair redefines the ‘after-history’ of a

38 Sinclair 1995b, p. 199.
39 Benjamin 2002, p. 261; compare the quotation from André Monglond in Benjamin 1999a, p. 482 [N15a, 1].
cultural artefact in relation to that work’s socially prophetic capacity. The work prophesies the history to come after it, Sinclair proposes; in the text coming ‘political and social reality’ is speculatively constructed, ‘road-tested’. Yet the ‘visions’ of late-nineteenth-century genre fiction such as Conan Doyle’s, or of contemporary speculative science fiction, themselves have a ‘fore-history’ of critical and public neglect: their status as test-sites of historical reconstruction is only acknowledged, and then only for economic gain, when ‘it is too late to do anything about’ the criminal after-histories that they prophesied.

These works are prophetic; through them we can see what will happen, what must happen. Speculative scenarios run ahead of mundane facts: political and social reality is always second-hand. It has been explored and exploited, road-tested by imaginative authors operating in those zones that are only acknowledged by compendium reviews in the humblest corners of the broadsheets. With the passage of time, the throwaway leaflet, the pulp paperback, acquires a posthumous gravity. When it is too late to do anything about it, we begin to franchise (and misinterpret) the visions of writers like Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, Philip K. Dick, Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard.40

Sinclair is, of course, at his least materialist when he splits ‘mundane facts’ from our cultural consciousness, and vitalistically elevates the fast-track creative self over dreary socio-economic forces. Notably, however, the speculative creative self upon which his account of the production of historical prophecy focuses, is a more marginal one – one less contaminated by the bourgeois idea of literary value, which means precisely the idea that aesthetic value can be abstracted from commercial (pulp) exigencies – than the brand-name, gold-top historical novelist such as Ackroyd. It is precisely when Sinclair develops his transcendental view of history, hypothesising the status of socially prophetic, speculative texts as test-sites of historical reconstruction – ‘undercover reportage, transcripts of reality’ – that he foregrounds, most materialistically, the unacknowledged labour involved with the production of cultural works. Benjamin famously noted, in his article on Fuchs, that ‘the products of art and science owe their existence not merely to the effort of the great geniuses who created them, but also, in one degree or another, to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries’.41

40 Sinclair 2001a, pp. xii–xiii.
There are forgotten men in small town temperance hotels & mining shacks, mid-continental inertia, who have literally been waiting in their rooms, sitting by the bed, looking out on meridian main street traffic, bills paid by computer, for over thirty years – for the phone call from Hughes that will activate them: & meanwhile they write, on typewriters, science fictions & horror god inventions, squeeze nature into aborted surgeries, work for *Weird Tales*, John Campbell’s *Astounding* or Roger Corman; they invent (or are made aware of) impossible literatures in languages that were never spoken, the Necronomicon, or Ludvig Prinn’s *Mysteries of the Worm*. [...] They see them & translate them into their fictions – which become undercover reportage, transcripts of reality. The invented horrors are literal.\(^{42}\)

These lines offer more than a description of the contemporary maintenance of intellectual labour by the squeezing of cognition into ever more specialist and mutually-alienated fields. The eeriness of this vignette derives from the way in which Sinclair suggests that the ‘languages’ relayed via the fantasists’ transcripts, are not from here. ‘The invented horrors are literal’ – they prophetically report on our own nightmare world – but the horrific tales, Sinclair emphasises, consist of relays of languages ‘that were never spoken’, languages that are seen, like visions: transcendental languages. We are reminded of Sinclair’s conception of a ‘pure’ written word, a ‘pattern’-charm that will ‘remake the physical world’, reconstruct historical events. The pulp writers’ neglected cultural production is perhaps again allied with a notion of a transcendental text, guiding history, when Sinclair goes on to call the Prinnians a ‘secret ant army controlled by emptiness, by time-wedges driven into their lifelines’.\(^{43}\) Sinclair’s twinning of unacknowledged intellectual labour and transcendent textuality certainly re-emerges in his short story ‘The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb’ (2000). Here, an unknown reporter’s baldest summary of the transfer of ownership of a famous Whitechapel pub is reconceived as a ‘covert’ relay from a ‘psychic wire service’. The relics of ‘pure information’ are the preserve of ‘anonymous masters’, and are transcribed with reverential tact. Their reader feels privileged, but continues to want this language.

Poetry was accessed from boards outside newsagents’ shops, the ones that summarised what was happening in a tactful arrangement of upper-case lettering: BLIND BEGGAR SOLD. He loved these messages, covert dispatches


\(^{43}\) Sinclair 1995a, p. 238.
produced for his eyes only. They were like transcripts taken down, hot, from a psychic wire service. In the towers of Hawksmoor churches and derelict end-of-terrace houses, waiting for demolition, were spies and watchers who tapped in their reports. BLIND BEGGAR SOLD. This was all that was left of pure information: lean, spare, pertinent. Norton aspired to, but never achieved, the style of these anonymous masters with their calligraphic half-haikus. BLIND BEGGAR SOLD.  

Norton’s desire, the way that he claims – seizes at, aspires to – the transcendental text relayed by these anonymous masters, suggests that Sinclair perceives, alienated and abstracted away within the transcendental language use of hidden intellectual labourers, a mode of unalienated human creativity. The transcendental ‘calligraphic half-haikus’, like the ‘pattern’ with the force to reconstruct historical events, can be re-read as pointers toward the fulfilled creativity which capitalism’s religious projections continue to hypostatise and alienate into what Fredric Jameson, in ‘Radical Fantasy’, called ‘an image or a figural form’.

Feuerbach […] had the ingenious and remarkable idea of grasping religion as a projection: it is, he argued, a distorted vision of human productive powers, which has been externalised and reified into a force in its own right. Divine power, of which the various theologies are so many abstractions and elaborations, is in fact unalienated human creativity that has then been re-alienated into an image or a figural form. In it, labour and productivity, including human intelligence and imagination, the ‘general intellect’ of humanity, has been hypostatised and subsequently appropriated and exploited like any other human product. We do not read Marx’s great footnote – the Theses on Feuerbach – fully and correctly unless we appreciate the nature of this revolutionary analysis, which has immense implications for all cultural and superstructural analysis and not only that of religion.

Sinclair’s references to a transcendental verbal ‘pattern’ or figure recur, throughout Suicide Bridge in particular, where lines such as ‘the immortality of smoothed calculation, pure sign as language’, can be difficult to interpret as anything other than elaborations of transcendental power. But an impulse to re-materialise divine force back to human productivity (and its impediments)
is apparent in Sinclair’s essay on *A Study in Scarlet*, where Holmes’s socially
prophetic, transcendental power is located precisely in his rôle as a projection
of the wider society’s unfulfilled capacities. Taskless Holmes, read by Sinclair,
is a fictional externalisation of the general dormant intellect, our alienated
creativity or ‘cultural psychosis’, which breaks out into crime-ritual – the only
performative mode appalling enough to jolt our debased social consciousness
and trigger an arrest of the continuum of empty time.

Awful though the notion might be, the anguish of an unemployed Holmes
(echoed and reinforced by a blocked author who admits that he finds it
unendurable to cobble together another plot) is part of a cultural psychosis
that finds its resolution in the late century’s most brutal sequence of sacrifices,
the Jack the Ripper murders. Only after these lurid brutalities can the public
be roused from their inertia and made to address the social problems of
prostitution, appalling housing conditions, squalor and destitution of the
East End.47

The old fire emotions

Unemployment is here the primary marker of social breakdown, ‘cultural
psychosis’, because terms such as employment, activity and energy tend to
be the core terms asserted within Sinclair’s vocabulary of social relations. His
own work does tend to foreground the self’s drive or motivation, however,
and Sinclair’s privileging of the self’s experience in this way arguably restricts
his imagining of collective historical experience. In *Suicide Bridge* (his most
Lawrence-inflected text), Sinclair identifies the self’s momentum with precisely
the self’s essential singularity, writing of ‘the individual spark, the unique,
the inviolate, the flaw; which is the true drive, life’.48 At another point in
*Suicide Bridge*, after the momentum of a self’s unalienated creativity or free
production – ‘a reason for existence, a motive, a reason for movement’ –
assumes the form of a numerical ‘pattern’ (‘an elegant lattice’), and so becomes
another figure of transcendental power, this momentum itself becomes –
translates into – a cosmic motivation: ‘the galactic motive’. This momentum
is astral and so materialist again; but it remains privatised. It is as if the

47 Sinclair 2001a, p. xii.
48 Sinclair 1995a, p. 231.
galactic momentum subsumes and stifles the ‘voices’ of social striving. A single ‘head’ – not our ‘general intellect’ – fuses with the stellar ‘radial velocities’ and chemical effects from which our impulse to self-realisation derives.

The head is sucked across the floor, itches into numbers, into marked insects, scarabs, marble chips. Each with its sigil, each impulse has a value: a reason for existence, a motive, a reason for movement. The head of Slade still looks like a head, rings hollow, an elegant lattice of numbers in treaty, in alliance, re-entering the ionised dust cloud, mating with silica, iron, false carbon.

The cloud thickens, all voices, all numbers, radial velocities, become the galactic motive, into the arms of the Nebula, bone embrace, stress factors.49

Sinclair’s essay on Hughes saw the perfection of a self’s ‘pure’ work of historical contemplation, which is to reconstruct supposedly fated historical events, to nonetheless also be locked within a reflexive, dialectical relation to these ‘stars’. ‘Perfection shifts the stars, on however small a scale: & this, by instant playback, restructures the donor. Which is a whole new sweep of terror.’ Sinclair recognises that products of a pure interpretative motive are readily assimilable by the external world – to be exploited, stripped of their radicality – but the only consequent recourse for the self, that Sinclair proposes, is a deeper plumbing of its own motive:

It is also an absolute challenge to the work undertaken; because if your thesis breaks surface instantly, is made public on media umbrella, as soon as you construct it, then you have to work faster, sharpen your wits, go deeper, find the strata beneath the skin, confront the primary mineral controls.50

But the self’s ‘primary mineral controls’, the chemical well-springs of motive, are themselves programmed by the stars, as Sinclair stressed again in his 1978 essay ‘Servant to the Stars’.

The minerals, the carbon thatch of life buried in the belly, the chest, the brain: this is what we owe to star gestation. To the ecstasy of impacted dust cores, the white gush of emotion that surfaces and is acknowledged – though it derives from no known domestic source.
If the self’s experience foregrounded by Sinclair – such as the primal ‘gush’ of emotional motivation – is derived from the undomestic, ‘elemental and alien’ motives of the star-field, it becomes similarly essentialised and invariant.

the old fire emotions writ large
Keats – holiness of the heart
is modular entrance
is shape of star, essence

So, in a way, the stars do not in fact shift, and nor do the self’s motivations – for instance, its drive to contemplative ‘perfection’ – modulate. Sinclair’s positing of the reflexive relation of the self to the stars as a ‘bone embrace’, also posits invariant, fated drives; which could result in a writing of collective history as fate. Indeed, ‘Servant to the Stars’ itself evolves a concept of naturalised fated experience: the poet Brian Catling is argued to hold to ‘the notion of man-star, vertical destiny’. Sinclair’s fusion of a self’s invariant momentum with an invariant galactic motive, recalls Auguste Blanqui’s translation of the invariant linear continuum of empty time – here subjectivised by Sinclair – to the physical laws of astral systems, in his L’Éternité par les astres (1872). Benjamin observed the way in which Blanqui’s attack on the illusory progress of capitalist society, as he discerns ‘an image of progress that (immemorial antiquity parading as up-to-date novelty) turns out to be the phantasmagoria of history itself’, finally sets up the oppressive eternal return again on other planets. In Blanqui, as in Sinclair, the self’s invariant momentum is reflected in the cosmos: ‘The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs – imperturbably – the same routines’.

To propose that the donor of a ‘pure’, perfect work of historical contemplation is restructured by the ‘stars’, by supposedly fated historical events, is to propose the speculative historian to be intentionless: guided, her historical reconstructions themselves reconstructed, by star-purpose; or by the historical moments around which – ‘involuntary, unwilled’ – she circulates. Within Sinclair’s transcendental view of history, the negation of contemplative volition emerges as a way into the continually momentary rescue of historical

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51 Sinclair 2001c, p. 46; for further treatment of Sinclair’s questioning of the individual’s volition in this essay, see Bond 2006.
52 Sinclair 1995a, p. 299.
53 Sinclair 2001c, p. 46.
54 Benjamin 1999a, p. 25.
55 Benjamin 1999a, p. 26 (quoting Blanqui).
knowledge, or into the interaction with a historical moment that is performed within a shifting present moment. In White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings, Sinclair predicates Catling’s fleeting, reconstructive intervention within future events on the passive nature, and self-erasure, of the moments of his speculative performance work:

Always erasure, not exorcism. Exorcism merely confers status on the exorcist: who claims, falsely, that he has the power to unmake. Has tricks to stake the demonic, nail the black heart.

Erasure acts over, is a discretion. Joblard’s performance in the warehouse erased itself so that the voices were set free. They wound back the memory of the future.

In the novel Landor’s Tower (2001), Sinclair’s account of Catling’s early poetry again identifies Catling’s self-erasure with the liberation of ‘voices’, or with the objectification of language beyond the self.

His was a purposefully high form of composition, mediumistic and life-threatening. The task: to create a parallel world in which words were objects; an enigmatic zone from which he, the author, would be banished.

This parallel world recalls the contemplated historical world, ‘something beyond us’, which, for Sinclair, the intentionless speculative historian is to construct. ‘“We must use what we have been given: go back over the Ripper text, turn each cell of it – until it means something else, something beyond us.”’ As I argued above, Sinclair suggests that the past is only to be redeemed into ‘something beyond us’ because, like Benjamin, he senses that the past is itself intrinsically beyond our grasp: our apprehension of historical moments can only be momentary, provisional and incomplete. Sinclair’s stress on the speculator’s fleeting, self-erasing interaction with historical moments, is in keeping with Benjamin’s insight into the removal from the historian of what he called ‘the work of the past’, which, because it is itself uncompleted, can only be momentarily and incompletely grasped by the present. In his article on Fuchs, Benjamin stressed not the restitution of past suffering by the present – which, as Caygill notes, ‘would be for the present to come into complete possession of the past’, rather like Sinclair’s exorcist nailing its heart – but, instead, the impossibility of ever possessing the past: ‘Historical materialism

56 Sinclair 1995b, p. 199.
57 Sinclair 2001b, p. 311.
58 Caygill 2004, p. 93.
sees the work of the past as still uncompleted. It perceives no epoch in which that work could, even in part, drop conveniently, thing-like, into mankind's lap.\textsuperscript{59} The energies of both the unredeemed and redeemed pasts are beyond what we know under present capitalist conditions. Caygill remarks that, for Benjamin,

the objects and events of the past are not conveyed as complete and autonomous objects to the present but retain a reserve, whether of unacknowledged labour or of a potential that is yet to be realized. [...] Something of the past escapes the present, leaving the past as an incomplete task, already in the future.\textsuperscript{60}

In White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings, Sinclair asserts that ‘the richest fault in time is the least seen’.\textsuperscript{61} Something from the past can also blast into the present: within the immediate context of this article, Benjamin’s essay ‘Experience and Poverty’, which I want to begin to read now alongside Sinclair’s most recent novel, Dining on Stones (or, The Middle Ground).

\textbf{Definitively de-energised?}

‘So much experience, I thought, and so little of it experienced, lived through, understood.’\textsuperscript{62} This sentence appears on the first page of Dining on Stones and recurs, with minor alterations, throughout Sinclair’s new novel.\textsuperscript{63} The question of how we can achieve cognition of, and potentially transform, our socio-historical experience indeed becomes unavoidable within a contemporary moment poised ‘in the gap between nostalgia and exploitation’.\textsuperscript{64} Sinclair seeks to stall the spread of cultural ‘amnesia’\textsuperscript{65} attendant upon the construction of ‘New London’\textsuperscript{66} – for example in the form of the Thames Gateway development – and asserts a riverine history ‘too rich to be trashed by developers and explainers’.\textsuperscript{67} Contemporary global capitalist experience is

\begin{footnotes}
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\item[59] Benjamin 2002, p. 267.
\item[60] Caygill 2004, p. 93.
\item[61] Sinclair 1995b, p. 196.
\item[63] Sinclair 2004, pp. 254, 271.
\item[64] Sinclair 2004, p. 64.
\item[65] Sinclair 2004, p. 116.
\item[66] Ibid.
\item[67] Sinclair 2004, p. 169.
\end{footnotes}
seen to negate the city’s historical capitalist experience: ‘New London, global stopover, treats the old, dirty, lost London as an abstraction’. The relation between contemporary and historical experience is also understood as a relation between contemporary and historical forms of narrative response to experience, when Sinclair adds that the gap between nostalgia and exploitation is ‘as good a place as any to work out the price of behaving with 19th-century diligence in a fast-twitch electronic multiverse’. Sinclair here implicitly opposes his own, more traditional narrative method, the careful, incremental reconstruction of the urban environment, to a more superficial, glancing response to urban experience, in a way that recalls Benjamin’s opposition of ‘Erfahrung’ to ‘Erlebnis’ in his essay ‘Experience and Poverty’. In this essay, as Esther Leslie notes, Benjamin asserted that technologised, fast-twitch modern conditions ‘have made the continued existence of experience as “Erfahrung” – practised, well-established and continuous tradition – virtually impossible in this moment. The technological traumas of war confirm and kick home experience as “Erlebnis” – shock, adventure, disruption.’

In *Dining on Stones*, the essay on artist Jock McFadyen – ‘Jimmy Seed’ in the novel – likewise relates a decline of experience *qua* tradition to the precedence of technologised, disrupted experience:

> The position of the realist painter, the detached observer of metropolitan life, is increasingly complex. Life doesn’t work in the city. Roads are clogged. Buses don’t arrive. There’s a bug in the system. Marginal landscapes drift, swallowing all trace of their previous history.

Benjamin’s essay stressed that the devaluation of a *sense* of experience as tradition, and the accompanying rise of debased *Erlebnis*, marks a general impoverishment of experience within modern conditions: ‘our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.’ In *Dining on Stones*, deprived personal experience is shown up perhaps most often through Sinclair’s preoccupation with deprived creative inspiration; one narrator, for instance, admits himself to be one of those who ‘self-plagiarise to the point

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69 Sinclair 2004, p. 64.
71 Sinclair 2004, p. 58.
72 Benjamin 1999b, p. 732.
of erasure’.73 Seed’s canvases, deprived of a human presence even, chart our present impoverished social experience, possible seedbed for a new barbarism: ‘The official topography, energies stolen and exploited, is bleaker than ever. More abandoned. Seed doesn’t paint people because their time is done. He anticipates the coming age of restlessness, boredom and terror.’74

For Benjamin, our state of impoverished experience entailed the attempt to discern a distant motive for existence: we are ‘people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon’.75 Sinclair captures the contemporary impoverishment of experience, emblematised by the South Coast, with a similar image – though at this point he could be accused of naturalising our lack of purpose. ‘If a life sentence means what it says, Pevensey Bay has cracked it: a leathery immortality (animals included), clumps of sea kale, uninterrupted contemplation of the great fact of the English Channel.’76 The South Coast is immortal in that it is ‘post-historic’,77 being the home of ‘the posthumous casualties of contemporary life’,78 its time is done, forever. ‘Glue-sniffers without the energy to sniff’ define our ‘half-life of tranquillised opportunism, reflex crimes enacted for the benefit of (out-of-service) CCTV cameras’.79 The novel presents an exhausted culture of the ‘definitively de-energised’,80 jolted into illusory vitality by automatised, technologically-programmed behaviours. Genuine vitality is seen reduced to labour value and so inhibited: Pevensey Bay hosts ‘non-commissioned documentarists, painters without galleries, writers who didn’t write’.81 Hence ‘the Undead’82 are seen to be not just the criminally pseudo-active, but also the straightforwardly economically inactive, who can become ‘those non-eaters, non-movers, who find their place. And abdicate. Turn away, resolutely, from other potentialities.’83 One’s very life-blood is held in, inhibited, as a potentially

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73 Sinclair 2004, p. 100.
74 Sinclair 2004, p. 61.
75 Benjamin 1999b, p. 735.
76 Sinclair 2004, p. 302.
78 Sinclair 2004, p. 316.
80 Sinclair 2004, p. 333.
81 Sinclair 2004, p. 301.
83 Sinclair 2004, p. 335.
marketable commodity to be held back: vagrants ‘valued blood deposits they hadn’t yet sold’.84

*Dining on Stones* augurs a coming capitalist world of restlessness, boredom and terror, within which the potential for experience is radically diminished, yet it is precisely the negativity or destructiveness of Sinclair’s social vision which enables the emergence, as in ‘Experience and Poverty’, of what Benjamin called ‘a new, positive concept of barbarism’.85 Caygill describes the stance of ‘active nihilism’ which – as in the following passage from Benjamin’s essay – took destruction ‘as an opportunity to establish a new configuration of experience’, instead of simply intensifying the destruction with a ‘reactive, passive nihilism’.86 Benjamin’s active nihilism welcomes the degeneration of *Erfahrung* as the destruction of a false form of experience, and the productive condition of the formation of a new, non-bourgeois and dehumanised relation to the world:

For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors.87

Benjamin emphasises that the new mode of experience, the process of construction, stems from our need to adapt to conditions of impending ‘economic crisis’: we are now ‘beginning anew and with few resources’.88

Benjamin’s idea of construction is of great practical relevance to present-day ‘non-movers’, I would suggest; indeed Sinclair’s own narrative of economic inaction is itself structured by the montage principle of beginning anew with few resources. *Dining on Stones* employs what we could call a method of composite narration, making new starts by re-energising or redeploying its own narrative resources, and approaching the given social environment as a tabula rasa to be re-constructed:

It was in the car park of the Docklands Travelodge, as I paced, restlessly, waiting for Hannah, that I developed my notion of composite landscape

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84 Sinclair 2004, p. 318.
85 Benjamin 1999b, p. 732.
86 Caygill 1998, p. 32.
87 Benjamin 1999b, p. 732.
88 Benjamin 1999b, p. 735.
(leading to composite time): skies from one exposure (Hastings) laid over another shore (Bow Creek). Characters from a deleted narrative could be given a second chance, revived in order to ‘rescue’ a dull passage of prose.

The entropy of the road, the A13, invited this multilayered approach: documentation, in its absolute form, as pure fiction.89

Marina Fountain, for example, is seen independently re-writing one major strand of the narrative: ‘she was out there, ahead of us, inventing fictions that anticipated – and, in some senses, neutralised – my more measured psychogeographical reports’.90 The final novella of Dining on Stones revives an earlier narrative strand, developing it beneath the new one: ‘I could see the A13 pilgrims, Jimmy, Track and Danny, down there, far below, tiny figures on the river path, heading east, to answer my riddle’.91

The tininess of these redeployed figures recalls the barbaric comedy with which Benjamin invested the process of construction, as well as Sinclair and Benjamin’s shared concern to formulate a dehumanised relation to the world.92 Jimmy Seed’s work, like the narrator’s writing, shows us ‘human figures treated like caricatures, rude cartoons’.93 The cartoon quality of Dining on Stones ensures the destabilisation of a bourgeois idea of aesthetic value: just as much of the novel’s material clownishly announces that it is ‘too preposterous for fiction’.94 The clowning alone matters, so the scenarios are self-consciously arbitrary and arbitrarily rearrangeable: who should care whether it is Max Bygraves or Howard Marks who becomes the victim of the ‘Albanian plot to kidnap an unnamed celebrity at the White Queen Theatre’?95 As Marina Fountain indicates in her short story ‘Grays’, characterisation – that mainstay of bourgeois-humanist writing – is incompatible with the attempt to bring to life dehumanised experience. ‘Cora didn’t need characters. Acknowledging their existence, granting them space, led to unwarranted projection, the invention of other lives. Empathy. Eavesdropping. Romance.’96 Anti-character Cora herself resembles one of the fresh people (‘completely new, lovable, and

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89 Sinclair 2004, p. 351.
91 Sinclair 2004, p. 388.
92 Compare the reference to the ‘laughter [which] may occasionally sound barbaric’, in Benjamin 1999b, p. 735.
93 Sinclair 2004, p. 129.
94 Sinclair 2004, p. 279.
95 Ibid.
96 Sinclair 2004, p. 146.
interesting creatures’) whom Benjamin found in Paul Scheerbart’s fiction. In ‘Experience and Poverty’, Benjamin notes of Scheerbart’s dehumanised language ‘its arbitrary, constructed nature, in contrast to organic language’. Cora’s behaviour is as newly-(re-)constructed as Scheerbart’s or Sinclair’s style:

Being alone in a strange city, visiting libraries, enduring and enjoying bureaucratic obfuscation, sitting in bars, going at whim to the cinema, allowed her to try on a new identity. A new name. She initiated correspondence with people she had never met.98

Dining on Stones is full of new names, constructed labels beneath which Sinclair’s whims can temporarily shelter: Track, Kaporal (reappearing from Landor’s Tower), Mocatta, Rawnce. These dehumanised names affiliate with those from Scheerbart (and Soviet Russia) which Benjamin’s essay cites: Peka, Labu, Sofanti, October.99

For Benjamin, the exemplary culture of constructors, which can articulate a new mode of experience responsive to the crisis of capitalism, shows ‘a total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it – this is its hallmark.’100 I have suggested that the very illusionlessness or negativity of Sinclair’s social vision in Dining on Stones – which would trace ‘queer domestic rituals, human glimpses, against a backdrop of monolithic alienation’101 – itself continues to develop the culture of constructors, engendering a positive barbarism which would bring to life new dehumanised experience. If in our present time of socio-cultural amnesia we are still, with Benjamin, ‘preparing to outlive culture’102 or to survive the degeneration of Erfahrung, Sinclair’s description of the ‘middle ground’ – as the site of unexploited, re-constructable cognition – could also describe a freer, more arbitrary and less programmed, new relation to our experience: ‘In parts of the map that are not overwritten, worked out, everything bleeds into everything, sea and sky, truth and legend; defences are down, faces merge into protective beards. We confess, we lie. We make up stories.’103

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97 Benjamin 1999b, p. 733.
99 Benjamin 1999b, p. 733.
100 Ibid.
102 Benjamin 1999b, p. 735.
103 Sinclair 2004, p. 171.
References


I am very much honoured by this prize because of the commitment of its namesakes (especially Isaac Deutscher from whom I learned much in my early reading and whose appreciation of Capital on the BBC formed part of my first lecture every time I gave my Marx course). And also honoured because it links me to such a stellar group of previous recipients including István Mészáros who, thirty-five years after delivering the first Deutscher Prize Lecture, continues to remind us what the point is. I hope that my own thoughts here can help.

Assume a perfectly competitive capitalist economy with costless freedom of entry and exit, and where the attempt to raise taxes on capital in one jurisdiction will lead capital to exit for other jurisdictions. Accordingly, we conclude, there is no point in trying to tax capital.

Assume that a set of productive relations exists so long as it does not fetter the development of productive forces. Therefore, we conclude that the

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1 The Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture (4 November 2005, London) was delivered on the occasion of receiving the 2004 Deutscher Prize for Lebowitz 2003.
reason capitalism persists is because it is ‘optimal for the further development of productive power’.2

Assume identical production functions in a credit-market island and a labour-market island, where the delivery of labour for the wage is ‘as simple and enforceable a transaction as the delivery of an apple for a dime’.3 We conclude from identical mathematical results in the two islands that capitalist exploitation does not require domination at the point of production but flows simply from unequal property endowments.

In each case, the conclusions are present in the premise. What is proven is what is already embedded in the assumptions. These examples point to the necessity always to interrogate conclusions to see whether they flow from our assumptions.

So, if we accept this very simple point, what conclusions are latent in the assumption that ‘in a given country at a given period’ the quantity of the means of subsistence required by workers is given and ‘can therefore be treated as a constant magnitude’?4 Does this assumption imply that productivity increases as such will not benefit workers?

The assumption introduced

I began to worry about Marx’s assumption that the standard of necessity is given once I started the process of trying to understand the Grundrisse. For one, there was Marx’s stress in the Grundrisse about capital’s tendency to create new needs for workers, on which, he noted, ‘the contemporary power of capital rests’.5 There is no mention of this in Capital. How could such an important source of capital’s power be reconciled with the assumption that the worker’s necessary needs were constant? Clearly, this was a critical assumption to be removed, I concluded many years ago, in that ‘Book on Wage-Labour’ that Marx had promised.6

But there was another aspect of the Grundrisse that troubled me. That volume revealed the relation between Marx’s discussion of capital in general, his inner analysis, and the necessary form of existence of capital as many capitals in competition. Over and over again, we see Marx stress that

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4 Marx 1977, pp. 275, 655.
5 Marx 1977, p. 275.
6 Marx 1973, p. 287.
competition does not create the inner laws of capital, that competition merely lets them be seen.\textsuperscript{7} He said this often enough that it could not be dismissed as a casual comment. And, once you grasp that relation between the essence and appearance of capital, it is there to be seen clearly in \textit{Capital}, where Marx explicitly indicates that ‘the general and necessary tendencies of capital must be distinguished from their forms of appearance’.\textsuperscript{8}

However, if the competition of capitals executes and manifests the inner laws of capital, we should be able to demonstrate the same results on both logical levels. Sometimes this is very simple. For example, in his examination of capital in general, Marx explains that capital’s drive to expand leads it to attempt to lengthen and intensify the workday and to increase productivity. Look, then, at the struggle of individual capitals against each other – we see that their attempt to expand leads them to do everything possible to reduce production costs and that they are driven by competition to precisely the same results. In short, we can demonstrate that ‘the immanent laws of capitalist production manifest themselves in the external movement of the individual capitals, assert themselves as the coercive laws of competition . . .’ .\textsuperscript{9}

So, what happens at each level when there are productivity increases? At the level of many capitals competing in the real world, growing productivity means, all other things being equal, rising output, falling prices and thus increased real wages. At the level of capital in general, however, rising productivity yields, not rising real wages but relative surplus-value – this is, of course, the story presented by Marx in \textit{Capital}, Volume I, Chapter 12. But, if competition reveals the inner laws of capital, how is that, in one case, workers benefit from rising productivity and, in the other case, capital benefits? There was the immediate puzzle.

Well, of course, the explanation is the assumption that Marx introduced at the level of capital in general – the premise that the quantity of means of subsistence for workers can be treated as given for a given period in a given country. He initially defended this assumption by stressing the need for simplification – for holding some things constant at the outset and removing these assumptions subsequently. ‘Only by this procedure,’ Marx explained to Engels, ‘is it possible to discuss one relation without discussing all the rest.’ Similarly, at the same time in his \textit{Grundrisse} manuscript, he indicated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Marx 1973, pp. 651, 751–2; cf. Lebowitz forthcoming.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Marx 1977, p. 433.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 433.
\end{itemize}
that making such fixed assumptions was necessary in order to avoid ‘confounding everything’. But, was holding the standard of necessity constant the only option if you wanted to avoid confounding everything?

Within a few years, in his ‘1861–3 Economic Manuscripts’, Marx offered an additional reason for the assumption. The physiocrats, he noted, had begun with this assumption of subsistence as a fixed magnitude and thereby had correctly identified the sphere of production as the source of surplus-value. Marx argued that this concept of a subsistence wage was the foundation of modern political economy – and Adam Smith had followed their lead ‘like all economists worth speaking of’.

Of course, the assumption had nothing to do with a natural or physiological subsistence (a mistake the physiocrats were inclined to make). That subsistence wage could be high or low:

The only thing of importance is that it should be viewed as given, determinate. All questions relating to it as not a given but a variable magnitude belong to the investigation of wage labour in particular and do not touch its general relationship to capital.

Thus, what was critical was the particular insight that this assumption of a given standard of necessity provides about the nature of capital. It permits us to grasp the concepts of necessary labour and the value of labour-power (and, thus, the concepts of surplus labour and surplus-value). In addition, Marx insisted that being able to determine the basis of the value of labour-power was of ‘the highest importance for grasping the capital-relation’. So, even though he was clear that the standard of necessity is a variable magnitude, Marx put that question aside until his study of wage-labour in particular:

In our investigation, however, we shall everywhere assume the amount and quantity of the means of subsistence, and therefore also the extent of needs, at a given level of civilisation, is never pushed down, because this investigation of the rise and fall of the level itself (particularly its artificial lowering) does not alter anything in the consideration of the general relationship.

It is not hard, then, to understand why Marx assumed the standard of necessity given: (a) a simplifying assumption was desirable; (b) it was an assumption

10 Lebowitz 2003, p. 46.
11 Lebowitz 2003, p. 45.
already familiar in classical political economy (distinguishing that school from vulgar economy); and (c) this particular assumption illuminated the nature of capital as the product of the exploitation of workers. While Marx was clear, too, that ‘the level of the necessaries of life whose total value constitutes the value of labour-power can itself rise or fall’, this was a matter that would be addressed later – ‘the analysis of these variations, however, belongs not here but in the theory of wages’.14

But, was the assumption neutral? Did it illuminate some aspects of the nature of capital but leave others in the darkness? And, since we know that Marx never did get around to removing it, were there conclusions latent in that assumption?

The non-neutrality of Marx’s assumption

Think about the implications of assuming a constant standard of necessity. In such a case, the only way that necessary labour (and its value-form, the value of labour-power) can fall is through a fall in the value of a given set of the necessaries of life. ‘In our investigation,’ Marx indicated, ‘wages are only reduced by the DEPRECIATION of that labour capacity, or what is the same thing, by the cheapening of the means of subsistence entering into the workers’ consumption.’15

In short, to understand the nature of capital, the only change in the wage to be considered is that which results from changes in the conditions of production of the commodities consumed by workers. Explicitly excluded from purview is any change related to the market for labour-power. Marx was quite clear in stating this:

In so far as machinery brings about a direct reduction of wages for the workers employed by it, by e.g. using the demand of those rendered unemployed to force down the wages of those in employment, it is not part of our task to deal with this CASE. It belongs to the theory of wages.16

So, return to the concept of relative surplus-value. Given Marx’s assumption, ‘a change in the magnitude of surplus-value presupposes a movement in the

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16 Ibid.
value of labour-power, brought about by a change in the productivity of labour’. We have here the basic relationship first accurately formulated, according to Marx by Ricardo.\(^\text{17}\) Accordingly, the story of the growth of surplus-value becomes simply a story of the development of productive forces. It is the point that Marx makes over and over again in his elaboration of ‘the concept of relative surplus-value’: capital has an ‘immanent drive’, a constant tendency towards increasing the productivity of labour, in order to cheapen commodities and, by cheapening commodities, to cheapen the worker himself.\(^\text{18}\)

So, what is important about co-operation of workers? Social productivity of combined labour exceeds the sum of individual productivities. Productivity rises but capital, rather than workers, is the beneficiary. What occurs in manufacturing? Increase in productivity, capital benefits. What occurs in machinofacture? Increase in productivity, capital benefits. The important story told is that the development of productive forces benefits capital because it yields relative surplus-value by lowering necessary labour through the increase in productivity: ‘It is only the shortening of the labour-time necessary for the production of a definite quantity of commodities that is aimed at’.\(^\text{19}\) True, individual capitalists may want to destroy unions, may want to use machinery to defeat strikes, but capital as a whole, capital in general, has its eye on the prize of ‘cheapening the means of subsistence entering into the workers’ consumption’.

So, what drives the development of capitalism? Capital’s desire for growth, its desire for surplus-value – and only that. Capital is the actor. Capital makes history (though not under conditions of its own choosing). The picture, in short, is one of capital propelling itself to develop the productive forces, one of a system that accordingly delivers better and better productive forces. And, when capital can no longer develop those productive forces, revolution is on the agenda. ‘The function of the revolutionary social change,’ Cohen inferred, ‘is to unlock the productive forces’.\(^\text{20}\) Accordingly, since capital has created better, more efficient (and, of course, neutral) productive forces, the task now is both to take these achievements and give workers the benefits of them –

\(^{17}\) Marx 1977, pp. 658, 660.
\(^{19}\) Marx 1977, p. 438.
\(^{20}\) Cohen 1978, p. 150.
the highest achievements of capitalism and soviet power – and to build upon these.

How much of this particular story flows from that assumption of a constant standard of necessity? If we made a different assumption – a constant rate of surplus-value (the Volume III, Chapter 13 assumption underlying a tendency of the rate of profit to fall) – the effect of productivity increases which reduce the value of the means of subsistence would be real wages which increase at the same rate as productivity. ‘In this case, because the productivity of labour has risen,’ Marx explained in his 1861–3 manuscripts, ‘the quantity of use values he receives, his real wage, had risen, but its value has remained constant, since it continues to represent the same quantity of realised labour time as before.’21

In short, under this alternative assumption of a constant rate of surplus-value, workers are the beneficiaries of productivity increases. The value of the worker’s money wage would be unchanged but, with a doubling of productivity, it would ‘represent twice as many use-values as before, and ... each use-value would be twice as cheap as it was before’.22 Of course, too, by assumption there would be no generation of relative surplus-value. Thus, the direct link between productivity increase and relative surplus-value would be severed.

Yet, it is essential to understand that we do not need to make an explicit assumption of a constant rate of surplus-value to achieve this result in which real wages rise with productivity. All that is necessary is to drop the imposed assumption of the constant standard of necessity. Then, with a falling value of means of subsistence as the result of productivity increases, all other things being equal, the real value of the worker’s money wage would rise. The doubling of productivity would lead to a halving of commodity values and, thus, a doubling of real wages. Once we no longer impose the requirement of ‘a definite quantity of commodities’ consumed by workers, the constant rate of surplus-value, all other things being equal, emerges as a result with productivity increases. This inference at the level of capital in general corresponds in this case to what occurs at the level of capitals in competition, all other things being equal – or, when productivity changes drop from the sky.

22 Marx 1977, p. 659.
The basis, in short, for relative surplus-value is not the growth of productivity (as presented in Chapter 12 of Volume I). We need to understand that Marx’s assumption is not neutral. That assumption leads us to make this specific connection between productivity increases and relative surplus-value. However, if an increase in social productivity were to drop from the sky, all other things being equal, it would be workers who benefit and there would be no relative surplus-value. Something additional is required for relative surplus-value. Something is missing from the story Marx told in Chapter 12. And, if it is missing here, the question is whether it is missing everywhere.

Another variable, another assumption

To capture what is missing, Beyond ‘Capital’ introduces at the inner level of capitalism a specific concept and new variable – the degree of separation among workers.

This concept reflects the fact that capitalism is not driven simply by the goals of capital. There are also the goals of workers. Capital has the explicit goal of the growth of surplus-value. Workers, though, have their explicit goals, too: they struggle for time for themselves (not only to rest and recuperate but also, Marx noted, ‘the worker needs time in which to satisfy his intellectual and social requirements’); they struggle to reduce the intensity of their working day in order to have energy for themselves; and they struggle to secure the use-values which correspond at that point to their ‘social needs, the needs of socially developed human beings’. Underlying all these needs of workers is what Marx described in Capital as ‘the worker’s own need for development’.

There are, thus, two ‘oughts’ in capitalism: ‘the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction’. What, then, determines ‘the respective powers of the combatants’?

I propose that we conceive of a variable \( (x) \), which represents the degree of separation among workers. ‘The workers’ power of resistance,’ Marx pointed out, ‘declines with their dispersal’; and, we can suggest that this \( x \)-factor will determine the strength of the ability of workers to struggle over wages, to

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23 Lebowitz 2003, pp. 66–76.
24 Marx 1865, p. 146; Lebowitz 2003, pp. 73–4.
struggle over the length and intensity of the working day, and to struggle against capital as a whole.\textsuperscript{25}

Come back to the case for the generation of relative surplus-value. The necessary condition for relative surplus-value is the decline in necessary labour, a condition which is satisfied if productivity \((q)\) rises more than real wages \((U)\). What, then, determines the course of real wages? We can represent the course of real wages as a function of the relation of productivity to the degree of separation \((q/x)\). Then, we can set out the following cases:

(a) if productivity rises and the degree of separation among workers is constant, then real wages rise at the same rate as productivity. In this case, necessary labour and the rate of surplus-value are constant; the worker is beneficiary of productivity gains;

(b) if productivity rises and the degree of separation increases at the same rate, then the real wage is constant. In this case, capital captures all the benefits of productivity increase as relative surplus-value; and,

(c) if productivity rises and the degree of separation of workers increases but at a lesser rate, then there is both relative surplus-value and a rising rate of surplus-value as well as increased real wages.

From this perspective, then, the necessary condition for relative surplus-value is a rise in the degree of separation of workers (or, inversely, a fall in the degree of unity of workers). Productivity increases by themselves cannot explain the growth of relative surplus-value. But how can we say this when we understand that capital, as the owner of the products of labour, is the immediate beneficiary of any increase in productivity (whatever its source)? The answer is, simply, that a rise in the \(x\)-factor is essential for the growth of relative surplus-value because, if capital benefits immediately from productivity gains, the question would remain as to why the worker is not successful in capturing these benefits when he ‘measures his demands against the capitalist’s profit and demands a certain share of the surplus-value created by him’.\textsuperscript{26}

Why is there confusion in the understanding of the necessary conditions for relative surplus-value? Precisely because productivity gains are generally associated with the changes in the labour process initiated by capital, the

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\textsuperscript{25} Marx 1977, pp. 591, 638.
\textsuperscript{26} Lebowitz 2003, p. 91; Marx 1973, p. 597.
effects of productivity changes and increases in the degree of separation among workers tend not to be disentangled. Take, for example, the substitution of machinery for workers, a case where use of the product of the social brain definitely fosters the development of social productivity. The begged question is why workers are not the beneficiaries, why they are not able to capture the gains in the form of real wages which rise at the same rate as the productivity gains. Chapter 12 of Volume I offers no answer to this.

Recall, though, that Marx excluded from his discussion of relative surplus-value the case where ‘machinery brings about a direct reduction of wages for the workers employed by it, by e.g. using the demand of those rendered unemployed to force down the wages of those in employment’. Here is precisely the missing explanation. All other things being equal, the displacement of workers increases the degree of separation of workers. As a result, productivity rises more rapidly than real wages, and the resulting fall in necessary labour yields the increase in surplus-value. Further, we can see this inner tendency manifested in competition, in that real world of many capitals and many wage-labourers. There, all other things being equal, the weakened position of workers in the labour market produces the downward pressure on money wages that is the condition for real wages to rise less than productivity.

Of course, all other things are not necessarily equal. While capital attempts to raise the degree of separation to its maximum, the worker ‘constantly presses in the opposite direction’. In short, we cannot exclude the possibility that workers, by organising and by uniting, can counteract capital’s tendency. To sum up, the removal of the assumption of a given standard of necessity and the articulation of the variable $x$, the degree of separation among workers, clearly bring class struggle to centre stage in the discussion of the development of capitalism.

**The assumption of class struggle**

Class struggle, of course, is not absent from *Capital*. When Marx puts aside the question of changes in the ‘definite quantity’ of means of subsistence until the ‘Book on Wage-Labour’, he did not put aside the question of class struggle. However, he froze the worker’s side of class struggle. What other basis could there be for assuming real wages to be constant in the face of rising productivity? In *Capital*, workers do not press in the opposite direction to
increase their wages. Rather, the degree of separation of workers increases to prevent them from sharing the benefits of the advance of social productivity.\textsuperscript{27}

Once we recognise, however, that workers have their own goals and that they combine in order to struggle successfully, we can no longer assume that the link between productivity increase and surplus-value is automatic; nor can we assume that capital proceeds as if productivity increases automatically translate into relative surplus-value. Capital must negate its negation in order to posit itself. It must divide and separate workers as its necessary condition of existence.

The $x$-factor immediately allows us to see that part of the essence of capital, indeed, an essential aspect of the logic of capital, is the tendency to divide workers by turning their differences into antagonism and hostility. It is a point Marx recognised well in his comment about the antagonism between Irish and English workers. This antagonism, he noted, is ‘the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it’.\textsuperscript{28} The use of racism and sexism, however, does not appear as part of the essence of capital in Marx’s \textit{Capital} – and that is not an accident.

Similarly, once we recognise the importance to capital of dividing workers, then we can no longer look upon capital’s tendency simply as one that inexorably yields an increasing scale of productive plant (and which has as its unintended consequence the centralising, uniting and organising of the working class). Capital’s drive for surplus-value can lead to specific alterations in the mode of production that lower productivity as such – as long as they divide workers. For capital, what matters, after all, is not productivity but the relationship between productivity and the degree of separation ($q/x$).

Indeed, much of capitalist globalisation may be driven by the desire to weaken workers – by an attempt to decentralise, disunite and disorganise workers. Does the assumption of a given standard of necessity help us to understand the phenomenon of modern capitalist globalisation or capital’s drive for contracting-out?

But that raises the whole question of the nature of the changes in productive forces sponsored by capital. We know that capital has the tendency to stimulate co-operation in production among workers. In choosing the forms of

\textsuperscript{27} Lebowitz 2003, pp. 117–19, 89–91.
\textsuperscript{28} Lebowitz 2003, pp. 159–60.
co-operation, though, how likely is it for capital to introduce changes in the labour process that strengthen the unity and self-consciousness of workers? Capital encourages the development of the collective worker in itself, but has no interest in the emergence of the collective worker for itself.

Given that capital’s goal is valorisation rather than the development of productive forces as such, the relation of productivity to the degree of separation of workers is what capital must consider when initiating changes in the labour process. The logic of capital accordingly demands that the changes in the productive forces introduced by capital cannot be neutral. Those productive forces, at any given point, reflect capital’s goal within capitalist productive relations; and, insofar as that goal is relative surplus-value, the productive forces must operate by weakening workers’ unity.

The non-neutrality of capital’s achievements, which one would not grasp from a reading of Marx’s Chapter 12, means that the society that would go beyond capitalism cannot simply take the achievements of capital and channel the benefits to workers instead of capital. As I proposed in Beyond Capital:

Precisely because capital’s goal is not the development of productive forces for itself but is valorization, the character of instruments of production and of the organization of the capitalist production process at any given point expresses capital’s goals in the context of two-sided class struggle. In short, unless the behaviour of capital is considered in the context of wage-labour for itself rather than just wage-labour in itself, the clear tendency is to think in terms of the autonomous development of productive forces and the neutrality of technology. Both conceptions are characteristic of economism.29

There is no better way to grasp the class character of the productive forces than to recall what Marx learned about the nature of the workers’ state as the result of the actions of workers in struggle in the Paris Commune. The parallels are striking. Just as the working class cannot use the ‘ready-made’ state machinery for its own purposes, so also it cannot use the ready-made productive machinery for its own purposes. Just as in the case of the capitalist state, the existing productive forces introduced by capital are infected – their very nature involves a ‘systematic and hierarchic division of labour’ and capitalist production assumes the character of ‘a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism’.30

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29 Lebowitz 2003, p. 123.
30 Lebowitz 2003, p. 194.
that Marx recognised this despotism of the capitalist workplace with its ‘barrack-like discipline’. But who would argue that this abomination flows simply from the drive to increase productive forces?

Understanding the importance of the $x$-factor, which is to say the pervasive character of class struggle, means that we recognise that building the society of associated producers necessarily requires us to go beyond the seizure of the capitalist state and beyond the seizure of capitalist productive enterprises. The associated producers inherit these but they must transform them to correspond to the essence of associated producers: the self-government of the producers, that form which allows the producers to transform both circumstances and themselves and which stimulates, rather than truncates, the development of their capacities.

When we begin without Marx’s assumption; without freezing class struggle from the side of workers, we not only understand capitalism better, we also gain insights into the process of going beyond it.

The politics of assumptions and variables

Can acceptance of assorted evils like economism, determinism and statism then all be traced to a simple assumption about the standard of necessity? We need to think about the importance of identifying variables and about the assumptions we make. As we should know from Marx, our variables, our assumptions, the way in which we express formulas, direct our attention to what must be understood.

Consider the variable labour-power, that is, the capacity to perform labour. By articulating this variable, Marx enabled us to distinguish explicitly between the labour necessary to reproduce the worker and the labour the worker performs. It shines a light on the importance of the reproduction of the working class, the necessary condition of existence for the reproduction of capital, a central concept that finds no place in vulgar (or neoclassical) economics. Similarly, there are the concepts that he saw as so important to articulate: surplus-value (independent of its various subdivisions) and abstract labour, which is the key to unlocking the riddle of money. What would Marx’s *Capital* be without these new concepts and variables he introduces?

We can also see the importance Marx attached to assumptions about variables. Recall his point about treating the standard of necessity as given. The

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31 Marx 1977, pp. 450, 549.
physiocrats had made a great leap forward by making the subsistence wage, ‘the equivalent of the necessary means of subsistence’, the pivotal point in their theory. Although they were mistaken in treating this ‘unchangeable magnitude’ as determined entirely by nature, ‘the Physiocrats transferred the inquiry into the origin of surplus-value from the sphere of circulation into the sphere of direct production’. In this way, they ‘thereby laid the foundation for the analysis of capitalist production’ and deserved to be recognised as ‘the true fathers of modern political economy’. And we see that Marx retained this assumption in order to advance this ‘inquiry into the origin of surplus-value’. To understand the nature of capital, he stressed, ‘the only thing that is important’ about the standard of necessity is that ‘it should be viewed as given, determinate’.

Finally, we know that Marx grasped that the way in which a formula presents a relation can, in fact, conceal the specific nature of the relation. Classical political economy, he observed, had worked out the formulae for the rate of exploitation and the rate of surplus-value ‘in substance, but not in a conscious form’. Yet, Marx was very critical of the way these formulae presented the relation. He argued that, by expressing surplus labour in relation to the entire working day and expressing surplus-value as a fraction of the total value-product, classical political economy mystified the nature of the capital-relation as a relation of exploitation, presenting instead ‘the false semblance of a relation of association’.

What was the problem? Clearly not that there was anything false about classical political economy’s formulae. After all, their formulae were essentially the same – they were simply ‘derivative’ formulae. The problem is that the permissiveness of their derivative formulae allowed erroneous conceptions to be smuggled in, not simply by permitting the idea that ‘worker and capitalist divide the product in proportion to the different elements which they respectively contribute towards its formation’. There were also assumptions that could be introduced without conscious formulation. By relating surplus labour to the entire working day, Marx pointed out that:

The political economists’ favourite method of treating the working day as constant in magnitude became a fixed usage, because in those formulae surplus labour is always compared with a working day of a given length.

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33 Marx 1977, pp. 668–70.
34 Marx 1977, p. 671.
35 Marx 1977, p. 670.
As we know, the treatment of the working day as a given (and, thus, its disappearance as variable) meant that, for classical political economy (and, unfortunately, for some late interpreters of Marx), the coercive nature of the capitalist working day disappeared. With the obscuring of the compulsion to perform surplus labour so apparent in absolute surplus-value, the source of the surplus was mystified – leaving the exploitation of workers as no more compelling an explanation of the surplus than that of the exploitation of corn, steel or peanuts.

Assumptions and forms of expressing relations that open the door to mystification need to be challenged. This is not a purely academic or scientific question. There was a reason that Marx was very sensitive to the political implications of assumptions and formulae. Although definitely a man of science, he was (as Engels pointed out at his graveside) before all else a revolutionary, one whose ‘real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society’.36

So what would this revolutionary (and, indeed, what should all revolutionaries) think about the retention of an assumption which treats the lowering of the value of commodities consumed by workers as an immanent tendency but obscures capital’s tendency to divide workers? What should we think about an assumption that prevents us from seeing that the story of the growth of surplus-value is not simply one of the growth of productive forces but, indeed, one of capital’s continuing ability to divide workers in the face of the development of social productivity? What should we think of an assumption that portrays as neutral the productive forces introduced by capital? The economism that flows from the assumption that Marx intended to remove should be clear.

**Theory and history**

But when should that assumption be removed? In *Beyond ‘Capital’*, I followed Marx in proposing that the removal of the assumption belonged in the ‘Book on Wage-Labour’. Yet, should not the assumption of the given standard of necessity be removed before the historical illustration of the development of productive forces which occurs under capitalist relations of production? After all, that account of manufacturing and modern industry in *Capital* is meant to be a test of the theory of relative surplus-value as set out in Chapter 12.

‘Testing by facts or by practice respectively,’ Lenin commented about Capital, ‘is to be found here in each step of the analysis.’ 37 We know, too, that the demonstration of the correctness of abstract thought was critical for Marx. As he wrote to Engels in 1867:

As regards CHAPTER IV, it was a hard job finding things themselves, i.e., their interconnection. But with that once behind me, along came one BLUE BOOK after another just as I was composing the final version, and I was delighted to find my theoretical conclusions fully confirmed by the FACTS. 38

Indeed, Marx insisted that, only after the inner connections have been discovered (through the ‘power of abstraction’), ‘can the real movement be appropriately presented’. 39 Yet the argument that I have made is that Marx did not elaborate all the inner connections. In focusing only upon capital’s ‘immanent drive’ to cheapen commodities in order to cheapen the worker herself and in ignoring capital’s immanent drive to divide workers, Marx presented ‘the general and necessary tendencies of capital’ only in part, only one-sidedly. Should not the theory that is ‘tested’ be one which focuses explicitly upon both productivity and the \( x \)-factor? Upon the relation of productivity to the degree of separation among workers?

The answer, I suggest, is obvious. What kind of historical account of the development of capitalism can be based upon an assumption that effectively freezes the workers’ side of class struggle? The theory which should be tested by historical illustration is one which begins from two-sided class struggle, one which explicitly recognises the struggle over the degree of separation.

And, yet, think about that historical account. There is more in that account than just a description of productivity gains for the purpose of producing a definite quantity of commodities more cheaply. We also see, for example, how the competition of women and children in the factories breaks the resistance of male workers, how workers are forced to compete against machines, and we see the use of machines as weapons for ‘suppressing strikes’, as ‘weapons against working class revolt’. 40 Those historical observations, however, are

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39 Marx 1977, pp. 90, 102. Marx underlined this point when he commented about the concept of value that ‘Even if there were no chapter on “value” in my book, the analysis of the real relations which I give would contain the proof and demonstration of the real value relation.’ Marx and Engels 1965, pp. 209–10.
sparse and scattered. Most significantly, they are not theorised – their premise has not been developed as part of the inner connections.

In this respect, the history presented is not simply a confirmation of the theory of relative surplus-value by ‘the FACTS’, by the real movement. When it comes to testing the theory that Marx presented in Chapter 12, there are clearly ‘unexplained variations’ in the historical account of manufacturing and modern industry. These observations would not, however, remain without explanation in a theory that includes capital’s goal of weakening workers and increasing the degree of separation of workers.

To demonstrate that capital is the product of surplus labour, Marx explicitly sets aside critical questions until his ‘investigation of wage-labour in particular’. However, by choosing not to develop the side of wage-labour and the ensuing struggle over the degree of separation of workers theoretically, before presenting the historical development of capitalism, Marx weakened both his own theory and how it was viewed by those who followed.

Did he recognise this? We know from Engels’ ‘Preface’ to the Third Edition of Volume I of Capital that ‘it was Marx’s original intention to re-write a great part of the text of the first volume, to formulate many theoretical points more exactly, to insert new ones, and to bring historical and statistical materials up to date’. Would theoretical points raised here about the degree of separation of workers have been among those formulated more exactly or inserted in Volume I? Although we will never know Marx’s intention, how can we ourselves proceed without formulating and inserting them?

**Theory and politics**

However, do we need to specifically articulate this $x$-factor? Could it not be said that all that is required is to be more explicit about the importance of class struggle and the balance of class forces? I suggest not. However salutary it is in the face of economism to repeat the phrase ‘class struggle’ over and over again, it is not enough.

We need to remember that identification of a variable can cast a particular light, that it can illuminate what has been in the shadows – and this, I propose, is precisely true about the $x$-factor, the degree of separation among workers. This variable proclaims that what matters is the unity of the working class.

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41 Marx 1977, p. 106.
It insists that it is the division and separation of workers by capital that defeats them and that prevents workers from being the beneficiaries of the growth of the productivity of social labour. And it demands that we ask at all times two questions: (i) what divides us and (ii) how can we break down those divisions?

Once you think about this variable, I suggest, there is no going back to the comfort of determinism or the scientism of the Marxist economists whose contribution to the overthrow of capitalist society would be the discovery of the correct solution to the ‘transformation problem’ (a puzzle whose assumptions, incidentally go unrecognised by these alchemists). When you focus upon the struggle over the degree of separation among workers and when you recognise how seemingly well-grounded and objective economic variables (like the rate of profit) are affected by the results of this struggle, then (however threatening this may be to economists – either by training or by inclination) what becomes obvious is the indeterminacy inherent in struggle.

Articulating this variable for the degree of separation forces us to go beyond the economism of the economists in another way. Obviously, the \( x \)-factor is not determined solely by the struggle over purely economic matters. There is the struggle against capital’s deployment of racism, sexism and its fostering of divisions and competition among workers in different countries. These are struggles to create vehicles that can bring workers together, struggles over the state and struggles in the sphere of ideology. Indeed, at the core of these struggles is the battle of ideas – a struggle to demonstrate not only that capital is the result of exploitation but also that this exploitation is based upon the separation of workers.

In this respect, assertion of the need, firstly, to understand the inherent bias flowing from Marx’s assumption; secondly, to remove that assumption; and, thirdly, to introduce the variable I have called the \( x \)-factor – should be seen as part of the battle of ideas, as an attempt to redirect the activity of Marxist thinkers to the focus of the revolutionary Marx. By introducing this variable explicitly into our theoretical work, our theory assumes politics and political struggle. Indeed, we put politics in command.

I concluded Chapter 9 of *Beyond ‘Capital’* by stressing that the purpose of Marx’s *Capital* was to give workers a weapon with which to go beyond capitalism. And, I asked, why did Marx not get around to writing the book on ‘Wage-Labour’? I answered that ‘the completion of his epistemological
project interested him less than his revolutionary project’. In these days when Hugo Chavez (inspired by István Mészáros) has very clearly reminded us of the obvious point – that the choice before us is socialism or barbarism – it is time to remember that revolutionary project. What else should we expect from anyone whose mission in life is to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society?

References


42 Lebowitz 2003, p. 177.
Since its first edition in 1992, Michael Lebowitz’s *Beyond ‘Capital’. Marx’s Political Economy of the Working Class* (hereafter, *Beyond ‘Capital’*) has stood out, within the field of contemporary Marxian social theory, as one of the most insightful continuations of Marx’s theoretical project. Eleven years later, the second edition of the book, which was substantially rewritten by the author, came to confirm its relevance for the understanding of Marxism. Concurrently, this new edition was awarded the 2004 Deutscher Prize, an additional proof of the rigour and quality of Lebowitz’s investigations. Thus the decision of the editors to open the pages of the journal for a plural discussion of *Beyond ‘Capital’*, as a contribution to the critical development of Marxism.

Anyone approaching Marxism, sooner or later, faces a knotty problem: concisely, the place of the *subject* in Marx’s works. The dilemma is how to reconcile the notion of capital as an alienated form of social mediation with the notion of class struggle as the dynamic principle of history. Many would even argue that most of the traditional theoretical dichotomies that have marked Marxist debates, often
revolved around this question. Its centrality would not be surprising, however, as the political implications embedded in such dilemma relates, straightforwardly, to the status of the proletariat as revolutionary subject.

With the symposium on Beyond ‘Capital’, then, the journal resumes the discussions on the problem of the revolutionary subjectivity that permeated the previous symposia on Postone’s Time, Labor and Social Domination, and Holloway’s How to Change the World without Taking Power. It is worthwhile reminding readers that Postone in his book makes a compelling argument for capital as historical subject, which, ultimately, ends up negating the revolutionary potential of the working class. Holloway, in turn, engages in a radical critique of fetishism, and its multiple social forms of appearance, which, in my opinion, dilutes the notion of class struggle with abstract antinomies – fetishisation versus anti-fetishisation, power versus anti-power, subordination versus insubordination. Yet, the vital point is that both theoretical works, though opposites in most aspects, are thought-provoking contributions to the theme of the relationship between the dynamic of capital and the possibilities of the constitution of an emancipatory consciousness. Moreover, and to their credit, Postone as well as Holloway, make conscious efforts to avoid the establishment of external links between the materiality of the alienated forms of capitalist social relations and human subjectivity.

Beyond ‘Capital’ has much to say in this respect. For, in few words, the book is a painstaking crusade for the restoration of Marx’s own conception of workers as subjects, and hence, of the centrality of class struggle, which leads Lebowitz to conclude that the possibility of the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity relates directly to the nature of workers’ needs, as they are produced by the inner movement of capital.

Thus, the starting point of the analysis is that, quite astonishingly, this aspect of the relation of capital and wage-labour is absent from Marx’s Capital. Indeed, it is Lebowitz’s main thesis, that the whole side of workers’ struggles, insofar as wage-labourers face capital as a means whose aim is the worker for herself, remains in the dark in Marx’s masterpiece. As he puts it:

Marx’s failure to set out the side of wage-labour in a logical and analytical manner equivalent to that developed for the side of capital has meant that there is a silence that yields a certain one-sidedness to the entire project.1

1 Lebowitz 2003, p. 80.
Lebowitz finds two main sources of misunderstanding at the root of a one-sided Marxism, that only recognises the *ought* of the valorisation process, while neglecting workers as subjects acting for themselves against capital. According to Lebowitz, those two sources stem partly from the incomplete character of Marx’s work – though they cannot be reduced to it – epitomised by the missing ‘Book on Wage-Labour’. On the one side, Marx’s assumption as regards the standard of necessity, namely, that the amount of means of subsistence required by workers, is given; this allows Marx, in turn, to only look at productivity in considering the value of labour-power. On the other side, that, even in Marx’s own logic, the totality presented in *Capital* would be faulty, as the reproduction of capital depends on the production of labour-power, through a process of production distinct from that of the former, though, of course, subordinated to it.

It follows that, insofar as *Capital* was deemed an account of the concrete totality of capitalism, the gap between pure theory and the reality of capitalism remained untouched. Hence, *Beyond ‘Capital’* devotes its pages to resume theory where Marx left it undeveloped, with the aim to narrow such a distance. These introductory and brief remarks on the symposium do not intend to enter into the detail of how Lebowitz deals with those theoretical problems; this has been the job of the contributors, who offer exhaustive and acute accounts of his endeavours. Still, I would just like to point to some fruitful insights for working-class politics to be found in *Beyond ‘Capital’* – although, as we shall see later, the political inferences of the book is one of the main targets of the contributors.

By removing Marx’s assumption on the fixed standard of necessity underlying the value of labour-power, Lebowitz not only deepens our understanding of the theory of wages, but also unveils the inadequacy of the classic formulation of relative surplus-value. This crucial step allows him to place the class struggle at the heart of capitalist social relations, and not as an afterthought. At the same time, this means that the separation, division and atomisation of the working-class are pursued by capital as a condition to capture the gains from social production. They are not contingent upon political factors but inherent in capital.

Similarly, when posing the circuit of production of labour-power, Lebowitz advances the notion of the *political economy of the working class*, a concept useful for grasping the character of capital as the specific mediator for the wage-labourer in the labour market, in the ‘hidden abode’ of production, and in the sphere of circulation as owner of the products of labour, and therefore,
for reaffirming the ‘necessity to remove capital as a mediator between workers
as a whole’. In this manner, the argument highlights different sides and
locations of the class struggle against capital in society. As a result of doing
this, the relationship between working-class politics and the so-called ‘social
movements’ acquires new and promising meanings.

Lastly, the same theoretical road led Lebowitz to introduce the discussion
of the wage-labourer as non-wage-labourer, in short, to the production of the
worker as a whole. This standpoint includes those activities outside the realm
of wage-labour, which are, nevertheless, essential for workers’ reproduction,
opening a rich area for analytical purposes as well as for political action, with
regards to questions of class organisation and subjectivity.

Needless to say, my argument is not that these analytical fields are free
from controversy, both from theoretical or practical standpoints, as will become
clear below, when sketching the arguments of the contributors to the
symposium. But I have no doubts that Beyond ‘Capital’ constitutes an exciting
reading to all those who engage in theoretical debates for political purposes.

The symposium

Although the contributors to the symposium are sympathetic to the critical
reconstruction of the missing ‘Book on Wage-Labour’ essayed by Lebowitz,
all of them raise important criticisms.

I will start by reviewing Bonefeld’s paper, as his is of a different analytical
sort and register. This author considers that, although pointing to the right
direction, Beyond ‘Capital’ fails to bring the human subject to the fore. For him,
Lebowitz does not grasp the importance of rooting his critical reconstruction
in a critique of the fetishism of economic categories, given that the opposition
between labour and capital is already contained in even the simplest of those
categories. He argues, then, that it is a theory of the social constitution of
capital – ‘human beings produce through their own social labour a reality
which increasingly enslaves them’ – the clue to restoring workers to centre
stage. His paper, then, is devoted to tracing the contours of such theory. It is
my view, however, that Bonefeld misjudges Beyond ‘Capital’, insofar as whether
or not Lebowitz’s argument is underpinned by a theory of social constitution.
For it is the inverted world of capital that Lebowitz precisely addresses in

the book, by identifying the dynamic core of the social constitution of class struggle from the side of the workers.

Barker, Campbell and Tutan, and Panitch and Gindin agree on two main specific criticisms. First, they share a general distaste for, as Panitch and Gindin put it, ‘Lebowitz’s unfortunate flirtation with the category of “slavery” in thinking through the implications his argument has for family relationships’, when treating the global production of the wage-labourer. In defence of Lebowitz, however, it is necessary to note that he does not endorse uncritically Marx’s parallel between male domination in working-class households and slavery. Rather, the discussion of Marx’s argument serves Lebowitz to show that ‘in addition to capitalist relations’, wage-labourers also exist within other specific social relations, which may entail particular modes of domination or exploitation, typically, for instance, patriarchal relations. Therefore, ‘to speak of wage-labourers is to describe people who are in no way identical in their relations’, and hence, whose goals and hierarchies of needs may differ. In my opinion, the danger of focusing on this particular point is that, by monopolising the discussion about the wage-labourer as a non-wage-labourer, namely about the distinction Lebowitz poses within the concept of wage-labour itself, differences in opinion regarding the debate on household relationships might obscure the relevance of the issues at stake once the analysis goes beyond the abstraction of wage-labour—issues linked to workers’ relations with each other, like race, ethnicity, community life, religion and so on, that, in Beyond ‘Capital’, remain unexplored.

Second, they focus on Lebowitz’s account of competition among capitals. For Campbell and Tutan, ‘at this point he bends the stick too far’, due to his intention to stress the centrality of class struggle to understand the dynamics of capitalism, which leads Lebowitz to dismiss the role played by the pressures on profits, brought about by competition. As the critics are quick to add, this may only bring disorientation to socialist politics.

Furthermore, given Lebowitz’s thesis on the primacy of needs in the determination of the course of historical change, Campbell and Tutan strongly claim that the issue of false needs, a matter under-investigated (and not only in the Marxist tradition), should be incorporated to the analysis. The authors go on to suggest possible ways to discern between true and false needs, often on the basis of people’s massive and democratic participation, but stressing

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3 Lebowitz 2003, p. 151, author’s emphasis.
that, even if their proposals are found wanting, the issue will still need to be addressed by a Marxism devoted to overcoming one-sided views.

Lastly, Panitch and Gindin (but also Barker, though more briefly) underline that Beyond ‘Capital’ fails, in the end, to offer clues to the development of a revolutionary politics of the working class. And this would be a crucial weakness of the book, as going beyond capital requires political thinking. Both papers, thus, regret the lack of political theory to draw strategic conclusions concerned with working-class practice. Panitch and Gindin find Lebowitz’s engagement with the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat disappointing; Barker feels uneasy about the likelihood that the notion of self-transforming revolutionary practice will suffice to account for the emergence of revolutionary subjects. Those remarks are crucial, as they would suggest that, despite Lebowitz’s outstanding tour de force, the gap between class struggle within capitalism and revolutionary action is only slightly touched upon by Beyond Capital.

To finish, then, I anticipate – and hope – that, given its centrality for socialist politics, it will be this latter point, that is, the political inferences of the book, that will constitute the focus of Lebowitz’s reply (to be published in a future issue of Historical Materialism) to the criticisms raised by the contributors to the symposium.

Reference

Since the beginning of the 1980s, when Michael Lebowitz began producing papers outlining some of the ideas in this book, his has been a distinctive voice in socialist theory. Lebowitz is a self-avowedly orthodox Canadian Marxist, who offers criticism of Marx’s magnum opus, Capital, from a remarkably fruitful standpoint. The second edition of his book is to be welcomed.

In essence, Lebowitz’s critique of Capital does not consist in an attack ‘from the outside’, but in an argument that, in its own terms, Marx’s work is inherently incomplete. Because it is incomplete, its presentation is ‘one-sided’, and this has seriously affected the way the work has been understood. Lebowitz sets out to show that what we might term ‘Writing Capital’ is a worthwhile exercise that transforms our understanding of Marx’s great work, and connects it more securely with the rest of his lifework.

Lenin famously concluded in the early period of the First World War, that it was impossible to understand Marx’s Capital unless one had studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s Logic. Consequently, he concluded, ‘half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!’. Lebowitz
goes further: we cannot understand Capital unless we make the effort to complete it!

In various places in his papers, as Marx was preparing to write Capital, he set out a number of outlines for the whole work. There were to be six ‘Books’, as follows:

1. Capital
2. Landed property
3. Wage-Labour
4. State
5. International Trade
6. World Market

Of these, the first three were to comprise the ‘inner totality’. Here, the three classes whose interaction constituted the core of economic activity within capitalist society would be analysed. As for the last three, everyone agrees these remained unwritten. So far as I know, nothing survives even of outline notes on what these Books might have included. Anyone trying to make sense of capitalism in the century and more since Marx’s death must regret that we lack a systematic and critical discussion by Marx of the place of the state, and of the world economy as a whole, within the political economy of the capitalist system. Twentieth-century Marxists grappled with the theoretical problems of imperialism, war, world crises, combined and uneven development, state capitalism and the like, without benefit of much assistance from Marx’s passionate intellect.

But what of the first three Books? There is a case for saying that Marx incorporated sufficient of the proposed ‘Book on Landed Property’ into the discussions of ‘Rent’ in Capital Volume III. The real issue is the ‘Book on Wage-Labour’. Lebowitz suggests that this is ‘missing’. More importantly, this Book is absolutely needed if we are to connect Marx’s ‘politics’ with his ‘economics’, and if we are to avoid reading Capital in a completely ‘one-sided’ way.

This is controversial. Numbers of Marx’s interpreters, from Kautsky and Grossman to Rosdolsky and Mandel, have suggested that Marx abandoned

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1 These are listed and discussed – though not entirely satisfactorily – in Rosdolsky 1977, Chapter 2.
2 Though not necessarily to his own satisfaction. It seems that he wanted to draw on the materials on Russian peasant agriculture, which he studied intensively in the 1870s.
his original six-book scheme. In particular, they suggest that the content of the original ‘Book on Wage-Labour’ was incorporated into the first volume of *Capital*, in the section where Marx discusses ‘wages’. In a study of the bibliographical evidence, Oakley concluded that the materials do not exist to decide whether Marx abandoned his original project or not.\(^3\) How then are we to decide? And, anyway, does it really matter that much?

Marxism is currently under attack from a number of quarters, not least, on the Left. Of course, a disdain for Marxism, and its ‘naïveties’, is not a new thing, but in recent decades this has been expressed in new forms. André Gorz famously bade a ‘farewell’ to a working class, which he saw as disappearing. Jean Cohen, Claus Offe and others have suggested that the proletariat was never up to the job of emancipating society from capitalism, and instead, look to ‘new middle-class social movements’ to achieve this task. Marxism, it has been alleged, has little to say about the concerns of such movements – about ecology, feminism, national minorities, and even rank-and-file workers. Marxism is charged with being ‘economistic’ and with forcing all manner of forms of oppression, either into obscurity or into the oppressive mould of class analysis.\(^4\)

How should we respond? The problem, Lebowitz suggests, does not only lie with weak arguments among Marxism’s critics – though he might have said more about how weak some of their arguments are! – but also in our own understanding of our own theory. We have, he follows, a theory, which is ‘not entirely successful’. But, he urges, rather than following the critics in bidding a ‘long goodbye to Marxism’, we need to develop the theory itself. And that requires a critical re-examination of its very foundations.

We need to go beyond *Capital* – by developing it further. That implies re-reading Marx’s masterwork, with an eye that is simultaneously critical, yet faithful to Marx’s own essential method. Where does the problem lie? *Capital* is sub-titled, *A Critique of Political Economy*, but the difficulty is that Marx remained, partly, on the very ground that he set out to criticise.\(^5\) As the young

\(^3\) Oakley 1983; see also Oakley 1984, and 1985.

\(^4\) Part of the argument concerned the question: how do we make sense of falling strike statistics, and other apparent indications of declining working-class combativeness, from the mid-1970s onwards, especially, as these were paralleled by an apparent expansion of ‘new social movement’ activism? Theories of ‘post-capitalism’ (and indeed ‘post’ much else) claimed to provide ‘structural’ reasons for the shifts. For a critical review, and an outline alternative account of a more ‘conjunctural’ character, see Barker and Dale 1998.

\(^5\) Lebowitz draws here on E.P. Thompson’s critique of Althusser; see Thompson 1978.
Marx noted in the 1840s, what marked ‘political economy’ was that it did not consider the worker as a ‘human being’ but only as a ‘factor of production’. It, thus, ruled out of its field of discussion, all manner of issues relevant to the real understanding of the worker’s human situation: relations of power, sexuality, cultural practices, consciousness, norms and values, ad so on. Lebowitz suggests that *Capital*, as Marx left it to us, is open to the author’s own youthful strictures.

The critics, he argues, are posing real questions, even if their answers are unsatisfactory. The heart of the problem is that, in the text of *Capital*, as we have inherited it, Marx maintains a critical silence over an absolutely essential matter, namely, the self-activity of wage-labour. As a result, it seems that the only subject for scientific discussion is capital itself, its movements, its contradictions, its development. The three volumes of *Capital* provide a basis for a ‘one-sided Marxism’, which is insufficient and fundamentally incomplete. The work’s deficiencies can only be overcome if we attempt to continue it. Only then, can we develop a Marxist theory, which can properly answer the difficulties and objections posed by critics.

Lebowitz’s book is thus cast within ‘orthodox Marxism’. Following Lukács, he denies that orthodoxy consists in holding that everything Marx said was correct, and everything he did not say is not true. ‘Orthodoxy’ is characterised by two key arguments. First, that Marx’s *method* was correct. Second, that Marxism must be, in Gramsci’s terms, ‘sufficient unto itself’. An adequate Marxist theory should contain everything needed to construct a total and integral conception of the social world. If we find Marxism defective, or in need of improvement, we should look within the structure of the thought for the solution to our problems, rather than trying to solve our difficulties by eclectically adding on elements from other systems of thought.6

In what does the ‘method’ consist? Like Lukács, Lebowitz identifies the category of ‘totality’, and the notion of the supremacy of the whole over its parts, as crucial. Orthodox Marxism stands opposed to methodological individualism, which seeks to construct an account of the social system out of its various parts. Marx’s aim was to grasp capitalism as ‘an organic system’, a ‘connected whole’, where all the different elements co-exist and mutually

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6 For an example of such a contrast, see Lockwood 1992. Lockwood identifies some real problems in Marxist treatments of class consciousness, but looks to the adding on of Weberian notions of ‘status’ to solve them, in a formulation with ultimately social-democratic conclusions.
support each other, and in the surface movements of society to find the ‘inner core, which is essential but concealed’. In principle, the theoretical system should encompass every element essential to capitalism, so that, the totality can be adequately represented in thought. The method involves asking: what specific patterns mark capitalism as a mode of social production, that is, what are the social relations between people involved in producing and reproducing their conditions of existence?7

The method, of course, has a political significance. The whole discourse of Marxism, as Lebowitz suggests, is about exploitation – though we might add that it is also about competitive antagonism and social division, a point to which we shall return. Marxism is concerned with the rejection of exploitation in society, and about the necessity and possibility of transcending this society. Marx sees going beyond capitalism as an inherent possibility, developing within the existing system, for it is embodied in the goals and struggles of working people. But the overcoming of exploitation cannot be achieved piecemeal: the whole totality of social relations requires to be reshaped. Partial reformist projects are inherently flawed: they do not succeed in doing more than changing some of the figures and forms of exploitation. They leave the essential heart of the system untouched. Marx’s argument for ‘totality’ was necessarily revolutionary.

If we apply Marx’s method to his own work, Lebowitz suggests, we have to conclude that, whatever Karl Marx himself thought, the argument of Capital must be driven much further forward. The ‘Missing Book on Wage-Labour’ is a vital necessity.

It is in his arguments for the necessity of this ‘Missing Book’ and in many of his suggestions as to what its core arguments might be, that the importance of Lebowitz’s book resides. To my mind, his case is convincing.

The ‘missing book’

Lebowitz approaches the issue by discussing Marx’s treatment of ‘needs’. In Capital, Marx insisted that the value of labour-power was determined by the

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7 Since the matter is often misunderstood, we should stress that this is not just a question of people producing things, as Marx is too often read, but also, and simultaneously, of their producing social relations. Society itself, and the beings composing it, are produced through human activity. A ‘mode of production’ is a social form, in which human beings, their needs and their social relations are made and remade, and not just a way of producing out of external nature.
labour-time necessary for the production of labour-power. Within capitalism, workers’ needs consist in a certain quantity of the means of subsistence, sufficient to maintain the worker ‘in his normal state as a working individual’. And, Marx went on to argue that, at any time, this quantity was ‘a known datum’. In Capital, Marx takes the value of labour-power as given.

There are two rather significant issues here. First, we know, from all manner of other writings by Marx, that he believed this standard of necessity must tend to rise as capitalism developed. Second, Marx treated the ‘givenness’ of the value of labour-power in Capital, not as a ‘fact’, but as a methodologically sound working assumption. Nothing was further from Marx’s mind than the idea that workers have a fixed set of necessities. Needs develop with society, as both Smith and Hegel before Marx, had already pointed out. For Marx, the development of human needs is part of what he saw as a core characteristic of human activity. Our species develops and transforms the forces of production, and thus, transforms its own nature and its own needs. Indeed, for Marx, part of the very notion of historical progress consisted in the development by human beings of new needs. ‘Regarded materially, wealth consists only in the manifold variety of needs’. Marx insisted that the determination of the value of labour-power involved, not some merely animal notion of ‘physical necessity’, but always what he termed ‘a historical or social element’.

Capital, resting on the exploitation of alienated labour, restricts the growth of workers’ needs, on one side, but in its own striving to enlarge the market, it also expands them. The capitalist class’s attitude to workers’ consumption is inherently contradictory: as exploiter in production, capital seeks to limit and reduce workers’ needs and consumption; as realiser of surplus-value, capital must seek to inspire new wants and needs in workers. Workers’ needs grow as a function of their very participation in capitalist society.

Capitalism, however, generates needs it cannot satisfy. The expansion of capitalist wealth inspires in workers dissatisfaction with their relative condition. Our wants and needs are conditioned by society, but in capitalism there is always a gap between what we need, and what we can (in money terms) ‘demand’. The most obvious practical expression of this gap is the working class’s struggle for higher wages.

There might seem nothing controversial in that. Yet... the struggle for

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9 It was bourgeois theorists who tried to treat workers’ needs in this way. See, for example, the attempts by Rowntree to work out a minimum poverty budget, as described in Kincaid 1973.
higher wages is not discussed in *Capital!* Marx suggested, in fact, that discussion of changes in the level of needs belonged ‘in the theory of wages’. As late as manuscripts written in 1864–5, he clearly thought such a theory necessary, as Lebowitz shows. But he did not write it.

So, given that Marx clearly thought both that the value of labour-power was not fixed and that the struggle for higher wages was a crucial feature of capitalism, why in *Capital* did he treat the level of necessity as ‘given’? Quite simply, he was making a presentational assumption. His aim, at that moment in *Capital*, was not to explore the movement of wages, but to reveal the nature of capital and its basis in the exploitation of labour. He was using a procedure he necessarily employed throughout the development of the argument of *Capital*: holding one element constant, so that another could be explored. But this ‘holding constant’ could only be provisional. The assumption of constant wages needed to be relaxed later. Only, ‘later’ never came.

So what? Lebowitz drives his argument forward. If that question is absent from *Capital*, what else is missing? If the struggle for higher wages is to be incorporated into *Capital*, what presuppositions of that struggle must also be incorporated? Marx, after all, explained capital in a very strict and systematic fashion in terms of money, and money in terms of the commodity. Where should an analysis of the wages struggle begin, with what ‘simplest determinations’? For Marx’s method, as he outlined and explored it in various places, consisted in seeking to reveal the inter-connections between the phenomena of capitalist society as a whole by working from an adequate starting point, and using this, to gradually unfold the many-sided and contradictory character of the system as a totality. The conditions for success in this intellectual endeavour included one, learned from Hegel, that the system’s various presuppositions should all be presented as posited by the system itself. Nothing should remain, in a sense, ‘outside’ and ‘before’. Everything within capitalism should be explicable from within itself.

In Marx’s own terms, the system of concepts in *Capital* is incomplete. How and why?

Marx suggested that capital’s movement as a whole could be represented as a circuit:

\[ M \rightarrow C (M_p, L_p) \rightarrow P \rightarrow \ldots \rightarrow C' \rightarrow M' \]

Money (M) is exchanged for commodities (C), which consist of two essential elements, means of production (M_p) and labour-power (L_p). When these two elements are combined, the process of capitalist production (P) can proceed.
At the end of that process, new commodities, with an added element of surplus-value (C’) are produced, and these are, then, exchanged for a larger sum of money (M’). Through this circuit, capital enlarges itself by exploiting workers’ labour-power. This circuit can be entered at any point, but is continuous. Thus it can be represented, diagrammatically, as a repeating circle.

Here, it seems, and as generations of Marxists have more-or-less uncritically accepted, we have a closed social input-output system in which nothing is ‘exogenous’. The whole process of capitalist reproduction is represented, and every element is explained in terms of its being produced elsewhere in the circuit.

But, actually, this is not so. At this point, Lebowitz objects, something is still unexplained. There is one element in the system, which is not produced and reproduced by capital, and yet, which is vital to capital’s own circuit of production. That something is labour-power. Marx noted that ‘[t]he maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital’, but added ‘the capitalist may safely leave this to the
worker’s drive for self-preservation and propagation’. After these few words, there is theoretical silence from Marx. This ‘necessary condition’ for capital’s reproduction is not further theorised. But, if it is a ‘necessary condition’, it requires to be integrated into the conceptual apparatus properly. And that is what the ‘Missing Book on Wage-Labour’ should have concerned itself with.

There is, Lebowitz proposes, a whole missing circuit of production. Not only must labour-power be produced (and capital does not do that!), but also the commodities that capital produces must be seen as of two types: means of production (bought by capital for money), and articles of consumption (bought by workers with their wages). A second circuit of production must be posited, distinct from that of capital, though inter-related with it. It can be represented as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
M & \rightarrow Ac \rightarrow P \rightarrow Lp \rightarrow M \\
\end{align*}
\]

Again, we begin with money \((M)\), only this time in the worker’s hands. This is exchanged for articles of consumption \((Ac)\), which are then consumed in a process of production \((P)\). What is produced in this labour-process is the worker’s labour-power \((Lp)\), which is then sold to the capitalist in exchange for wages \((M)\).

If we put together the two circuits of production – of capital and of labour-power – we can represent this double process in diagrammatic terms (where \(k\) stands for capital, and \(w\) for wage-labour, see p. 64).

Workers’ consumption occurs outside the immediate circuit of capital. Here, in a classic case of Marx’s dictum that every act of consumption is an act of production, by using up articles of consumption purchased with the wage, workers reproduce their own living capacity, their labour-power, ready to sell it again for money-wages.

Within capital’s circuit, labour-power appears as a means of production for capital itself, as the means by which it expands itself. The worker is subordinated here to the will of the capitalist, and compelled to perform labour, including surplus-labour, on capital’s means of production. In capital’s circuit, the worker appears again, as part of the market for capital’s commodities. Wage-labour is present through the movement of capital, as the necessary means for its expansion and as one means for realising surplus-value.

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10 Marx 1977, p. 718, my emphasis.
But labour produces itself, in its own circuit, with the means of reproduction it buys from capital. What is this ‘hidden abode’ of production like? Workers consume commodities as use-values (baked beans, bedding, cutlery, housing, clothing, and so on) and, in the act of consuming these use-values, they reproduce themselves as living human beings with labour-power. This process of self-reproduction is a ‘labour process’, involving activity, the self-transformation of the worker. Its output is a use-value, namely, the worker who embodies certain skills and energies, in other words, labour-power of a specific type. This labour process is a purposeful activity, undertaken under the workers’ own self-direction. Just as capitalist production has a goal – the self-expansion of capital – so too does labour’s self-reproduction. Only, here,
the goal is different: it is, in Marx’s words, the worker’s own need for
development, as this need is also shaped within society. All the manifold
needs that workers possess, and which they themselves further develop and
expand as they participate in capitalist society, provide the motive for this
labour-process.

To complete this labour process, workers need access to necessary means
of production, use-values without which human reproduction cannot be
secured. These are more than just means to simple biological reproduction,
but are ‘social needs’. Marx mentions – though not in Capital – some of the
elements they encompass:

[T]he worker’s participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the
agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures,
educating his children, developing his taste, etc.\textsuperscript{11}

Required here is the expenditure of human energy of a socially determined
quality and capacity, only, with that energy and intelligence under the workers’
own control. The reproduction of labour-power demands time that belongs
to the worker, that is, ‘free time’.

But, of course, this process of producing labour-power is not self-sufficient.
Its product is only labour-power, not the means to restore and regenerate it.
The circuit of labour-power cannot itself be, as capital’s circuit also is not, a
complete system of social reproduction. For wage-labour is, by definition,
separated from the means of production required to produce itself. The worker
lacks the means to attain her own goal of self-development, reproducing only
her self as a ‘needy individual’.\textsuperscript{12} What is reproduced within both circuits
taken together is the workers’ continued dependence on capital, as reproduction
of the class relations of capitalism. The only way they can obtain the necessary
means to engage in this vital process of regenerating life itself, is to re-enter
the sphere of circulation, to find a capital willing to exploit them. ‘To be for
self, the wage-labourer must be a being for another’\textsuperscript{13}. Just as wage-labour is
the mediator for capital, making possible its self-expansion, so too capital is
the necessary mediator for wage-labour, is a moment in labour’s self-production.
Furthermore, the relation between labour and capital, as Marx remarked,
is ‘inverted’: the worker works under the control and direction of the

\textsuperscript{11} Marx 1973, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{12} Lebowitz 2003, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
representatives of capital, and ‘it is not the worker who employs the conditions of work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work employ the worker’.

The circuit of wage-labour requires, to be adequately completed, more resources than capital, in order to complete its circuit, can supply. In this relation, labour struggles with capital, in order to limit its own subordination, to protect itself against capital’s carelessness and depredations, to obtain free time for its own needs, to raise wages the better to be able to engage in self-production, and so forth.

One of the most famous and immediately accessible passages in Capital is Marx’s account of the struggle over the working day. But underlying that account is something that Marx did not establish conceptually: ‘the wage-labourer as being-for-self’. The struggle of labour with capital is latent within the process of production of wage-labour itself.

What emerges from Lebowitz’s argument, in short, is class struggle from the side of the wage-labourer. Not only does capital pursue its essential goal of self-expansion, but workers also necessarily stand in its path asserting their own contrary goals. There are, in Marx’s phrase, ‘two oughts’, and between them it is force that decides.

In this light, the question of ‘needs’ and their determination emerges, not as something capable of being established in the theoretical abstract, but only as a field of struggle between opposed powers and rival drives. That is the ‘historical and moral element’ in the value of labour-power.

Lebowitz is not arguing that the category of wage-labour is entirely absent from Capital, of course. But it is missing as ‘the ought which has capital as its barrier’. In other words, the self-activity of labour pursuing and struggling for its own goals is missing, as a theoretical category. As well as capital-as-subject, as Marx presents the matter in Capital, the presentation of capitalism as a totality requires the theoretical insertion of labour also as an active subject. This crucial conception is only present, latently, within the pages of Capital as Marx left it. In this sense, we have inherited Capital as a ‘one-sided’ work, open to all manner of apolitical and mechanical interpretations.

**Theorising the class struggle**

If Marx did not produce a developed theory of wages, what might it have looked like? Marx’s presentation, treating workers’ needs as fixed or frozen,
permitted him to reveal capital’s nature as dependent on expanding unpaid labour and accumulating its results, as a first step in analysis, ‘without confounding everything’. Marx shows capital struggling with wage-labour to expand surplus-value, but does not also show wage-labour struggling back. Unless this presentational assumption is relaxed, and the analysis completed, the result is also to freeze the workers’ side of class struggle. A theory of wages must clearly go beyond the standpoint of capital, which – as the young Marx argued – treats the worker as simply a ‘thing’, a ‘factor of production’ with given needs for the reproduction of herself, and for the reproduction of a new generation of labourers. To be sure, the level of wages is shaped by such matters as overall labour productivity, which affects the cost of the commodities making up workers’ necessities, as these shape the value of labour-power. But class struggle – unrecognised in political economy as a factor in capitalist development – plays a significant part in determining the very level of ‘necessity’ underpinning the value of labour-power, and is ‘at the core of changes in the standards of necessity’. This is not to claim that class struggle is the sole determinant of wages, or of the material level of necessity. Real wages cannot continue to rise when they cut into accumulation, inducing capitalists to start laying workers off, and thus, reducing the demand for labour-power. Wages are confined within definite limits, set by the foundations of capitalist production.

Lebowitz offers a general methodological observation, that while Capital is the summit of Marx’s work, it is anything but the whole of his writings or his overall theory. Given the incompleteness of Capital, any version of Marxism that rests uncritically on what we have of Capital will share the one-sidedness of the text as Marx (and Engels) left it to us. The core of the ‘one-sidedness’ of Capital consists, in essence, in Marx’s lack of exploration of ‘the side of wage-labour for itself’, a lack, which leaves Capital as ‘an incomplete epistemological project’.

Lebowitz turns to Marx’s Inaugural Address of the International Working Men’s Association, written in 1864 in the midst of his work on Capital. There, Marx points to the existence of two political economies founded on utterly opposed principles: as well as the political economy of capital, there is an opposed ‘political
economy of the working class’. And that working-class political economy, he went on to suggest, had already secured two practical victories. The first was the Ten Hours Bill, setting some limits to working hours in factories, with consequent effects on workers’ ‘physical, moral and intellectual’ condition. Not only that, but Marx saw in the Ten Hours Bill something more, namely, the ‘victory of a principle’ over the ‘blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class’. The other, for Marx even more significant, victory of ‘the political economy of labour over the political economy of property’ was the emergence of the co-operative movement, in particular the co-operative factories. These showed in practice that modern large-scale production could be ‘carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands’.16

From other parts of Marx’s writings, moreover, we can posit some other principles of this ‘political economy of labour’. As against exploitation and competition, that is against the principles of capital’s political economy, workers’ interest consist in raising material living standards, maintaining the ‘normal’ working day, restricting capital’s coercive control in the workplace, reducing the rate of surplus-value, negating competition among themselves, and opposing capital’s ‘divide and rule’ policies.

Marx’s ‘political economy of labour’ adopts a critical stance, not only to capital, but also to inherently limited forms of working-class opposition. Thus, while expressing support for both trade unionism and the co-operative movements of his time, he both pointed to the limits of trade-union forms of activity and organisation, and to the ways that the existing co-ops, while seeking to replace capitalism, also reproduced its defects. The lesson Marx drew from the Ten Hours movement was that, since in economic terms capital is always stronger than labour, a political class movement is needed. Conquering political power is the great duty of the proletariat, raising the working class to the position of ruling class, winning the battle of democracy.

Capitalism, in this light, can be seen as the site of an unending battle between two opposed ‘political economies’, of capital and of labour, for mastery over the whole world. Both are practically rooted in the activity of workers: the one in wage-labour as alienated, exploited, subordinated, divided, compelled to reproduce itself according to the needs of capital; the other in labour as struggling against its bondage and seeking to impose its own self-developing needs on social production.

16 Marx 1985, pp. 10–11.
That war goes on, not just as between capital and labour, but also within the ranks of labour itself, as a practical and ideological struggle over the ‘making’ of the working class, as a force capable of remaking the world. The politics of the working-class movement, its forms of struggle and organisation and its ideas, thus, become part of the proper content of an expanded vision of Capital.

Lebowitz’s argument enables us to put flesh on the ringing words towards the end of Capital, Volume I, when Marx, who has devoted most of his great book to a demonstration of the tendencies of capital, suddenly looks forward to the time when the workers will expropriate the expropriators. It is a magnificent conclusion, but one that is actually not embedded in the categories Marx has developed in Capital. Rather than emerging as a necessary conclusion to the whole analysis, it appears as a rhetorical flourish, a rabbit surprisingly pulled out of the dialectician’s hat. If the heart of Lebowitz’s argument is that labour’s struggle against capital must be adequately integrated into an understanding of capitalism itself, that helps to bring Marx’s great flourish back to earth, where it belongs, by rooting it in a theorisation of the everyday class struggle in capitalism.

The argument has rich implications. First, we must further refine the meaning we give to the term ‘capital’. Not only is capital defined as value, permanently seeking its own self-expansion, but now, we see it confronting labour and constantly struggling against its own potential negator. If capital, as Marx insisted, is ‘not a thing but a social relation’, that social relation is one between capital and wage-labour, and moreover a relation in which both sides must be understood as actively engaged in mutual struggle.

Second, our understanding of the ‘tendencies’ of capital’s development is impoverished if we consider them only as tendencies of capital on its own, and not of capital in its antagonistic relation to wage-labour. Thus, such processes as the development of machinery, the rising organic composition of capital, the concentration of capital and the like, do not occur only as outcomes of the competitive struggle of capitals with each other, but also as products of capitals’ struggle to defeat workers’ resistance and workers’ efforts to realise their own contrary goals. Of course, there is a danger in this innovation – which Lebowitz occasionally seems to fall into – that in stressing the new element the usefulness of the old disappears, and that capitalist competition’s role is downplayed entirely (see below). But the basic point is surely correct: not only must capital-as-many-capitals struggle competitively with itself, but also it must strive to weaken the position of workers. And
Sometimes this requires that it use less ‘technically efficient’ methods of production with lowered productivity, as a condition for forcing the production of surplus-value. The reciprocal interaction of capital and wage-labour involves both sides in the development of opposed goals and practices, which are an inherent aspect of the totality of capitalist production. And we miss these if we focus, one-sidedly, on capital alone. Capital’s ‘laws’ and ‘tendencies’ can take on the appearance of ‘objective’ laws of a technicist and economistic character.

Third, the argument throws new light on such concepts as ‘wealth’, ‘value of labour-power’, ‘population’, ‘productive labour’ and the like. As Marx develops these, within *Capital*, they do not rise above the level of ‘political economy’, that is, the standpoint of capital itself. As such, they remain ‘one-sided’ and provisional, still requiring further social specification in terms of the class struggle. Merely quantitative concepts such as ‘value of labour-power’ need to be transformed into qualitative concepts referring to levels of culture, pleasure, need and civilisation, where inherently non-linear and non-enumerative measures such as ‘richness’ and ‘variety’ can be applied. From the standpoint of capitalist political economy, ‘wealth’ does indeed appear as ‘an immense collection of commodities’; but this is but the present, capitalistic, form of appearance of a deeper and more general notion of wealth, outlined by Marx in earlier writings:

In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces and so on, created through universal exchange?21

It will be seen, how in place of the wealth and poverty of political economy, come the rich human being and rich human need. The rich human being is, simultaneously, the human being in need of a totality of human manifestations of life – the human whose own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as need.22

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17 Some readers have doubted this specific argument of Lebowitz. I will only remark that there are many situations, in which ‘technical efficiency’, would actually be raised if workers had ‘more say’ in the organisation of production. However, employers regularly resist such ‘participation,’ fearing that ‘concessions’ in one sphere may spill over to others.
19 Marx 1975, p. 304. I cannot help remembering a comrade’s funeral. At the graveside his mother turned and addressed his friends: ‘I always thought of him as a poor man, but now I see what a rich man he was – he had all of you’.
Wage-labour embodies, in its needs, a conception of wealth opposed to that of capital, and which requires for its practical realisation the struggle against capital. Similarly with the concept of ‘productive labour’. As Marx develops it, he considers the question only from the standpoint of capital, without asking – as ‘the Missing Book on Wage-Labour’ must have done – ‘productive for whom’ and by what standard of need? From labour’s standpoint, that labour is ‘productive’, which produces use-values that enhance working-class life, including for instance public education and health provision. A Marxism which merely analyses capital’s conceptions, and does not counterpose to them those of labour, is one-sided, unfinished, like a play that never gets beyond Act One.

The reproduction of the wage-labourer

Lebowitz’s Chapters 2 to 7, whose argument I have attempted to summarise above, constitute the most valuable part of his book. They establish very effectively, in my view, that wage-labour needs to be incorporated in a direct and active sense into the whole argument of Marx’s Capital, and that filling this gap is a vital antidote to all mechanical and deterministic understandings of Marxism and its political project.

His remaining chapters open a new series of explorations. While there is much of value here, the reader needs to tread more carefully.

To date, Lebowitz suggests, Marxist theory remains still insufficient:

Not only the absence of socialist revolution and the continued hegemony of capital over workers in advanced capitalist countries, but also the theoretical silence (and practical irrelevance) with respect to struggles for emancipation, struggles of women against patriarchy in all its manifestations, struggles over the quality of life and cultural identity – all these point to a theory not entirely successful.

Part of the problem, he suggests, is that we still retain a too abstract concept of wage-labour, lacking the ‘concrete richness and diversity of the human being’. Yet, as Marx insisted, once we treat human beings as subjects, we are necessarily concerned with ‘all human relations and functions, however and in whatever form they may appear’. In Capital, Marx assumed individuals

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20 Of course, the social forms in which these are produced are themselves open to criticism, but those matters will not be addressed here.

21 Lebowitz 2003, p. 140, author’s emphasis.

only as bearers of specific class relations, but this was a presentational assumption, and one which still requires to be transcended. Lebowitz’s proposed ‘second circuit’ of production of wage-labour can, he suggests, be further explored by noting that it includes the wage-labourer as both wage-labour but also non-wage-labour. How are those use-values produced which contribute to the production of wage-labour?

The production of the wage-labourer may occur within various social relations. Of especial significance are those social relations constituting working-class ‘households’, ‘families’ and ‘marriage’. Thus we begin to explore what has been termed ‘domestic labour’ and, more generally, the relations between men and women, and between adults and children. While I shall suggest that Lebowitz’s own treatment is unsatisfactory, his underlying case is correct: namely, that consideration of such questions does belong under a developed treatment of ‘wage-labour’. So too do all manner of other questions about working-class self-reproduction and self-development, including working people’s relations with each other in neighbourhoods, communities and nations, including the bases of division among themselves on ethnic, religious, racial and other lines. (And, we should most decidedly add, the bases also of unity and solidarity among them.) The formation of a general, abstract concept of wage-labour is, indeed, a ‘rational abstraction’, insofar as it brings to the fore the essence of class relations within capitalist society, and the antagonistic inter-dependence of wage-labour and capital. On the side of capital, after all, Marx first explored the intrinsic character of ‘capital-in-general’, but then went on, especially, in Capital, Volume III, to consider the various internal relations within the capitalist class. In like manner, any developed account of wage-labour would presumably proceed in similar fashion.23

Lebowitz focuses his attention on one aspect of the whole matter, namely, the ‘private’ labour undertaken within working-class households. He proposes that we begin by considering household relationships as relations of slavery, where a male wage-labourer secures necessary use-values without either working to reproduce them or exchanging for them, and does so, by exploiting another person in a relationship based on fear. In such a domestic relationship, a slave-owning wage-labourer gains in free time, what he has to pass over from his wage-packet, to secure his slave’s reproduction. Why begin discussion

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23 Lebowitz does not draw the parallel with Marx’s account of capital. This is a function of his own downplaying of the matter of ‘competition’ in capitalism, a topic to which I shall turn later.
of family and marriage with discussion of slavery? For Lebowitz, it is because he sees both Marx and Engels starting here, with both the domestic enslavement of women and the enslavement of children by their parents. He cites Marx writing in *Capital* that working-class parents have ‘assumed characteristics that are truly revolting and thoroughly like slave-dealing’. Not only does the male labourer sell his own labour-power to capital, but ‘Now he sells wife and child. He has become a slave dealer’.24 In their own period, says Lebowitz, Marx and Engels saw the male wage labourer as existing in two class relationships, as wage-labourer for capital and as slave-owner with respect to his family. They perceived, not an abstract wage-labourer, but a ‘patriarchal wage-labourer’ for whom higher wages permitted reproduction of patriarchy, alongside a women worker for whom higher wages offered a means to escape patriarchy and to gain her own free time. The general point is that male and female workers are produced differently within patriarchal relations; and, within these relations, women and children conduct their own struggles as subjects and actors.

Is the ‘slave relation’ an adequate starting point for discussion of working-class households? In no way should we deny the facts about working-class life that Marx and Engels took into account in their own time. Perhaps we should, though, remember Marx’s suggestion that in selecting analytical starting points we should look for the most developed forms of phenomena. Today, within developed capitalist countries, most women work for wages and most children do not. Women’s wages remain significantly lower than men’s, on average, and ‘marriages’ are still constructed between unequals in terms of relative power and income. Women still bear more of the burden of housework and childcare. As to how and why, of course, there are wide-ranging debates – but ‘slavery’ seems an inadequate starting point for such an analysis. Even for Marx’s own period, before the widespread availability of effective contraception, the internally contradictory aspect of working-class family life has to be stressed. As Jane Humphries pointed out long ago, the family was not only a centre of unequal power and resources, but also a centre for the construction of elementary solidarities and a ‘place’ on which working-class people put an understandable value. It was a needed institution for the rearing of children, who were understood as much more than, either persons to be exploited by a patriarchal parent, or as mere reproductive

additions to capital’s labour force. Lebowitz suggests generally that, when evaluating manifold struggles (and also institutions and practices), the question we need to ask is ‘does this help in the self-development of the working class?’ In respect of the working-class family and its various forms, the answer is likely to be more complex than Lebowitz’s account can allow.

The politics of wage-labour

Capital’s own operations and divisions promote all manner of divisions among workers. Indeed, as Lebowitz asks, one might wonder how Marx could ever think, in the face of the multiple divisions among workers, that the working class could go ‘beyond capital’? How can we suppose that the transcendence of capitalist social relations is even possible?

There is, as Lebowitz argues, no adequate answer to be found in some notion that the ‘development of the productive forces’ will semi-automatically save us from capitalism. For this leaves out all questions of human action and organisation. Nor, indeed, does it lie in the dissatisfaction generated among workers by the gap that capitalism constantly recreates between their needs and their fulfilment. For capitalist history has sufficiently demonstrated that working-class struggle can in various ways not get ‘beyond capital’, confining itself to going round in narrow reformist circles. That was the burden of Marx’s (supportive) criticism of the limits of trade unionism, as it was later also of Luxemburg’s.

The real question is, what grounds might we have for thinking that workers can recognise, practically and intellectually, that capital itself is ‘the real limit’ to fully expanded human production and the meeting of their needs? How, trapped as they seem to be within capitalism’s circuits and the ‘necessary illusions’ these generate, can workers constitute themselves as a force sufficiently clear and sufficiently united to be able to overthrow it?

To ask that is to pose questions about the importance of politics and theory. Why did Marx devote so much of his life to writing Capital, and spend so much energy arguing that capitalism must be looked at as a totality? Precisely because it is only from this vantage point that capital can be seen as the
product of the exploitation of wage-labour. The ‘political economy of wage-
labour’ begins from a theoretical standpoint different from that of capital’s
political economy, for it must grasp that there is a system to be combated,
not just a series of separate capitalists and separate states.28

Marx’s purpose in Capital was revolutionary. He set out to demonstrate
that capital was the result of exploitation. His was inherently a project of
demystification, aimed at a definite audience: the working-class movement.
Such a work was necessary because, as he argued at various points within
Capital, the real character of capitalist exploitation, in a sense, disguised itself
as a series of processes of fair and free exchange, a series which capitalist
political economy represented more or less uncritically. Left as it were to itself,
without criticism, the very processes of reproduction within capitalism tended
to produce workers who viewed their conditions of life as subject to ‘self-
evident natural laws’, and hence, unalterable.

But, if the matter rested there, then there could be no talk of a struggle for
the political economy of the working class. The working class would remain
trapped ideologically and practically within capital’s routines and categories,
struggling always only against capital’s effects and never able to confront
and transform it as a totality. However, the Marxist argument involves one
further step – not found in Capital, but restated and developed in all manner
of Marx’s other writings. Capitalism compels its working class to struggle to
realise its needs within the system, but that class struggle itself is also a
‘process of production’. Through the very act of collective struggle, workers
make themselves different, and produce new needs – among them, the need
for organisation and solidarity, for ideas. Through class struggle, the producers
make themselves into potential world-transforming subjects of history.

Going ‘beyond capital’ is not merely a matter of theoretical development,
but is a practical problem. Lebowitz highlights two aspects. The first concerns
the scope of movements, and second their political aims.

First, we must respond to those ‘new social movements’ theorists who
propose that, as well as and beside the struggle of workers against capital,
it is necessary to ‘add’ movements that address such issues as gender and
racial oppression, or ecological problems. They quite miss the point. They

28 Lebowitz is absolutely correct to object to those would-be Marxists, who abandon
Marx’s methodological holism and ‘Hegelianism’, in favour of a false identity between
methodological individualism and good science. They denature the theory they claim
to advance.
narrow working-class struggle against capitalist society to one of wages and conditions, and do not see that the issues they address concern other needs of workers themselves and are an integral part of the class’s struggle for its complete emancipation. The only real basis for going in practice ‘beyond capital’ is great numbers of people in motion, directly involved in struggle against the existing conditions of their lives, people who, through that struggle, make themselves capable of re-making the world. That conception of collective self-production, by which the exploited class of capitalist society, make themselves into the founders of a new, more directly need-based system of social production, is the final element which must be assumed in the ‘Missing Book on Wage-Labour’. The final contradiction of capitalism is that between the worker as wage-labourer and the producer as human being, with rich and multiple needs. The resolution of that contradiction lies in what Marx termed ‘revolutionary practice’, and that requires a struggle to transform the totality.

Second, it was Marx’s argument that workers need to make the state serve their own interests. To achieve that, they must develop a political movement, ‘a movement of the class, with the aim of enforcing its interests in a general form, in a form possessing general, coercive force’. Over all manner of matters – for instance, the working day, trade-union legislation, full employment, provision of use-values like public health and education – capital and wage-labour push in opposite directions. Between them, force decides. Marx certainly thought that the state could be compelled to act in workers’ interests: that was his point about the Ten Hours Bill. True, other things being equal, capital’s economic power will normally prevail, and advances made by workers regularly turn into mere barriers for capital to surmount. But must other things always be ‘equal’, if workers can conquer political power? Here, Marx’s arguments for the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, for the working class placing itself in the position of ruling class, for victory in the battle for democracy, take on their full significance. Workers could not hope to immediately break every vestige of their dependence on capital, but with political power in their hands they could wrest control from capital by degrees, by ‘despotic inroads’ on its powers. Class struggle would continue after

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29 A similar case was proposed in Barker and Dale 1998. Although the case is often misread, it was also at the heart of Lenin’s argument for socialists as ‘tribunes of the people’. See Lenin 1961 [1902].
30 Marx and Engels 1965, pp. 270-1.
political victory, sometimes through violent and sometimes by peaceful means. All of that, as Marx and Engels learned from the 1871 Commune, required a specific form of state, quite opposed to the existing state machineries with their ‘systematic and hierarchic division of labour’ and their character as ‘a public force organised for social enslavement, of an engine of despotism’.31 
The workers’ state must be subordinated to society, not stand over it, hence, must be deeply democratic.

Part of Lebowitz’s target is the legend of an Old Marx versus a Young Marx, a scientist versus a romantic humanist. There is an especially marked continuity in Marx’s thinking with regard to both his basic conception of capitalism and of what drives beyond it. The young Marx wrote that the proletariat and private property, form an antithesis, in which the worker is ‘the negative side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self’.32 Because workers are not just wage-labourers but also human beings, they are driven to rebel. Not that there is any inevitability about socialism, but the possibility is created and re-created by the critical experiences of those who inhabit and reproduce capitalism.

Some critical considerations

Lebowitz’s work represents a serious advance in Marxist theorising. But, in some respects, it is itself still ‘unfinished’, and even ‘one-sided’.

First, he has proposed a very important starting-point for further development of Marx’s categories, but he has not completed the analysis even of ‘wage-labour’. For, in just the same way that, after Lebowitz’s development of the ‘Missing Book on Wage-Labour’, our understanding of ‘capital’ is also enriched, so too the concept of ‘wage-labour’ still requires to be further enriched through the subsequent development of still other matters that Marx included in his original outline: above all, the missing ‘Books’ on the state and the world market. No account of the reproduction of labour-power – and of such institutions as the family – can proceed very far without reference to the involvement of states in such processes. And a full theorisation of wage-labour cannot emerge, unless and until, we consider the working class as a world class facing a global capitalist antagonist, and developing a necessarily internationalist project. A host of issues necessarily linked to the further

31 Marx 1971, p. 130.
32 Marx 1975, p. 35.
development of the categories of *Capital* require to be explored: the ‘welfare
state’, the formation of the world labour market and the system of national
states (and thus nationalism and racism and the struggle against these),
capitalist war economy, and so forth.

Second, Lebowitz’s treatment of *competition* is highly problematical. He
opens the book with a brief account of Marx’s account of capitalism. It is an
account that says nothing about value relations or competition. The whole
work presents capitalism solely in terms of the ‘vertical’ relations between
capital and wage-labour, and not simultaneously as the ‘horizontal’ relation
between commodity producers and capitals. Several consequences follow.
Capital’s dynamic impulses and its tendencies to crisis are all incomprehensible,
as long as we treat capital as ‘one’. So too are some of its self-mystifying
characteristics, not least those arising from the monetary system. If, as Lebowitz
suggests, we treat the question of competition between capitals as merely
‘surface’ or ‘appearance’, then, it is unclear why capital’s driving force is
indeed the drive to valorise itself, to create surplus-value. Is it the effect of
mere whim or greed? What in capital’s own nature compels its behaviour?
Lebowitz does note that capital can only grow by passing through circulation,
but does not notice that circulation is a process outside each capital and that
one capital presupposes others, as competitors, suppliers, customers. Lebowitz
never gets beyond ‘capital’ in the singular, despite the insufficiency of such
a conception. Lebowitz is correct, that Marx ‘set aside’ competition in order
to reveal the character of capital-in-general (as against other forms of wealth
and exploitation) as based in the exploitation of wage-labour. However, Marx
both arrives at this concept of capital from a starting point in commodity
production and exchange (without which capital is impossible) and returns
to the ‘surface’ to look at competition in the form of the shaping of prices,
the formation of a general rate of profit, and so on. The presupposition of
capital is already competition, albeit in an ‘underdeveloped form’, as commodity
production and exchange. In *Capital*, Volume III, where Marx returns to
competition as the antagonistic relation between capitals, he begins to lay a
basis for consideration of the political capacities of the capitalist class, notably,
in his characterisation of that class as a band of ‘hostile brothers’, at once

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33 As Marx put it: ‘A universal capital, one without alien capitals confronting it,
with which it exchanges – and from the present standpoint, nothing confronts it but
wage-labourers or itself – is therefore a non-thing. The reciprocal compulsion between
capitals is already contained within capital as realized exchange value’ (Marx 1973,
p. 421).
united against wage-labour and divided against itself. It is odd that Lebowitz can be sensitive to the need to develop Marxist treatments of wage-labour beyond necessary but incomplete ‘abstraction’, but not see the need to develop an account of the differentiation of capital as well. His enthusiasm for his own discoveries leads him to his own form of ‘one-sidedness’. Capital’s tendency to develop the means of production, for instance, is explained only in terms of its struggle with wage labour’s intransigence, as if allowing inter-capitalist competition to play any part in explanation must lead to determinism. Additionally, there are important implications for the politics of wage-labour – the matters addressed in Lebowitz’s later chapters. A practical socialist politics cannot be founded solely on the possibilities and limits of working-class unity, as if labour’s class opponent were a homogeneous entity, not itself both prone to generate convulsive crises and wars, but also subject to its own inner divisions and splits. Nor is the problem of ‘going beyond capital’ only a question of abolishing exploitation, but equally a problem of overcoming the essential ‘private property’ limits set by commodity production itself, and its developed outgrowths.

Third, there are crucial issues about political organisation, which go beyond the exposition and critique of Marx himself. In the 1870s, Marx and Engels sharply expressed their differences with a reformist current within the German socialist movement. They could hardly have guessed at the importance the issue of reformism within labour movements would assume after their deaths. Lebowitz does not address this matter, nor does he rise above the level of Rosa Luxemburg’s perceptions. She brilliantly perceived the way in which the working class developed itself in struggle. But she treated the working class as simply a self-educating and self-transforming ‘unity’, and not as itself internally differentiated. In an unwise footnote, Lebowitz takes the side of Luxemburg against Lenin (but only the Lenin of 1902), without understanding the conceptual and practical breakthroughs involved in Lenin’s whole developing theory of socialist revolution and party organisation. Lebowitz, rather wishes away the twentieth-century problem of reformism, offering no theorisation and no outline of what practical solutions might look like. Finally, something needs to be said about the theoretical implications of going ‘beyond capital’ into a consideration of a Marxist politics of wage-labour.

First, Marxist theory, as a politics, is the product of generalisations from the

34 Marx and Engels 1974.
35 On this, see above all, Harman 1968–9; also Shandro 1995.
experience and achievements of workers’ movements, arising out of the practical and theoretical discoveries they themselves have made. This is true of the advances Marx records in the ‘political economy of wage-labour’, both the invention and the critique of trade unionism and co-operatives, the development of political movements and parties, the discovery (by the Paris Commune) of the outlines of the political form of a workers’ state, and much more besides.

Second, going beyond political economy involves the development of a political theory, which is necessarily concerned with practice, with matters of strategy and tactics, with internal argumentation within and around workers’ movements and, indeed, other movements against oppression, injustice, war, waste and division. Such a theory requires a different form of presentation from that appropriate to political economy and its critique. It must be less formal in character, and more historical.36

Third, the workers’ movement could only benefit from the dispassionate objectivity which – at its best – political economy was capable, as Marx noted, admiringly, of its greatest earlier exponents (like the physiocrats, Smith, and Ricardo). That enabled them to provide much of the underpinnings of a scientific understanding of capitalism and its workings as a ‘totality’, with which the workers’ movement must grapple. But the workers’ movement needs more than theory in this sense. It also requires a ruthless objectivity about itself, its own strengths and weaknesses, its own development, its own possibilities, but in a slightly different form. It needs not only a theory about itself, as it were from the outside, but also a theory for itself. At the centre of such theorising lies an ever-shifting debate about the situation in which the movement finds itself and what it must do to advance its own interests. To be useful, such theory must necessarily be rooted in understanding of the nature and possibilities of human association and creativity, and must have the character of an art as much as a science. Its concerns and forms must involve aspects of the dialectic, which are relatively weakly developed within political economy and its critique: a sense not just of ‘totality’, but equally of leaps and discoveries, of re-makings and re-organising, of the interplay between cognitive, practical, emotional and aesthetic aspects of the discontinuous development of human experience. Such a political theory must combine elements of the Machiavellian with the ethical, oriented to the self-production

36 There are some guidelines to what such theory might involved, in the models provided by the ‘theses’ developed in the first four Congresses of the Communist International.
of a movement with the real capacity to revolutionise the world, and in the process, itself and its participants. It must take account of how people learn, not simply to reproduce old ways of working, organising, thinking, aspiring, but also how they learn new things by reflecting on past and present experience. Here, even Marx’s brilliant account of labour as an activity is insufficient, for it assumes the producer already has in his mind’s eye the product she is setting out to produce. Even in material production, this is sometimes insufficient: the refractory nature of materials and processes involves not mere reproduction of an already formed conception, but active and innovative engagement with the task, such that its character develops along with the producer, sometimes, in surprising new ways. This is even truer in political and social activity. No one developed the ideas of the Commune in advance of the practical experience of Paris’s artisans and workers in their struggle with the regime in 1871, and Marx paid tribute to their discoveries. There is more in Marx’s critical notion of self-transforming ‘revolutionary practice’ than repeating the actions and ideas of the past.37

Nevertheless, Michael Lebowitz’s short book is one, I think, that revolutionary socialism needs. If some of his formulations require amendment, and if some of the issues he poses require further development, he has nonetheless made a significant contribution to the development and revival of Marxist theory. His case for going beyond Capital and beyond a ‘one-sided Marxism’ deserves a wide audience, and serious discussion.

References


37 It is, to my knowledge, only in some rather quirky places that the logic of these matters have been developed at any length, and some effort is needed to sort out the nuggets of theoretical gold, within some otherwise slightly oddball matter. But see Engeström 1987, and also Newman and Holzman 1993.


Werner Bonefeld

**Marx’s Critique of Economics. On Lebowitz**

Michael Lebowitz’s book is on class struggle. He argues against the silence on human experience in *Capital*. In his view, *Capital* looks at the working class from the point of view of capital. Although its one-sidedness fulfils a useful function – it explains the nature of capital\(^1\) – it does not provide a full understanding of the social reality of capitalism.\(^2\) *Capital* is thus deemed one-sided because it ignores the side of workers, their struggles and goals. He sees it as an analysis of capital but not as a study of capitalism. His book intends to make this good by reconstructing Marx’s unwritten book on wage-labour through a focus on some critical assumptions in *Capital*.

Lebowitz’s endeavour to bring the ‘vanished’ human subject to the fore opens the right perspective for any critical reconstruction of *Capital*. Critical reconstruction is indeed needed. I am, however, not at all sure whether such reconstruction finds its resolution in the discovery of wage-labour struggles. Critical reconstruction has to show the social constitution of capital. Without such an inquiry, its

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\(^1\) Lebowitz 2003, pp. viii, 177.
\(^2\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 80.
‘one-sidedness’ is, in fact, affirmed inasmuch as Capital’s account of ‘capital as being-for-self’ is taken as the presupposition for the attempted critical reconstruction of the theory of the collective worker ‘in action’. Lebowitz recognises this when he argues that ‘capitalism inverts everything’ and that would mean that wage-labour is itself an ‘inverted’ form. In order, then, to comprehend the social constitution of class struggle, of capital and wage-labour, one has to investigate the critical intention of Marx’s argument that he deals in Capital with workers and capitalists only as ‘personifications of economic categories’. Lebowitz, however, takes this formulation at face value, arguing that, without a theory of wage-labour, Capital offers ‘objective economic laws, determinism, economism and one-sided concepts that bear little relation to the real movements of society’. This ‘one-sidedness’ is the result of ‘Marx’s failure to set out the side of wage-labour in a logical and analytical manner’. Since ‘references to class struggle by workers are missing… Capital is essentially about capital’ and thus offers a logical derivation of economic categories. As he sees it, the only ‘subject’ in Capital is ‘capital’ and the ‘worker as subject is missing’. Yet, his reconstruction of the working-class subject presupposes the ‘capital subject’. ‘We have to understand the presupposition of wage struggles if we are to incorporate wage struggles into Marx’s argument’. Thus, the ‘concrete totality’ of capitalism is in fact premised on the criticised one-sidedness of the analysis of capital in Capital: capital is the presupposition of the theory of class struggle. What, however, is the social constitution of capital? The understanding of Marx’s critique of political economy as a theory of social constitution emphasises that capital contains, within itself, its own opposite and that it thus is a social relationship that appears in the objective illusion [objektiver Schein] of economic categories.

Lebowitz does, however, also argue in favour of a theory of social constitution, that is, a critique of economic categories as inverted forms of essentially practical social relations. As he puts it, ‘labour for capital… is labour alienated from self’. Capital is thus seen to be grounded in labour,
specified as an alienated form of labour, and labour is seen as the constitutive essence of capital, an essence that is rendered invisible in its form of appearance. Essence, Hegel argued, must appear. However, one has to add: it hides itself in its appearance. Thus, as Marx argued, ‘already the simple forms of exchange-value and of money latently contain the opposition between labour and capital’. Instead, then, of the criticised ‘one-sided totality’ of Capital, this quotation suggests a critical reconstruction of Capital as a conceptualisation of the totality of social praxis [begriffene Praxis] that constitutes, suffuses and contradicts the apparently objective ‘logic’ of capital. This, then, means that class struggle does not have to be introduced as a corrective to the objectivism of Capital, as Lebowitz argues. Rather, the opposition between labour and capital is already ‘contained’ in its simplest categories. The theory of social constitution is fundamentally a critique of the fetishism of economic categories. The remainder of the essay focuses on this issue and argues that Lebowitz’s reconstruction presupposes a theory of social constitution. Without such a theory, the ‘incorporation’ of wage-labour struggle is premised on ‘the hegemony of capital’ – an ostensibly critical term that, however, presupposes the explanation in the explanandum.

II

Lebowitz is right to suggest that Capital offers only glimpses of its dialectical method. Marx contrasts his method to the method of ‘formal abstraction’ of ‘the’ economists, which subordinates ‘the concrete to the abstract’, and which is therefore ‘uncritical’ because it does not ‘develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialized forms of those relations’.

What does Marx mean by celestialised forms?

Lebowitz quotes approvingly from Marx’s Capital that the

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14 Schmidt 1974, p. 207.
15 Given space limitations, the argument can only offer a brief outline. For accounts see the numerous publications of especially Backhaus, Reichelt, and also Bonefeld 1995 and 2001.
16 Lebowitz 2003, p. 20.
17 On Marx’s concealed method, see Reichelt 1995.
18 Marx 1969, p. 106.
19 Marx 1972, p. 87.
life process in the realm of the social – for that is what the process of production is – we find the same situation that we find in religion at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and vice versa.  

This quotation raises a number of significant issues and in this context, three are most important. First, the social is equated with the process of production and this implies, as indeed Marx argues, that capital is a social relationship of ‘Man himself in his social relations’.  

Second, Marx’s comparison of his ‘economics’ with the critique of religion refers back to the work of Feuerbach and Marx’s critique of Feuerbach, that is, the critique of abstract social forms as socially constituted forms of human praxis. Third, the quotation emphasises that his ‘economics’ amounts to a critique of economic categories as inverted forms of human social praxis. This seems to indicate that his ‘economics’ continues his earlier critique of perverted social forms, from the critique of the form of religion, to the critique of the form of state, and finally the critique of the economic forms. As I have argued elsewhere, all these forms are criticised as inverted forms of essentially practical human social relations, however perverted their mode of existence might be in the form of God, the political state, or capital.  

Inspired by Marx’s Robinson example in his critique of fetishism and Marcuse’s reading of Marx’s critique of economics through the lens of his early philosophical work, Backhaus, like Lebowitz, has argued that, if one were to abstract from the macro-economic reality of capital, that is, the atomised competitive relations that characterise class society, then ‘the macro-economic totality suddenly reveals itself as a communist unity, a unity of human social cooperation’. Since, however, the social subjects act in individualising, atomising structures, social co-operation appears to be the product of the movement of things, as if these were a person apart. Social co-operation, the unity of society, exists against itself in the form of value. Capital is thus identified as a form of human co-operation in perverted form: it detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent thing. This detachment, however, cannot be explained through the mysterious quality of the objective things themselves. Rather, as the Theses on Feuerbach announce, ‘all mysteries which lead theory to mystification find their rational solution in human  

\(^{21}\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 206.  
^{22}\) Marx 1973, p. 600.  
^{24}\) Backhaus 2000, p. 173.
practice and in the comprehension of this practice’. In terms of Marx’s ‘economics’, this means that the social constitution of capital has to be found in the ‘peculiar social character of the labour that produces’ commodities25 and that social labour achieves ‘sociality’ only when it expresses itself in the form of its own denial, the ‘social hieroglyphic’ of value.26 Just as his critique of religion argued that God is the creation of Man’s own social existence, the doubling of Man into Man and God, his critique of the political state argued that society doubles itself into society and state. His critique of capital employs the same figure of thought: human social labour doubles itself into ‘labour and capital’.27 Because of the peculiar character of the social labour that produces commodities, human social co-operation, the social subject, is absent in a direct sense and at the same time constitutive – it is the ‘creative ground’28 of its own reified existence: value relations take the place of the absent self-conscious subjects. In short, ‘the constitution of the world appears behind the backs of individuals, yet it is their work’.29

Lebowitz argues similarly and yet does not decipher Marx’s economic categories as social categories.30 The ‘whole secret’ of the commodity lies in ‘the critical conception’ of the ‘double character of labour’ and it is this critical conception that shows that the wage-form is ‘the irrational form’ in which the peculiar social character of the bourgeois form of labour ‘appears’.31 Lebowitz, then, poses the critical insight of the theory of social constitution – human beings produce through their own social labour a reality which increasingly enslaves them – and juxtaposes it to a theory of wage-labour that is premised on the view that wage-labour struggles entail the potential of revolutionary separation from capital. Capital, he argues, ‘is what has not been established in Capital – the wage-labourer as being-for-self’32 and ‘the worker is only for self when she is not a worker for capital’.33 If, then, the worker is no longer a worker for capital, would she still be a wage-labourer? His two lines of argumentation appear to collide. He demands the ‘abolition

26 Marx 1983, p. 79.
28 Marx 1973, p. 278,
30 Cf. for example, Lebowitz 2003, pp. 53, 58–9, 75, 163, 177–8, 186, 206 and 209.
31 Marx 1868, p. 514, adapted from MEW 32, p. 11.
32 Lebowitz 2003, p. 73.
33 Lebowitz 2003, p. 75.
of the wage system"\textsuperscript{34} and argues that wage-labour has ‘to negate its negation to posit itself’.\textsuperscript{35}

Leaving aside Marx’s judgement that ‘to be a productive labourer is ... not a piece of luck, but a misfortune’,\textsuperscript{36} what does it mean to say that wage-labour posits itself as itself? He argues that ‘Marx’s object clearly differed form Hegel’s’ but that ‘he similarly uses the method of dialectical derivation’.\textsuperscript{37} Marx could therefore not set out the side of wage-labour in an analytical manner, as Lebowitz demands.\textsuperscript{38} The analysis of wage-labour and the dialectics of wage-labour belong to different worlds, the one affirmative, however critical in its demand for fair and just wages and conditions, the other negative in its determinate denunciation of wage-labour as a perverted form of human existence. The wage contract is the fundamental form of all relations in bourgeois society – it connects freedom with exploitation.\textsuperscript{39} Nevertheless, according to Lebowitz, Marx’s method is that of the negation of the negation that ‘understands the unity of ... specific opposites’ in their transcendent synthesis, where the one-sidedness of each opposite is reconciled.\textsuperscript{40} In distinction to Lebowitz, Marx intended his ‘dialectical method’ as the ‘direct opposite’ to that of Hegel.\textsuperscript{41} Whether he realised his intention is a question of critical reconstruction.\textsuperscript{42} Lebowitz’s acceptance, however, that Marx merely operationalised Hegel’s method in \textit{Capital} has formidable consequences. Marx’s critique of capital did not negate the negation in order to arrive at new levels of synthesis: the worker-for-self as a pseudo-absolute of the ‘workers’ state’.\textsuperscript{43} Marx, in contrast, negated that what is negative, namely, human social relations as relations between things. In Hegel, Marx argues,

\begin{quote}
the negation of the negation is not the confirmation of the true essence, effected precisely through negation of the pseudo-essence. With him the negation of the negation is the confirmation of the pseudo-essence, or of the self-estranged essence in its denial; or it is the denial of this pseudo-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Lebowitz 2003, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{35} Lebowitz 2003, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{36} Marx 1983, p. 477.
\textsuperscript{37} Lebowitz 2003, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{38} Lebowitz 2003, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{40} Lebowitz 2003, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{41} Marx 1983, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{42} Cf. Reichelt 1995.
\textsuperscript{43} Lebowitz 2003, p. 189ff.
essence as an objective dwelling outside man and independent of him, and
its transformation into the subject.\textsuperscript{44}

Lebowitz doubles this ‘subject’ into ‘capital as being-for-self’\textsuperscript{45} and ‘wage-
labour for self’.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, for Lebowitz, it seems that the negation of the negation
is positive: the negation of capital posits wage-labour, and wage-labour posits
its ‘self’ in the ‘workers state’.\textsuperscript{47}

Marx argued, however, that the negation of the negation amounts to the
‘superseding of . . . alienation’\textsuperscript{48} – a determinate negation.\textsuperscript{49} It refuses to sanction
things as they are. It negates the negative human condition – a condition
governed by things where human purpose exists in the mode of its denial,
that is, as a mere economic resource in the form of wage-labour. Human
co-operation, then, has to be liberated from the false totality of capital and
its state: all who live from their labour and the sale of their labour-power

find themselves directly opposed to the form in which, hitherto, the
individuals, of which society consists, have given themselves collective
expression, that is, the State; in order, therefore, to assert themselves as
individuals, they must overthrow the State.”\textsuperscript{50}

‘The State’ is the ‘concentration of bourgeois society’,\textsuperscript{51} the content of whose
‘illusionary community’\textsuperscript{52} is the ‘perpetuation of the labourer’ – the ‘sine qua
non of the existence of capital’.\textsuperscript{53}

Marx starts his section on the fetish character of the commodity with
decisively un-economic terms. The commodity, he writes, presents itself as a
‘very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological
niceties’. It appears as such a mysterious thing because its socially useful
character is changed into ‘something transcendent’.\textsuperscript{54} These characterisations
of the commodity indicate a determinate negation of the constituted forms

\begin{itemize}
  \item Marx 1959, p. 140.
  \item Lebowitz 2003, p. 75.
  \item Lebowitz 2003, p. 73.
  \item Lebowitz 2003, pp. 124, 189.
  \item Marx 1959, p. 146.
  \item Marx and Engels 1974, p. 85.
  \item Marx 1973, p. 105.
  \item Cf. Marx and Engels 1974, p. 53. Translation modified from MEW 3, p. 33. The
    English version translates ‘illusorische Gemeinschaftlichkeit’ as ‘illusory communal life’.
  \item Marx 1983, p. 536.
  \item Marx 1983, p. 76.
\end{itemize}
of capital as ‘relations between humans’. Adorno rightly saw this ‘reductio
ad hominem’ as the essential core of Marx’s critique of political economy. It
deciphers the ‘puzzling forms’ of value as forms ‘assumed by social relations
between man and man’ and reveals their social constitution in the peculiar
social character of labour that ‘becomes productive only by producing its
opposite’, i.e. capital. The critical question, then, is not to accept Capital as
a study of the ‘logic of capital’ that needs to be balanced by a theory of class
struggle, but to ask: ‘why does this content [human social relations] take that
form [the form of capital]’. This sentence does not appear in the English
edition of Capital. Yet it is most significant, as the following attempts to show.

Marx’s understands his programme of critique as a means of deciphering
the real system of economic mystification ‘where the social character of labour
appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves’. He
attempts thus ‘to get behind the secret of our own social product’ and he
argues that each ‘form’, even the most simple form like, for example, the
commodity, ‘is already an inversion and causes relations between people to
appear as attributes of things’. Indeed, each form is a ‘perverted form
[verrückte Form]’. Further, the most developed perversion, the constituted
fetish of capital is the relationship of capital to itself, of a thing to itself. And
the substance of this self-relation? The ‘common social substance’ of commodities
‘is labour’, which because of its peculiar social character ‘take[s] the appearance
of inherent properties of capital’. The constitutive fetish of capital renders
its character as a social relationship ‘invisible’. And the wage relation? ‘Price

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55 Marx 1972, p. 147.
57 Marx 1983, p. 94.
58 Marx 1973, p. 305.
59 Lebowitz 2003, p. 177.
60 Marx 1962, pp. 94–5.
61 Marx 1983, p. 79.
62 Ibid.
63 Marx 1972, p. 508.
64 Marx 1962, p. 90. In the English edition translates the German verrückte Form, as
‘absurd form’ (Marx 1983, p. 80). In German, ‘verrückt’ has two meanings: verrückt
(mad) and ver-rückt (displaced). Thus, the notion of ‘perverted forms’ means that they
are mad as displaced or inverted forms of human social practice where the subject is
inverted into object and vice versa. On this, see Backhaus 1992.
68 Marx 1987, p. 820.
of labour is just as irrational as a yellow logarithm'. The need to add: a perversion that is real in practice. Marx’s critique is thus subversive in that it seeks to bring to the fore what the inverted world of capital hides and presupposes as its social basis – human social relations that exist against themselves in the form of value.

Lebowitz rightly argues against conceptions of an epistemological break between the humanist Marx and the scientific Marx. The young Marx argued that critique has to demonstrate ‘*ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for Man the root is Man himself’. The scientific Marx insisted, similarly, that critique has to return the relations amongst the things themselves, the constituted forms of the economic categories, to ‘relations between humans’ and the commodity-form needs to be deciphered on a ‘human basis’. And, inasmuch as ‘the’ economists and ‘economics’ have to be characterised in general and especially in methodological terms, Marx always describes, not the individual, but those ‘Messieurs les économistes’, or just the ‘standpoint of the economist’ in ironic terms. He thus insists that the critique of political economy entails a ‘general critique of the entire system of economic categories’. Lebowitz’s understanding of *Capital* as a necessarily one-sided analysis of ‘capital’ that needs to be extended to a study of capitalism through a theory of wage-labour struggles, accepts those same mysterious economic forms that Marx’s critique seeks to decipher as perverted forms of essentially practical social relations. Lebowitz’s argument focuses on two antagonistic subjects. He does not ask why human social co-operation assumes the form of capital. His book is surprisingly silent on the issue of social form and outspoken on the issue of class struggle. Yet, how might class struggle be understood without comprehending the categories of *Capital* as social forms of class antagonism?

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69 Marx 1966, p. 818.
70 Marx 1975, p. 182.
71 Marx 1972, p. 147.
73 Marx 1858, p. 301. For commentary, see Backhaus 2005.
III

We owe Lebowitz a great debt for his rigour and unfailing devotion to the political economy of labour. His acceptance of the one-sidedness of Capital denies, however, what his conclusion emphasises as a theory of social constitution.\textsuperscript{76} Without deciphering the social content of economic forms, that is, without comprehending the form of capital as a perverted form of social relations, the bourgeois world can only be conceived in the form of an objective-subjective thing.\textsuperscript{77} Such conceptions encourage the derivation of working-class struggle from capital’s allegedly objective logic. Lebowitz rightly rejects such derivation.\textsuperscript{78} His scattered references to social constitution thus need to be taken up so that the political economy of labour gains consciousness about itself. The struggle for the society of the free and equal – that is, the struggle for the democratic organisation of socially necessary labour time by the associated producers themselves – does not have to be incorporated into the capital relations from the outside.\textsuperscript{79} Human co-operation is the ‘fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production’.\textsuperscript{80} This co-operation exists against itself in the form of value that integrates the ‘assassination of a people’ with the respectful forms of equal and free exchange relations.\textsuperscript{81} In conclusion, however contradictory the results for labour,\textsuperscript{82} the ‘basic prerequisite’ of the struggle for the society of the free and equal is the struggle for ‘the shortening of the working day’.\textsuperscript{83} This, then, is the splendid category of full employment in and through the emancipation of labour that Marx conceived as the democratic organisation of necessity through the realm of freedom by the associated producers themselves. Conceived in this way, Lebowitz’s summons of ‘class struggle from the side of wage-labour’\textsuperscript{84} demonstrates the practical truth of the political economy of labour: the struggle for human autonomy over its own social practice so that ‘man’s own deed’ is no longer ‘an alien power opposed to him’ but instead ‘controlled by him’.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{76} Lebowitz 2003, pp. 206–10.
\textsuperscript{77} Cf. see Reichelt 2001.
\textsuperscript{78} Lebowitz 2003, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{79} Cf. Lebowitz 2003, pp. 62–3.
\textsuperscript{80} Marx 1983, p. 317.
\textsuperscript{81} Cf. Marx 1983, p. 343.
\textsuperscript{82} Marx 1983, Chapter 10.
\textsuperscript{83} Marx 1966, p. 820.
\textsuperscript{84} Lebowitz 2003, p. 73.
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Al Campbell and Mehmet Ufuk Tutan

*Beyond ‘Capital’: A Necessary Corrective and Four Issues for Further Discussion*

Writing in 1758, David Hume argued that, when attempting to describe some aspect of reality, one should be sure '[f]irst, that it be consistent with plain matter of fact; secondly, that it be consistent with itself'.¹ These criteria are still held as necessary for the validity of any theory concerning an aspect of the real world. Lebowitz argues in *Beyond ‘Capital’* that (i) *Capital* is not a complete presentation of Marx’s theory of capitalism (as established by considering the complete body of his writings), but rather a one-sided presentation: capitalism considered only from the viewpoint and the logic of capital, and (ii) the corresponding one-sided understanding of Marx’s theory by the large majority of his disciples has yielded a Marxism that cannot achieve its self-declared goal of explaining capitalism. In terms of Hume’s criteria, Lebowitz finds the dominant one-sided Marxism to be neither ‘consistent with itself’ nor to be ‘consistent with plain matter of fact’. This, in turn, leaves one-sided Marxism inadequate to prepare workers for the proximate step in their

¹ Hume 1988, p. 88.
self-development, which involves overthrowing capitalism to remove the particular constraints it imposes on their realising their human potential. Lebowitz states these concerns in different words repeatedly throughout the book. One particularly compact statement comes at the end of Chapter 2:

The lack of correspondence of the theory of Capital to the facts is the most important reason to attempt to develop theoretically the side of the worker. However, there are two additional reasons. In their order of importance, they are (a) that Marx’s own dialectical logic requires consideration of the worker, and (b) that Marx intended to explore the side of the worker in a book on wage-labour.²

In this brief commentary on Beyond ‘Capital’, we want to do two things. Because we are in strong agreement with the broad claims and message of the work, we will spend the bulk of this critique addressing four issues that either we think need further consideration beyond what is included in the book, or that we disagree with. Before that, we will give a précis of what we perceive as the central logical assertions of the work, which is necessary to set the frame in which our concerns and disagreements are located.

I. Précis

(i) Marxism is not just a positive social-economic-political theory of capitalism. Embedded in Marxism is a rejection of capitalism. That rejection is based on the goal of ‘human development’ or ‘realizing human potential’. Lebowitz frequently refers to this same concept as ‘developing human needs’, which we will discuss further below. Human development is understood as a process, and human potential itself is understood historically: at some moment in history, humans have a certain potential that could be realised, and human development consists both of realising that potential and developing further potential.

(ii) Marx’s analysis of capitalism is the most insightful analysis of capitalism constructed to date, both the capitalism of his time and contemporary capitalism. At the same time, the presentation in Capital is one-sided and therefore incomplete. Lebowitz refers to this incompleteness as a product of not rising above political economy (notwithstanding that Capital was a critique

of its contemporary political economy), that is, it described the laws of motion of capital from the viewpoint and logic of capital and presented that as the laws of motion of capitalism. Thus, given that Capital is Marx’s most finished work on the basic nature of capitalism, and given also that the large majority of the rest of his writings on capitalism were not available until relatively recently, it is not surprising that most schools of Marxist thought take their understanding of capitalism from Capital, and therefore reflect this one-sided understanding.

(iii) Capital’s fundamental incompleteness concerns its logic, in the sense referred to in the quote above: Marx’s own dialectical method requires considerations not included in Capital. Quoting Gramsci, Lebowitz argues that Marx’s method and approach require that a theory be “‘sufficient unto itself,” that is, that it “contains in itself all the fundamental elements needed to construct a total and integral conception of the world . . .”’. A total theory requires an explanation of its own prerequisites, it cannot simply take them as ‘given from outside’ itself. ‘For Marx, all capital’s presuppositions must be explained as produced by itself, as developed and shaped within the whole, “and everything posited is thus also a presupposition”’. In this framework, Capital as a description of capitalism is fundamentally incomplete. It takes the working class, wage-labour, a centrally necessary component of capitalism, as an unexplained ‘given’. As a description of capital from the logic of capital, that is acceptable: capital takes wage-labour as given, and concerns itself not at all with its reproduction, but only with its exploitation in line with its goal of maximal accumulation. An adequate theoretical description of capitalism, to the contrary, requires an explanation of the production and reproduction of all its components, in particular both capital and wage-labour. In the system of capitalism, the production and reproduction of capital requires wage-labour, and the production and reproduction of wage-labour requires capital. The two are antagonistic (as defined by their different goals, to be discussed below) components of the whole, capitalism, and capitalism cannot be adequately described without describing the dynamics of the production and reproduction of both aspects, including, in particular, their necessary interaction.

(iv) One must not mix up the fundamental shortfalling of Capital (and all Marxisms based primarily on it) with the fundamental incompleteness discussed in the last point. The fundamental shortfalling, as also alluded to in the

3 Lebowitz 2003, p. 25.
4 Lebowitz 2003, p. 59.
quote above, is its lack of correspondence with reality. In particular, in line with its inherent project of moving beyond capitalism, the two most important of these non-correspondences are the ‘durability of capitalism and the passivity of its working class’.\(^5\) Connected with the latter is also the failure to project the importance, throughout the history of capitalism but particularly today, of struggles against oppression not rooted in the role of the people as wage-labour, as for example struggles against gender or racial oppression. These fundamental shortcomings are seen as consequences of the fundamental incompleteness indicated in the last point.

(v) *Capital* certainly discusses wage-labour, and, in some well-known passages, its descriptions of the oppressed condition of the workers rise to poetry. The descriptions, however, are (mostly) from the logic of capital. That is, while *Capital* describes the terrible conditions of life imposed on wage-labour by capital, reflecting the logic of capital to drive down wages as low as possible, what it does not describe is the fight by wage-labour to raise wages as much as possible. That would be an aspect of the functioning of capitalism seen from the logic of wage-labour. As opposed to capital’s goal of maximal accumulation, the humans that constitute wage-labour have the goal of self-development (both in their role of wage-labour, and in all other human roles). A correct description of the functioning of capitalism would describe it as the result of the interaction of the two antagonistic drives of accumulation of capital and human self-development.

(vi) Lebowitz argues that the logical device used by Marx to create this one-sided presentation is that he assumed, in order to allow him to focus in *Capital* on the logic of capital which he wanted to show there, that human needs were fixed. This, then, by assumption removed from the process the effects of wage-labour struggling for its own goal of self-development, since it did not have the expanding needs that would make that struggle continuous. Rising productivity would soon allow existing fixed needs to be met, leisure time would increase as productivity continued to grow, and there would be no cause for an ongoing struggle against capitalism as the only way to further self-development.

(vii) As briefly alluded to in the quote that opens this commentary, Lebowitz accepts the argument that Marx intended to write a separate book on wage-labour. He presumes that this is where Marx would have addressed this other

\(^5\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 17.
essential aspect of capitalism, and thereby completed the description of capitalism.

(viii) The three central concepts that one-sided Marxism treats in a one-sided way (that is, again, from the viewpoint and logic only of capital and not from the viewpoint and logic of the humans that constitute wage-labour) are the reproduction of wage-labour, wealth, and productive labour.

(ix) Lebowitz focuses on two key concepts for the political economy of wage-labour, where the political economy of wage-labour is understood as the study of wage-labour from its own viewpoint and according to its own logic. (a) Co-operation and opposition to competition are key (traditionally one of the central goals of socialism that has often been expressed as ‘solidarity’). Whereas competition enforces and realises the logic of capital, the fight against competition is key to enforcing and realising the logic of wage-labour. Separation and competition between wage-labourers, both that which is directly and often consciously engendered by capital in the work process, and the more indirect but equally important separation engendered by capitalism when it converts differences that will always exist (such as gender, race, etc.) into separation and competition, are one important aspect of the durability of capital. But, beyond that, the material basis for expanded human development consists of the social surplus. Under capitalism, this is largely expropriated by capital, but wage-labour continually fights for whatever share it can obtain. It is necessary for workers to come to understand that the social surplus is the result of their collective labour, and to come to see themselves as co-operating parts of a collective worker. This not only strengthens them in their fight against capitalism, but beyond that, an understanding of their collective nature is an intrinsic aspect of the society to be built after capitalism that will free them from capitalism’s particular restrictions on their human development. (b) Capital must be removed as mediator from all moments of the circulation of capital – in the labour market, in production, and as owners of the products of labour. On the one hand, this is a part of point (a), fighting against the separation of workers and competition between them. On the other hand, this removal, and particularly removing them as owners of the products of labour, is essential for the task that Capital was written for. While it is correct to say that, theoretically, the goal of Capital was to expose the origin of profits (and hence the dynamics of capital, the ‘economic laws of capital’), that goal itself was seen as serving a political goal. Under capitalism, workers come to believe that capital is necessary for the production of a social
surplus, and hence necessary for their goal of self-development. This is not simply an illusion: under capitalism, capital and its further accumulation indeed are necessary for the production of a social surplus. It is, however, a ‘mystification’ of capital. Marx saw the workers coming to understand that capital was not necessary for the production of a social surplus in general, seeing through the mystification, as the most important key to overthrowing capitalism and moving beyond it, and Capital’s ultimate purpose was to contribute to that demystification.

(x) Lebowitz’s purpose in his call for a completion of Marx’s theoretical project remains the same as Marx’s:

Revealing capital as the workers’ own product turned against them, working for unity in struggle, stressing the centrality of revolutionary practice for the self-development of the collective worker, and setting out the vision of a feasible alternative – all these are essential ingredients to the demonstration that a Better World is Possible. Build it Now. 6

(xi) In relation to this shared purpose, Lebowitz’s argument is that the omission of wage-labour as an agent for itself from Capital, that is, the omission of human beings, who, even under capitalism, have their own ‘ought’ (self-development) that differs from the ‘ought’ of capital (maximal accumulation), subverts the desired result. Marx’s Capital did do a good job of revealing the nature of capital (from the viewpoint of the logic of capital, including its deleterious effects on wage-labour which are a part of the logic of capital), ‘[y]et understanding the nature of capital is not sufficient to lead workers beyond it’. Lebowitz argues that Marx basically believed it was sufficient, and hence (a) underestimated the durability of capital, as history has demonstrated, and (b) left an inadequate instrument for the necessary demystification, Capital. ‘Even though there is no inexorable natural process by which capitalist production begets its own negation, nevertheless there is the possibility of negating capitalism.’ But that requires getting beyond the acceptance of TINA (‘There Is No Alternative’): ‘Required as well is that they grasp that capital as such is not necessary.’ The structure of Capital with its absence of humans as agents who try to act for themselves even under capitalism (reinforced by the other ‘silence’ in Capital, Marx’s vision of an

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7 Lebowitz 2003, p. 198.
8 Ibid.
alternative to capitalism), hindered the development of an understanding of the lack of the necessity of capital. Hence the importance of this theoretical project to Lebowitz.

II. Four issues: concerns and disagreements

(i) Competition (a small issue: bending the stick too far)

Lebowitz correctly lays out Marx’s framework that competition between capitals is the mechanism by which the inherent aspects of capital, which above all consist of its relation with wage-labour, are enforced (see in particular Chapter 7). From this, Marx concluded that an investigation of the laws of motion of capital should start with a consideration of ‘capital in general’, and only later should the competition between capitals be investigated to consider how the already understood central logic of capital manifests itself in the real world. In line with his central concern to highlight the role of humans and class struggle as essential, not accidental, in the dynamics of capitalism, Lebowitz wants to be sure not to lose ‘the extent to which worker’s struggles impose upon capital the continuing necessity to revolutionize the instruments of production’. Hence he posits that mechanisation and the concentration of capital are ‘based on the opposition of capital and wage-labour’. Similarly, concerning technology, he argues that

capitalists will be constantly searching for ways to increase the degree of separation of workers . . . [and] they cannot be assumed to be indifferent to the effect of any given innovation upon the ability of workers to combine.

At this point, he bends the stick too far, and loses the distinction between the final effects from competition between capitals on the relation of capital to wage-labour, and the direct effects of competition. His ideas cease to correspond to the real world of capitalism. While right now capitalism is moving away from large production units that facilitate the political unity of workers, for at least three hundred years it moved toward such units. How could one

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9 One can see quite clearly from some of Marx’s other works that he indeed had a vision of an alternative to capitalism, notwithstanding his well known reluctance to present it.
10 Lebowitz 2003, p. 121.
11 Ibid.
12 Lebowitz 2003, p. 122.
explain that aspect of real-world capitalism if one argues that the issue of separating the working class is the driving force for mechanisation, centralisation and innovation? This is the same functionalist error of arguing that technology is determined by capital’s need to control workers that was built into (along with many valuable observations) the well-known work *Segmented Work, Divided Workers* by Gordon, Edwards and Reich in 1982. To the contrary, all evidence indicates that mechanisation, centralisation and innovation are generally, in fact, driven by the pressure on profits from competition between capitals, exactly what Lebowitz here dismisses. While we consider this a small issue, given our agreement with Lebowitz’s general framework on the relation of competition to the logic of capital, it nevertheless is important in fighting capital not to confuse the fact that, logically, competition only enforces the inherent logic of capital as a whole, with the position that competition is not essential, but only accidental to capitalism. Failure to realise the essential aspect of competition will misorient the struggle against capitalism.

(ii) *The absence of the issue of false needs (an issue of disagreement)*

‘The creation of new needs for workers, . . ., Marx concluded, “is an essentially civilizing moment, and on which the historical justification . . . of capital rests”.’

This role of needs is at the very heart of Lebowitz’s description of the antagonistic role of humans in capitalist production, which, in turn, is the basis for the possibility of moving beyond capitalism, as follows.

Lebowitz divides human needs into three groups. First there are ‘physiological needs’, whose name explains their nature. Second there are ‘necessary needs’, that reflect ‘the use-values that are “habitually required” and normally enter into the consumption of workers’, and thus reflect the culturally and historically determined part of workers’ consumption. Together, these first two categories are the needs that underlie the concept of the value of labour-power in *Capital*.14

In addition, Lebowitz introduces ‘social needs’.15 ‘This is the level of needs of the worker as a socially developed human being at a given point; it

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15 Marx used the term ‘social needs’ often, but in a general way, and not as part of a three way division of needs. We find Lebowitz’s division of needs into these three categories useful and specifically necessary for his theory, but beyond that a generally useful way to think about needs.
constitutes the *upper limit* in needs for use-values in a commodity form\(^{16}\) (at a given historical time and place). These are needs developed by the system that are not regularly met at the given wage – if they were, they would become part of necessary needs, part of the value of labour-power. On the one hand, the constant development of new needs in this category is exactly what contributes to the constant human development:

\[\ldots\] production of [the social human being] in a form as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and relations – production of this being as the most total and universal possible social product, for in order to take gratification in a many-sided way, he must be capable of many pleasures, hence cultured to a high degree . . . \(^{17}\)

On the other hand, it is exactly the failure of capitalism to fulfill these socially created social needs which causes wage-labour, in pursuit of its objective of self-development, to struggle for higher wages and benefits, thus putting it in an antagonistic role with regard to capital’s goal of maximal accumulation. All this, as outlined above, is at the very heart of what Lebowitz argues was left out of the analysis of capitalism that appeared in *Capital*, and must be reincorporated to give the necessary theoretical basis to strengthen the possibility of transcending capitalism.

There is, however, a serious problem with this position.

The idea that Lebowitz has in mind for the type of things that constitute these social civilising needs is the following:

The worker’s participation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for his own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating his children, developing his tastes, etc.\(^{18}\)

What about the need for jet skis, cock fighting, pornography and McDonald’s french fries? Many people feel a strong need for them. Is the development of these needs part of ‘an essentially civilizing moment’? Of course, most progressives and communists would answer ‘no’ – but that then poses the central problem.

Lebowitz spends a significant amount of space, and returns to the point a number of times, correctly arguing that Marx was very concerned to show that the new needs were generated by the operation of the capitalist system

\(^{16}\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 40.

\(^{17}\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 38, quoting Marx.

\(^{18}\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 70, quoting Marx.
19 As part of Marx’s whole deep concern that the critique of capitalism had to be an *immanent critique* if it was to be complete, hence valid.

20 McNally 1993, p. 188.

21 McNally, 1993, p. 190. McNally gives a third condition, which indeed is necessary for a transition toward socialism, but is not relevant to the point being discussed here.
this issue that we suggest in point (iii) should in no way invalidate the argument of point (ii).

(iii) Incorporating the issue of false needs (an issue for discussion)

We want to start with a well-known quote by Marx followed by a well-known position of his concerning socialism, to give a general indication of what we consider the nature of true human needs, and from there indicate what we consider the essence of false needs under capitalism.

... as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntary, but naturally, divided, man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. ... [I]n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.22

The quote is somewhat unfortunate in that it has often been read to posit that a goal is for each person to be able to do whatever she wants, whenever she wants, as an individual, even according to whim. A more careful reading would note that it says one is free to not be restricted to one job for life exactly because society regulates production. The implication then is that job changes are indeed possible and desirable, in accord with the true multi-sided character of human nature, but they would be done in consultation and co-ordination with others, that is, socially, not as the act of an isolated individual. The point here that Marx was concerned with was that, for human development, one should not be confined to work in one job for life. Under capitalism, job restriction follows in the name of efficiency, given that the purpose of work is to maximise accumulation. Under socialism, the purpose of work is two-fold, both to socially provide the goods needed to survive and develop as humans, and to develop oneself from the work itself. From the latter, it follows that one should be able to vary one’s work.

22 Marx and Engels 1976, p. 47. We are interested here in this quote only regarding the points we make concerning it. It is widely dismissed even among Marxists as a utopian aberration of Marx’s. For a tightly argued position to the contrary, see Ollman 1979, Chapter 3.
A well-known position of Marx on socialism was that it would (to start) cut the working day in half. At the same time that Marx argued that work had to be radically transformed so that one could self-develop though work, he also argued that non-working time had to be expanded for self-development.

Together, these positions suggest that Marx held that time free from material constraint (such as providing material sustenance for survival) was the raw stuff of authentic human freedom, the necessary prerequisite for authentic human development.

Pat Devine’s interpretation of the work of Rudolf Bahro ties the above to the issue of false needs. As we find the concepts of absorbed and surplus consciousness used there not very illuminating, we will make the whole presentation in terms of human activity, but the argument is the same.

We have just described the type of genuinely free activity that Marx believes capitalism today restricts, compared to what would be technologically possible. We can begin with the limit of twenty-four hours in a day. Until we entered the unhealthy sleep-deprived age of modern capitalism, we could take as a rough figure that, on average, eight of those hours were spent sleeping. Some part of the remaining sixteen hours had to be dedicated to socially providing the materials for life. That would vary radically between cultures and between times, and between members in a given culture, in accord with the level of the forces of production and in accord with the social norms of production and consumption. Suppose a person worked twenty-four hours per day, leaving one with four hours ‘free time’.

This free time can be spent in two ways, in response to two different kinds of needs. On the one hand, ‘emancipatory activities’ are a response to emancipatory needs. These would be exactly the type of activities that Marx was concerned with expanding the possibilities of, activities that lead to self-development, self-realisation, multi-dimensional growth (development of undeveloped aspects of one’s potential), and so forth. These activities could take many forms – studying in groups with or without teachers, practising skills such as sports, music or art, experimenting in science, developing types of human behaviours such as nurturing or decision making, introspection on one’s relations with other people, or any of an infinity of other possible emancipatory activities, all involving the free exercise of human creativity.

On the other hand, one could spend this free time on ‘compensatory activities’.  

23 Devine 1988, Chapter 7.

24 All activities involved in both production for existence and reproduction.
These are seen as activities one undertakes exactly because access to emancipatory activities is blocked, through any number of possible blocking mechanisms (the most effective being those internalised in the person involved), as substitutes for and distractions from authentic emancipatory activities. This is the essence of today’s materialist consumer society in advanced industrial economies that is at the heart of much the socially pervasive malaise so broadly commented on, especially under the rubric of ‘the need to find meaning in your life’. As Bahro expressed it,

people have to be indemnified, by possession and consumption of as many things and services as possible . . . for the fact that they have an inadequate share of proper human needs.26

Expanding on Marx’s quote above, Devine suggests six different types of activities that would constitute examples of the socially developed needs that would constitute civilising moments as referred to in the quote by Marx above, authentic needs that would contribute to human self-development: planning, administering, creative, nurturing, skilled and unskilled.

The obvious final piece to this approach is the question of how to decide what are authentic needs and what are false needs. The solipsism of neoclassical theory where everyone simply decides for themselves what they consider to be their authentic needs could not work in any social system where humans are interconnected, exactly because of the unaccounted for interconnections, including in capitalism which falsely claims to be reflected by neoclassical theory. There are two parts to this issue: (i) how would a decision be made as to what activities to pursue, that is, which activities would be considered authentic activities and which would be considered false activities, and (ii) how would it be guarantee that the decision made was correct? It is important to understand that what we run into here in the end, once we reject solipsism, in this inquiry into authentic and false needs is the well known, and we would argue not thoroughly resolved, issue of socialist democracy.28 As the issues and the debate on this are extensive, we will here just indicate aspects of what we consider essential for a healthy socialist democracy, as it pertains to our concern of distinguishing true from false needs. We suggest three

25 In the popular usage of the term, not the philosophical.
26 Quoted in Devine 1988, p. 164.
27 He stresses nothing hinges on exactly these particular broad divisions or the particular activities he offers as examples of each.
28 Most Marxists advocate one or another form of socialist democracy involving
components are essential to the decision-making process. (i) The decision on authentic versus false needs must be made socially, in the sense that everyone affected must be involved in the decision. For this issue, that would mean everyone in society. (ii) The decision on authentic versus false needs must be made socially, in the sense that the members interact in forming their opinion. This is the essence of what has come to be called ‘discursive democracy’ or ‘deliberative democracy’. The central point is that, unlike in neoclassical theory, people do not approach social decisions with fixed preformed opinions ('preferences'), and simply socially decide according to one voting rule or another. Interaction before any stage in which people express their opinions allows people to see issues from the perspective of other people, which can (and in the real world often does) cause them to change their ‘preferences’, their opinions. (iii) The decision-making on authentic versus false needs must be participatory, and this includes that the decision must be dynamic and repeated and not ‘once-and-for-all’. People (including the possibility of representatives, though there are well-known problems with that) must be involved in administering and constantly evaluating the effects of the decisions made as to what promotes human development and what does not. This is necessary both as a channel for correcting incorrect decisions, that is, noticing when decisions subjected to the test of human practice are not yielding the results they were expected to yield, and to notice when the environment which is being operated in has changed in such a way that activities that were yielding the expected and desired results, now yield undesirable, or less than maximally desirable, results. It would be nice to argue that there is some guarantee that through trial and error, over time, this process will necessarily ‘discover’, ‘reveal’, or ‘converge on’ authentic needs, and thereby expose false needs. But, of course, notwithstanding our Gramscian optimism of the will, which does believe this social process shall, on average and over time, eliminate false needs, one has to accept the pessimism of the intellect as logically indicating that no such guarantee exists.

We want to end this section by pulling attention away from its details and returning to the central point of both this section and the last one. False needs are an essential issue to be addressed in Lebowitz’s framework, and more
broadly, in any appropriate Marxist theory of progress. We have presented here what we consider a plausible way to socially address the issue, but there is no claim that this is the only way, or even the best way, that could theoretically be imagined.

(iv) A theory of capitalism versus a general theory of oppression and exploitation (an issue of disagreement)

One central concern of Chapter 8, ‘The One-Sidedness of Wage-Labour’, is to return to the issue of the separateness of workers that is so essential for the continued existence of capitalism, and give it a much more central theoretical role than in previous Marxisms. Lebowitz argues

it is not a great leap to extend this discussion of differently-produced wage-labourers to differences based on age, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, historical circumstances and, indeed, on ‘all human relations and functions, however and in whatever form they may appear.’

From that, he attempts to ‘demonstrate that within the Marxian framework there is theoretical space to develop these questions’.

His argument proceeds as follows. He begins with a point that is central throughout his whole work, that, in Capital, Marx abstracts from the concrete humans that constitute wage-labour by treating it as ‘wage-labour as such’, that is, treating wage-labour from the point of view and logic of capital. In reality, wage-labourers, however, are real humans, and they have many other dimensions to their existence besides that of wage-labour. To be concrete, he then develops his argument in terms of the issue of gender. Men typically and historically have had power over the disposition of the time of women (and children), and could use that to cause them to produce use-values (services or goods) that the men consumed. In the framework that Lebowitz has established in the book of a process of production of the workers, he refers to this as exploitation. Generally, this has been referred to as oppression, and we argue that Lebowitz’s terminology here begins to confuse the exploitation that is the source of the surplus-value, whose accumulation is the purpose of capitalism, with all other forms of oppression, which in capitalism serve above all the essential task (for capital) of maintaining the

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30 Ibid.
separateness of the workers. He continues in the same vein by arguing that these workers are involved in two class relations: in a class relation of wage-labour to capital, and in a class relation of patriarchy in relation to the family.\(^{31}\)

In line with the universal human drive for self-development that is central to his whole theoretical structure, he argues that anyone ‘exploited’ (oppressed) in any way will have a tendency to struggle against their situation.\(^{32}\) This last point is certainly true, but, again, it does not logically establish that all such oppressions play the same role in capitalism.

We maintain that Lebowitz mixes up two correct claims. He has asserted that the general method that Marx used to examine capitalist exploitation could be fairly directly extended to study all other forms of oppression that involve the claim to the labour time, and hence the produced use-values, of one group by another. One would only have to consider the issue from both sides, the side of the oppressors (or, better said, from the side of the system of oppression), and from the side of the oppressed, who are driven by the goal of self-development. We agree with this position. But there is then a logical jump from that to concluding that all such oppressions need to be considered to understand the essential nature of capitalism.

This point can be made more concrete by noting that gender discrimination is neither necessary nor sufficient for capitalism. We know historically that it is not sufficient for capitalism – we have had gender discrimination under at least every form of historically recorded class society. Its necessity, on the other hand, is certainly not historically disproven, since it has certainly existed under all historical forms of capitalism (though to significantly differing degrees, it is worth noting). But we must consider its theoretical necessity as well.

The methodological point here is exactly the point that Lebowitz made so clearly concerning competition. Marx (correctly) considered capitalism first without competition, because competition is not logically necessary for the capital/wage-labour relation that is the heart of capitalism. At the same time, competition indeed is essential to real-world capitalism, in its role as the enforcer of the logic of capital. Gender oppression is conceptually similar. The logical essence of capitalism can be indicated without any reference to gender oppression or any other type of oppression other than exploitation,

\(^{31}\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 151.
\(^{32}\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 152.
as Marx indeed (half) did in Capital. One can even complete the theoretical
description of capitalism along the lines Lebowitz has called for by including
the missing half of the description, the struggle by wage-labourers against
the limits that capitalism places on their self-development in their role as
wage-labourers. All this can be done without any reference to the many other
forms of oppression that humans can suffer. None of this contradicts that
these other forms of oppression do play an essential role in capitalism (like
competition, though in a different essential role) by maintaining the separateness
of the workers that is a life-and-death issue for capitalism, and for those of
us trying to overthrow capitalism.

Lebowitz is correct, and it is a politically important point, that the human
struggle for self-development implies the struggle against all forms of
oppression, that each of those struggles is an important struggle for human
self-development in its own right in addition to being important to the essential
issue of the unity of wage-labour, and further, that all such struggles reinforce
each other because of their transformatory effects on the humans involved.
All of that, however, does not give to all forms of oppression and the fight
against them the same *logically necessary role* in the functioning of capitalism
as exploitation and wage-labour’s fight against it.

III. Conclusion
One cannot understand capitalism properly without dialectically reconnecting
to Capital its missing side of the study of wage-labour from the viewpoint
and logic of wage-labour. While overthrowing capitalism and moving beyond
it is always only a possibility and not an inevitability, the possibility is
significantly less with an incorrect one-sided understanding of capitalism
than with a proper understanding of its totality. While, of course, it would
be absurd to claim that the only way to gain such an understanding of
capitalism as a totality is to read Beyond ‘Capital’ (noting that Lebowitz himself
could not have read it as he worked out its ideas, nor could his source for
his studies, Marx), we will argue that it is by far the most efficient way we
know to escape from the dominant incorrect one-sided understanding of
Marxism and obtain an understanding of a dialectically (logically) whole,
and therefore politically more useful, Marxism. And since we are trained as
economists, maximum efficiency is good enough for us.
References


Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin

**Bringing the Working Class In: Michael Lebowitz’s Beyond ‘Capital’**

Capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation.\(^1\)

If there is one important message from this book, it is that economic crises do not bring about an end to capitalism.\(^2\)

**Introduction**

In *Beyond ‘Capital’*, Michael Lebowitz makes a rather startling claim. *Capital*, he contends, failed to posit and integrate a ‘political economy of the working class’ into its theorisation.\(^3\) For anyone first drawn to Marxism by the exciting discovery of alienation, surplus-value, and the self-emancipation of the working class, this eyebrow-raising allegation is bewildering. What can this possibly mean when *Capital* abounds in insights about work and wage-labour, and when Engels’s preface to the English edition already noted that, ‘*Capital* is often called . . .

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\(^1\) Marx 1990, p. 929.

\(^2\) Lebowitz 2003, p. xi.

\(^3\) Lebowitz 2003, p. ix.
"the Bible" of the working class? That Lebowitz makes his claim as a proudly ‘orthodox Marxist’ only adds to the perplexity.

Yet Lebowitz has come to praise and build on Marx, not to bury him. *Beyond Capital* first arrived in 1992, by then already over a decade in the making. The trajectory of capitalism and the working class since then, as well as the substantive additions to the 2003 edition, make its argument all the more compelling. Lebowitz offers a sympathetic explanation for why Marx intended but never got to write the crucial missing book on wage-labour. But that exegesis of Marx, however much it is where Lebowitz’s own expertise rests, is not the main point. The significance of *Beyond Capital* lies in its establishing a critical inadequacy in Marxism and then pointing us in the right directions to develop our thinking about how to really get beyond capitalism.

Taking his cue from Michael Buroway’s 1989 claim that ‘two anomalies confront Marxism as its refutation: the durability of capitalism and the passivity of its working class’, Lebowitz asserts that Marxism shoulders some of the responsibility for both of these ‘facts’.

Not only the absence of socialist revolution and the continued hegemony of capital over workers . . . but also the theoretical silence (and practical irrelevance) with respect to struggles for emancipation, struggles of women against patriarchy . . . struggles over the quality of life and cultural identity – all these point to a theory not entirely successful.

The problem, Lebowitz shows, does not lie in Marx’s method nor in his overall political and theoretical perspective, both of which went beyond a narrow conception of labour and stressed ‘all human relations and functions, however and in whatever form they may appear’. The problem lies, rather, with the limitations inherent in the theoretical project of writing the political economy of capital as it came to be embodied in the three volumes of *Capital*. Lebowitz agrees with E.P. Thompson that the problem with Marx’s critique of political economy is that its ‘postulates ceased to be the self-interest of man and became the logic and forms of capital’ with the result that *Capital* became a study in the logic of capital, not of capitalism, and the social and political dimensions of the history, the wrath and the understanding of the class.

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4 Marx 1990, p. 112.
5 Burawoy cited in Lebowitz 2003, p. 20.
6 Lebowitz 2003, p. 20.
7 Marx cited in Lebowitz 2003, p. 142.
struggle arise from a region independent of the closed system of economic logic.\(^8\)

But he does not agree with Thompson that this was because Marx got trapped into the lifeless categories of political economy. All the young Marx’s concerns regarding the ‘multiple determinations of individuals’ stayed with him through the writing of Capital and governed his politics and political writings until the day he died. Capital was a moment in Marx’s overall project, indeed a vitally necessary contribution to social science and to revealing to working people themselves the nature of exploitation:

The criticism that Marx simply reproduced the inadequacies of the political economy of capital is misplaced. Marx’s Capital is a study in the logic of capital, and that is what it needed to be – given the necessity of explaining the nature of capital... the abstraction from the heterogeneity of wage-labourers is necessary in order to demonstrate what all wage-labourers have in common... to give workers a weapon with which to go beyond it.\(^9\)

Lebowitz takes the side of those Marxologists who believe that Marx knew Capital remained inherently one-sided, that ‘only by this procedure is it possible to discuss one relation without discussing all the rest’, as he told Engels.\(^10\) Or, as he put it in the Grundrisse:

All these fixed suppositions themselves become fluid in the further course of development. But only by holding them fast at the beginning is their development possible without confounding everything.\(^11\)

The ‘Book on Wage-Labour’, among the six Books he had originally envisioned, would have started the development of a political economy of the working class to match the political economy of capital, but the mature Marx’s political work got in the way: ‘his epistemological project interested him less than the revolutionary project’.\(^12\) This left, however, a major gap in Marx’s theoretical contribution, which Lebowitz, to his great credit, starts to fill in.

\(^8\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 23.
\(^9\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 177.
\(^10\) Marx cited in Lebowitz 2003, p. 46.
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Lebowitz 2003, p. 177.
The primacy of needs and the promise of capacities

The central issue for Lebowitz is not that the working class is absent from Capital. It is the limited content of its presence: it exists primarily as an object for capital, as commodity and victim and not, in spite of the occasional burst of rhetoric, as an active agent facing particular barriers and uncertain possibilities. When Marx discusses capital, his analysis is comprehensive. He addresses capital’s goals and, as Lebowitz points out, identifies these not only as ‘Accumulate! Accumulate!’ but also as a boundless passion for consumption, for which accumulation is the condition. And Marx goes on to address capital’s capacities (private property, the commodification of labour, technology); internal class relations (competition); mechanisms of reproduction (the overall circuits of capital, labour dependency); and contradictions (the falling rate of profit, crises). In contrast, a comparable analysis of labour is only hinted at. Even though labour, by virtue of being both dependent and independent of capital, is at least as complex and contradictory as capital, Marx failed ‘to set out the side of wage-labour in a logical and analytical manner equivalent to that developed for the side of capital’.

Where class struggle is introduced in Capital, as in Volume One’s discussion of the battle over the ten hour day, workers’ demands are framed within the logic of capital’s own systemic need for the reproduction of healthy labour-power, showing only how ‘wage-labour as such does not transcend capital but is bounded inherently by capital’. Thus, even workers’ definitions and assertions of their needs – for higher wages, lower hours, social provision – are assumed, for the purposes of getting on with the analysis and uncovering the logic and laws of capitalist production and exchange, to be ‘given and determinate’. The result is a one-sided Marxism . . . inadequate to grasp the concrete totality. On offer are objective economic laws, determinism, economism and one-sided concepts that bear little relationship to the real movements in society.

In moving to rectify this, Lebowitz begins by proclaiming his fidelity to Marxist methodology. Marxism remains the best foundation for understanding capitalism, Lebowitz argues, due to its emphasis on the totality (the parts

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13 Lebowitz 2003, pp. 10–11.
14 Lebowitz 2003, p. 80.
15 Lebowitz 2003, p. 207.
and their relationships cannot be grasped apart from the whole) and its
insistence against Hegel that the whole can only be addressed in material
and historical terms. But, even as an ‘orthodox Marxist’ in this sense, Lebowitz
insists that ‘a ruthless criticism of all that exists’ needs to include a critique
of Marx and of Marxist fundamentalism. Lebowitz chastises today’s ‘post-
Marxists’ for having incorporated the cardboard stereotype of the working
classes as ‘one-sided opposites to capital’ which exist only as wage-labour,
and for having wrongly claimed that is all there was to Marx. But Lebowitz
is right to insist that

the ‘post-Marxists’ did not invent that stereotype... the Abstract Proletarian
is the product of [the] one-sided Marxism that has distorted Marx’s own
conception of workers as subjects.18

Neither one-sided fundamentalist Marxism, nor its eclectic post-Marxist
opposition, Lebowitz argues, can ‘traverse the gap between the pure theory
of capital and the reality of capitalism’.19

Lebowitz’s goal is, consequently, to develop a Marxist political economy
of the working class to overcome the one-sidedness of the Marxist political
economy of capital. Whereas

... individual self-interest and competition constitutes the political economy
of capital... [t]he political economy of wage labour, by contrast, begins
from the recognition that social productivity results from the combination
of social labour, from the cooperation of the limbs and organs of the collective
worker. And, it stresses that only by reducing the degree of separation, that
only through combination and unity can wage-labourers capture the fruits
of cooperation for themselves and realize their ‘own need for development’.
That political economy focuses on the necessity to remove capital as mediator
between workers as a whole – and thus on the intrinsic nature of both purely
economic and political struggles against capital.20

This, too, is pure Marx of course, but it is that side of Marx that stresses the
thesis of the primacy of human needs rather than the primacy of productive
forces, and which was not systematically developed in Marx’s writings.21 It
is workers’ own need for development that capital must constantly try to

19 Ibid.
mediate in order to reproduce capitalist social relations, and this process too needs to be analysed far more systematically than Marx did in Capital. This involves locating the working class in other spaces than just the workplace; investigating the contradictory pressures of working-class demands for ‘more’ and demands for ‘different’; exploring the barriers to overcoming fragmentation and to forming collective identities and capacities; and incorporating all this into a more nuanced and contingent theory of capitalist development and social change. The one side of wealth that the political economy of capital is all about is countered by Marx’s conception (articulated in the Grundrisse no less than in the 1844 Manuscripts) of human beings ‘as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and social relations.’ All the things that capital defines as ‘unproductive labour’ (and that Marx’s Capital recognises as such in terms of educational and health services that do not produce a profit) get turned right side up – they now come into view as ‘obviously productive from the standpoint of the worker into whose reproduction they are inputs.’

But, above all, Lebowitz insists that a focus on the articulation of workers’ needs also gives us a window on workers’ capacities, how these are both developed and distorted under capitalism, how they reveal the possibility of socialism. The centrality of ‘capacities’ provides the crucial link between the moral critique of capitalism, as well as reformist tendencies that emerge out of working-class practices, and the possibility of transformative agency in the face of structures of dependency. Morally, the case against capitalism is not just that one class lays claim to the social surplus, though this is certainly crucial, but that, in buying and applying the labour of others, one class controls how the existing capacities of another class are used and has an inordinate say in determining how those capacities develop over time. That is, one class controls the specifically human potential of another class.

**Working-class agency in and against capital**

This underlying reality is obscured by market structures and daily experiences which tend to undermine the ability of the working class to independently imagine, let alone create, a different world. This message of dependence on capital is concretely inscribed in workplace relations: it is capital that embodies

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accumulated science and knowledge; has the links to finance, inputs and markets; and mediates the gathering of disparate skills and labour-power so as to gain the advantages of social labour. Yet the very fact of placing all this on the terrain of ‘capacities’ also opens the door to potentials and possibilities that are not immediately apparent, raising the question of the contradictory spaces and experiences of capitalism that might create openings for building a movement to go beyond capital and capitalism.

But what kind of historical materialism would such a Marxism amount to, if workers’ own needs and capacities, so powerful in their potential to take us beyond capital, were theorised as if they had no effect on the functioning of capital itself? For the most part, and for the reasons already articulated, Marx wrote Capital as if this were the case. Yet Lebowitz is adamant that the project of developing a political economy of the working class involves not merely adding labour on to an existing theoretical framework but on integrating labour into the whole, consequently affecting how capital itself functions. In particular, this means that we cannot understand how capital develops – the technology it adopts, its spatial flows, even its stages of development – without relating this to the development of working-class needs, capacities and struggles.

And, just as workers’ demands for limits on the working day are crucial to understanding capital’s transition from absolute to relative surplus-value extraction, so both the emergence of structural crises and their effects cannot be understood without bringing the working class in as a relatively autonomous agent. Explanations of crises limited to trends in the organic composition of capital and the tendency towards a falling rate of profit, as well as those limited to the technical terrain of excess competition and barriers to exit (like those offered of the 1970s crisis by so many Marxists on all sides of the recent Brenner debate) are inadequate to grasping the cause of particular structural crises.

In a personal exchange with Lebowitz in 1977, Paul Sweezy warned him against spending too much time on the falling rate of profit: ‘Not only is it, taken by itself, an egregious case of mechanistic theorizing; even worse, it fosters that kind of thinking everywhere else.’ It is a good thing Lebowitz took his advice. For one of the main accomplishments of his book is a rich
clarification of the limitations of Marxist crisis theory, based on a crucial distinction between the concepts of ‘barriers’ and ‘limits’. When Marx says in Volume II of *Capital* that the tendency to overproduction is ‘the fundamental contradiction of developed capital’ and draws the conclusion from this that ‘the true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself’, Lebowitz interprets this in terms of Marx’s comment in the *Grundrisse* that capital ‘both posits a barrier specific to itself, and on the other side drives over and beyond every barrier’. And Lebowitz elaborates:

> Yet the story is about more than the contradiction within capital. Critically, it is that capital succeeds in driving beyond all barriers and that its development occurs through this very process. . . . To describe capital’s motion as the result of this impulse to drive ‘over and beyond every barrier’ is, of course to suggest an endless limitless process, an infinite process. . . . [But] Marx did not think of capitalism as an endless, infinite system. So, *what is the Limit that makes capital finite?* It is not that capital gets tired or senile, unable at a certain point to drive beyond those barriers any more. Rather the answer that Marx and Engels gave throughout their lives was consistent – the working class is capital’s Limit. . . . The conclusion: workers end capital’s story.27

Yet workers only end capitalism’s story when they develop the capacities to do away with capital’s mediation of the development of their needs. Given the time and political space to adjust, capitalism has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to reconstitute itself in the face of crises. Even where workers are capable of imposing barriers to capital, the resultant slowdown of accumulation will itself threaten to weaken workers, or result in state intervention to resolve the deepening crisis by restructuring social relations in a way favourable to capital. Without the revolutionary capacity to move beyond capital, crises will generally prove to be temporary and likely even functional to capital, and capital will again be reconstituted.

Lebowitz shows there are good reasons to expect the working class to develop a degree of solidarity and to move into the political arena to press their demands. But

> [R]ather than pointing beyond capital, the inability to satisfy their needs in itself leads workers not beyond capital but to class struggle within

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capitalism... a capitalism humanised by the struggles of workers. The unemployed worker wants a job (to be ‘exploited’ like others); the disabled worker wants to be included (‘the dignity of labour’); the lower-paid worker wants to match better-paid workers (to move up within the system); well-paid workers want to maintain what they have gained (and may even be ready to give up some of those gains – accept ‘concessions’ – to hang on to their overall material status); each wants security and improved social programmes, not a revolution in property relations.

Addressing the question of where more radical expectations and demands might come from requires a confrontation with one-sided Marxism. Revolutionary class capacities cannot come from a Marxism that marginalises the working class in its explanation of crises, assumes a teleological escalation of such crises, has not addressed the structural obstacles to workers going beyond capitalism, and then magically conjures up an ‘Abstract Proletarian’ turned superhero to arrive and end capitalism.

[N]o-where is the functionalism that flows from the one-sidedness of Capital more apparent than with respect to the Abstract Proletarian, the mere negation of capital. The political economy of labour, Lebowitz implies, demands a different type of analysis than that of the political economy of capital, insofar as it must incorporate an analysis of political struggle, consciousness, organisation and identity. Moreover, as it needs, as theory, to play a strategic role that goes beyond the demystification of capital. While Capital does expose the social and historical constitution of the labour-capital relationship, highlighting that its development was neither natural nor inevitable, this is not enough. Unless labour as agency is problematised – as it must be in the political economy of the working class – we end up with either the discredited ‘Abstract Proletarian’ raised earlier, or the fatalism of There Is No Alternative.

By positing the category of ‘labour’ as more than the simple ‘negation’ of capital, Lebowitz sets the stage for examining the working class in its concrete diversity across identities, range of interests/needs beyond the workplace, and debilitating ‘separateness’. It is only through this initial step of addressing these barriers to working-class cohesion that we can also address the possibility of workers going beyond capital. This then allows the political economy of

labour to point us to appropriate criteria for assessing class struggles. As Lebowitz emphasises, ‘... a central question to pose with respect to all struggles becomes – does this help in the self-development of the working class?’ Whatever form specific mobilisations take – whether they revolve around workplace bargaining, reforms pushed through the state, or mass strikes or protests – the measure of their success is not just immediate results, but the struggle’s contribution to the narrowing of working-class separateness and the general development of the collective intellectual, visionary, organisational, strategic, and democratic capacities that make up expressly political capacities.

Finally, Lebowitz argues that the inclusion of a political economy of labour carries within it the core of the socialist alternative:

> The political economy of the working class begins from the concept of the collective worker, a concept that implies an alternative (‘counterfactual’) society in which capital is no longer the mediator between and above workers.31

What all this yields can be set down in terms of a set of crucial propositions, each relating to long-standing Marxist debates:

1. Economic crises cannot be understood apart from the role of the working class as an active and oppositional agent.
2. Absent a working class capable of setting limits on capital, capital has the capacity to move beyond the barriers to accumulation represented by crises.
3. The working class is not inherently revolutionary.
4. A political economy of labour, integrated into Marxism, can contribute to the question of how the working class might become revolutionary.

**Lebowitz’s limitations: considerations on his critics**

The most far-reaching critique of the new edition of Beyond ‘Capital’ so far has come from Robert Albritton, who has argued that trying to bring a book on labour into Capital is misplaced and yields an unfortunate combination of ‘class struggle functionalism with humanist essentialism’.32 According to Albritton, a political economy of the working class simply has no place within

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30 Lebowitz 2003, p. 189.
31 Lebowitz 2003, p. 176.
32 Albritton 2003, p. 106.
an abstract theory of capital that is inherently so general that it allows for neither ‘time nor place’. Marx, Albritton argues, had it right in not including a theory of a self-determined working class in Capital, precisely because the complexities Lebowitz raises can only be introduced at a more empirical and historical level, such as the analysis of American capitalism in the postwar period. At that more concrete level, with labour not being privileged, a myriad of movements and issues can join the working class in the opposition to capitalism.

There is indeed something to Albritton’s warning that we cannot expect too much of any abstract theory of the working class. And, as we will argue with regards to Lebowitz’s analysis of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’, there is a problem in Lebowitz’s transition from pure theory to a level of analysis that demands a more explicit historical analysis. Yet Lebowitz is surely right to insist that the point of abstractions is nothing if it is not to give us some orientation as we move to more empirical levels of analysis.

The danger in excluding a political economy of the working class from the ‘pure’ level of abstraction is that its subsequent insertion at more concrete levels of analysis will carry an inordinate measure of arbitrariness. Or, put in terms of Albritton’s framework of ‘stages of analysis’, the stages become overly distinct from one another. In Albritton’s framework, the strategic centrality of labour is lost. Labour becomes one movement of many, resulting in an eclectic mix of social agents without any clear theorisation of their relationship to each other or understanding of how they fit into the capitalist totality. Rather than a richer sense of agency, we lose strategic focus.

It is important to emphasise that the issue is not the denigration of movements that stand outside the ‘privileged’ category of class. It is, of course, true that not all oppressions can be reduced to class, but it is equally important to highlight the degree to which, once we concretise ‘labour’, the people who appear are so often Filippino maids, black autoworkers, Mexican migrants, gay orderlies, and punk ‘bar-istos’. And as soon as we concretise working-class needs, the range of issues identified – the environment, public health, child care, education, birth control, poverty, war – suggest that what are often seen as movements external to the working class, reflect not simply ‘others’ but ‘other dimensions’ of the many-sided lives of the working class.

Among the critical reviews in this volume, Werner Bonefeld too sees Lebowitz’s project as misplaced but for different methodological reasons. As we understand Bonefeld’s argument, the concept of ‘capital’ already includes labour; the issue is not ‘bringing labour in’, but exposing the ‘social constitution
of capital’. Bonefeld argues that Lebowitz’s project fails to address how to do this; it is ‘surprisingly silent on the issue of social form’. This, it appears to us, misunderstands the scope of Lebowitz’s project. In spite of what Bonefeld suggests, Lebowitz certainly sees the singular importance of Marx’s contribution to addressing the reification of the capital-labour relationship – Lebowitz’s critical Chapter 5 opens with quoting Marx on this very point. But even if Marxist theoreticians can reveal the inverted form of social labour within capital, crucial questions remain – questions that require going beyond faith in ‘class struggle’. In the correspondence with Lebowitz cited earlier, Sweezy cautioned that ‘. . . one has to guard against the notion that when one has said “class struggle” one has also solved, rather than posed, the important questions’.

Under what conditions will working-class people be open to accepting such an analysis? Even if workers understand the ‘social constitution of capital’, under what conditions will they believe they can do something about it? And under what conditions can they in fact do something about it? These are the kind of critical questions that Lebowitz’s political economy of the working class helps to pose and address more clearly. Bonefeld seems to believe all this is present in *Capital*. It is not.

Barker’s and Campbell and Tutan’s reviews raise, at quite another level, two specific criticisms of Lebowitz. The first relates to Lebowitz’s unfortunate flirtation with the category of ‘slavery’ in thinking through the implications his argument has for family relationships. The second is more fundamental in that it addresses the foundations of the theory itself – Lebowitz’s treatment of competition among capitalists.

If the labourer is himself produced through use-values produced in the home, this raises the vital question of relationships within the family. Introducing the category of ‘slavery’ to characterise the subordination of women in the household might serve a rhetorical point, but as analysis it is not helpful. Amongst its many problems, it passes over the contrast between how the slave and the family relationship are established (abduction versus courtship); reduces genuine child rearing concerns within the family to simply ‘producing labourers’; and ignores the historic role of the family as also being, as Barker puts it, ‘. . . a centre for the construction of elementary solidarities and a “place” on which working-class people put an understandable value’.

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33 Lebowitz 2004b, p. XXXX.
We would only say in Lebowitz’s defence that his approach to this issue is rather tentative. He presents the argument on slavery as reflecting Marx’s perspective; he does note that, as women enter the workforce, this relationship changes; and he does hedge the argument by stating that ‘. . . the central issue is not the precise term, but the essential characteristic – exploitation’. The problem is that, by giving the argument even the limited play it gets, Lebowitz appears to endorse it. Extending Lebowitz’s important insights on the working class into the domain of the family requires new concepts, not an inappropriate repackaging of old ones.

We also share Barker’s and Campbell and Tutan’s criticism of how Lebowitz deals with competition. Lebowitz argues that stressing competition in the political economy of labour would obscure the class foundation of capitalism. It would tend to explain capital’s drive for surplus as reflecting a relationship among capitalists, rather than the class struggle; and it would shift attention to how the surplus is distributed amongst capitalists, rather than on how it is first created. But this is part of a polemical argument, not a case for subordinating the development of a comprehensive theory to how that theory might be (mis)interpreted and (mis)used by others.

Capitalism involves three social relations: the relationship between capital and the working class; the fragmentation of workers within the working class (a relationship that is central to Lebowitz’s analysis); and the division within the capitalist class into autonomous and competing units of capital. There is no reason for the political economy of the working class to exclude any of these relationships and good reason to include each. Lebowitz is quite right to emphasise that the strategies of capital cannot be explained by only considering competition; issues of control over labour are basic. But this only reinforces including both class and competition in order to advance beyond those who choose one or the other partial element.

Class and competition generally overlap and mutually affect each other in ways not easily separated. Consider, for example, the introduction of just-in-time production in North America. This involved production and organisation efficiencies as well as greater exploitation of labour. The pressures for moving in this direction were intensified as competition increased (free trade, the higher American dollar in the early 1980s, Japanese investment in North America), but the new systems of production also included new

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34 Lebowitz 2003, p. 151.
vulnerabilities to labour militancy. It therefore became essential for capital to both move in this direction under the spur of competition, and at the same time to evolve new mechanisms of control over labour so that the scope for labour sabotage did not undermine competitiveness vis-à-vis other producers.

What is to be gained by describing this complex process – or other processes – as only being about the labour-capital relationship? Why shunt competition aside when (as Lebowitz repeatedly stresses) it has become such a crucial material as well as ideological instrument for disciplining workers and keeping them in their place? Why exclude competition from the political economy of the working class when we subsequently need to develop that theory to address all those crucial issues that concern workers and cannot be addressed without also discussing competitiveness – like free trade, neoliberalism, globalisation, financialisation, subordination of social programmes to first establishing nationally ‘competitive spaces’, economic tensions between capitalist states, and so on? The competition between capitalists is materially expressed as competition between workers and, as Lebowitz has pointed out, there is a crucial asymmetry between competition amongst capitalists and that amongst workers: the former may weaken specific capitalists but ultimately strengths capitalists as a class; the latter weakens the working class in both the short term and the long term.35 How can a political economy of the working class not include this dimension of working-class fragmentation? As for the argument that competition is in fact ‘crucial’, but it should only be introduced at other levels of analysis, does this not suffer from the same problems as Albritton’s argument to exclude the political economy of the working class from the ‘pure’ theory? None of this, we hasten to add, undermines Lebowitz’s basic argument. In fact, integrating competition into the theory would strengthen it.

There is one criticism of Lebowitz that is not directly raised in the reviews of this second edition of Beyond ‘Capital’ but that will surely surface. This criticism will come from that tradition in Marxism which argues that a) to include the resistance of workers in explaining crises opens the door to blaming workers; and b) to declare that ‘economic crises will not end capitalism’ is itself demobilising and fatalistic. This kind of criticism involves the old unfortunate habit of over-politicising theory. The subordination of theory to conclusions that are ‘politically’ preferable, rather than truly trying to

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35 Lebowitz 2003, p. 83.
'understand the world so we can change it', has seriously damaged both the development of Marxist theory and socialist politics. As Marx said of bourgeois science in its declining phase, in place of honest investigation ‘there appeared hired prize-fighters’.36 Explaining the causes of economic crises without bringing the working class in also implies denying the power workers have and need to build on. Arguing, in the context of crises, that the legitimate demands made by the working class cannot be met by capital is not to ‘blame’ workers, but to expose the limits of a system based on profits, not needs. Moreover, a critical element in working-class politicisation emerges out of workers having to confront, rather than hide, the limits of ‘normal’ militancy – such as the reality that their demands do threaten capital accumulation and a choice must therefore be made between retreating or going further.

What also needs to be challenged is the belief that crucial to mobilisation must be a constant warning that a crisis is about to engulf capitalism. It is not only that endlessly crying wolf has done so much to discredit the Marxist Left, nor that threats of crises, in themselves, may instead push workers to consolidating what they have and accepting restraints. It is also that a strategy so dependent on economic collapse diverts us from getting on with developing the kind of responses and strategising we really need in the face of a durable capitalism, such as winning people over to seeing capitalism as a barrier to the full development of human needs even when it is functioning ‘well’.37

**Lebowitz’s limitations: theorising working-class politics**

In bringing the ‘real’ working class into the ‘pure’ theory of capitalism’s dynamics, Lebowitz provides a crucial foundation for going ‘beyond capital’ in the sense of moving on to the politics of the working class. But *Beyond ‘Capital’* does not in fact get us to that politics. For those coming to *Beyond ‘Capital’* for the first time, this may not matter; its political economy of the working class remains a stimulating read. But those expecting a theoretically-developed working-class politics will be disappointed.

An immediate problem is that Lebowitz provides us with no sense of the methodological borders between the method of analysis for dealing with the political economy of capitalism and that for addressing the politics of opposition and transformation. Moreover, while the political economy of the working

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36 Marx 1990, p. 97.
37 Gindin 1998.
class under capitalism may contribute some insights about how we orient ourselves to the transition to socialism, a main concern of Lebowitz, this in itself can only scratch the surface of the issues involved in the radically distinct complexities of attempting revolutionary change – complexities that, as his articles on Venezuela show, Lebowitz is himself well aware of. Beyond ‘Capital’ is a book on the political economy of the working class, not on political theory. But, even so, there is a vast Marxist literature on working-class politics and it would have been productive to see, in the concluding chapters of Beyond ‘Capital’, a move beyond the citations from Marx and an attempt to engage that literature in the light of the theory developed in earlier chapters.

To be sure, the link between a particular political economy and the politics it implies is not always obvious. Nevertheless, a political test of any theory is whether it is at least historically and materially grounded as well as strategically suggestive. Thus, even if it is true, as Colin Barker puts it, that since politics is necessarily experimental and contingent, its analysis must be ‘less formal and more historical in character’; and even if the old saw that politics is as much art as science correctly implies that politics involves a particular kind of creativity (not just uncovering what is hidden, but discovering a new form of organising human activity), one cannot just shrug and say this lies outside the proper remit of political economy. Lebowitz himself, after all, clearly wants his political economy of the working class to lead to certain strategic conclusions.

Lebowitz has a good deal to say about the role of trade unions (albeit drawing almost exclusively on Marx and Engels’s own writings and ignoring all the excellent Marxist literature over the last forty years), in ‘expressing the interests of wage labourers’. He also identifies their limits in terms of only acting in opposition to specific and particular capitals. Yet, the power to be confronted is that of capital as a totality . . . The trade unions fight the effects within the labour market and the workplace but not the causes of the effects.

And he picks up Marx’s criticism of them for keeping ‘too much aloof from general social and political movements’.

Yet Lebowitz’s political economy of the working class also keeps itself aloof

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40 Lebowitz 2003, pp. 90–1.
41 Ibid.
in this respect. Surprisingly, he offers no analysis whatsoever of working-
class parties. Since, as Lebowitz stresses, the working class is not spontaneously
revolutionary, and since struggles in themselves can teach demoralising lessons
as well as inspiring ones, the ‘party question’ cannot be avoided. Although
the issue of political parties has traditionally focused on how to take state
power, Lebowitz’s own argument implies the prior importance of focusing
the party issue on developing the collective confidence among workers that
their dependence on capital can be overcome. This implies developing the
kind of party that concentrates on education; that attempts (by way of the
priorities chosen, forms of struggle adopted, alliances developed) to structure
struggles so demystification and confidence are in fact the more likely outcome;
and that is committed, as Barker puts it, to ‘a ruthless objectivity about itself
[and] its own strengths and weaknesses’.

Any really substantive theorisation of working-class politics would indeed
be required to examine the 150 year old history of working-class parties
and develop a rigorous analysis of that experience according to the Marxist
method, summarised so well by Lebowitz himself, of studying the concrete
and developing concepts as result of that analysis that allow for logical
generalisations about the totality of working-class politics. Even most social-
democratic parties, or at least many of the leading theorists within them,
have historically defined their role in terms of organising and educating the
working class, and in terms of demystifying capitalism through the message
(which Lebowitz argues must be the central one of a working-class politics)
that the means of production and increased productivity results from ‘the
combination and cooperation of social labour’.

Yet Lebowitz’s discussion of social democracy (from which the trade unions
in most countries did not keep themselves aloof) is limited to a one sentence
footnote on the ‘sorry history of social democracy, which never ceases to
reinforce the capital relation’ and a passing reference in the text ‘on the failures
of social democratic governments (which have demobilized and disarmed
workers’ movements and surrendered to capital).’ How this happened and
why this happened is entirely left aside, even though Lebowitz hardly needed
to start from scratch here – he had a wealth of Marxist accounts and analyses
(let alone serious non-Marxist ones) to draw on, from Michels to Miliband
and much more since.

42 Lebowitz 2003, p. 175.
That this is so is all the more striking since Lebowitz (rightly) has little patience with those one-sided Marxists who wallow in the functionalist presumption that what happens occurs because it corresponds to capital’s needs... If a public healthcare system is introduced, it is because capital needs healthy workers and needs to reduce its own costs, if a public school system, capital requires better-educated workers. If sectors of the economy are nationalised, it is because capital needs weak sectors to be operated by the State. Such arguments are inherently one-sided. When the needs of workers are excluded at the outset and only capital’s needs are recognized, it cannot be considered surprising that a one-sided Marxism will find in the results of all real struggles a correspondence to capital’s needs.44

But, since social-democratic parties so often were the agents through which these ‘real struggles’ were conducted, Lebowitz surely has some explaining to do of his own when he comes to characterise social democracy in the passing and dismissive terms he uses. Social-democratic reforms, while advantageous to workers, were usually advanced in terms of how they would also meet capital’s needs. What lay behind this may be similar to what Lebowitz recognised in his discussion of trade unionism, that the immediate impulse of workers is often to struggle within capitalism to satisfy their needs. But Lebowitz does not concern himself with the question of whether social democracy advances reforms in the name of class harmony rather than class struggle (i.e. as good for capital as well as for workers) in order to make them agreeable to capitalists, or whether they do so because it is easier to win over workers’ support for these reforms that way. Yet this must be one of the central questions of what has gone wrong working-class politics. It does not carry us very far to quote Marx’s attack in 1879 on the ‘three Zurichers’ to the effect that since

the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat is the great lever of the modern social revolution; it is, therefore, impossible for us to co-operate with people who wish to expunge the class struggle from the movement.45

The absence of any analysis of the ideological, organisational and representational practices of social democracy is matched by a similar absence...
of any discussion of working-class parties in the Leninist tradition. This is all the more surprising since Lebowitz resurrects one of their favourite concepts ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ as the most useful concept for how to use state power to advance class struggle in a revolutionary manner. Yet, not only does he insist (albeit again only in passing) that those parties which came to power under this slogan only ever built ‘unreal socialism’, he also sides with Rosa Luxemburg in her blistering attack on Lenin’s Bolsheviks immediately after the 1917 revolution precisely in terms of the Central Committee having already become a dictatorship over the workers in the name of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.46

To be sure, in attempting to rehabilitate the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as Marx’s main contribution to the political economy of the working class, Lebowitz is trying to get at the idea that the struggle for political power involves more than assuring a change in property relations, that it requires a different kind of state. Equally important is what the concept implies in terms of finishing what cannot be completed within capitalism – developing the working-class confidence, will, and collective skills that can in fact build and self-administer the alternative society. ‘Very simply,’ Lebowitz writes, ‘continuing the class struggle’.47 But there is, of course, nothing simple about this. Every working-class party that has entered the state, whether by insurrection or election, has soon made it clear that it expected the working class to let the new government now do its thing rather than continue the class struggle outside the state. The notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat is markedly unhelpful to get at the more complex analysis that is required to understand why this is so and its implications.

The limitations of the concept were demonstrated by a good number of the leading Marxists political theorists of Lebowitz’s generation and disposition over two decades ago.48 It is impossible to recap that argument here, but suffice to say, in Marx no less than in his Leninist followers, most of the difficult questions concerning taking state power in the name of the working class are swept under the carpet by the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. To begin with, and most obviously, the language itself is a problem: the term ‘dictatorship’ cannot readily be rehabilitated to socialist use. To point out as Lebowitz does that what was meant by this idea in the nineteenth

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46 Lebowitz 2003, p. 220.
47 Lebowitz 2003, p. 192.
century was rule by the majority, ‘democracy carried to its fullest’ insofar as the majority class would become the ruling class, hardly begins to address the real problems associated with the tension between this conception and the conception of a revolution being the most authoritarian thing Engels could think of, not least because it involved a really coercive dictatorship for a period (in the sense of restrictions on freedom of speech association, press, etc.) in order to forestall a counter-revolution by the former ruling class. Nor does the concept address the real problem that the reason the ruling class remains such a threat is in large part because (as Deutscher pointed out in his Trotsky trilogy) it still has considerable support in the former subordinate classes – who then would also need to be suppressed.

Relatedly, the dictatorship of the proletariat is of little help in thinking through the complex issues of democracy within the working class. As Campbell and Tutan note in their review, we cannot assume a convergence in working-class interests on issues that are either ‘small’ (the practicalities of everyday life) or ‘big’ (related to the revolution’s trajectory). Moreover, the very process of foreclosing freedom of speech, association, the press, and so on, to forestall a counterrevolution, has the effect, as Luxemburg said in her critique of Lenin, of robbing the working class what it needs most, i.e. the opportunity to develop its capacities through the full democratic participation in every sphere of life that the old order denied it; and of robbing the revolutionary government of what it most needs, popular input towards a thousand solutions to the thousand problems of revolutionary transformation. What is really at issue is the creation of ‘a different kind of state’ that is democratic in the sense of not only doing things for its constituency, and not only involving them in particular decisions, but in the much deeper sense of applying state resources and create appropriate institutions for mobilising the base and also developing its future organisational capacities. These are not fine points about abstract democracy; the survival of the revolution, its dynamism, and its legitimacy all depend on the collective checks and insights that comes from the most-open debate possible.

To point, as Lebowitz does, to Marx’s account of the Paris Commune as indicating what he really meant by the dictatorship of the proletariat is, again, not very helpful. For one, that account left many questions begging concerning the mode of resolution between the multiple popular sovereignties envisaged even at the level of Paris. For another, since we know that the old revolutionaries who ushered in ‘unreal socialism’ also read that account of the Paris Commune,
what we need to address is a range of constraints that did not allow them to put such a model into place anywhere in the wake of the revolutions of the twentieth century. And we have now started the twenty-first century with a Workers’ Party government in Brazil, a party founded twenty years earlier with the commitment to the ‘continuation of the class struggle’ from within the state inscribed in its very self-conception as post-social-democratic and post-Leninist. Yet the continuation of the class struggle hardly appears to be what Lula is actually doing, unless it is the continuation of Cardoso’s struggle on behalf of the bourgeoisie.

This section on the state was intended to be one of the key additions to the latest edition of *Beyond ‘Capital’*. By limiting himself primarily to Marx’s political writings after he finished *Capital*, Lebowitz seems to be suggesting that Marx really did provide us with the solutions that *Capital* left out. He did not; and what is really needed is to build on the rich tradition of non-fundamentalist-Marxist political analysis to develop the theorisation of political transformation that is indeed so badly needed. It is no doubt somewhat unfair to berate Lebowitz for not himself doing this – one only wishes he had made it clear how big the theoretical task yet remains and yet how great the theoretical legacy we Marxists are able to call on from the mid-to-late twentieth century let alone the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Moreover, it must be said that, for all its limitations, Lebowitz’s orientation to the question of state power stands in stark contrast to the international social justice movement’s studious disengagement from (if not hostility to) the issue of state power altogether. Lebowitz’s resurrection of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ can hardly be expected to make a dent in the social justice movements’ scepticism about state power, and overcoming this will take more than pointing to what Marx said about the Paris Commune. But the fact remains that the justice movements are presently at an impasse, and their failure to think through the role of states and the kind of movement that can ultimately tackle state power is one of the central problems. Lebowitz is therefore to be applauded for his desire to make the political economy of the working class relevant to the radically creative and democratic processes that would bring about a different kind of state.

*Beyond ‘Capital’* stands out because it does in fact ‘ruthlessly’ address the ‘durability of capital and the passivity of the working class’. Despite its own limited theorisation of working-class politics even in this second edition, the book is an exciting and major contribution to the renewal of Marxism and
the revival of socialist politics. It includes much that is new, but equally important, it takes concepts and ideas that have been loosely applied before and, reminding us why rigour matters, provides them with a more solid foundation, a theoretical home. It touches an impressive number of the issues critical to moving ‘beyond capital(ism)’ and where it does not fully resolve them, it leaves us with an ambitious and worthy research agenda. Above all, it challenges a new generation to commit itself to developing the theoretical legs to sustain a movement aspiring to take on capital, and go beyond it.

References


Interventions

John Milios and Dimitri Dimoulis

Louis Althusser and the Forms of Concealment of Capitalist Exploitation. A Rejoinder to Mike Wayne

1. Introduction

The significance of Marx’s as well as of later Marxists’ analyses of fetishism in capitalist societies, and their relevance to theories of ideology, constitute a subject of great interest. Fetishism – which often, but not necessarily, is reduced to the notion of commodity fetishism – attains a key position in Marxist theory, as it constitutes a notion that links the critique of political economy with the Marxist theory of the state and ideology and with Marxist philosophy in general. It combines the critique of capitalism as an oppressive and ‘unjust’ system with the issue of socialist revolution, in turn conceived as a process of de-fetishisation.  

1 Cannon 2005. We disagree with the author’s main thesis that the labour movement constitutes the authentic representative of modernity whereas capitalism appears as a ‘premodern form of sociality’ (pp. 160–1). However, this approach is relevant to the actuality of fetishism in the debates on the political strategies of the labour movement.

2 ‘Fetishism is the central theoretical problem confronted by any theory of revolution’ (Holloway 2002, p. 53).
Materialism chose to entitle a recent symposium on John Holloway’s, *Change the World without Taking Power: Commodity Fetishism and Revolutionary Subj ectivity*.3

This justifies our return to the issue of fetishism, in response to a text by Mike Wayne which criticised our essay on Marx’s notion(s) of fetishism.4 The present rejoinder will focus on issues of Marxist philosophy, in an effort to clarify the theoretical framework in which the analyses of fetishism (and the limits of these analyses) should be comprehended.

Mike Wayne begins his critique of our essay on Marx’s notion(s) of fetishism declaring that what annoys him about our intervention is the reference to the work of Louis Althusser:

The theoretical source for much of what is problematic in their essay is easily identifiable in terms of a name: Louis Althusser.5 Wayne blames us for ‘dependence on the debris of Althusser’s theory of ideology’.6 Althusser continues to suffer theoretical proscription, of which Wayne’s article serves as a reminder.

We believe that Althusser’s work preserves its theoretical significance, despite the fact that it is not suitable for ‘canonisation’. It should be noted that in our original paper we acknowledged the conceptual importance of fetishism as socially necessary misrecognition induced by the functioning of the market, and we criticised the contradictions in Althusser’s work. Yet, Wayne argues that

there are no doubt many Althussers but it is a very orthodox one which Dimoulis and Milios recycle in their essay.7

It would be proper, therefore, to clarify the ‘theoretical scandal’ caused by the name of Althusser which, as Wayne’s text shows by counterexample, is more pertinent than ever.

2. Althusser’s legacy

One aspect that is frequently overlooked in discussions of the work of Althusser and his ‘school’ is that he was systematically engaged with the actual text of

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3 Starosta 2005.
7 Wayne 2005, p. 194.
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Capital as site of a critical theoretical breakthrough. This return to Marx, and the attempt to conduct a collective re-examination of the text of Capital⁸ and the tensions that pervade it, were embodied in the 1960s in a movement which, at least chronologically, preceded the current debate on the theory of value, which began in the 1970s.

Althusser theoretical programme⁹ retains its productive potential as:

(i) It has persisted in regarding Capital as a text that represents a critical breach with classical political economy and on that basis it has reformulated the concept of the epistemological break.

(ii) It has defended the originality of the Marxist œuvre, which cannot be assimilated to any other philosophical tradition, insisting that it should not be read through any borrowed philosophical prism (theoretical humanism, historical dialectics). In this context, Althusser’s analysis emphasises three elements:

– theoretical anti-humanism (rejecting every form of essentialism),
– anti-historicism (distinction between history as a process and theoretical disquisitions on history),
– the existence of contradictions in Marx’s writings, especially stressing Marx’s ‘epistemological break’ after 1845.

(iii) It has introduced the distinction between a materialist dialectical conception of social contradictions and other schemata derived from the ‘philosophy of history’, including certain Marxist interpretations of the work of Hegel.

(iv) It has defended an original conception of social totality incorporating both political power and ideological relations as central structural determinants of the capitalist mode of production and, through the key concept of overdetermination, it has sought to raise the question of a non-metaphysical and non-teleological theory of determination.

(v) It has drawn a dividing line between the terms under which historical social forms or elements and interpenetrating social practices make their appearance, and the synchronic dimension of reproduction of a mode of production as a structured social totality.

(vi) It has insisted on the analytical priority of class struggle and the priority of productive relations over productive forces.

⁸ Althusser et al. 1996.
(vii) It has offered an analysis of ideological representations not as forms of false or mystified consciousness, but as socially necessary forms of social misrecognition that are reproduced in practices.

The basic parameters of Althusser’s approach to materialist dialectics, the epistemological break, the eccentric conception of social totality, the primacy of class struggle, the relative autonomy and interpenetration of the various practices, point to the theoretical potential implicit in a new reading of the theory of value and an insistence on the significance of the value-form.

By contrast, readings of the theory of value based on an ‘object-subject dialectic’ constitute a reversion to philosophical humanism, substituting the Marxist notions of class struggle, capitalist exploitation (appropriation of surplus-value as a social relation) and the capitalist mode of production, with conceptions of a supposed subjection of ‘humankind’ to the ‘object-world’ created by ‘human labour’\textsuperscript{10}.\textsuperscript{11} The anthropological approach to fetishism is thus formulated, which we criticised in the case of Lukács as \textit{extensive-universalising}\textsuperscript{11} and which appears, with forms barely different, in recent analyses of fetishism that present capitalism as dehumanisation.\textsuperscript{12}

In this framework, fetishism essentially substitutes for the process of ideology production (and transformation in class struggle) and is conceived as the matrix of an alienating structure which, when ‘reversed’ (‘humanisation’!), will pave the way for the development of the revolutionary subjectivity of the ‘masses’ who are exploited by capital.

### 3. Althusser’s contradictions in reading Capital

Citing these points of departure, which connect us with the Althusserian legacy, does not mean ignoring the contradictions that pervade Althusser’s approach to the theory of value in the texts of the 1960s: on the one hand, the conception of the break with Ricardo primarily in terms of the replacement of labour by labour-power and not so much in terms of the value-form; on

\textsuperscript{10} Wayne 2005, p. 204, formulates this anthropological approach as follows: ‘Never before in the history of \textit{humankind} has labour been the source of such \textit{productive powers} (mediated by technology and knowledge) and, yet, never before has the \textit{object world} which human labour-power produces been more \textit{powerful over} and independent/autonomous of \textit{human labour-power} than in the era of capitalism’ (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{11} Dimoulis and Milios 2004, pp. 9–10, 16–17.

the other hand, the tendency to overlook the necessarily contradictory character of the texts of the ‘mature’ Marx as well, something which also afflicts the significant concept of symptomatic (‘symptomale’) reading, since Althusser tended to think that a reading of this kind could extract a relatively unified theoretical nucleus.

However, as we have argued in a previous text, there are contradictions within this nucleus itself, which means that, for the clarification and further development of Marxist theory, a symptomatic reading has to be applied also to the texts of the mature Marx (in order, first of all, to distinguish between the different theoretical discourses to be found in them and to adopt a stance on these discourses). 13

These contradictions were expressed in an uneven manner in the evolution of Althusser and the intellectuals influenced by him. One typical example is the vacillation on the subject of the first part of Volume I of Capital (‘Commodity and Money’), with its characteristic admonition not to commence the reading of Capital from there but rather from the second part. 14

Althusser became increasingly sceptical about the problematic of the value-form, considering that Marx was seeking a Hegelian-style point of departure in the simpler concept, though this could even lead him to quasi-anthropological misinterpretations (fetishism as reification of man). The intensely polemical character of many of Althusser’s interventions played a contributing role in this (‘bending the stick in the opposite direction’).

The contradictory stance of those associated with what we might call the ‘Althusser school’ vis-à-vis the first part of Volume I of Capital, in particular the theory of fetishism, is characteristic.

On the one hand, we have the position of Balibar, 15 partly adopted by Althusser himself, 16 which insisted that a theory of ideology, of ideological class struggle and ideological apparatuses of the kind elaborated at that time by Althusser, is not compatible with a theory of fetishism as a form of ‘spontaneously generated’ misrecognition at the level of economic structures. Consequently, the latter must be seen as an indication of the fact that Marx had not completely distanced himself from a preceding ideological (bourgeois) problematic.

13 Milios et al. 2002.
14 Althusser 1976, pp. 52, 59.
On the other hand, there was the position of Macherey\textsuperscript{17} and the important analysis by Rancière,\textsuperscript{18} who attempted to read the first part of Volume I of *Capital* in the light of the Althusserian conception of the Marxist problematic summarised above. Rancière carried out a reading of commodity fetishism as a theory of necessary outcomes of misidentification that are generated at the level of the economic structure.

Our view, which takes Rancière’s analysis as a starting point, incorporates the concept of fetishism into the theory of ideology and does not reject it as an idealistic construction. This, precisely, is how it succeeds in identifying the actual idealism that pervades many of the anthropological readings of the notion of fetishism. Fetishism is conceived as a network of self-generating ideological representations (along with all other spontaneous ideological representations emanating from the function of the state and juridical superstructure, or those related to the history of class struggle in concrete capitalist social formations – for example, racism and sexism). Furthermore, it is argued that fetishism is particularly functional and necessary in itself for enabling the practices of social actors to reproduce capitalist relations, and whose concrete codification as an ideological configuration necessitates the functioning of ideological apparatuses of the state.

This situation of inner contradictions characterising the ‘Althusser school’ was also detectable in the interpenetration of base and superstructure. On the one hand, it might be part of an anti-metaphysical and anti-historicist viewpoint on society as a whole. This would emphasise the relative autonomy of political and ideological relations (as opposed to the treatment of them as ‘reflections’ of economic structures and processes), and also stress the distinction between the *diachronic emergence* of different practices or social forms, and the *mode of production* as a concept pertaining to a totality of ‘synchronically’ reproduced social relations and forms. On the other hand, it could lead to a quasi-empirical theory of a ‘catalogue’ of elements producing different historical forms depending on the way they combine with each other.\textsuperscript{19}

These contradictions should be seen as the outcome of a particular theoretical conjuncture with which Althusser took issue. He was required to respond to the categorisation of Marxism as a historicist variant of Hegelian philosophy,

\textsuperscript{17} In Althusser et al. 1996.
\textsuperscript{18} In Althusser et al. 1996.
\textsuperscript{19} The ‘regulation school’ is one example of such a tendency towards the constitution of ‘middle-range’ (descriptive) theories. For an analysis that attempts to link it with the work of Althusser, see Lipietz 1993.
a tendency particularly strong in the postwar French philosophical scene, which in general attributed greater significance to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* as a ‘philosophy of history’, and rather less to the *Logic* and the endeavour to develop a semantic tool of greater complexity.

Thus he was obliged to treat theoretical humanism as an idealistic deviation *par excellence* within Marxism, which meant a head-on clash with all theories of *reification* [Verdinglichung, Versachlichung, Vergegenständlichung]. He attempted to confront the economism of the official Communist movement, expressed above all through support for unlimited development of – by their nature ‘positive’ – productive forces. This involved placing emphasis on class struggle and the conflict-ridden character of capitalist production and necessarily referring less to the effects of the market as a mechanism for socialising individual private undertakings or to value as a specific social form (that is, ‘the form of the whole production process’ in capitalism).20

The fact that we can explain these contradictions in Althusser’s work as relating to his approach to the theory of value should not translate into rejection of the need for a reading of the work of Marx deriving from the Althusserian programme. This is what Wayne most probably understands, when he accuses us of ‘orthodox’ Althusserianism: that, despite the fact that we stress what we consider to be Althusser’s contradictions or weak points in his reading of the first chapters of Volume I of *Capital* and, more specifically, of fetishism, we do not abandon the main theses of the Althusserian approach: the commitment to a relational approach to class power, the critique of philosophical humanism, essentialism, historicism, economism and so on.

**4. Capitalist mode of production, capital fetish and the dominant ideology**

In our essay, we argued that the concept of fetishism pertains not exclusively to the commodity but first and foremost to capital (and so to the commodity as a form of capital), that is, to the capital relation and all the forms in which it makes its appearance. It is necessary to take into account the customarily ignored analyses of the fetishism of interest-bearing capital in Volume III of *Capital* (M–M’), where we have the fully-developed account of capitalist relation that enables us to see the full range of theoretical prerequisites for the concept of fetishism, which is thus approached much more as a specifically capitalist

20 Rubin 1978, p. 123.
form of social misrecognition. It is therefore problematic to regard that Marx completed a theory of fetishism in the first part of Volume I of Capital, that is, prior to introduction of the concepts pertaining to the capitalist mode of production.

We further argued that fetishism is only one form of ideological concealment emanating from the capital relation: the one connected with the function of the market and in which capitalist relations are imprinted on ‘things’. Bourgeois ideology is not restricted to fetishism, but pertains to the totality of class practices, and foremost to the functioning of the capitalist state. This means that fetishism is not the cardinal effect of the rule of capital and consequently that the ‘uprising’ against fetishism (if possible) would not necessarily have an ultimate revolutionary outcome.

Wayne criticises this approach for ‘letting the superstructure effectively break free from any substantive determination by the base’. His argument is based on the conception of a self-activating essence (the economic base expressed in the value-form – or, more precisely, in the simple ‘act of exchange’ and commodity fetishism), from which all other social instances and forms of ideology derive. Wayne comprehends the mode of production as a merely economic structure and endeavours so to defend Lukács’s position on reification: in reference to the way he comprehends the value-form, he attaches all importance to the antithesis between exchange-value and use-value, a topic whose associations are with quantification, objectification and homogenisation of practical experience and with an anthropological approach.

He thus reduces all forms of ideology to commodity fetishism:

Commodity fetishism I shall argue, is no more than a materialist (and not economistic) account of how social relations and the forces of production, within a given configuration and at a given level of development, are

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22 The fetishistic act of exchange itself provides the essential spontaneous ideological basis on which the systematic production and elaboration of political, juridical and cultural ideologies can flourish. Without the act of exchange, such ideologies would have little correlation with the real-life experience of the subject and hence have far less “sticking power” than they, in fact, do have’ (Wayne 2005, p. 209).
23 He speaks about ‘the determination of fetishism (and therefore the mode of production) on the superstructures’ (emphasis added) (Wayne 2005, p. 197).
24 It is characteristic that Wayne tends to reduce the value-form to the ‘act of exchange’, he never refers to money as the most abstract form of value (and therefore of capital). On this subject see Milios et al. 2002, pp. 13–64.
inscribed with a tacit ideological consciousness, ‘appropriate and rational . . .
to a particular typical position in the process of production’ as Lukács writes
of class consciousness generally.25

And he also does the same with state functions, thus claiming that ‘the form
in which the state deals with subjects is structurally determined by the fetishism
of the value-form’.26

The Lukácsian approach is completed by equating the effects of commodity
fetishism with quantification:

Quantification is not just an economic feature but is the indispensable means
for articulating social power, namely the social power of a minority class
to impose its interests onto the majority class . . . The dominance of the
logic of quantitivity is social power.27

We have extensively criticised this approach in our essay.28 But rejecting the
simplistic model of derivation of ideology from the ‘fetishistic act of exchange’
does not mean that we let ‘the superstructure effectively break free from any
substantive determination by the base’. On the contrary, Marx’s notion of the
(capitalist) mode of production allows for a comprehension of the structural
unity between base and superstructure and the determination in the last
instance of the latter from the former.

Marx’s notion of the capitalist mode of production refers to the causal
nucleus of the totality of capitalist power relations (economic, political,
ideological), the fundamental social class interdependencies, which define a
system of social power (a society) as a capitalist system.

It is established in the capital relation initially on the level of production: in
the separation of the worker from the means of production (who is thus
transformed into a wage-labourer, possessor only of her labour-power) and
in the full ownership of the means of production by the capitalist: the capitalist
has both the power to place into operation the means of production (which
was not the case in precapitalist modes of production), as well as the power
to acquire the final surplus product.

The (capitalist) mode of production does not constitute, however, an
exclusively economic relation, but refers to all of the social levels (instances).
Therefore, the notion also contains the core of (capitalist) political and ideological relations of power. And this means that the particular structure of the capitalist state is also articulated in it.29

However, as already noted, it is the economic element which determines the structure of the CMP in the last instance. More precisely, it is the socially specific ownership relations of the means and the conditions of production and the consequent specific form of surplus labour which determine the structural characteristics of each mode of production:

It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers (. . .) in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence.30

Thus, in capitalism, the

worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realisation of his labour-power.31

It is clear from the passages just cited that the economic level of the CMP (and the determination in the last instance of all other levels from the economic) entails not just the ‘act of exchange’ or the ‘quantification’ implicit in the value-form, but a specific form of surplus labour, or equally, as Marx puts it, the ‘direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers’. It is this ‘direct relationship’ which shapes the wage-form (the transformation of the labour force into a commodity), that is, the social form *par excellence* that characterises capitalism.

The Althusserian notion of *relative* autonomy refers to this structural unity under the determination, in the last instance, from the economy, which cannot be reduced, however, to the simple ‘act of exchange’:

It is possible to say that the floors of the superstructure are not determinant in the last instance, but that they are determined by the effectivity of the

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29 As Althusser puts it: ‘. . . certain relations of production presuppose the existence of a legal-political and ideological superstructure as a condition of their peculiar existence, and . . . this superstructure is necessarily specific (since it is a function of the specific relations of production that call for it)’ (Althusser in Althusser and Balibar 1997, p. 177).


base... their index of effectivity (or determination), as determined by the determination in the last instance of the base, is thought by the Marxist tradition in two ways: (1) there is a ‘relative autonomy’ of the superstructure with respect to the base; (2) there is a ‘reciprocal action’ of the superstructure on the base.32

On this basis, we argue for the necessity of acknowledging fetishism as part of a process of social subordination through the market but not as a comprehensive theory of ideology, as Wayne claims.33 Such a theory would presuppose reference to overriding social mechanisms constituting and reproducing bourgeois ideology and power as a whole.

This is exactly what Althusser’s theory of ideology does.34 It is an analysis of the reproduction process of capitalist power relations on all social levels, with emphasis on the role of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ in this process. It has, therefore, nothing to do with ‘ahistorical functionalism’, as Wayne believes.35

To put it differently, we consider the ‘act of exchange’ not to constitute the genetic code of all ideological forms, but a form of the economic element, which is combined with the political and the ideological element in the complex structured whole of the capitalist mode of production.

Precisely on the basis of this problematic, which focuses on the ‘direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers’, does Marx compare and differentiate the spontaneous concealment effects produced in capitalism, with those (spontaneous concealment effects) produced in the slave-owner mode of production:

When the political economists treat surplus-value and the value of labour-power as fractions of the value-product... they conceal the specific character of the capital relation, namely the fact that variable capital is exchanged for living labour-power, and the worker is accordingly excluded from the product. Instead of revealing the capital-relation, they show us the false semblance of a relation of association, in which worker and capitalist divide

32 Althusser 1971, p. 135.
33 ‘Under capitalism, there is a general form to ideology which can indeed be derived from the fetishism of the value-form... The general form of ideology derived from fetishism... may well be able to offer an account of the unity of ideologies at the level of the form’ (Wayne 2005, p. 217).
34 Althusser 1995.
the product in proportion to the different elements which they respectively contribute towards its formation.\textsuperscript{36}

Or,

In slave labour, even that part of the working day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of existence, in which he therefore works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All the slave’s labour appears as unpaid labour. In wage labour, on the contrary, even surplus-labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid. In the one case, the property-relation conceals the slave’s labour for himself; in the other case the money-relation conceals the unrequited labour of the wage labourer. . . . All the notions justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalistic mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economists, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation.\textsuperscript{37}

Marx argues that the structural elements of the ruling ideology (freedom, equality, justice, etc.) necessarily emerge as a ‘function of the specific relations of production that call for it’.\textsuperscript{38} Althusser theorised the manner of emergence of socially necessary misrecognitions (socially necessary in the sense that they underwrite those practices that reproduce capitalist relations of production) and integrated it into a broader theory of ideology (and so of ideological state apparatuses).

On the contrary, the Lukácsian approach to commodity fetishism and ideology that Wayne reproduces in his text fails to comprehend the tenets of Marx’s analysis of the CMP and the class (economic, political, ideological) relations of exploitation and domination inherent in it.

How can one comprehend, for instance, nationalism (the idea and practices of national unity and national interest as opposed to class power and class interest), the ideology par excellence of the capitalist state (capitalist political power) on the basis of Wayne’s affirmation that ‘under capitalism there is a general form to ideology which can indeed be derived from the fetishism of the value-form’?\textsuperscript{39} How can one explain nationalism through the insistence

\textsuperscript{36} Marx 1990, p. 670.
\textsuperscript{37} Marx 1990, p. 680, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{38} Althusser in Althusser and Balibar 1997, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{39} Wayne 2005, p. 217.
on the idea of quantification (‘the social power of the minority class requires the imposition of a quantitative logic on all exchanges, mediations and comparisons within the mode of production’)? Does this necessarily mean excluding ‘qualitative judgments and processes’?40

Nationalism (by definition a ‘qualitative judgment’) is supported by the way the capitalist state is structured, as part of the overall social power of the bourgeoisie: the nation-state. The nation in its modern-day sense is an inseparable aspect of the capitalist social order, very tangibly expressing the political and ideological-cultural predominance of capital, which homogenises every community within a political territory into an ‘ethnic community’. This homogenisation ‘effaces’ the boundaries between the classes, hence, class power and exploitation, or merely relativises them (representing them as something secondary in the broader context of national unity and cohesion).41

The Lukácsian approach adopts a pre-Marxist philosophy, according to which ‘humankind’ is being subjected to the ‘object world’ it has created. This approach offers the theoretical basis to Wayne’s analysis, which overestimates the foundational relevance of fetishism by claiming that:

A theory of ideology (and the subject) grounded in fetishism provides the makings of an understanding of the relations between mode of production and the superstructure.42

It is exactly this approach which Althusser places at the centre of his critique, and this is one of the reasons why we consider his analyses to be of great actuality for current debates.

References


41 As Poulantzas put it: ‘National unity . . . becomes historicity of a territory and territorialization of a history . . . The enclosures implicit in the constitution of the modern people-nation are only so awesome because they are also fragments of a history that is totalized and capitalized by the state’ (1980, p. 114).
42 Wayne 2005, p. 194.


Milios, John, Dimitri Dimoulis and George Economakis 2002, Karl Marx and the Classics, Aldershot: Ashgate.


Patrick Murray

**In Defence of the ‘Third Thing Argument’: A Reply to James Furner’s ‘Marx’s Critique of Samuel Bailey’**

Examining Marx’s theory of value through his critique of Samuel Bailey, James Furner intends to undermine Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ – that exchange-value expresses value – and to support Chris Arthur’s proposal to reconstruct Marxian theory by introducing labour into the theory of value at the conceptual level of capital.¹ Furner concludes: ‘It would therefore be surprising if Marxists were to continue to give much positive weight to the “third thing argument”’.² I believe that it is a serious mistake to dismiss the ‘third thing argument’. Marx’s theory of value cannot do without it, and if you are going to do without Marx’s theory of value, you might as well do without his critical theory of the capitalist mode of production.

Furner separates his discussion of value theory into three parts, looking first at the simple commodity,

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¹ Marx’s critique of Bailey is part of the manuscript of 1861–3; it was published in Part III of *Theories of Surplus-Value* (Marx 1971, pp. 124–68).

² Furner 2004, p. 108. It is not clear how much weight the argument is given presently. Allen Wood suggests (implausibly) that Marx himself did not take it very seriously, ‘Despite its prominent place in *Capital*, Marx’s “proof” of the law of value is not taken seriously as such by its author. I think it is best regarded as an expository device, part of Marx’s avowed attempt to “popularize” his discussion of value in *Capital*’ (Wood 1981, p. 228).
then at money and capital. Furner claims that Marx’s case in Chapter One of *Capital* against Bailey’s identification of value with exchange-value – and in favour of his own (labour) theory of value – is fallacious. According to Furner, Marx’s polemic against Bailey’s value theory, a forerunner of modern utility theories, becomes effective only when we advance to the theory of money (Marx’s value theory explains the necessity of money where Bailey’s does not) and, all the more so, when we move to the level of capital, where Bailey’s insistence that comparisons of value across time are nonsensical makes any understanding of capital impossible. Furner writes, with Chris Arthur and others in mind:

> Many discussions of Marx’s theory of value focus on a couple of pages in Section One of Chapter One of *Capital*. In these passages, Marx is quick to distinguish between exchange-value and value as a purely social aspect of commodities and to identify its source in (abstract) labour. A number of contemporary advocates of Marx’s theory of value stress that neither issue can be resolved at this point.3 Furner is not arguing that Marx’s value theory – in particular the claims that value is a ‘purely social’ objectivity belonging to commodities which is distinguishable, though inseparable, from their exchange-value and that value’s ‘source’ is (abstract) labour – is indefensible. On the contrary, Furner writes as an advocate of Marxian value theory. His point is that Marx’s theory cannot be established at the conceptual level of the commodity (Chapter One)

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3 Furner 2004, pp. 89–90. The idea that Marx identifies ‘(abstract) labour’ as the ‘source’ of value is problematic since Marx calls ‘(abstract) labour’ the ‘substance’ of value. Source and substance are two different concepts. The moon is the source of tides but not their substance; the connection between moon and tides is empirical, not conceptual. Marx argues that socially necessary ‘abstract’ labour of the sort that produces commodities belongs to *what value is*. In Chapter One, Marx distinguishes three inseparable aspects of the complex phenomenon of value and treats each in turn: the substance of value, the measure of value, and the form of value. Marx identifies ‘abstract’ labour as the substance of value, labour-time as the immanent (not directly observable) measure of value, and exchange-value as the form of value. That Furner says ‘source’ where Marx has ‘substance’ is not accidental; it exposes a dilemma facing Arthur’s proposal for reconstructing Marxian value theory. If we *can* know what value is without any reference to labour, then labour (‘abstract’ labour) does not belong to the concept of value. Consequently, when labour is brought in (once we get to the level of capital, in Arthur’s proposal), it will have to be brought in as value’s ‘source’ rather than its ‘substance’. If we *cannot* know what value is at the level of simple commodity exchange, how will we develop Marx’s concepts of money and capital?
and by means of the ‘third thing argument’, but only as we move to the more complex phenomena of money and capital.

Furner is right to contrast my view with Chris Arthur’s:

With regard to the relation between value and ‘abstract’ labour, a difference emerges between Patrick Murray’s turn to Section Four of Chapter One on commodity fetishism, in which Marx sets out from a system of production organised in private yet materially dependent units in order to demonstrate why commodities acquire an ‘objectivity as values’ [Wertgegenständlichkeit], and Chris Arthur’s account turned towards the category of capital.4

Furner’s conclusion that Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ fails, and that it must do so, supports Arthur’s reconstructive initiative. Since I maintain that Marxian value theory does not require the reconstruction Arthur proposes – what is more, I do not see how the reconstruction can work – I need to show that, where these conclusions are concerned, Furner is mistaken.5 That is what I propose to do here.

Do commodities ‘have’ exchange-values?

Furner argues that Marx’s ‘third thing argument’, which is presented in the first section of Chapter One of Capital, begs the question. Furner first cites the passage where Marx reasons from the fact that a given commodity has multiple exchange-values to the conclusion that ‘the valid exchange-values of a particular commodity express something equal, and secondly, exchange-value cannot be anything other than the mode of expression, the “form of appearance”’, of a content distinguishable from it.6 Furner comments:

This passage begins by considering the fact of a given commodity’s exchange with many other commodities. These exchange-values are said to be exchange-values the wheat ‘has’. To say that the exchange-values belong to the wheat is taken to imply that there is something of which the wheat is further

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4 Furner 2004, p. 90. If Furner’s contrast is meant to imply that I adopt the traditional interpretation that Chapter One is about a precapitalist system of ‘simple commodity production’ – I am not sure that it is – it is mistaken. Capital is about the capitalist mode of production from the start.


possessed by virtue of which it has exchange-values. To grant the wheat such an intrinsic property allows one to say that there is a constancy that x boot-polish or y silk or z gold each represent and which makes them ‘of identical magnitude’. There is thus more to Marx’s reference to equality than the fact that a diverse set of commodities exchange for the same amount of wheat. There is said to be some intrinsic aspect to a commodity that any number of other commodities may represent such that in representing it they are equal.7

Furner thinks that Marx begs the question by claiming that a given commodity ‘has’ an exchange-value: ‘To say that the exchange-values belong to the wheat is taken to imply that there is something of which the wheat is further possessed by virtue of which it has exchange-values’. Furner seems to be using the term ‘imply’ as equivalent to ‘means’. In other words, Marx does not argue for the existence of a ‘something of which the wheat is further possessed by virtue of which it has exchange-values’; he assumes it in assuming that exchange-value is something that the wheat ‘has’.8 But Marx is not begging the question; he is arguing from something that commodities are observed to have, namely, ‘valid’ exchange-values, to something further, something intrinsic to the commodity, value.9

7 Furner 2004, p. 93.
8 I am not confident that I understand Furner’s line of thought here. Furner may be using ‘imply’ in the usual way, but then it seems that Marx does just what he proposes to do, namely, argue from exchange-values to value. Perhaps Furner thinks that Marx begs the question just by saying that a commodity ‘has’ exchange-values. That criticism does not work either. To see why will require a closer look at what Marx means by claiming that commodities ‘have’ exchange-values.
9 Value is intrinsic to the commodity not as a use-value – it is not one more natural or physical property – value is purely social and supersensible. It is an unavoidable consequence of the peculiar social form of the commodity. Bailey cannot conceive of a property that is wholly social yet intrinsic to the commodity. In denying that value is anything intrinsic to the commodity, Bailey is trying to dispense with the reality of the commodity’s social form. Neoclassical economists, in conceiving of value as something purely subjective, likewise deny that value is in any way intrinsic to the commodity. In doing so, they, like Bailey, try to brush off the reality of the commodity’s social form. Ironically, in doing so, both Bailey and neoclassical economists pride themselves on overcoming what they regard as a double fetishism regarding commodities. First, they expose the supposed fetishism of classical (Ricardian) value theory, which claims that value is intrinsic to the commodity. Second, swept up in the subjectivism of modern philosophy, Bailey and the neoclassical economists consider the attribution of use-value to commodities a further, less apparent, case of fetishism: usefulness, according to them, is purely subjective. Common sense, which takes usefulness to be objective (though not purely so), is living in a fool’s paradise according to Bailey and the neoclassical economists. Marx shows this speculative daring to be based on two phenomenological errors. It is a mistake to think that usefulness can be
Furner inverts Marx’s reasoning. It is not the question-begging assumption of some ‘intrinsic property’ to the commodity that ‘allows one to say that there is a constancy that x boot-polish or y silk or z gold each represent and which makes them “of identical magnitude”’. Marx’s argument is that the fluctuations of actual exchange-values (it is the fluctuations in the prices of commodities that Marx has in mind) display a pattern. Only on that basis do commodities have ‘valid [gueltige]’ exchange-values, and only on the basis of commodities having ‘valid’ exchange-values does Marx claim that they are ‘mutually replaceable’ ‘as exchange-values’. If the ‘valid’ exchange-value of a gallon of milk is three dollars and the ‘valid’ exchange-value of a gallon of gasoline is three dollars, I can replace the milk with gasoline by selling the milk and buying the gasoline. Marx takes the mutual replaceability of commodities to be sufficient evidence of their identical magnitude. But if these diverse commodities share some magnitude, what is its dimension? It cannot be milk, money, or oil. Since commodities have no sensible (physical) feature in common, the dimension must be a ‘supersensible’ one. Marx’s wholly separated from the specific properties of a commodity. As for value’s being intrinsic to the commodity, Marx would agree that there is something metaphysical in the derogatory sense about value. But Bailey and the neoclassical economists mistake the source of the problem; they blame it on a propensity to the metaphysical on the part of Ricardo and other classical value theorists. While Marx rejects as asocial the classical labour theory of value, he agrees with Ricardo that value is intrinsic to the commodity. In developing his purely social labour theory of value, Marx explains that this fetishism of the commodity, this intrinsic supersensible value that gives the commodity its clout, is an inescapable consequence of the peculiar social form of the labour that produces commodities. Value is intrinsic to the commodity because the commodity’s specific social form is intrinsic to it. That is why the denial by Bailey and the neoclassical economists that value is intrinsic to the commodity amounts to a denial that the commodity’s social form is intrinsic to it. Therein lies their second phenomenological error: they think that wealth can exist without any specific social form. They fall into what I call ‘the illusion of the economic’, that is, the illusion that the economy in general, the economy with no particular social form, can actually exist. Capital is the root of the bad metaphysics of value, not some metaphysical penchant on the part of economists.

Furner 2004, p. 93.

See Campbell 1997 for the argument that Marx begins Capital with the assumption that there are commodities and money in the sort of society he is examining.

Furner says nothing about Marx’s adjective ‘valid’.

‘Valid’ exchange-values require money. Only with money is there a unitary measure of value to provide a common scale with which to identify the fluctuations in exchange-value.

‘But although the commodity has a thousand different kinds of value, or a thousand different prices, as many kinds of value as there are commodities in existence, all these thousand expressions always express the same value. The best proof of this is that all these different expressions are equivalents which not only can replace one another in this expression, but do replace one another in exchange itself’ (Marx 1971, p. 147).
argument, then, goes from the observable replaceability of specific quantities of commodities (as determined by their ‘valid’ exchange-values) to the identity of their magnitudes (taking replaceability as the test of identity of magnitude). Magnitude is always magnitude of; it always has a dimension, but the various commodities do not share a use-value dimension. Milk is not money; money is not oil. Consequently, argues Marx, there must be a supersensible ‘third thing’ intrinsic to commodities, whose dimension is common to them.15

What does Marx mean by talking about a commodity ‘having’ exchange-values? Furner starts his commentary saying that ‘[t]his passage begins by considering the fact of a given commodity’s exchange with many other commodities’.16 This understates Marx’s claim. Marx asserts not simply that commodities are exchanged but that they have ‘valid’ exchange-values.17 In

15 Marx’s argument is complicated by the fact that some commodities, land, for example, are not products of labour. This point has long been taken as an obvious objection to Marx’s argument that the ‘third thing’ that commodities have in common is ‘abstract labour’, and it is an important consideration in Chris Arthur’s call for a reconstruction of Marxian value theory. In ‘The New Giant’s Staircase’, I point out that this seeming objection was anticipated by Marx – he spells it out in his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: ‘the last, and apparently decisive objection [to any labour theory of value, P.M.]... is this: if exchange-value is nothing but the labour-time contained in a commodity, how does it come about that commodities which contain no labour possess exchange-value’ (Marx 1970, p. 63) – and I argue that Marx answers the objection not only with his theory of rent but also with his strategy that makes capital in general, and the commodity as a representative (or aliquot) part of the ‘heap’ of commodities, the subject of investigation. Following that argumentative strategy, Marx need not make the claim, which he knows to be false, that every commodity is a product of labour. I know of no other strategy by which a Marxian labour theory of value can be developed.

16 Actually, this is misleading because it suggests a barter situation. Since it is a capitalist society Marx is writing about, all exchanges are between commodities and money. Marx does not consider goods exchanged in barter to be commodities, ‘The direct exchange of products [barter, P.M.] has the form of the simple expression of value in one respect, but not as yet in another. That form was x commodity A = y commodity B. The form of the direct exchange of products is x use-value A = y use-value B. The articles A and B in this case are not as yet commodities’ (Marx 1976, p. 181).

17 Marx takes it as a fact about the sort of society he is investigating, capitalist society, that wealth takes the commodity form and that commodities have prices. (That, of course, means that he takes the existence of money to be a fact of life in capitalism.) He writes, ‘the endless series [of exchanges between money and all other commodities, P.M.] is a socially given fact in the shape of the prices of the commodities’ (Marx 1976, p. 189). It belongs to Marx’s concept of a commodity that it ‘has’ a price. Marx says of the products of labour that ‘their taking the form of commodities implies their differentiation into commodities [on the one hand] and the money commodity [on the other]’ (Marx 1976, p. 188 n. 1). In limiting the scope of Capital to those societies where the commodity-form is dominant, Marx begins with a fact about capitalism: commodities ‘have’ prices. In the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy Marx makes no bones about this: ‘The busiest streets of London are crowded with shops
asserting that commodities have ‘valid’ exchange-values, Marx asserts that there are patterns to the fluctuations of exchange-values. Indeed, Marx insists that the only way that ‘valid’ exchange-values (prices) can exist is amidst fluctuations:

The possibility, therefore, of a quantitative incongruity between price and magnitude of value, i.e. the possibility that the price may diverge from the magnitude of value, is inherent in the price-form itself. This is not a defect, but, on the contrary, it makes this form the adequate one for a mode of production whose laws can only assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities.\(^\text{18}\)

Marx’s assertion that commodities ‘have’ exchange-values is an empirical claim, not a question-begging assumption. Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ cannot be made on the basis that goods exchange with other goods. If there were no money and prices and if there were no regularity to price fluctuations – if the law of value did not force its way through – there would be no ‘valid’ exchange-values. Then there would be no basis on which Marx could assert that commodities can replace one another, hence no basis for asserting that they are of identical magnitude. That would eliminate the observational basis for asserting a ‘content [Gehalt]’ intrinsic to commodities that is distinguishable from their properties as use-values. Without observable constancy in the fluctuations of prices, Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ for value cannot be made.

That Furner fails to recognise what Marx means by the ‘valid’ exchange-values of a commodity – hence fails to understand the observational basis for and the logic of the ‘third thing argument’ – shows itself in a point he makes against Andrew Kliman’s defence of Marx. Furner distinguishes between ‘actual price and average price over a certain period’ and goes on to say: ‘One does not need to think of average price as something a commodity “has”’.\(^\text{19}\) True, but this is because the concept of ‘average price’ is purely mathematical; it applies whether there is a pattern to the prices of a commodity or not. Furner does not grasp Marx’s concept of a ‘valid’ exchange-value (price): ‘valid’ price and ‘average price’ are not the same. Every commodity

\[^{18}\text{Marx 1976, p. 196.}\]

\[^{19}\text{Furner 2004, p. 96.}\]
has an ‘average price’ simply as a matter of computation; to have a ‘valid’ price, the fluctuations in a commodity’s actual prices must display patterns, which we take to reveal something about the commodity. These patterns, to which Marx refers with his concept of the ‘valid’ exchange-value (price) of a commodity, provide the evidence for Marx’s argument that value is intrinsic to commodities. Reasoning along these lines, Kliman observes that ‘whenever exchanges are merely contingent, ephemeral events’, a commodity cannot be said to ‘have’ an exchange-value.  

Kliman adds:

Marx could not successfully have derived the equivalence of commodities to one another from the mere phenomena of exchange . . . he instead derived it from a particular fact about capitalism – commodities ‘have’ exchange-value.

So it is not surprising that Furner – overlooking Marx’s concept of ‘valid’ exchange-value and the evidence to which he appeals – concludes that Marx’s argument begs the question. Furner is right that it makes no sense to say that a commodity ‘has’ an average price, but it does make sense to say of a commodity whose prices present a pattern that it ‘has’ a ‘valid’ price.

Furner recaps his case for why Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ begs the question as follows: ‘As the above discussion hoped to show, Marx actually begins his “third thing argument” by supposing exchange-values to be had by a commodity’. I agree that Marx asserts that a commodity ‘has’ (replaceable) exchange-values but disagree that he begs the question when he argues for value as distinct from exchange-value. What Marx means is that commodities ‘have’ ‘valid’ exchange-values, that is, fluctuations in their prices can be observed to show patterns. Furner does not recognise this; instead he interprets the meaning of ‘has’ in a way that leaves Marx begging the question. But there is nothing question-begging in asserting that commodities ‘have’ ‘valid’ exchange-values and arguing on that basis that they must have the supersensible, strictly social, property of value.

21 Ibid. What Kliman goes on to say, namely, that in capitalism ‘we think and say’ that a commodity has a price, is a step removed from Marx’s point. In saying that commodities ‘have’ exchange-values, Marx claims that prices exhibit patterns, not that people think that they do – though that is true too. Furner has a point, then, when he objects to Kliman’s appealing to common sense to establish this premise as a ‘fact’ of everyday experience (Furner 2004, p. 95). The fact relevant for Marx’s argument is a fact about prices, not what people think about them.
22 Furner 2004, p. 94.
Furner is no more convinced by Marx’s follow-up argument, where he takes any two commodities that are exchanged for one another and represents their exchange as an equation. Marx argues that such an equation implies that there is a third thing, value, which is neither the one commodity nor the other, but exists in both. Furner focuses on a phrase that comes up on p. 152 of Capital (the ‘third thing argument’ comes up on p. 127), where Marx praises Aristotle for ‘his discovery of a relation of equality in the value-expression of commodities’. Furner jumps on the phrase ‘the value-expression of commodities’, charging: ‘With this phrase, exchange can no longer be seen as the logical starting-point of Marx’s argument. Instead of value depending upon an equality, it is equality that is said to be found in the expression of value’. Furner detects a circular argument that moves from value, to equality expressed in exchange-value, then back to value, but his case is forced. Marx makes his argument that exchange-value presupposes value and is value’s expression some twenty-five pages prior to his use of the phrase to which Furner objects! Actually, Marx’s second argument builds on his first. If every commodity ‘has’ a ‘valid’ exchange-value, every commodity is mutually replaceable with every other commodity having the same ‘valid’ exchange-value. Mutually replaceable commodities, argues Marx, have the same magnitude. But two commodities having the same magnitude are equal to one another with respect to that magnitude. This allows Marx to represent their exchange as an equation, leading him to the ‘third thing’ (value) in answer to the question: What are these equal magnitudes, magnitudes of?

**On appealing to common sense**

Furner reprimands Kliman for appealing to common sense:

> What lends this argument [Kliman’s] a certain strangeness is that, at no point in Chapter One of Capital, could Marx be construed as providing a principled claim about extending validity to commonplace ideas. If anything, the way in which the idea of an intrinsic value is first introduced in contrast to what exchange-value ‘appears to be [scheint]’ suggests the inappropriateness of such an attempt.\(^{24}\)

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\(^{23}\) Furner 2004, p. 95.

\(^{24}\) Furner 2004, p. 96.
But Kliman does not assert that Marx considers common sense to be always reliable; neither is such a strong claim required to make his case. What is Furner’s point? That Marx does not endorse commonsense beliefs across the board? Who would doubt that? That no appeal to commonsense beliefs is allowable unless all are? Why accept that? Furner’s talk of the ‘inappropriateness’ of Kliman’s appeal to certain commonsense beliefs hardens later on: ‘It is neither desirable nor possible to rescue Marx’s “third thing argument” by appealing to commonplace patterns of thought’. Is Furner suggesting that Marx excludes all appeals to commonsense beliefs? But Marx regularly calls upon them, including in Chapter One. A striking example comes up in the context of Marx’s praise for Aristotle’s attention to the value-form. Marx argues that Aristotle was unable to discover the truth about value ‘because Greek society was founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labour-powers’. It was only the shift in common sense toward egalitarianism that made it possible to move forward:

The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion.

Suspicion regarding some commonsense beliefs is compatible with trusting others.

Furner argues against Kliman’s claim that common sense and behaviour take ‘commodities to have a worth independent of their actual exchange’. (Or does Furner want to argue that common sense need not draw such a conclusion?) Furner maintains that one need not conceive of an unusually high or low price as lying above or below some price that the commodity ‘has’ and consequently being a ‘rip-off’ or a ‘bargain’. Furner rightly connects the question of whether a commodity ‘has’ an exchange-value with the question of justice in exchange. If there is no exchange-value that a commodity ‘has’, there can be no question of its being sold above or below that exchange-value.

26 Marx 1976, p. 152.
27 Ibid.
28 Furner 2004, p. 96. One must be cautious in speaking of commodities having value prior to or independently of exchange. For Marx, the potential value of a commodity is realised only in exchange. To insist without qualification that value is independent of exchange is to slip into a Ricardian conception of value.
value: the discourse of justice and injustice in commercial transactions loses
its grip. In place of a discourse of just and unjust exchanges based on
commodities’ ‘having’ exchange-values, Furner recommends that we think
of prices as either ordinary or unexpected, ‘the only distinction that needs to
be made is the distinction between actual price and average price over a
certain period’.29 Here, Furner follows Bailey: since there is only exchange-
value (price), exchange-value is not the expression of anything intrinsic to
the commodity. Consequently, there can be no discrepancy between price and
intrinsic value. Unjust exchange is thereby excluded in principle.30 But common
discourse pertaining to justice in commercial exchange cannot be collapsed
into talk about ordinary and unusual prices.31 Someone who says that a certain
price is unjust does not mean that it is unusual.32 Ordinary discourse is
incompatible with Bailey’s contention that value is established exclusively in
the act of exchange.

In support of his claim that nothing in common sense or common practice
requires us to hold that commodities ‘have’ prices, Furner cites this passage
from Marx’s critique of Bailey, ‘the most ordinary merchant does not believe
that he is getting the same value for his £1 when he receives 1 quarter of
wheat for it in a period of famine and the same amount in a period of glut’.33
But Marx’s point here is the opposite of Furner’s. It is not that the ordinary
merchant sees that wheat does not ‘have’ an exchange-value, so that all there
is to say is that prices in conditions of famine or glut differ from the average
price for wheat. Marx’s point is that the merchant knows that the value of a
measure of wheat – and, with the value, the price that the wheat ‘has’ – is

29 Furner 2004, p. 96.
30 Thus, Marx concludes from Bailey’s theory of value: ‘A commodity cannot be
sold below its value any more than above it, for its value is what it is sold for’ (Marx
1971, p. 154).
31 St. Thomas Aquinas’s statement ‘it is contrary to justice to sell goods at a higher
price than their worth, or to buy them for less than their value’ (in Murray 1997,
p. 100), is representative of the common view.
32 ‘If 3 lbs. of coffee exchange for 1 lb. of tea today or would do so tomorrow, it
does not at all mean that equivalents have been exchanged for each other. According
to this, a commodity could always be exchanged only at its value, for its value would
constitute any quantity of some other commodity for which it had been accidentally
exchanged. This, however, is not what people generally mean, when they say that
3 lbs. of coffee have been exchanged for their equivalent in tea. They assume that
after, as before, the exchange, a commodity of the same value is in the hands of either
of the exchangers. The rate at which two commodities exchange does not determine
their value, but their value determines the rate at which they exchange’ (Marx 1971,
p. 132).
33 Marx 1971, p. 150.
not fixed; it will be greater in times of famine than in times of glut. The context of Marx’s observation is his criticism of Bailey’s identification of the value of one commodity with the amount of another commodity received in exchange for it (as opposed to the amount of the value of the other commodity); for example, the value of a day’s labour-power is a quarter of wheat. That makes the quantity of the latter commodity the (invariable) measure of the value of the first. Marx’s point is that even an ordinary merchant knows that a quarter of wheat changes value in times of famine or glut; it is no fixed measure of value. Correctly understood, this case of the ordinary merchant proves Furner wrong when he complains that it is ‘neither desirable nor possible’ to argue on the basis of ‘appealing to commonplace patterns of thought’. In this case of the ordinary merchant, that is exactly what Marx is doing. He refutes Bailey’s assertion that the quantity of one commodity is an invariable measure of the value of a second commodity by appealing to fact that even the most ordinary merchant knows better.

**Must the ‘third thing argument’ fail?**

Furner pushes his criticism of Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ further, arguing that defences of it ‘necessarily fail’ because, at the level of the argument in Chapter One of *Capital*, Marx cannot defeat Bailey’s rival subjectivist theory of value as ‘relative esteem’. Even if we grant Marx’s contention that ‘the exchange of commodities in given proportions could not proceed if it were not underpinned by some sort of qualitative homogeneity’, that will not prove that there is some supersensible property, value, that is intrinsic to commodities. Furner’s intention is not to defend Bailey’s theory that the ‘qualitative homogeneity’ underlying commodity exchanges is nothing intrinsic to commodities but rather purely subjective relative esteem. Furner is simply proposing that, at this level of argument, Marx cannot defeat Bailey and establish his own (labour) theory of value. But, like generations of interpreters and critics of Marx going back to Böhm-Bawerk, Furner overlooks the fact

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34 See Marx 1976, p. 130.
36 Furner 2004, p. 98. Furner passes over in silence the complications for Bailey’s theory of value raised by introducing ‘relative esteem’; for example, if value is ‘relative esteem’, then the exchange relation is not value – as in Bailey’s official theory – it is the expression of value.
that, both in Capital and in his critique of Bailey, Marx mocks the very idea of subjective value theory. Here is what Marx has to say (in the fifth paragraph of Capital) about the idea that usefulness is something purely subjective, that is, wholly separable from all particular features of the useful thing:

The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter.38

The brevity of Marx’s criticism does not detract from its profundity and finality. The idea that usefulness is something ‘qualitatively homogeneous’ is simply a non-starter. Marx does answer subjective value theory in the first chapter of Capital; it is just that few seem to notice.39

Is Bailey’s theory of value transhistorical?

Furner examines and sets aside one possible argument for the superiority of Marx’s value theory over Bailey’s, namely, the charge that Bailey uses ‘a transhistorical category’, relative esteem, ‘to explain a historically specific phenomenon’.40 After granting that there is a ‘real slackness about the way in which Bailey jumps from using transhistorical to historical terms’, Furner lets him off the hook because ‘in practice, Bailey used the concept of esteem in connection with terms particular to commodity production such as market competition’.41 Here, I think Furner underestimates Bailey. Bailey’s conception of ‘relative esteem’ is not transhistorical even in theory.

In his Critical Dissertation on Value (1825), Bailey introduces ‘relative esteem’ as follows:

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38 Marx 1976, p. 126. Marx directs this point explicitly against Bailey’s subjectivist theory of use-value, ‘it is through its own properties, its own qualities, that a thing is a use-value and therefore an element of wealth for men. Take away from grapes the qualities that make them grapes, and their use-value as grapes disappears for men and they cease to be an element of wealth for men’ (Marx 1971, p. 129). See also Marx 1971, p. 144. Marx closes Chapter One of Capital on this point, chiding those economists – he has just quoted Bailey – who ‘find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties’ (Marx 1976, p. 177).

39 In this criticism of subjective value theory, we glimpse Marx’s rejection of the subjectivism of modern thinking, what Marx often called the ‘bourgeois horizon’ common to modern philosophy and political economy. Conversely, it may be taken as an indication of Marx’s renewal of Aristotelian philosophy, which opposes the bifurcations of modern thinking. Perhaps that explains why it has been overlooked.

40 Furner 2004, p. 100.

41 Ibid.
It is only when objects are considered together as subjects of preference or exchange, that the specific feeling of value can arise. When they are so considered, our esteem for one object, or our wish to possess it, may be equal to, or greater, or less than our esteem for another; it may, for instance, be doubly as great, or, in other words, we would give one of the former for two of the latter.\textsuperscript{42}

Bailey does slur ‘preference’ into ‘exchange’, proving Furner’s point about his ‘slackness’; still, it is fair to say that Bailey believes that ‘the specific feeling of value’ arises only where we have a social practice of commodity exchange. In putting the term ‘exchange’ into his explanation of ‘relative esteem’, he introduces the idea that value exists only where there is generalised commodity exchange. In fact, Bailey says as much. Writing of Torrens’s ‘excellent’ observation ‘that value is not essential to the idea of riches’, Bailey wonders ‘whether it [value] is not always implied, and whether the latter term would have been invented in a state of society in which there was no interchange of commodities’.\textsuperscript{43} This conceptual link between ‘relative esteem’ and commodity exchange is further confirmed by Bailey’s praise for Smith’s definition of value as purchasing power: ‘the definition of Adam Smith, therefore, that the value of an object “expresses the power of purchasing other goods, which the possession of that object conveys”, is substantially correct’.\textsuperscript{44} Bailey’s conception of value as ‘relative esteem’ incorporates the phenomenon of commodity exchange; contrary to Furner, it is not transhistorical, even in theory.\textsuperscript{45}

We might say that, when Bailey insists that ‘relative esteem’ must be expressed in the exchange of commodities, he injects value-form theory into a conception of value meant to be purely subjectivist. But how can value-form theory, which conceives of exchange-value (price) as the necessary form of appearance of value, be an ingredient of a purely subjectivist account of value? Commodity exchange is an objective and historically specific social practice. If commodity exchange belongs to the concept of value, as it appears to in Bailey’s theory, the intent to frame a purely subjective theory of value is violated. Value-form theory is incompatible with any purely subjectivist value theory. So Bailey’s stab at a subjectivist theory of value does not represent

\textsuperscript{42} Bailey 1967, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{43} Bailey 1967, p. 166 note.
\textsuperscript{44} Bailey 1967, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{45} Compare Marx 1971, p. 163.
a viable alternative to Marx’s value theory, as Furner claims. If Bailey’s theory of value were transhistorical, Marx would be justified to criticise it as such – as Furner grants. But not being transhistorical does not make Bailey’s theory of value a viable option; instead, the theory implodes.

**Money**

Furner is correct that Marx’s theory of money is superior to Bailey’s because Marx explains what money expresses and why it exists. This provides a good reason to judge Marx’s theory of value superior to Bailey’s. Equally, though, it can be said of Bailey’s theory of value that it fails to explain why value exists. Though Bailey recognises value as specific to societies where there is commodity exchange, he has no account of why there is such a practice, hence why there is value, any more than he has an account of why there is money – and for the same reason. Bailey has no notion of the inseparability of forms of production and forms of distribution (exchange). Bailey is oblivious to the topic of the social form of production. Lacking that idea, Bailey cannot say why commodity exchange attains prominence in a society, which on his terms is the same question as why there is value. This counts against Furner’s claim that the superiority of Marx’s theory of value first appears when he gets to money. Marx can account for why there is value; Bailey cannot.46

Furner’s critique of Bailey’s thinking about money sidesteps several of its severe shortcomings. (i) Bailey does not understand what money is; that is, he lacks the proper concept of money.47 Bailey does not recognise that money must be the exclusive commodity in what Marx calls the general equivalent form of value; money is the one and only commodity that is ‘directly social’, in other words, directly and universally exchangeable.48 This connects to Bailey’s failure to recognise that commodities ‘have’ exchange-values, since

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46 Consequently, Bailey’s theory of value is, as Marx calls it, fetishistic: ‘Bailey is a fetishist in that he conceives value, though not as a property of the individual object (considered in isolation), but as a relation of objects to one another, while it is only a representation in objects, an objective expression, of a relation between men, a social relation, the relationship of men to their reciprocal productive activity’ (Marx 1971, p. 147).

47 Furner observes, ‘Marx claims that Bailey cannot say what money is an expression of and thus why it exists at all’ (Furner 2004, p. 102). True, but Marx claims that Bailey does not even understand what money is.

48 Marx 1976, p. 161. This involves an observational lapse on Bailey’s part, for the exclusivity of money’s character as directly and universally exchangeable is observable to the ordinary participant in a capitalist society: ‘Everyone knows, if nothing else,
that commodities have a common value-form which contrasts in the most striking manner with the motley natural forms of their use-values’ (Marx 1976, p. 139). It is a singular strength of Marx’s theory of money that it accounts for this phenomenon.

Furner never mentions the polarity of the value-form. Polarity comes up in Marx’s treatment of the simple form of value (in Section Three of Chapter One), which constitutes a reply to Bailey (Campbell 1997, p. 94): ‘The relative form of value and the equivalent form are two inseparable moments, which belong to and mutually condition each other; but, at the same time, they are mutually exclusive or opposed extremes, i.e. poles of the expression of value’ (Marx 1976, pp. 139–40).

Let us consider the first and third points in more detail.

(i) One could say that Bailey’s is not so much a theory of money as the denial that money exists.52 Money, according to Marx, is the commodity that exclusively occupies the universal equivalent form of value and thereby directly incarnates value. According to Bailey, there is no such thing. Bailey regards each commodity as a new kind and a new measure of value:

The value of any commodity denoting its relation in exchange, we may speak of it as . . . corn-value, cloth-value, according to the commodity with which it is compared; and hence there are a thousand different kinds of value, as many kinds of value as there are commodities in existence, and all are equally real and equally nominal.53

That commodities have a common value-form which contrasts in the most striking manner with the motley natural forms of their use-values’ (Marx 1976, p. 139).

51 See Marx 1971, p. 162.

52 Likewise, one can say that Bailey’s is not so much a theory of value as the denial that value exists. (i) Bailey denies that value is any one thing; rather, there are as many kinds (and measures) of value as there are commodities. (ii) Against Ricardo, Bailey insists that value is not a property of commodities; in fact, it is not a property of anything: nothing has value.

53 Bailey 1967, p. 39. Furner does not mention this passage, though Marx quotes it
With Bailey, everything is money and nothing is money.

(iii) Furner is right to trace Bailey’s theory of money back to his idea that the values of two commodities, A and B, can be compared only by seeing how each relates to C, a third commodity. Bailey explains:

If we wish to know whether A and B are equal in value, we shall in most cases be under the necessity of finding the value of each in C; and when we affirm that the value of A is equal to the value of B, we mean only that the ratio of A to C is equal to the ratio of B to C.54

But the ratio of A to C (say, ten gallons of milk to one ounce of gold) cannot equal the ratio of B to C (say, ten gallons of gas to one ounce of gold) unless A and B are commensurable. A subtle bait and switch is going on here. Bailey conflates the ratio of the units of A to the units of C with the ratio of the number of units of A to the number of units of C (ten to one). By eliminating the dimensions of A and C (milk and gold), the latter expression reduces to a number, ten, which could be compared to the number obtained by handling the ratio of B to C in the same manner. If the numbers are the same, we say A and B have the same value. But there is no justification for dropping the dimensions to arrive at this number. That leaves us comparing a ratio of ten gallons of milk to one ounce of gold with a ratio of ten gallons of gas to one ounce of gold.55 There is no way to equate these two ratios and determine that A and B have the same value, except to make the assumption that, as values, A, B, and C are homogeneous: they have a common dimension. Only then would the dimensions of A over C and B over C cancel out. But, to concede that A, B, and C have a common dimension is to concede the point of Marx’s ‘third thing argument’. Nothing in Bailey’s official conception of value allows us to do this.56
Capital

In his section on capital, Furner points up problems that Marx identifies in Bailey’s theory of profit. One problem goes to capital’s root: determining profit involves comparing the value of one’s investment with the value of the return, but Bailey excludes comparison of values across time.57 No doubt, this counts heavily against Bailey’s theory of value. Furner raises a further problem with Bailey’s theory of profit. Due to the multiplicity of kinds and measures of value in Bailey’s theory, profit, understood as the capitalist’s portion of the commodities sold, could go up while the value of profit could go up, stay the same, and go down – all at the same time – depending upon which measure of value one employs. Furner quotes Marx: ‘It merely amounts to a repetition by Bailey of his proposition that value is the quantity of articles exchanged for an article’.58 Referring to this passage, Furner mentions ‘the confusion between use-value and value that arises within Bailey’s discussion at the level of the commodity’.59 Ironically, by identifying value with the use-value of the commodity for which another commodity is exchanged, Bailey finds himself making that use-value an invariable measure of value.60 If, in the course of a year, wages go from one bushel of wheat to two, they have doubled according to Bailey’s thinking. But, as Marx pointed out in his appeal to the common merchant, everyone knows that the value of a bushel of wheat does not remain constant. Value is not use-value. By identifying value with use-value, Bailey wants the impossible – to wipe away the inescapable fetish character of the commodity form of wealth without changing the social form of production. Contrary to Furner’s thrust, this gives us a good reason to prefer Marx’s theory of value to Bailey’s already at the level of the commodity.

There is a problem with Furner’s argumentative strategy that cuts across his sections on money and capital. He reasons that Marx’s theory of value is superior to Bailey’s since, in the case of money, it can explain what money expresses and why it exists, while, in the case of capital, Marx’s theory of

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57 ‘Is it not a fact that, in the process of circulation or the process of reproduction of capital, the value of one period is constantly compared with that of another period, an operation upon which production itself is based?’ (Marx 1971, p. 154).
60 Actually, this is doubly ironic: first, because Bailey was so critical of Ricardo’s search for an invariable measure of value, and, second, because Bailey’s insistence that comparing value across time is senseless puts the whole issue of the variability or invariability of value out of bounds. On the latter point, see Marx 1971, pp. 150–1.
value allows, as Bailey’s does not, for comparisons of value across time, without which the circuit of capital makes no sense. All true, but one wants to know with what justification Furner introduces Marx’s theory of value in these sections. After all, he has argued that Marx’s own case for his theory of value, which goes through the ‘third thing argument’, begs the question. So how do we get to Marx’s theory of value at all?61 Furner provides no alternative line of argument. Rather, value drops into his sections on money and capital like a deus ex machina.

I have tried to make the case that Furner is wrong to think that, in assuming commodities ‘have’ exchange-values, Marx’s ‘third thing argument’ begs the question. It is wrong to think that there is any level at which Bailey’s subjective value theory can compete with Marx’s labour theory of value. With regard to the latter point, I have argued both that Marx directly attacks the idea that value can be purely subjective – the very idea of purely subjective utility is bogus – and that, because Bailey’s value theory incorporates the idea that value (‘relative esteem’) must be expressed in the exchange of money and commodities, it undermines its own claim to be purely subjective. One purpose I have in defending the way Marx develops his theory of value is to show that a reconstruction of Marx’s value theory along the lines suggested by Chris Arthur is unnecessary. I hope that none of this will detract from the service Furner has done by calling attention to Marx’s critique of Samuel Bailey and by forcing us to think through what it means for a commodity to ‘have’ an exchange-value.

References


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61 Marx emphasises the necessity to develop the concept of value at the level of the commodity, not capital, toward the end of his critique of Bailey, Marx 1971, pp. 164–5. See also p. 131.


Review Articles

The Paths of History
IGOR M. DIAKONOFF

Reviewed by JOHN HALDON

Civilisations, States and Empires

Igor Diakonoff belongs to a not inconsiderable body of scholars whose position in the academic community of the former Soviet Union was assured by his distinguished contributions to the study of history, in this case of the ancient Near and Middle East, in particular Mesopotamia, and south-west Asia. His work embraced the social, economic and cultural history of the region, and is especially notable for its attempt to elaborate a non-reductionist and complex model of ancient society, incorporating both the economic and the material conditions of existence of the social formations he studied, as well as their ‘cultural psychology’. In the present volume, first published in Russian in 1991, he attempts to show how the rules or norms underlying social relations of production in the ancient world, and the various political systems which they support, reflect universal regularities in the ways in which human societies evolve that are amenable to a systemic analysis. His demonstration is presented in the form of a survey of human history from ancient times to the present day.

The rise and fall of ancient and modern civilisations, empires and states has been a popular theme in comparative social and political history for many years, yet we still find the whole process fascinating – perhaps because in the modern world the notion of the ‘end of history’ has persuaded many that decline and fall is something that affects the past but not the present. While this is most certainly not the case – and that means that even the most powerful contemporary state systems are likely to occupy a very different position in the world in several centuries from that which they hold today – the dynamics of historical social change remain problematic because there are no simple answers to the question ‘why did such-and-such an empire rise when it did, and why did it collapse or succumb to external pressures when it did?’.

1 The discussion is complex and a range of different perspectives have been expressed in the recent literature. For a representative sample, see Di Cosmo 1999; Lieberman 1999; Tilly 1992; Goldstone 1991; McNeil 1989; Mann 1986a (reviewed by Wickham 1988); Carneiro 1987; Tainter 1988; Runciman 1989 (reviewed by Wickham 1991, pp. 188–203); Skocpol 1979; Rueschemeyer et al. 1985; Jessop 1990; Block 1988; Steinmetz 1999.
Diakonoff sets out a series of examples in order to offer his own explanation, and attempts to put a series of historical cases into a comparative context based on both a discussion of their economic, social and political-cultural systems, and a comparison of the systemic similarities and dissimilarities they displayed. Ancient and medieval China, examples from India, the neo-Assyrian empire, Achaemenid Persia, Athens, Rome, Byzantium and the early Islamic caliphates (Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties) among several others provide the main premodern examples, although other comparative material is also drawn upon. In the process, he challenges many, if not most, of the dogmas of traditional Soviet Marxist history-writing: the concepts of slave or feudal modes of production, the relationship of ‘base’ to ‘superstructure’ – which he recognises is immeasurably more complex and dynamic than has often appeared – and the understanding of transitions from societies dominated by one set of production-relations (and cultural systems) to another.

While critical of the sort of reductionist and dogmatic Marxism which characterised the Stalin years and left its imprint throughout Soviet intellectual life, Diakonoff’s aim is to show that the basic principles of Marx’s historical-materialist approach to human social evolution are still valid. But he argues that they must be brought up-to-date in respect of more recent social-scientific thought, and in terms of the basic model through which they can be represented and employed. Where Marx posited five stages of social evolution, Diakonoff proposes eight – primitive society, primitive communal society, early antiquity, imperial antiquity, the Middle Ages, absolutist society, capitalism and postcapitalism. Without much detailed discussion, he also expands the key dynamic elements in the original model, adding culture and technology to Marx’s notions of mode of production and class structure.

In spite of these efforts, the book remains tied to a fairly traditional version of the (Soviet) Marxist enterprise, merely displacing the weight of attention to a broader set of key factors which determined the possibilities for social and economic development. Likewise, and in spite of claims to challenge Eurocentrism, the book nevertheless retains a clearly Eurocentric focus or bias in elaborating a world model based on the study of the dynamics of social change in Mesopotamia, the ancient and medieval Mediterranean and Europe. This is perhaps inevitable, and it may be objected that every historian will necessarily begin from the empirical base with which they are most familiar. Thus Diakonoff rejects the notion of ‘feudalism’ as both too Eurocentric and devoid of sufficient specificity to be of value in looking at non-European societies. Yet his ancient near eastern model tends to inform his analysis of, say, T’ang China in such a way that the latter appears as a variant on the former. No doubt this is unintentional, but the method brings with it the result.

Recent comparativist surveys of world social and economic history have tended to concentrate in particular on developing both multi-factoidal models of social change, and in emphasising the non-exclusive nature of social evolution. Diakonoff, like Marx,
presents his survey largely in terms of individual social formations and their internal properties (although some allowance is made for technology transfer), thus allowing no room for other historical processes which transcend individual formations – migratory movements, trade and exchange of goods and ideas, military technology and logistical structures, and so forth – which also act causally on the societies they touch. This is problematic, for neither is there any discussion of the concept of mode of production, within which such phenomena might be understood or contextualised, nor of the relationship between very different but neighbouring social formations sharing a common system of production relations (whatever the varying phenomenal forms such relations took). While he does attempt to take adequate account of ideology and belief systems, through an examination of the cultural psychology of particular societies, this is not really sufficiently or convincingly integrated into his assumptions about causation. It is thus not possible, using Diakonoff’s approach, to generate a dynamic and generalisable explanation of socio-economic change. This is problematic given that, as we are told in the Introduction, this is the whole purpose of the book. It is also problematic because he does not take into account other strong theories of societal evolution, such as those derived from the works of Max Weber – in particular, he could have drawn upon already-established traditions (in the ‘West’) accessible to him which deal specifically with the cultural and non-class-reducible aspects of social structure. Often developed as critiques of what has been seen as the actual or potential class reductionism of some Marxist approaches, these might have helped broaden his critique of the Soviet tradition as well as help him to define what it is about his own Marxist approach which justifies the case he wants to build. It is likely that he did not have access to the work of, say Runciman, at least not in its fully-theorised form;² but he might usefully have drawn on the slightly older work of Parkin, for example, in respect of ‘closure theory’, as well as on other ‘bourgeois’ historical theorists and comparative social analysts.³

The primary absence, therefore, is a lack of theorisation – and thus of precision in the employment – of key concepts. There is no discussion, as remarked already, of mode of production: does it actually have any analytical value? If we follow Diakonoff, it is merely a descriptive category. Neither is there any discussion of what constitutes ‘the economic’, surely a crucial element in any historical-materialist discussion. Diakonoff distinguishes different systems from one another on materialist lines by focusing on the ways in which surplus is appropriated, and the ways in which means of production and labour-power are combined. His typology, however, remains almost entirely descriptive and provides little to explain social change. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the historical analysis in the book remains at a very high level of abstraction. We are given short accounts of a whole range of different societies which

² Runciman 1989.
are typical of a particular type of social formation, but the empirical detail is, in most
cases, both generalised and even inaccurate. Thus much of what Diakonoff writes
about the Roman, late Roman, Sassanid Persian and medieval Islamic worlds is both
out-of-date and out of touch with much recent scholarship (perhaps hardly surprising
given the intellectual climate in which he has lived much of his life).

In the following discussion, I will look at some of the key issues that I believe need
addressing if we are to get beyond such broad generalisations and such theory-poor
speculation. The possible range of the debate is vast, of course, and so I will confine
myself to looking at the question in respect of premodern, or ‘traditional’ social-
economic systems and the political structures that they evolve.

(i) States

Let us begin with the notion of the state, which Diakonoff takes for granted. 4
A universally accepted general definition which has any real analytic value is difficult
to achieve, partly because historians and anthropologists tend to define the state in
terms of the questions they wish to ask. Too rigid a definition merely acts as a conceptual
strait-jacket which ignores the fundamentally dynamic and dialectical nature of human
social organisation and so, as with any definition, the notion of ‘the state’ must remain
flexible if it is to generate explanations; it should function as a heuristic tool.

Adopting a provisional working definition would therefore seem appropriate at
this stage, even if its determining factors must be allowed to vary in both their
emphases and perspective. At one extreme of social-political organisation, the term
‘state’ can refer to a relatively short-lived grouping of tribal or clan communities
united under a warlord or chieftain who is endowed with both symbolic and military
authority (in anthropological terms, a ‘Big-man’ confederacy). Such ‘states’ rarely
survive for long, however, and are sometimes referred to as ‘proto-states’, since they
have not yet attained a degree of institutional permanence. Examples would include
the majority of the ‘nomad empires’ which arose on the Eurasian steppe zone from
the beginning of the first millennium BCE and periodically re-appeared until the
seventeenth century CE, with the possible exception – although the point is certainly
debatable – of the post-conquest Mongol ‘hordes’ in the early thirteenth and fourteenth
centuries.5 At the other extreme, we find more-or-less territorially unified political
entities, with an organisational ‘centre’ (which may be peripatetic) from which a ruler
or ruling group exercises political authority, and which maintains its existence
successfully over several generations. A key element in the evolution and degree of

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4 For some older literature, see Cipolla 1970; Cohen and Service 1978; Claessen and Skalník
follows on an updated version of the more detailed analysis in Haldon 1993; see also Haldon
1998.

5 See Runciman 1989, 152ff., for example.
permanence of such formations is that the authority of the ruler, or ruling group, is recognised as both legitimate and exclusive. In this respect, the ideological aspect is absolutely fundamental to state-building, a point to which I will return below.

This more permanent type of state formation might be defined in the first instance as a territorially demarcated region (although lands may well have been geographically dispersed and frontiers ill-defined or fluctuating, reflecting the process of formation – through amalgamation, conquest, inheritance and so forth), controlled by centralised governing or ruling establishments of some sort, which may have a monopoly over the use of coercion, and which usually have the coercive power to assert their authority over the territories they claim, at least on an occasional ‘punitive’ basis. How exactly such central authorities achieve these ends varies enormously from state to state and society to society. In all premodern states there have been gaps in the extent of state authority – border or mountainous regions, for example, difficult of access and untouched by state supervision; ‘tribal’ groups nominally owing allegiance and occupying territory claimed by the state, but not always easily brought under the state’s authority or control. Where geography has favoured a tribal pastoral and/or nomadic economy, the nomads have frequently formed important elements in the armies of conquest states, certainly in the initial stages of their evolution. However, this has also meant that they are both able and sometimes inclined to resist any central authority that does not directly favour their own interests because of their mobility, their internal social cohesion and self-sufficiency, and the fact that their wealth is generally easily moved away from the reach of state officials. By the same token, the relative patchiness of central control may represent a point on the line from local to supra-local state to empire (and back again), as with Assyrian control over neighbouring territories in the early period of expansion (ninth century BCE). Ideological power can overcome this at certain times, but by itself generally remains a short-term means of cementing such power-relationships. The very different configuration of power-relationships within different late ancient/early medieval states, for example, provides striking examples of the ways in which these features combined.

A key element in state formation is the generation of fairly complex ideological and legitimating systems, on the one hand, and, at the same time, more impersonalised and institutionalised modes of surplus extraction than proto-states or clan or tribal groupings are capable of developing. Administration based on kinship and lineage relationships, and the exploitation of kin-based modes of subordination, tends to be replaced by non-kinship-based bureaucratic or administrative systems (although kin and lineage are rarely entirely absent). In most examples, a bureaucratic-administrative
structure of some sort confers a clear advantage, and appears to be a necessity if the political system is to retain its non-tribal existence and cohesion. This point was already made by the Muslim philosopher and political analyst Ibn Khaldun. He saw this process as generally following the initial formation of a supra-tribal political entity from tribal elements under a chieftain of some sort, and pointed to the crucial role played by religion as a unifying element providing a new, supra-kinship set of relationships, identities and loyalties. While Ibn Khaldun was clearly working on the basis of his knowledge of the evolution of Islamic states, his main point remains valid for any state-formative process.\(^9\)

A relatively open-ended account, allowing for both variety and evolution in state forms, is thus to be preferred to a closed and descriptive formulation, which would otherwise exclude features found in some state formations but perhaps not in others. An obvious reason for this preference is the fact that the formation of a state is never a single event, but rather a longer-term evolutionary process in which state organisations respond to changing conditions through what Runciman refers to as ‘competitive selection’ of practices. Where these organisations fail to respond adequately, the state fails to develop further and fails. There are many different shades of ‘state-ness’, both in respect of the degree of actual physical control, and in the degree of ideological integration of the varying and often antagonistic elements occupying the territory claimed by a given central authority. Some historical states have been represented by claims to legitimacy based on consensus, having little or no power of coercion, and have survived generally for only a relatively short time. Those state élites that have military coercion at their disposal, at least in the early stages of their development, may remain relatively isolated from the social structures they live off, surviving only as long as they are able effectively to coerce or persuade support and resources. Others may move towards the establishment of a permanent and self-regenerating body of administrators, which draws its recruits from either specific groups within the state (tribal groups, for example), from particular family dynasties, or from those of a particular social or cultural background.\(^10\) They thus tend to evolve institutional structures – fiscal systems, military organisations and so forth – which establish their own sets of roles and discourses, divorced from the daily practices of ‘ordinary’ society. The state becomes a specialised, and dominant, set of institutions, which may even undertake the creation \textit{ab initio} of its own administrative personnel, and which can survive only by maintaining control over the appropriation and distribution of surplus wealth which this specialised personnel administers.\(^11\) This certainly became the case

\(^10\) This includes the establishment of slave bureaucracies and armies, deracinated from their original social and cultural context and dependent entirely on the system to which they owe their position.
\(^11\) There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years on the nature and form of state power in premodern state formations. See in particular Mann 1986a; and Runciman 1989, both of which discuss, from very different perspectives, the ways in which structures of social power
in Rome and Byzantium, in the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates and in the Ottoman and Mughal empires, for example. And it also seems that this distancing of administrative apparatus from social base, as well as from the kinship ties of the royal household, represents a developmental shift, a process of maturation, in the evolution of state formation through time. Where the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires recruited their administrative infrastructure from the élite families of the centre and provinces, bound together through kinship ties or vested interests shared with the ruling dynasty and its kin, more developed bureaucratic systems recruited their personnel from a wider social range and depended upon more broadly-available literary and educational possibilities. Of course, the picture is in all cases uneven and patchy, a mix of both ‘types’, and this simplification does a certain amount of injustice to many historical cases. But where we find these phenomena, we also find ‘states’ in the more modern sense of the term.

A key issue is to distinguish the problem of the reproduction of state formations from the ability of a particular dynasty to maintain itself in power over a number of generations with its retinues based upon personal loyalties and notions of honour, obligation and reciprocity. A crucial factor in state reproduction is the evolution of a bureaucratic élite which has a sense of its own function within the state/society, even if this élite remains closely tied to a particular social stratum (such as the slave administrators of the imperial household in first-century imperial Rome or the royal household in Assyria and Persia). At higher levels of state development, this élite identifies with a particular set of ideological and symbolic narratives, and can recruit and train its personnel into the institutional roles and behavioural patterns relevant to the maintenance and even expansion of these structures. The relative success of the first Islamic caliphates, the Roman, Byzantine, Chinese or Ottoman states, to name just a few examples, provides good illustrations of the different ways in which some political formations evolved stable, yet flexible, structures that permitted their survival over a long period regardless of major shifts in dynastic arrangements and changes in the nature of central authority itself. The relative failures of the early Frankish kingdoms illustrate the fate of political formations that failed to generate such structures.

The case of the Athenian empire may be used as an illustration. In spite of its success in mobilising a vast resource catchment area, in the form of allies and dependent cities and territories, Athens remained remarkably jealous of its rights of citizenship, although this by no means reflected an impermeable system.12 But the failure to expand citizenship and to create identities between centre and periphery13 reflected the failure to evolve

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13 There were notable exceptions such as Samos, for example, towards the end of the Peloponnesian war.
an integrated imperial élite based on a broad tax base within the core territories. Athens was thus always parasitical in respect of its allied and subordinate territories, and this deprived it of the sort of structural flexibility that would have permitted it to survive the crisis of 405–4 and the defeat at Aegospotami. As in some states, problems of both regional and lineage identities (however spurious or artificial the latter may usually in fact have been) dramatically vitiated attempts by a central authority to maintain itself as an effective power with real coercive potential over more than a few generations, even when supported by elements of a permanent civil or military bureaucracy. As a result, Athens’s strength broke down precisely at the moment when it was most severely challenged.

In general, the long-term survival of state systems depends on combining ideological legitimacy and hegemony with appropriate coercive power, especially to face situations during which external pressures build up. The relatively short lifespan of the Athenian empire must owe something to these systemic weaknesses. In contrast, the neo-Assyrian state of the tenth-eighth centuries BCE appears to have been able to maintain a solid administrative apparatus. Although partly dependent upon a social and ethnic identity within the palace, it was mainly founded upon a combination of taxation and tribute-raising (and associated bureaucratic skills) that provided a stable basis for supporting this apparatus. These resource flows were, in turn, integrated into a system of vassalage and dependency upon both the royal dynasty and the cult of Assur, which was quite deliberately introduced into the pantheon of conquered peoples.14

The late-ancient/early-medieval Persian kingdom of the Sassanids provides a good example of a remarkably successful dynasty in which ideological legitimacy and a bureaucratic administrative structure were successfully combined to hold in check powerful centrifugal tendencies, including competition among several equally powerful clans, for some four centuries. The power of the Sassanid royal house depended very largely on two interlinked factors. First an ideological commitment by a powerful group of regional clan or dynastic chiefs (the Sassanian ‘aristocracy’, from whom the royal house was itself drawn) to the legitimacy of the dominant dynasty (which claimed politico-religious authority sanctioned both by a claim to ancient lineage and military leadership). Second, a willingness on the part of that dynasty to rule without challenging the key interests of that aristocracy, whether ideological, political or economic.15

Elsewhere, the failure to maintain these two interlinked factors in the course of dynastic rivalries, as well as questions of honour, shame and competition, inevitably undermined central authority. The Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) can be understood from this perspective, for already by the later ninth century the central power was

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14 See Pecírková 1977; 1987; Postgate 1974; also Liverani 1984.
heavily compromised by the growing autonomy of provincial governors and by generals commanding armies in the central lands. It could be argued that it was only the need to attain ideological legitimacy within Islam that held the wider polity together, and successful religious-ideological opposition in Africa, Egypt and the Arabian peninsula led to its disintegration into multiple caliphates.

(ii) Ideological integration and state survival

The importance of an integrated bureaucratic élite with its own resource base, as well as an ideologically-rooted identity and legitimacy, has thus been a key element in the sustenance of historical state formations. Yet it is clear from a cursory comparison of a number of ancient and medieval states that a central authority can survive for substantial periods simply through the manipulation of key ideological and symbolic elements in the cultural system of the social formation as a whole. South-Indian temple culture and the attendant state structures, particularly as exemplified in the Chola and Vijayanagar empires, provide classic examples. They also illustrate the central importance of legitimation within symbolic terms of reference – that is, within the symbolic universe of a given cultural formation – and of the social/cultural groups which are generally responsible for their maintenance, whether priestly groups or official churches or cult organisations or aristocratic élites endowed with particular symbolic authority.16

Thus, states may have an ideological life that is not necessarily tied to their actual political and institutional efficacy or power. This point is emphasised by Michael Mann, who has reasonably criticised Marxist historians for their failure to integrate belief systems adequately into the dynamics of social evolution and change, even if one can disagree with his judgement that a historical-materialist approach must necessarily exclude this aspect. For political ideologies and belief systems, once in existence, are sometimes well able to adapt and to survive in conditions which have evolved well away from those within which they were originally engendered, provided the contradictions between the two are not too extreme or insurmountable in terms of social praxis and psychology. Those which respond to long-term functional needs in human society provide the best examples. Religious systems in particular, such as Hinduism, Islam or Christianity, do, to a greater or lesser degree, free themselves in certain respects from both the political and the social and economic conditions which produced them, at time constraining the direction of social-economic evolution within those societies. ‘Political’ ideologies can also be extremely flexible. They may provide a rationale for conflict where no visible or obvious reason in terms of competition for material resources exists, for example. And they can also be extremely powerful. Many states were, in effect, little more than territories under the nominal authority of a ruler,

16 See, for example, Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976.
but in which actual power was exercised by a tribal-, clan- or family-based socio-economic élite. The position of such an élite might originally have depended upon the central ruler and/or the conditions in which the state came into being (by conquest, for example), but became, in practice, independent of the centre because of their actual control over resources or other historical conditions. Yet, in such cases, we find that the very idea of a centralised kingdom or state, together with the residual power of concepts such as honour and loyalty to a particular dynastic succession or a set of constitutional arrangements, were enough to maintain at least a fictional unity of identity. The later history of the Byzantine state from the thirteenth century to its final extinction in 1453 exemplifies this particular type of development. The Assyrian empire in the later ninth and first half of the eighth centuries BCE partly survived, it appears, because of the strength of these symbolic and ideological relationships, in spite of political strife at the centre and the loss of certain more distant western territories. The Holy Roman Empire provided an expanded base for Hapsburg rule in central Europe up to the seventeenth century primarily through the ideological power of the Roman Imperial ideal, rather than through the dynasty’s coercive or organisational strength. Finally, the repeated unification of China after its initial integration under the Qin and early Han appears to be at least partly rooted in the persistent ideal of a single Chinese imperium, an ideal that survived multiple defeats and disintegrations of particular dynasties.

These points suggest that a crucial element in the longer-term success of a state formation is a degree of acceptance of that state as normatively desirable, especially by élites, but even by the broader populace from which it draws its resources. I do not mean to revive the ‘consensus’ theory of state formation, but rather to stress the significance in the structuring of political relations of power and resource-distribution of rules, ‘law’ and forms of normative behavioural patterns. These differed enormously between historical cases. Some states survived only by virtue of their ability to coerce submission and the extraction of surplus wealth on a more-or-less continuous basis, such as the Aztec empire of Mesoamerica or the empires of the Mongol hordes. But, over the longer term, this has not been a particularly effective way of evolving or maintaining state power. A good example of more lasting imperial power is provided by the development from Republic to Empire in the case of Rome. Here, a conquest state was able to evolve an ideological hegemony which in turn generated a consensual identity among the élites incorporated within the conceptual world that the Roman conquerors delivered. This process hinged on a deliberate erasure of pre-existing political structures in many – although by no means all – the conquered territories.\textsuperscript{17} Although most states first evolved in the context of an imbalance between military coercion and co-operative participation, those that have been most successful have

\textsuperscript{17} Hopkins 1978; MacMullen 1966; Badian 1968.
usually generated increasingly complex relationships of reciprocity, consensus and interdependence with other elements of the social formations upon which they draw, but also influence. Leading elements of conquered groups or previous political formations, whether these are tribal and clan leaders, merchant élites or aristocracies, have thus been of particular importance in this process. Many states, established after a relatively brief period of military expansion and conquest, came to rest very heavily on such ideological structures for gaining the support of varied élites. The Indian examples mentioned earlier provide a good illustration of such systems. Equally, the Merovingian kingdom during the sixth and seventh centuries depended very heavily on the support and goodwill of the pre-existing Gallo-Roman élite and the episcopal establishment (the two were anyway very closely integrated), especially in its southern regions. The Ottoman rulers also relied, especially during the fifteenth century, on their Christian vassals as a counterweight to the power of the Turkish tribal and clan élites both in the Balkans and Asia Minor.

In the Western tradition, this ideological integration has generally been seen, until recently, at least, as a secondary aspect of state formation, a reflection, perhaps, of the dominance of military institutions and coercion in the political history of the western Eurasian world. In fact, comparison with different types of state suggests that this prioritisation may be misplaced. In the southern Indian state of Vijayanagar, political power rested on the exploitation of a core region, the source of immediate royal income, while the areas furthest away from the centre of military and political coercion were attached primarily through occasional military expeditions and by connections of a ritual nature. Rulers reinforced their legitimacy and claims to overlordship by exploiting the religious-ideological authority of key religious centres and temples for royal rituals, in return for which they undertook to support such institutions through a variety of endowments, regular gifts in cash and in kind, grants of labour services, and so on. It was through their involvement in such rituals that members of dominant social groups could be incorporated within, what was in practice, a network of royal and spiritual patronage. At the same time, the rituals legitimated more localised authority and power, so that the system as a whole provided a rationale for the prevailing political institutions and social-economic relations.19

18 See especially the valuable discussion of Wood 1977/9; and Heinzelmann 1975; Lewis 1976. Bishops represented a very important focus of spiritual power and authority, backed by sometimes quite extensive ecclesiastical revenues, quite independent of the royal and lay establishment. By the middle of the seventh century, the blending of Frankish and Gallo-Roman élites meant that the episcopate was more closely connected, through kinship, to the secular élites of the Merovingian kingdom.

The political relationships of the Vijayanagar state have been described by the concept ‘ritual polity’, just as, to a degree, the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and other empires in which religious/priestly élites and temple economies played a central role. The concept refers to a process of ‘intense ritual penetration of everyday life’. There is, of course, a danger in this notion of turning these specifically-structured systems of governance into an idealist notion of theocratic, or ‘Asiatic’ stability. Here, the rise and fall of states and power élites would be determined by ‘religion’, and economic relationships created by the demands of religious observance and beliefs or perceptions. However, it is clear that rulers were generally quite aware of the process of religious-political manipulation necessary to the maintenance of their power, and especially of the need to maintain control over resources in order to invest in this ritual system on a grand scale in order to continually legitimate their position. More significantly, it is clear that, when we examine a number of ancient state formations more closely, this ritual incorporative facet and the ways in which cultic systems function at both the political and economic levels to bind a wider territory together was widespread, and represented in practice one of the commonest means of empire-building – whether we are concerned with the Babylonian, Assyrian or any of the other early Near-Eastern empires. The point is clear in the Assyrian and Achaemenid Persian imperial systems, for example, where the rulers of both empires became actively involved in the dominant cults of conquered territories. The latter were then assimilated into a broader network of divine relationships, participation in which guaranteed both continuing divine support and therefore political and institutional stability.

Indeed, the ‘ritual penetration’ of a society is common to all premodern (precapitalist) social formations, but to different degrees. It is constituted by specific sets of social practices that express the legitimacy and belief system underpinning élite and central authority, and which generally express and reinforce the structure of social relations of production. In some societies, they have come to be the dominant expression of relations of production. As Godelier pointed out, each social-cultural formation represents and practices economic relations in different forms, the location and origins of which must be the subject of specific empirical analysis. In each case, the combination of a specific political universe, ecological context, kinship structure and religious configuration promoted the varying role and position of such ritual and transactional networks. In southern India, the incorporation of social praxis into a temple-orientated system of redistribution of surplus wealth and political legitimacy, combined with the particular and highly-fragmented character of the political geography of the region, meant that the process of state formation was always inscribed within such relationships. Legitimacy, in these structures based on political-religious relationships, depended to
a very great extent on consensual acceptance. The situation was not so different in ancient Assyria and Babylon.

But, in the case of Indian states, there is an additional factor to be taken into account. The ideological structures of Hinduism, and its contingent social practices tended, under certain conditions, to render the functions normally assumed by state structures dangerously redundant, especially those of maintaining order and internal cohesion. If we assume that states provide both centralised authority and, more importantly, normative rules for legal, social and economic relationships, then it becomes clear that, in the Hindu context, these characteristics of state organisation are already present in the internal order of religious and social life – the lineage structures and caste attributions alone provide for much of this. Although the two cases have rarely been compared, a similar argument could be made for certain varieties of Islam given the permeative strength of *Shari’a* as a guide to day-to-day patterns of behaviour down to the humblest levels of household existence. One could draw similar conclusions about the interface between state structures (and their functions), law and normative social behaviour for a few cases within Christianity, especially for certain post-Reformation movements. It would be interesting to examine some of the ancient state formations about which we have evidence in an attempt to see whether similar relationships did, or could, prevail, or whether, as argued by Mann, it is only the most recent salvationist systems which can achieve these results.

The persistence of ideological integration can allow states to survive even with considerable administrative decentralisation. State centres which are unable to maintain control and participation in the process of primary surplus distribution (through direct taxation, for example, or the ability always to coerce militarily), must attempt to survive by promoting their interests through alternative, secondary means of surplus re-distribution. Such means include both the ‘devolution’ of military and other authority, for example, to the level of the fief or an equivalent institution, as in Western Europe during the period from the sixth to the sixteenth century. They also include networks of redistribution reinforced and operated through primarily religious structures.

Of course, both Islamic and Christian rulers and élites (as well as those adhering to other universalist systems) have legitimated the extraction and distribution of surplus – which is to say, in effect, the continued existence of their respective states – through political theologies and ideological narratives. These highlighted the necessary duty of the state and its rulers to defend the faith and to promote the variety of associated activities which this entailed. At the same time, they had to be seen to reinforce and re-affirm their particular symbolic universe through ritualised expressions of faith and the redistribution of considerable amounts of surplus wealth to their

22 See in particular Stein 1985, esp. pp. 74ff.; and in general Saraswati 1977. For a detailed discussion of these points, with further literature, see Haldon 1993, pp. 242ff.

religious foundations. In the Byzantine world, the complex ceremonial of the imperial palace, the close relationship between the emperor (with the state) and the Church, and the supervision by the Church of popular beliefs and kinship structures, created an impressive ideological and symbolic system of legitimation. However, one should point out that this system, in contrast with the South-Indian examples, did not serve as a key institution of surplus distribution necessary to the economic survival of the state institution. Similar networks can be seen in the Islamic world, in Western Christendom, and in the Chinese empire. And, in the case of both Christianity and Islam, ritual incorporation (that is to say, conversion) served as a fundamental tool of political integration and domination. The ‘segmentary’ states (see below) of South and Central America provide closer parallels to the South-Indian case, for here temple-centred redistribution of surplus and tribute was a crucial means through which surplus appropriation and political authority were maintained.24

(iii) States and élites

Since S.N. Eisenstadt’s classic study of the dynamics of empires, the pursuit of resources by élites has been seen as central to understanding imperial states. Particularly important is the nature of the power-relations that dominated élite relationships – both within state apparatuses and between élites and the broader social formation.25 How independent of society were state functionaries, individually or as a group? How limited were state apparatuses by the social and economic relationships which dominated a given society? Was the state, as a set of institutions, dependent upon a social and economic élite, or ‘ruling class’, or upon an alliance of tribal lineages and identities (which may or may not have had any historical substance), or upon some combination of these?26 To what extent did emergent states incorporate existing élites? The relationships between these considerations and the origins of a given state system, on the one hand, and the appropriation, allocation and distribution or re-distribution of resources, on the other, constitute a series of focal issues.

These considerations are important because the state, while it provides a framework for the development of certain social and economic relationships, through its need to establish and then maintain a regular and predictable structure of surplus extraction, also enables or facilitates the evolution of new practices and relationships. This is clear in the evolution of the Roman state and empire, as well as in the way in which, for example, the East Roman/Byzantine state transferred the focus of its attention in fiscal matters away from urban centres to village communities during the course of

24 For ‘ritual penetration’, see Mann 1986a, p. 361; but against his argument that it was only the major world – salvationist – religious systems that offered such possibilities, see Wickham 1988, esp. 68–72. For the function of ‘ritual enclosure’ in pre-Columbian South American cultures, see Marcus 1976; and esp. 1984.
26 See for discussion Haldon 1993, pp. 140ff.
the seventh and eighth centuries. Such processes radically altered social relationships between landlords and tenants, on the one hand, and between peasant producers and towns, or the state, on the other. Similar examples exist in the cases of the Ottoman and Mughal states. In the Ottoman case, the growth of a local ‘nobility’ during the seventeenth century, together with the permanent garrisoning of imperial salaried troops and Janissaries in the provinces, radically altered the relationship between central government and regions (generally to the disadvantage of the former). Such changes were made possible precisely because of the state’s perceived fiscal and military requirements.

Thus the state also created spaces in which new developments could take place. One can think here of the role of tax-farmers in the Byzantine, Ottoman and Mughal contexts, who were both extractors of surplus and potential agents with the ability to change patterns of investment or consumption of wealth, and structures of money-use on the part of both producers and state administrations. In some cases, the existence of a central fiscal administration may have given hitherto unimportant local leader – village headmen, small-scale local landlords – a more significant role in the process of surplus appropriation and accumulation, leading to shifts in the political order of power at the local level and ultimately reacting back on the state itself. In sixteenth-seventeenth-century Indian states, the role of pre-imperial village elites and rank-attritions had a significant influence on the ways the Mughal state and its regional predecessors and successors, could organise, just as the existence of centralised state apparatuses and their demands for surplus in turn affected the ways in which these local relationships worked, opening up new social space within which they could evolve.

As we shall see again and again below, the evolution of states turned on how rulers sought new ways to maintain control over state (and often non-state) elites, while elites sought to maintain their authority – whether at the expense of the state, or rivals for local power. This leads in turn to a consideration of how such state-elite relationships form part of a complex social totality. They combine local and international structures which reciprocally, but unevenly, influence one another across the boundaries of social formations.

(iv) States, empires and complexity

One important aspect of any discussion of states and their histories must be the differential processes of evolution reflected in their age or maturity. ‘Mature’ states

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28 See, for example, Goffman 1990, pp. 26ff.
29 See, on these issues, the excellent discussion of Perlin 1993, esp. pp. 36ff., pp. 51–74.
30 For the ‘overlapping’ character of socio-economic and cultural structures, and the ways in which such reciprocal influences are hierarchised according to the relative strengths of the state, social, or cultural forms, see Rowlands 1987, and Hedeager 1987.
must confront very different problems from ‘young’ states. The degree to which their various institutional and ideological systems become well-established and entrenched, and embedded into the basic fabric of the social formations which support them, must play an important role. In newly-formed conquest states, the conquerors are rarely integrated into the wider structure of social and economic relationships. They remain, in effect, parasitic consumers of wealth extracted by force, or the threat of force, alone.

The ‘empire’ of the late Roman Republic can be examined from this perspective. In others, while this may once have been the case, centuries of ‘state-embedding’ have occurred, so that the state élite, its apparatuses and its ideology are inextricably interwoven into the social fabric of society at large. Major change then tends to be represented through shifts in dynastic and international politics, whereas fundamental change follows from technological and economic transformations. Differences in their histories, together with features such as the relative strengths of different methods of productive activity – especially as between sedentary peasants and nomadic pastoralists – can have very important implications for the direction in which states develop. These factors also influence both the contemporary as well as the modern views of certain states: the Byzantine ‘empire’ was, in many respects, just a small, territorially-unified state. Its ‘imperial’ aspect was both short-lived and occasional, yet it retained the image of an empire because of its ‘imperial’ origins, as part of the Roman imperial system.

This brings us at last to the one of the key questions at the heart of this volume, the nature, constitution and dynamics of empires. In a recent discussion, empires have been described very straightforwardly as the effects of the imposition of political sovereignty by one polity over others, however achieved, and the key marker of an ‘imperial’ state was thus the degree of ‘foreign-ness’ perceived to exist between rulers and ruled, conquerors and conquered. In the simplest terms, then, the study of empires becomes the study of the subordination of one ‘state’ or social formation by another, and the extent to which the conquerors are successful in converting these peripheral zones into a part of their original state, both ideologically and in terms of fiscal, military and administrative structures.

In some respects, this definition overlaps with the notion of the ‘segmentary’ state, intended to suggest a multi-centred, confederated political structure in which ideological elements and consensus play as great a role as centrally-exercised coercive power. Although many early states functioned on the basis of a series of concentric zones of power distribution, focused around a political core, we might reasonably describe ‘empires’ on the same lines. From this perspective, the issue of their success and

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31 See, for example, the discussion by Berktay 1991.
32 Doyle 1986, p. 45.
33 For the ‘segmentary’ state, see Southall 1956; 1965; also Stein 1977. For criticisms of the way this concept has been used, however, see Champakalakshmi 1981; Kulke 1982.
longevity will revolve around the same key questions: to what extent are empires of conquest able to impose upon the conquered lands and cultures their own ideological/cultural values, patterns of administration and élite formation, and thereby create out of a range of different socio-cultural formations a more-or-less homogeneous set of political values and ideological identities? Of all the ‘empires’ discussed in Diakonoff’s volume, the Roman – and its successor in the east Mediterranean basin, the Byzantine – states were among the most successful in this respect; while the various Chinese states, especially from the T’ang onwards, and perhaps with the exception of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, achieved similar rates of successful integration, although the vastness of the Chinese lands and the regionalisation of Chinese élites meant that this process was always contested and achieved at some cost.

Historians have generally referred to the expansive political entities of the East and pre-Renaissance Europe as ‘empires’ – whether that of China, of Charlemagne, of Rome, Russia, Persia, Byzantium or many others. The ‘national state’ is then something that emerges with the renaissance monarchies of Europe. Yet, in fact, most so-called ‘national states’ emerged through conquest or inheritance of previously distinct political/cultural domains even in Western Europe. This was true of the integration of Ireland into the British monarchy (or monarchies, as Scotland remained institutionally distinct as well into the eighteenth century); it was true of the French incorporation of regions such as Flanders, Alsace/Lorraine, and the Burgundian inheritance; it was true of various Italian peninsular states; and it was a fortiori true for such expansive multi-national entities as the properly named Prussian, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. In the nineteenth century, much of Africa and south Asia was then forcibly incorporated into empires ruled from European metropoles. ‘Empire’ was thus arguably the normal or modal form of large political entity throughout Eurasia up until quite recently. The true national state claimed by citizens as their own through their identification with a ruling élite to which all (or very nearly all) members of society could legitimately aspire is a quite recent phenomenon. It is perhaps only visible from the end of the eighteenth century in the United States and France, and from the nineteenth century in South America and most of Europe. In terms of political, cultural, and social integration and ideological unity, the late Byzantine and Ming Chinese states were more ‘national’ territorial states than was the late eighteenth-century British monarchy, which ruled over parts of North America, India, the Caribbean, Ireland, Scotland, and England as well as other overseas possessions.

While some empires about which historians are informed evolved through strategic alliances based on kinship or inheritance through gift or marriage, the majority of those political formations which we conventionally label as empires were the direct result of military conquest. However, the key defining element constituting ‘empires’ here is not simply their origins, but rather the mode through which states and élites exercised power and their relationships to each other and the broader society. In these
terms, an ‘empire’ is a territory (contiguous or not) ruled from a distinct organisational centre (which may be mobile) with clear ideological and political sway over varied élites who, in turn, exercise power over a population in which a majority have no access to, nor influence over, positions of imperial power. Such empires may, over time, acquire a great deal of cultural unification and identification between rulers and ruled (as in Ming China or late-Imperial Rome); or there may be a clear gulf between rulers and ruled (as in the Ottoman rulers of Christian territories in Europe and most of the Mongol empires); or there may be partial integration of local élites and even limited pathways for certain ordinary individuals into broader imperial structures (as in the Jannissary recruitment system of the late Ottoman Empire or the multi-national élite of the Austro-Hungarians). While the particular patterns of state/élite relations and how they were institutionalised in modes of surplus extraction and distribution varied over space and time, ‘empire’ in this sense was the typical formation by which large territorial states were ruled for most of human history, from several thousand years BCE until the last century or two.

Diakonoff’s broad-ranging descriptive account sets out to answer four key questions: how did such political formations come into being? How did they survive? What was the structure of power relations which facilitated this (or not), and what were the value orientations of the cultural systems in question? What was their economic basis in respect of both the production, distribution and consumption of wealth, on the one hand, and the expansion of the basis upon which wealth could be generated – whether quantitative (territorial expansion, for example), or qualitative (changing technologies of production, expanding trade or shifts in the structures of capital investment)? It is precisely in relation to these questions, I argue, that he fails to make any substantial contribution to the discussion, even if his reflections on the relationships between productive forces and technology, social relations and the labour process, and his reference to the social psychology of culture provide some important insights into causal priorities.

The problem partly comes down to his inability to determine at what level of explanation he wishes to situate the discussion. There are at least three temporal frameworks across which the generation of states may be understood, which we may call, for the sake of argument, macro-, meso- and micro-levels. While these are not equivalents for Braudel’s long, medium and short durées, they are similar in concept. The macro-level is perhaps best illustrated in the recent work by Diamond, which posits very long-term evolutionary pathways determined primarily by ecological conditions. Once a particular set of conditions has stimulated a particular set of responses in terms of demography, reproductive patterns, nutritional systems and technologies, then micro-level shifts and causal relationships are determined in their effects entirely within that set of constraints. In this framework, once the appropriation of surpluses from nature reaches a certain level, and this is combined with a certain
density of settlement and ability to transmit coercive force, then states and empires become possible. Ecological and evolutionary pathways then lead to further increases in density, surplus, extraction, and concentration of coercive force, or not. On these grounds, the geography, flora and fauna of the Fertile Crescent at the end of the last ice age (ca. 11,000 BCE) conferred specific advantages which gave the human societies which evolved there a permanent advantage over areas which were unable to offer those conditions. At this level of generality, of course, the value of specific data in terms of historical political systems is merely that it should not contradict the evolutionary pathways thus sketched out, and it is of little help in determining the causal relationships behind the rise and fall of specific imperial formations within ecological regions, which inflected historical development.

At the meso-level of explanation, however, we can begin to grasp issues pertaining to specific empires and peoples, and the way they impacted on a particular trajectory of development. Here, we are confronted with particular, but broadly-located, cultural systems set within specific geopolitical contexts which give rise to or support particular types of political structure (such as the fertile crescent, the Indus valley, the Eurasian steppe, the central and western European zone, the mountain and plateau regions of central and south America). Such differences tend to reflect fairly straightforwardly geographical catchment areas. On this point, one can contrast China with its extensive cereal and rice culture, extensive power relationships, vast manpower resources and consequent assumptions about use and availability of labour, with the micro-cosmic systems of the southern Balkans, Asia Minor and the Mediterranean basin; or again the Indian sub-continent with its contiguous zones of relatively open plain, semi-arid coastal and plateau regions, mountain and forest.

At the micro-level, finally, we need to interrogate local variations (in both time and space) affected by chronologically specific divergences in social praxis and fortuitous shifts in social relations that are instigated by issues of resource availability, competition and access to centres of production and distribution, density and rate of reproduction of population groups, and the relations of social re-production. At issue here, in other words, are the contingent patterns of kinship, control of resources and allocation of power and authority which are the products of those highly specific conditions.

While macro-level discussion provides a helpful framework for very long-term shifts in patterns of economic and technological development, it is chiefly at the micro- and meso-levels that plausible answers may be offered to specific historical evolutionary developments. One of the most important issues that emerges is that of avoiding an overly reductionist model – although lack of firm empirical data often makes this problematic – in grasping the actual workings of a given state formation in its social, economic and political context. For several empires, the preponderance of archaeological

34 Diamond 1997.
and documentary evidence concerns the state, its projects and operations. Thus an imbalance naturally emerges, with attention to the state’s internal structure and its relations to élites playing a far greater role in analysis than the equally important – from a theoretical point of view – relationship between élites and local populations or the social relations governing daily life within the empire. The limitations of definitions of state organisation confined for the most part to governmental and administrative structures must be obvious, yet the discussion has generally been confined – with some exceptions – to this level. Thus the role and function of the different elements that constitute the ‘ordinary’ populations of states and their day-to-day activities has been generally ignored.

Unfortunately, concepts of state power and authority have too often built upon this imbalance as if it were natural, so that study of the state has for the most part been confined by the limits imposed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century concepts of centralised states and societies. This has meant, in particular, that historians have been constrained by notions of societal evolution which begin with ‘the primitive’ and end up with the modern nation state, a teleology which has generally placed Western-European societies at the forefront of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ and presents the rest of the world either as a victim or a benefactor of western ‘advances’. While this strongly ideological perspective has been challenged sufficiently vigorously in recent decades to merit only a mention here, it is important to bear in mind the fact that it continues to exercise a certain attraction, especially when ‘ancient’ empires are discussed as precursors to a later ‘rise of the West’.

Equally suspect has been ‘state-centrism’, an approach which conceives of imperial states as sets of centralised operational processes and which denies local infrastructural autonomy to regions away from the central territories. This approach also tends to encourage a cyclical approach to historical change, in which the rise and decline of central state power is seen as a wholly internal process that occurs in abstraction from any change in the broader society and its economic and social relations. In contrast to Europe, some regions – such as South Asia, the Islamic realm, or China – are seen as lacking in cumulative and consequential processes. Each polity is taken as an object of research in itself that is self contained. As a result, its rise and decline, which leads to its eventual replacement by a new and, at the time, more dynamic political structure, is analysed with the assumption that its social bases are not themselves changing. Again, this has been challenged and a more sophisticated approach proposed in more recent debate.35 We should distinguish ‘system’ from ‘process’ in this respect, a distinction which necessarily raises an epistemological issue: if we emphasise the systemic differences between ‘primitive’ and ‘complex’ sets of economic and exchange relationships, for example, we impose descriptive and definitional limits upon the

social and economic structures we set out to examine. This is not because such structures were in fact bounded and limited in themselves, but because this ‘substantivism’ reflects our own way of apprehending and ordering the past in terms of the available data. This methodological tendency is inherent in all attempts to impose order and systematise human societies.\textsuperscript{36} However, in defining it and becoming aware of it, as Frank Perlin has argued, the historian or social scientist is able to escape the interpretational straitjacket it imposes, and to see that substantivised relational connections are at best only one aspect of social praxis within a much wider societal field.\textsuperscript{37}

One way of challenging these assumptions – where the empirical data is available, of course – is to attempt a detailed analysis of the evidence for what have been referred to as the ‘unofficial infrastructures’ within which and upon which the more obvious ‘official’ or public forms of government and state administration are built. This may take a variety of forms, but its premise is that only rarely do novel forms of political structure arise from a vacuum (namely, the complete annihilation of all that went before). Rather, elements of processual and structural continuity as well as change are universally present in the growth of any ‘new’ system. The analysis may be focused on a range of themes, including, for example, the role of household administrations, of accounting systems, of clerical and exchange media, of networks of inherited rights and jurisdictional claims, and of popular socio-economic solidarities and local ideologies and identities.

Wider structures of governmental administration arise out of a multiplicity of infrastructural relationships. Many of them remain entirely invisible to the historian because of the nature of the available evidence, but should always be borne in mind when describing the results of research based upon what data is at hand. State systems are usually the result of a long-term evolution of a wide range of highly inflected localised modes of micro-structural social organisation, each operating in its own immediate context according to local traditions and practices, which coalesce at a higher level to produce inter-local and inter-regional networks of resource management, distribution and exchange. Such networks always pre-exist the actual state formative moment itself (although such a moment can usually be precisely identified only in very recent cases). For some societies, we have enough material actually to identify, at least to a limited extent, these relational systems. This is the case for the later Roman Republic and Empire, the Byzantine state, especially in its last four centuries or so, the Ottoman Empire and some of the more recent state formations in the Indian sub-continent, the more recent Chinese and Japanese state systems. For the temporally more distant empires, it is not always possible, although a surprising amount of detail

\textsuperscript{36} For some challenges to this, see Bourdieu 1968.
\textsuperscript{37} Perlin 1993, esp. pp. 28ff.
for such aspects of middle- and late-kingdom Egypt and the empires of the Near East (including Assyria) can in fact be elicited.

The reason for emphasising this collective, many-headed, and sometimes random development is that it provides the essential ground in which systems of rule and administration began to develop, and these are fundamental elements in the medium- and long-term success of state-like political entities. ‘States’ were in effect many-centred, functioning through progressively de-centralised pools of administrative effectiveness, and dependent upon mutually beneficial relations of support, tribute and upward-redistribution of surpluses. These are only rarely visible in the case of the majority of the ancient states for which we have evidence, but they can be highlighted and brought out in the analysis of more recent state formations, as in Frank Perlin’s discussion of the ways in which the heritable rights and ‘property brotherhood’ described by the concept vatan functioned in the Maratha ‘state’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hence, even if certain dynamics are not be ascertainable through the limited ancient source-material, they should perhaps be assumed more widely when we examine the inner dynamic of any such political formation.

One aspect, which arises indirectly from these considerations, is the importance of the extensive keeping of records and accounts. These appear to be a key element in the structural underpinning of many, if not all, successful state and imperial systems. They stimulated the growth not only of a specialist, literary/clerical élite, but also functioned as determinants of the directions in which power and administration might evolve. Each imperial system appears to develop, to a greater or lesser degree, a ‘library’ of categories, techniques, measurement systems. These have their own organisational prerequisites, but require in turn a certain input of wealth and resources, a certain mode of social-economic organisation. They were an important feature of the Achaemenid administration and of the inter-provincial economy that flourished under Achaemenid rule. With obvious regional and local exceptions, they became an important element in the economies of the Roman imperial state, and remained so throughout the history of the Byzantine empire. They were equally significant at the ideological level, symbolising the power of the ruling house or the state administrative apparatus.

Systems of accounts, records and measurement are thus essential features of the broader historical developments in which we are interested, and exemplify two fundamental points: first, that state and governmental/administrative ‘systems’ cannot be the product of individual ‘reforms’ or planning (even if individuals may successfully introduce changes or innovations into pre-existing structures, as Macchiavelli noted!). Secondly, that infrastructural networks of administration, exchange, reciprocity and appropriation represent a constant element of any wider set of political power relations.

39 Macchiavelli 1997 [1513–17].
For they both support the latter and at the same time continue to lead an existence which, while not autonomous (given the dialectical relationships which prevail between all these different instances of the societal) nevertheless are also relatively independent of the higher-order authority at different (progressively more localised) levels of activity. Hence, the greater the social distance between them and the paramount political-economic power, the greater the degree of their autonomy. But there need not necessarily be a thorough-going uniformity across a state’s lands, either geographically or in respect of social use. Indeed, a multiplicity of systems could often co-exist beneath the surface created by the ‘official’ systems. The more geographically, socially and politically diverse an empire or state was, the more varied the sub-systems of exchange and measurement might be. Even in the most uniform of monetary systems, such as Byzantium, for example, there existed local and regional variations determined by social as well as geographical locus. In this respect, we need to keep in mind the specificity of infrastructural social organisation and at the same time its integration into wider networks of relationships. Mann, in a similar way, sets out a framework for analysing the process of change of state formations, and also stresses the open and non-bounded nature of social structures at certain levels of praxis by approaching the problem from the point of view of the distribution of networks of social power. Within the structures laid down by these broader sets of relationships, therefore, there are opportunities for both individuals and groups to introduce changes to the sets of social relationships they inhabit and constitute. The ‘role of the individual in history’, often omitted entirely from broader theoretical considerations, needs to be brought back in, but not at the expense of the meta-structural frameworks within which social practice is inscribed.

(v) Explaining historical change: the question of the ‘mode of production’

It is unfortunate that Diakonoff ignores the issue of mode of production almost entirely, except insofar as he creates an additional number of descriptive modes for his own purposes. He also fails to ask the question whether the concept of mode of production still has a relevance to historical explanation and whether it contributes to our understanding of historically-attested societies in all their complexity. It is generally agreed that a mode of production can be defined as a combination of forces and relations of production, a combination which is expressed through the social relations of production. The totality of these social relations of production represents the
‘economic base’ of a given society. They constitute the mode of appropriation of surplus and thereby the social division of labour, since it is the relations of production which generate a particular distribution of the means of production. The crucial element that makes one mode of production different from another lies precisely in ‘the mode in which . . . surplus labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourer’ on the one hand, together with the specific manner in which labourers are united with the means of production. In other words, modes of production are to be determined and distinguished through these two features, rather than in terms of the superstructural effects or conditions of that mode.

In turn, economic relationships can be conceptualised as a skeleton which determines both the limits and the basic configuration of a social formation: as different primates have different skeletons, differently articulated but with bodies constructed from the same basic set of corresponding organs and tissues, so different societies represent different combinations of modes of production, with differently articulated relations of production determining the general possibilities and limits of the social practices from which they are constituted. Relations of production do not cause a social formation; but they do have a determining influence on its physical forms, its capacities to deal with external influences, and its limitations in respect of production, consumption and expenditure of energy. But it is equally vital to emphasise that the physical forms limit and constrain the capacities and potential of this notional skeleton, that is the relations of production themselves. Such an analogy makes it possible at least to see the determining nature of economic relationships, without at the same time suggesting that they are either causally prior or that they are not themselves also determined in their effects and interaction by the social practices through which they are realised and reproduced.

Now, it is precisely because the same function or result can be realised through a broad spectrum of quite different social practices and institutional arrangements that the historian needs to exercise caution. On the one hand, the concrete practices that combine to make up the relations of production interact differently, and in different societal contexts, to produce a variety of possible short-term and longer-term outcomes. The same fundamental relations of production – let us say, those of the tributary mode – can be represented by very different institutional arrangements in different societies. They will, in consequence, evolve at different rates, with different results; and since this generally occurs over different geo-physical contexts, these results can be, even where the same fundamental relations of production prevail, dramatically different. On the other hand, different forms may well ‘conceal’, that is function as,
quite different social relations of production. Hence, kinship, for example, can have different roles in marginalised pastoral communities and in societies which possesses major urban centres, petty commodity production and extensive peasant cultivation. Complexity and multifunctionality are thus unavoidably inscribed into social relations. Hence, misconstruing the effects of a particular set of institutions in respect of the dominant relations of production within the society in question will have significant consequences for the logic and coherence of the analysis of other aspects of the society.

Modes of production do not exist in any real form. They represent merely the theoretical exposition of specific sets of economic relations. In actual social formations, they are always present in combination with other modes. It is the way in which these modes are articulated together that gives each social formation its particular configuration. A mode of production cannot of itself give rise to a different mode of production, but it can generate at times the conditions that may lead to its break up or transformation. This latter possibility is determined by the actual institutional forms of expression of the economic relationships they embody, forms that are subject to change or disruption at the level of class struggle and the political relations of power distribution. The search for a single dynamic law or set of laws, which will account for the transformation of one set of production relations into another, is pointless. Even the laws of capitalist production explain not how it is transformed into something else, but how it is reproduced and how its periodic crises arise (and can or cannot be resolved).

More importantly, since modes of production are ideal-typical concepts of sets of production relations, they provide a broad agenda, so to speak, delineating the essential nature of contradictions and the basic economic possibilities within production relations. However, it is at the level of social formation that change takes place, that these contradictions work themselves out, and it is therefore at this level that the explanation for change must be sought. If this is the case, of course, we might legitimately ask what value the concept mode of production has for any sort of detailed historical analysis.

The first point to make is, perhaps, a negative one, but it needs to be emphasised from the beginning: a theory about a particular mode of production is of no value in understanding the different evolutionary trajectories of social formations dominated by that same mode. although Diakonoff clearly believes – without demonstrating why – that it is. However, one can use the concept for making distinctions between societies or social formations, which are generated from different combinations of modes of production, and for examining how the dominance of one mode over others is realised somewhat differently in different social formations. Such comparisons are heuristically useful in locating the functions embodied by different institutional forms and social practices. This can help our understanding of the implications that different modes of extracting surplus (tribute in the form of tax, rent, corvée and so forth) have for political power relations, for questions of sovereignty and for legal forms.
More positively, each mode of production can be characterised by the structural constraints upon social, political and economic development that it embodies. Thus it is recognised that capitalist relations of production exercise a particular pressure or constraint on the ways in which capitalist states can function, as do tributary production relations. It is these constraints that provide clues to the potential for change, transformation and evolution of social formations dominated by a specific mode of production. In capitalist formations, states depend on a particular mode of surplus appropriation for their existence and reproduction. For this reason, it remains in the interests of states not to hinder or adversely intervene in the process of surplus extraction, and therefore in the fundamental relations of production of capitalist social formations. While governments or rulers may therefore intervene from time to time to modify the particular institutional or juridical forms characteristic of capitalist production relations in a given state formation (e.g. in order to alter the relations of surplus distribution), they normally also act in a way consonant with the mode of capitalist appropriation. Capitalist states use tax, for example, as a means of redistributing surplus, which is produced by economic means through the creation of relative surplus-value. The extraction of tax, as an institution for the redistribution of surplus value, is therefore an indirect or secondary form of surplus appropriation, which can only occur after the process of primary appropriation through the creation of relative surplus-value has taken place. States in the capitalist world, therefore, are ultimately maintained through the maintenance of those production relations that promote the extraction of relative surplus-value, not through their power to tax. The state itself often has little or no contact with these relations, although many modern states have intervened increasingly to regulate the ways in which surplus is generated and redistributed.

By contrast, these constraints take a different form in what I would wish to call tributary social formations; a concept which includes most complex premodern social systems, whether ‘feudal’ or not. It is clear that state élites and ruling classes in precapitalist formations have an equally powerful vested interest in the maintenance of those relations of production to which they owe their position. Struggles over the distribution of surplus within dominant élites, and between exploiting and exploited classes, provide the dynamic elements through which institutional and organisational changes occur. But all state formations dominated by tributary relations of production share one particular characteristic that, in the context of the dominant set of relations of production in the social formation as a whole, serves to differentiate them from state or social formations in other modes. This characteristic is the direct nature of primary surplus appropriation by the state, which has distinctive results for the mode of surplus distribution.

First, the relationship between the ruler or ruling élite and those who actually appropriate surplus on their behalf is always contradictory and potentially antagonistic. In contrast to capitalist states, those dominated by tributary production relations must
The ways in which feudal landlords could intervene directly in the production process, redefining the amount of surplus demanded and consequently affecting both the amount of labour-time invested by the producers and the amount remaining to them as subsistence and as marketable or exchangeable surplus, has been well analysed in Kula 1976. I would contend that tributary (i.e. feudal) states can act in just the same way, making the incidence of taxation (whether in kind, cash or labour, or all of these) as one of the possible forms of feudal rent, a fundamental element in the rate of exploitation of the producing population. For a useful, if now a little old-fashioned, discussion of the relationship between capitalist states and the bourgeoisie: Mandel 1968, pp. 310–11, pp. 498ff. On medieval states’ taxation, see Wickham 1997.

The constraints imposed upon tributary states, therefore, are constraints constituted both through the mode of surplus appropriation, and through the relations of surplus distribution.
distribution, which in turn express the social relations of production. How these constraints actually work themselves out, and how their effects are to be appreciated, can only be understood through an examination of the political relations of surplus distribution between states, elites and producers.

It is thus the direct and primary role of states and dominant elites in the process of surplus appropriation in tributary formations which informs both the nature of the class struggle between exploiting and exploited classes, as well as the structure of the political relations of distribution within the ruling class. This contrasts clearly with capitalism, where – as I have already noted – taxation is the means through which surplus redistribution takes place, to the state’s advantage, occurring therefore after the process of surplus appropriation. It is a secondary process of appropriation, in other words, a process of redistribution. Similarly, it contrasts with the slave mode, where it is crucially the supply of slave labour itself (which is to say, the availability and maintenance of a particular type of means of production), which determines the relationship between the ruling class, the state and the mass of non-slave producers.

The biggest single gap in Diakonoff’s discussion is that none of these issues are anywhere made explicit, and indeed their absence from his opening chapters, in which he sets out the framework for his analysis, is especially problematic. It means that his account of the development of human society and state formation across several millennia represents little more than the impressionistic and more-or-less entirely descriptive account of a historian who has, over the years, evolved his own views about the rise and fall of great civilisations, without, however, any real attempt to theorise the issues which will follow from the questions that must of necessity be asked in undertaking such an enterprise. It does not mean that the causal connections described or supposed by Diakonoff are incorrect. But it does mean that his explanatory model remains both obscure and unarticulated, and that its results are, unfortunately, unusable by those who may care to follow his reasoning.

Conclusion

I have concentrated chiefly, as noted above, on the premodern societies in which Diakonoff is interested, but it is important to emphasise that the book goes on to make some valuable points about both the analysis and the historical trajectory of modern, capitalist and postcapitalist systems. But once we have looked at the sorts of issues outlined above, it is not hard to work out where the problem with Diakonoff’s volume lies: quite simply, to a Western reader familiar with both Marxist and non-Marxist history and social science, the book has little, if anything, to say. It reflects the response of a formerly Soviet scholar to the removal of the constraints under which he habitually operated, a coming-to-terms with his own intellectual conscience, rather than a serious intervention in a debate of which he is largely unaware. Indeed, there is very little
literature cited in his notes at all, and the book reads very much as an attempt to set
out on an impressionistic and purely phenomenal basis how societies change and
how socio-economic transformation occurs. Diakonoff’s breadth of learning is impressive,
but this does not change the fact that the bulk of the book is simple descriptive history
with little real analysis or considered theoretical reflection. Change and transformation
are described through a variety of categories outlined in the opening chapters, including
the socio-psychological; and a more nuanced and gradualist transformative process
is allowed – quite rightly – for many periods of major socio-economic and cultural
transition. Diakonoff would not disagree with most of the points made above concerning
both the value of the concept of mode of production, and its application (and he
would probably sympathise with much else, including the discussion of state formation
and social transformation), except that he does not elaborate the opening points made
in his introductory chapter – all too fleetingly, unfortunately – in respect of the broader
and more particular theoretical problems he identifies in the traditional Marxist
framework.

Thus his whole edifice remains descriptive – change is identified, then described,
as are its results, without the structural and dynamic reasons for its occurrence being
interrogated. This is a shame, and is disappointing in view of Diakonoff’s reputation
as a conscientious, thoughtful and painstaking scholar in his own field. While it is
fascinating to read Diakonoff’s account and understanding of global historical
development, it is quite simply the case that – like some other publications which
followed the breakdown of the old order in the Soviet Union – this book seems to
address the author’s own needs as much as those of the debate on the evolution of
society. The Western (or at least, non-Soviet) Marxist tradition has already moved a
long way from the point at which Diakonoff seems to have rejoined it.

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Kant, Marx, and the Origins of Critique

The publication of a new work on Marx by one of postwar Japan’s most important philosophers and literary critics has been met with considerable enthusiasm. Kojin Karatani, author of twenty books (three in English, seventeen in Japanese) is most famous for his studies of Japanese literature. His latest work, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, has placed him at the forefront of the contemporary effort to re-read and re-think Marx in order to revitalise the socialist project in the twenty-first century. While I will argue that there are significant problems with Karatani’s own contribution, these do not negate its novelty and boldness.

Novelty and boldness. These two ideas recur throughout the reviews of the text that have appeared thus far. Hans Herbert Koegler regards Karatani’s effort as ‘timely and inspiring.’1 Slavoj Žižek concurs, claiming that Karatani’s text is ‘one of the most original attempts to recast the philosophical and political bases of opposition to the empire of capital today’.2 Finally, Harry Harootunian judges *Transcritique* to be ‘dense, complex, and original’.3 While I agree that the work is indeed novel, timely, and original, I will offer a somewhat harsher critique of its reading of Marx than has been given in the existing critical literature. The essential concern that I have with the text regards precisely the timing of its appearance. At the very moment when critical theory is overwhelmed with a ‘return to Kant’ movement, Karatani’s key claim – that the ethical foundations of the socialist project should be located in Kant – risks further obscuring the uniquely materialist ethical foundation of Marxism, just when its rehabilitation and development are most necessary.4

In the last three decades, the Kantian stress upon formally universal, rights-based frameworks of social action has supplanted the Hegelian-Marxist critique of the

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2. Žižek 2004, p. 121.
4. Karatani is not the first, of course, to have argued that Marxism should locate its normative grounds in Kant. That effort traces its history back to Austrian neo-Kantianism, and especially the work of Hermann Cohen. For the best contemporary argument in this vein, see van der Linden 1987. Van der Linden situates his own work as an outgrowth of the pioneering efforts of Cohen.
abstractness of liberal rights and the superficiality of liberal democracy as the normative framework of critical and democratic theory.\(^5\) Kant’s belief that substantive questions concerning the human good cannot ground a free society have been accepted as definitive by theorists of ‘pluralism’, whose primary concern is to legitimate, not criticise, liberal capitalism. For those who see little democracy and pluralism today, and who are not hopeful regarding proceduralist efforts to revive more deeply democratic social movements, any attempt to reconstruct a socialist project by reading Marx through the lens of Kant’s transcendental philosophy must be viewed with extreme caution. While I will conclude that Karatani’s proposals for novel forms of political action are promising, his idiosyncratic interpretation of Marx’s method and his claim that Kant’s categorical imperative forms the missing normative core of Marxism are seriously misleading.

While indeed original, Karatani’s text is frustratingly convoluted and loosely argued. Its two sections are tenuously held together by Karatani’s novel idea of ‘transcritique’. This neologism explains the origin of critique in that transposition of perspectives which characterises the careers of Kant and Marx. Both, Karatani argues, practised ‘constant transposition, and . . . the move to different discursive systems was what brought about the pronounced parallax’ that marked their critiques as revolutionary (p. 3). Despite the boldness of the claim, its essential superficiality cannot be hidden from careful analysis. Notwithstanding such serious weaknesses, the text does yield important insights that relativise its frustrations. It is an important, albeit flawed, intervention in contemporary political philosophy. Below, I will examine the idea of transcritique and the purported methodological identity between Kant and Marx, contest Karatani’s Kantian interpretation of the normative foundations of Marx’s critique, and evaluate Karatani’s proposal for a ‘possible communism’.

I will consider the claim that Kant and Marx practiced ‘transcritique’ from three angles. First, I will examine the relationship between transposition and critique. Second, I will scrutinise Karatani’s understanding of the transcendental nature of critique. Finally, I will explore Karatani’s claim that transcendental criticism is inherently ethical. The last point will serve as a bridge to the consideration of the normative foundations of Kant’s and Marx’s work.

Karatani argues that transposition is essential to the development of critique. In Kant’s case, it was the contrasting of his own self-certainty with his lack of certainty about the perspective of the other which motivated his Copernican revolution in metaphysics (pp. 3–5). In the case of Marx, the transposition was a literal movement

from Germany to France, and then from France to England, which enabled him to adopt a revolutionary understanding of capitalism as a social system (p. 138). In order to understand the reasons behind this comparison, we must consider Karatani’s understanding of philosophy.

Karatani argues that philosophy is essentially critical introspection. Until a rational subject has become alive to the possibility of a radical disconnection between representation and reality, there is no philosophy. Philosophy is essentially a critical self-scrutiny designed to test the fit between representation and reality. Karatani identifies Socratic dialectic as the historical origin of philosophy, and judges Kant’s transcendental method as a systematic refinement of philosophy’s historical mission. Transcendental criticism is that mode of critical introspection that results from ‘a bracketing of the imagined self-evidence of the empirical consciousness in order to reveal the unconscious conditions that constituted it’ (p. 82). In Marx’s case, his transposition was external, from one country to another, but the result was the same: as a result of a shift of perspective (parallax), Marx saw his earlier positions, and capitalism itself, in a new light.

While Karatani’s reading stems from an admirable hermeneutic boldness, it rests upon serious misunderstandings. Historically, philosophy does not originate with Socrates, but with the Ionian materialists, whose metaphysics were not critically introspective. Even in the case of Socrates, his procedure of *elenchus* is much more socially critical than strictly self-critical. In the case of Marx, while Karatani is correct to note the influence that new living conditions had on Marx’s development, it is not true that those theoretical developments begin and end with self-critical introspection. Indeed, Marx assigns no value whatsoever to critical self-reflection as a philosophical problem. As he bluntly says in the second thesis on Feuerbach, the question of whether human knowledge is adequate to reality ‘is a purely scholastic question’.6 Marx is concerned with changing capitalist reality. If his understanding is wrong, then the further development of social relations will prove it. At least for what concerns Marx, Karatani’s claims about the centrality of transposition to the development of critique fail to convince.

Equally unconvincing, and far more problematic, is Karatani’s claim that both Marx and Kant utilised a transcendental method. Karatani focuses almost exclusively upon *Capital*, for it is there, he argues, that one discovers the original theory of capitalist society and its revolutionary transformation (p. 185). It is also where we find, purportedly, the transcendental core of Marx’s critique of political economy. Karatani contends that ‘Marx approached capital in general in the first volume in order to conduct a transcendental scrutiny of the conditions with which the accumulation of capital is made possible’ (p. 243). Strangely, critics have not fully scrutinised the

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6 Marx 1976, p. 615.
soundness of this claim. While Žižek does note that Karatani’s argument would have been stronger in this regard had it considered Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s critique of Kantian epistemology, he does not press the point. It is true that Marx is interested in the conditions that made the accumulation of capital possible, but the conditions that interest him are social and historical, not transcendental. Karatani’s claim can be justified only if the specific meaning that Kant assigns to ‘transcendental’ is ignored.

Kant defines ‘transcendental’ as ‘all cognition . . . that is occupied . . . with our a priori concepts in general’. Marx is clearly not interested in the a priori subjective conditions that make capitalism possible, but, rather, with the social transformations that shaped the late feudal world and made possible the commodification of labour. While it is true that what Marx discovers in Capital is the value-form specific to the capitalist economy, it does not follow that, since this value-form is not an empirical property of individual commodities, he has thereby uncovered the transcendental conditions of capitalism (p. 243). Historical materialism is the antithesis of transcendental criticism, insofar as it understands the structure of human consciousness in a dialectical relationship with a changing historical reality. Kant’s ‘Categories’ and the ‘Transcendental Unity of Apperception’ are ahistorical structures that govern the constitution of any possible experience; structures, that is, which Marx would regard as, at best, abstractions and, at worst, obfuscatory. Here, I believe that Lukács’s argument against Kant and neo-Kantianism is decisive. Lukács contends that

> every Marxist student of socio-economic realities who abandons the method of Hegel and Marx, i.e., the study of the historical process from a total point of view, and who substitutes for it a ‘critical’ method which seeks unhistorical laws . . . will be forced to return to the abstract ethical imperatives of the Kantian school.

Indeed, Karatani is forced back into abstract ethical imperatives, as I will presently demonstrate.

Nevertheless, the flaws that mar Karatani’s reading of Marx do not necessarily apply to his reading of Kant. Of particular interest is his claim that there is an inherently ethical dimension to transcendental criticism. Since this argument is important as a precondition to understanding Karatani’s reading of the normative foundations of Kant’s and Marx’s philosophy, it is necessary to consider it before moving to the next section. For Karatani, the difference between phenomenon and thing-in-itself is not simply a logical necessity given the structure of human consciousness, it is equally a new mode of ethical disposition vis-à-vis the other of consciousness. Thus, the thing-in-itself is a limit to human knowledge, a field beyond mastery, an ethical core of

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7 Žižek 2004, p. 132. See also Sohn-Rethel 1978.
8 Kant 1998, p. 133.
inviolability that crosses the boundaries between nature and the social. As Karatani argues, ‘what Kant implied by the thing-in-itself is the alterity of the other that we can never take for granted and internalize just on our whim or at our convenience’ (p. 51). In other words, by determining the limits of all possible experience, Kant marks off a region that human beings cannot cognise, and therefore cannot bend to their purposes. Not only in his practical philosophy, but also at the very heart of the transcendental method, then, there lies a critique of instrumental reason. It is this implicit critique of instrumental rationality that Karatani exploits in his interpretation of the Kantian dimensions within Marx’s critique. While this reading is not without serious problems, those problems should not blind us to the incisiveness of Karatani’s excavation of an ethics at the core of Kantian metaphysics. In this regard, his text is reminiscent of Lucien Goldmann’s excellent Marxist interpretation of Kant.  

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In Karatani’s reading, ethics is not so much a specialised philosophical domain concerned with grounding principles of right action as it is a disposition towards one’s own and the other’s ineliminable freedom. He maintains that ‘for Kant, morality is finally about freedom rather than goodness or badness. If not for freedom there is no good and bad. Freedom is synonymous with being causa sui, self-motivated, subjective, and autonomous’ (p. 115).

Founding human freedom in the noumenal self does not entail, according to Karatani, that our freedom is expressed only in a subjective relationship between maxims of actions and the will. Since the transcendental method exposes the limits of my subjecthood in the thing-in-itself qua other, it implies a concept of freedom as much concerned with one’s disposition towards that other as with the internal relation between maxim and action. Indeed, it is only in the transcendental stance that the other as in itself valuable can appear. In our ordinary empirical experience, other people can only appear as valuable in relation to our own projects. It is only when we bracket the empirical otherness of the self that its personhood emerges. It is in the transcendental stance that the equality of selves as persons becomes manifest, because it is only then that I can see beyond what people can do for me to their ethical being as a person. ‘This imperative “be free”,’ Karatani argues, ‘ultimately contains the imperative to treat others as free agents . . . it is only thanks to Kant’s imperative that the personalities of others come into existence’ (p. 119). Once the natural self and the natural determinations to which all natural selves are subject have been bracketed, we ‘see’ that there is still something more to selves: their personhood. It is their personhood, their being as ends-in-themselves, that commands respect. Respect is

10 Compare Derrida 1999.
11 Goldmann 1971.
Like the idea of pluralism, ‘cosmopolitanism’ has also become a leitmotif of recent democratic theory, especially as a democratic bulwark against globalisation. See Held 1995; Held et al. 1999; Bohman 1998; Jones 2000.

paid to the person by universally extending the imperative ‘be free’ to all selves. The universalisation of the imperative of freedom leads us into the political heart of Kantian ethics.

That political heart is the idea of cosmopolitanism. In Karatani’s view, Kant’s cosmopolitanism is not so much a proto-theory of global governance as it is a call for a new disposition of the relation between the self and others. The cosmopolitan disposition crosses political and cultural boundaries without demanding that those boundaries be negated. Karatani argues that ‘people cannot be members of world civil society in the same sense that they belong to their communities. If not for an individual’s will to be cosmopolitan, or a world citizen, world civil society would not exist’ (p. 101). In other words, world civil society is not an institutional project to be created by top-down administrative re-organisation but a new mode of relation and association to be brought into being by extending the respect for persons across cultural boundaries. The importance of association to Karatani’s own political project will become apparent in the final section. At this point, it is important to turn to the question of how Karatani links Marx’s critique of capitalism to this Kantian ethical-political framework.

Karatani interprets Marx’s understanding of social relationships in light of his analysis of Kant’s conception of world civil society: ‘With the term “social” Marx pointed to the way in which individuals belonging to different systems/communities are connected by exchange without their being aware of it. This is the same critical space that Kant identified with his term “world civil society”’ (p. 106). This approach has the salutary effect of renewing attention to the internationalism at the core of Marxist politics. The idea of a world civil society developing in the interstices of market relations is thus not foreign to Marx’s work, although the social conditions necessary for its flourishing would be, in Marx’s conception, completely distinct from those presented by Kant. Nevertheless, Karatani here uncovers a very fruitful space for new thinking about a radically democratic form of globalisation.

However, when Karatani tries to trace Marx’s political ideal of a global civil society back to Kantian ethical foundations, serious problems emerge. While it might be fruitful to think of a Marxian international system of self-organising producers’ associations as a world civil society, we cannot understand the normative foundations of such a system as Kantian.

Karatani sees in Kant’s imperative to treat rational persons as things-in-themselves an implicit critique of capitalist instrumentality and, in that implicit critique, the normative theory missing from Marx’s critique of political economy. In the idea of persons as ends-in-themselves lies ‘the transcritical juncture between political economy
and morality, between Marx’s critique and Kantian critique’ (p. 217). Karatani, however, fails to consider the specific meaning that Kant assigns to ‘end-in-itself’. Human beings are considered ends-in-themselves only insofar as they are rational beings and not in so far as they are embodied. The exploitation of labour is quite compatible with being treated as an end in oneself. As Stathis Kouvelakis has recently recalled, Kant, while a consistent supporter of the French Revolution, never criticised the social relations of emerging capitalism and criticised the Jacobins not so much for the Terror but for their social policy. It is as a materialist critique of the social relations of emerging capitalism that the normative and political essence of Marx’s critique unfolds. Karatani’s rush back to Kant ignores the fact that, in Marx, there is a distinctive materialist understanding of the value of human beings, one that is at odds with Kant’s on the most important questions concerning the nature and social conditions of human freedom.

For Marx, it is not individual acts of will that are properly subject to moral criticism. One could criticised the capitalist for treating workers as mere tools, but that is beside the point, since insofar as the capitalist is a capitalist she must instrumentalise human beings. The capitalist stands guilty not as an abstract person who governs her will according to a heteronomous maxim, but because she belongs to a class that benefits from a murderous social system. Effective moral critique from a Marxist standpoint would highlight the systematic way in which capitalism destroys human and planetary life. It is not the desire to produce ‘good will’ that animates Marx’s normative theory, but rather the desire to produce a good world. As St. Joan of the Stockyards says: ‘Take care that when you leave the world you were not only good but are leaving a good world.’

This difference is not due to Marx’s rhetorical antipathy towards moralising in the face of misery, but stems from a materialist understanding of human beings as integrally active, social-organic beings. Our organic nature entails that humans must maintain constant connection with the natural world in order to survive and unfold our higher capabilities. Humans can only satisfy those needs socially, however. Implied in every social order is a co-operative régime of need-satisfying and capacity-developing activity. The central moral failure of capitalism (if we want to speak in terms of morals) is thus not that it turns our rationality in the abstract into the tool of others, but that it subordinates and determines the total life-activity of human beings in every dimension: physiological, socio-cultural, and temporal. This conception stands in sharp opposition to Kant’s bifurcated understanding of people as animal bodies and rational minds. For Marx, the whole human being is the locus of value, while, for Kant, it is openly permissible to exploit the body whilst respecting the rationality within. The capitalist

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14 Brecht 1969, p. 120.
labour contract is the perfect illustration of what this bifurcation permits. The worker is treated as an end in herself in so far as the contract recognises her as a free legal subject. The fact that there is no choice in the matter, given that the ‘freedom’ of the worker from the means of production cannot register in this construction, since the material being of the worker is taken to be a-rational and thus amenable to commodification.\textsuperscript{15} It is just because Kant ignores the material integrity of people that he is indifferent to the social context of freedom, and it is because he is indifferent to the social context of freedom that Marx heaps scorn upon him. Surprisingly, given his intentions, Karatani never quotes Marx’s infrequent but cutting critiques of Kant. The most important is found in the \textit{German Ideology}. Marx argues that ‘Kant is satisfied with good will alone, even if it remained wholly without results, and transferred the realization of good will, the harmony between it and the needs and impulses of individuals, to the world beyond’. Two pages later he concludes that because Kant is satisfied with a good will alone, he is the ‘whitewashing servant of the bourgeoisie.’\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, we should not confuse polemical assertion with the final word on the relationship between Kant’s ethics and the normative foundations of Marxism. Nor, however, should Marx’s own words be ignored in a sophisticated re-reading of that relationship.

For Kant, morality is a self-critical internal relationship between maxim and will, while, for Marx, it is a socially critical global relationship between politically engaged collectivities and the social structures that impede their freedom. For Marx, unlike for Kant, freedom is not a problem of metaphysics but of social organisation. That we can think, act, and change is sufficient proof for Marx that human beings are free, that is, self-determining. Here, again, Goldmann’s work on Kant is instructive. The greatness of Kant, he argues, is to have raised his thought above his own social conditions, positing uncompromising human freedom as the goal of history. Kant’s weakness, however, was his inability to raise his ethical thinking from the level of the abstract individual will to the world-transforming collective.\textsuperscript{17} Marx effects this shift from isolated acts of willing to the world-transformative power of collective labour. Hence, for Marx, the limits on our freedom are not to be found in our material ties to the natural world, but in the social orders that block the full development of human self-creative capabilities. Whether the individual ‘will’ is free from mechanical causal determination is not a question that interests Marx. However one comes down on that issue, the answer neither prevents nor enables us from doing what history shows that we are capable of doing: using social wealth to satisfy needs and develop the capabilities that distinguish humans as self-creative beings in the natural order.

\textsuperscript{15} Kant 1969, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{16} Marx 1976, pp. 208, 210. The only other significant discussion of Kant’s philosophy in Marx’s work that I am aware of is in \textit{The Holy Family} (Marx 1980, p. 222).
\textsuperscript{17} Goldmann 1971, p. 170.
The political light that Karatani sheds on Marx can be seen to dim when he attempts to explain its normative foundations.

3.

As a novel attempt to read Marx through Kant, *Transcritique* exhibits serious weaknesses. Paradoxically, however, the methodological looseness that marks the book as a failure in terms of its reading of Marx lends its political conclusions an independence which shields their plausibility from the text’s overall shortcomings. In the final section, Karatani sketches a ‘possible communism’ that rests on a heterodox reading of Marx’s critique of political economy. While this reading will prove controversial, the political conclusions that Karatani draws from it should serve to catalyse the novel thinking that those still committed to a radical transformation of capitalism need to undertake. 18

Karatani’s interpretation of *Capital* contends that the living core of Marx’s critique of political economy is his analysis of the realisation of surplus-value as profit through the entire cycle of capital. If surplus-value can only be realised through profit, and profit depends not only on exploitation but equally on the sale of the commodity, then it is as consumers, Karatani argues, that workers retain ultimate power over the future of capitalism. In a period characterised by the disappearance of confidence in classical theories of revolution, the weakening of the labour movement, the absorption into the ideology of efficiency of its remaining strongholds, and an enervating dispersion of radical energies in mutually indifferent or antagonistic groups, a revitalisation of radical struggles depends, according to Karatani, on a transformation of consumer struggles.

Karatani’s argument is distinct from the left-liberal strategy of the consumer boycott, both because it harbours no illusions about creating an ethical capitalism and because it still centres on the power of workers to radically transform existing conditions. People are not workers in one reality and consumers in another: workers are consumers and consumers are workers. Struggles on the production side, however, have become almost purely economic, and can succeed only by intensifying the pace of work and agreeing to ever more applications of labour-‘saving’ technology. In the long run, this strategy is self-undermining. If, however, capitalism must not only exploit labour, but sell the commodity that labour produces, then labour acting from the consumer side of the circulation process still retains the potential to produce radical change (p. 289). Consumer struggles are not limited to debating the terms of exploitation, but can

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18 Harootunian concentrates his critique of Karatani on what he takes to be the danger represented by the ‘embourgeoisification’ of the proletariat. By linking political power to consumer struggles, Harootunian feels that Karatani runs the risk of unwittingly supporting the process of global commodification. Harootunian thus emphasises that radical opposition is most likely to come from labour (peasant, indigenous) that is not yet commodified and not from labour that has already been so. See Harootunian 2004, pp. 33–4.
disrupt the system of exploitation as a whole by arresting the commodification of ever new sectors of life.

This strategy, however, demands that an alternative to need satisfaction through commodity purchase be available. The great strength of this proposal is that Karatani points to such an alternative – the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS). This system of local, non-profit, non-commodified production and distribution of goods has been a topic of theory and practice in the environmental movement for more than two decades, but its socially explosive potential has yet to be recognised by the Marxist Left. The basic idea is straightforward. Rather than purchasing goods from the market citizens with skills and goods create a local exchange network in which needs are met through zero-sum exchanges. One is dependent upon the market only to the extent that one cannot get what one needs from elsewhere. That is why, for example, peasant production and locally organised subsistence farming in the non-industrial world is so viciously attacked by capitalist agents. If, however, I can exchange my labour directly for locally grown food, I no longer need to shop at the supermarket.

It is important to keep in mind that the LETS is not the solution to capitalist despoliation of human and planetary life, but a basis from which more extensive transformations can be launched. The LETS is an undeveloped form of what Karatani calls ‘associationism’, the new mode of human relations upon which his ‘possible communism’ can be constructed. Associationism amounts to a re-humanisation of commodified social relationships and a return of productive activity to its essential function of need satisfaction. As Karatani describes it, ‘[a]ssociation is based on mutual aid like that found in traditional associations, yet it is not as closed. It is a network of voluntary exchange organized by those who have once left traditional communities in a commodity economy’ (p. 276). His conception leaves the realm of political platitude because it can point to concrete examples of associationism in practice in the LETS. Moreover, since it also draws upon the reciprocity of need-satisfaction in traditional indigenous ways of life, it can resound in countries now suffering the brunt of globalisation’s destructiveness. Associations must begin at the local level, but because they can be created in industrial and non-industrial economies alike, there is the real potential for international linkage and the incipient development of a radical democratic alternative to capitalism that works.

Like any radical alternative, Karatani’s idea of association – together with the LETS which serves as the mediating point between capitalist reality and a postcapitalist future – faces serious practical questions, not the least of which is how to expand the LETS beyond the very small-scale (spatial and temporal) to which it has been limited.

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19 A fuller discussion of its strengths and practical difficulties can be found in Schuman 2000.
20 Karatani’s idea of associationism should be distinguished from ‘associative democracy’, although it is possible that they could mutually enforce one another. On associative democracy, see Hirst and Bader 2001.
up to now. More deeply, it confronts what I take to be the biggest problem facing radical theory and practice today: the problem of radical political motivation in a world where the traditional forces of the Left have been defeated, where the vitality of exciting new movements against globalisation has been sapped, and where the biggest single-issue international mobilisation in history (the antiwar movement) was simply and effectively ignored. Those problems, however, are not specific to Karatani’s proposal, which, as I said above, deserves to become a focus of debate, notwithstanding the serious weaknesses of his methodological and ethical arguments.

References


**Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends**

MIKE WAYNE  

Reviewed by Lee Salter

Media studies is a subject area that has struggled to define and defend itself. Academic interest in media developed largely as a response to the different uses of technological developments such as photography, cinema, radio and television. Language, image and text have, of course, always been important to human beings, but it was at a specific conjuncture that specific media, communications and cultural studies came into being. Early studies of media were concerned with ‘effects’ and we can find the reasons for this in two concerns: investigating the potential for commercial and political propaganda and the concern for social stability. Such studies were not, however, considered to be ‘media studies’, but were grounded in existing disciplines such as sociology and psychology that were themselves new disciplines at the time. Whilst some of the earlier studies on the effects of cinema, music and television considered them to be quite determinate, between the 1930s and 1950s in the USA a liberal-pluralist view of the media developed, which claimed that ‘effects’ theories were too simplistic. Instead, it proposed that audiences respond to media representations, using the media for their own gratification, rejecting messages of which they do not approve. The alternative to this view of the media appeared in the various media-related projects of the Frankfurt school, which, responding to the experiences of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and capitalist North America, concluded that the media was an industry just like any other in a totally administered society. This latter emerged as a part of the expansion of instrumental rationality under capitalism and the corresponding forms of disguised homogenisation accompanying it. Although both the liberal-pluralist and the Frankfurt perspectives were grounded in multidisciplinary research programmes, only the latter was a historically oriented holistic and critical programme. However, neither treated ‘media studies’ as a distinct field of research.

It was not until the 1960s that distinct media, communication and cultural studies became established in universities, with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies...
(CCCS) in Birmingham established in 1964, the Centre for Mass Communication Research established in Leicester in 1966, what is now Sheffield Hallam University offering the UK’s first communications studies degree in 1975, and what is now the University of Westminster launching the ‘country’s first media studies degree also in 1975. Since these establishments, the three areas of study, media, culture and communication, have been much maligned. Although certain strands of media studies in the UK are rooted in Marxism, Marxists are often dismissive of media studies. Certainly, the development of the field of media and cultural studies was influenced by the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy and the related ‘cultural turn’ that did so much damage to Marxism. Further, as cultural studies developed as a discipline, it moved further away from the materialist underpinnings that Williams and others had retained, and towards an idealist grounding. For example, Stuart Hall, one of the key figures in the CCCS, tended to treat media as primarily an ideological tool rather than a commodity. Such are the shortcomings of idealist critiques that they have the potential to seek redress for ills in discourse itself almost as though they were the logical consequence of the method. As Peter Jones points out, even left-wing media analysts such as Norman Fairclough are capable of fetishising the media to such a degree that he calls for a bourgeois government to communicate more effectively. This is to say nothing about the far deeper material structures of language that Fairclough’s discourse analysis is supposed to expose.

Even the more materialist media analyses, such as Bagdikian’s The Media Monopoly offer no real answer to the problem of the media. After launching an attack on the political economy of the media, Bagdikian informs us that the ‘threat [to democracy] does not lie in the commercial operation of the mass media. It is the best method there is and, with all its faults it is not inherently bad’. Lawrence Soley’s excellent analysis of corporate censorship undermines the view that democracy and the free market go hand-in-hand. He also challenges the ‘American’ idea that the only censorship to be concerned about is that coming from the state. However, he fails to fully address the fundamental issue of underlying capitalist relations of production that demand market expansion, offering only a legalistic solution to the protection of free speech. Dahlgren’s excellent investigation into the capacity of television to facilitate a public sphere ends with a call for ‘common’ and ‘advocacy’ media domains to be established so as to separate what roughly corresponds to centre and periphery public spheres in the Habermasian sense. Though Dahlgren recognises that ‘as an industry, television has to follow the precepts of audience maximization and profits’ and its ‘institutional logic of course greatly conditions its role within the public sphere’, he offers few indicators as to how the industrial constraints and the productive system in which it

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5 Bagdikian 2000, p. 223.
6 Soley 2002.
7 Dahlgren 1995 and Habermas 1996.
finds itself can be overcome. Even more thoroughgoing historically oriented media texts are prone to simplification. Gorman and McLean, for instance, interpret Marcuse’s distinction between real and false needs as being addressed to advertising and to media representations. They claim that ‘for Marxists, advertising was essential to the survival of capitalism’ but that the ‘liberal and Marxist critiques have been increasingly questioned by other scholars, who have argued that advertising is not as powerful as previous writers had believed . . . and that the influence of advertising can only be understood by examining its interaction with other developments’. Of course, there are few, if any, serious Marxists who would assign advertising a causal or isolated role, so we see Marxism defeated by exchanging its depth of analysis for a superficial concern for isolated appearances.

Alongside idealism in media studies is fragmentation. Although mass communications, media studies and cultural studies had already been separated, each has more recently suffered further disintegration. Mass communications, for instance, divided into communications studies and media studies, with the former being subdivided into ‘applied’ communications, public relations and marketing as discrete ‘disciplines’. Media studies has been recently subdivided into film and television, journalism, new media (of various sorts), digital media, and various ‘practice’-based courses. This not only exasperates the existing ‘mono-medium and media-centric narrowness’ of media studies, but also threatens to limit the practical role of the latter. Though Stuart Hall argues that a great deal of early reception research was ‘funded for the purpose of identifying how to deliver specific audiences to advertisers’ and was guided by what he referred to as ‘unholy patronage’ of research institutes, media companies, public relations and advertising agencies, it is notable that academia as a whole is becoming increasingly difficult to separate from the direct demands of the economy. The fragmentation of the subjects makes it easier to instrumentalise knowledge.

Of course, none of these problems relate exclusively or necessarily to media studies. Manipulation, idealism and fragmentation are general trends in modern society. Manipulation comes to be thought of not as a process opposed to gaining understanding but as part of an unending ‘game’. Further, fragmentation and compartmentalisation result in part from processes of bureaucratic modes of capitalist organisation but also from the related ‘professionalisation’ of social studies, the social ‘sciences’ and replacement of generalist intellectuals by specific and instrumentalisable ‘experts’. 

9 Gorman and McLean 2003.
10 Gorman and McLean 2003, pp. 72–3.
12 Hall 1984, p. 59.
13 ‘Compartmentalisation’ is Alisdair MacIntyre’s term to describe a process whereby ‘each distinct sphere of social activity comes to have its own role structure governed by its own specific norms in relative independence of other such spheres’ (MacIntyre 1999, p. 7). MacIntyre’s point is related to the moral problems raised by compartmentalisation, whereas mine relates to the productivist issues raised by is. Thus, I argue it is a result of the instrumentalisation (in the interests of capital) of knowledge.
Postmodernists come to accept this process of fragmentation as part of a process of continual resistance to the sort of totalising theory that results in the Gulag. Though some, such as Giddens, have explained this general shift simply in terms of ‘growing complexity’ of specifically modern societies, one might accept instead that it is related, to borrow a Habermasianism, to the colonisation of knowledge by the systemic imperatives – fragmented knowledge is easier to instrumentalise. Trends in education policy, more generally, illustrate an increasing tendency to allow industry to dictate the content of education. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it,

What the system requires of teachers is the production of the kind of compliant manpower that the current economy needs, with the different levels of skill and kinds of skills that are required in a hierarchically ordered economy.

Though MacIntyre is here referring to schools, the argument holds because the English university system is ‘diversifying’, ‘vocationalising’ and absorbing further education. Thus, whereas film, television and writing have critical potential, as mass media in the form of cinema, broadcast, print and, now, computer-related media are becoming increasingly important (and profitable) sectors of the economy, critical interrogation becomes increasingly antagonistic to the demands on media education. Instead, there is an increased need for a cognitively and practically specialised workforce engaged in the mass production and communication of ‘culture’ as a set of commodities. Thus, the knowledge and practical skills required by, say, a film production company are specific to that company’s need to create profit in that industry. In this sense, the industry creates the demand and the education system supplies the human commodities to meet that demand. So, on the one hand, media studies programmes need to be formed in such a way as to appeal to the industry and, on the other hand, students take an instrumental stance towards studying media – it is understood to be a means of getting a job. For example, the growth in the number of media practice degree courses may well be mistaken for a return to the productivist paradigm and opposed to the consumerist paradigms dominant in media studies. However, studying media production in abstraction from broader questions of productive relations leaves media production firmly in the hands of capital and portrays relations of production as natural. The knowledge acquired by students is just enough to become a cog in a specific part of the machine, whereas the creativity acquired is sufficiently detached to facilitate its exploitation. Accordingly, these demands on media studies and the pressures on universities to meet them, threaten to empty media studies of its critical potential. Media studies departments become worker-training centres. Therefore, we cannot detach the fortunes of media studies from those of education and knowledge in general and we cannot detach the fortunes of education and knowledge from

14 Giddens 1990.
15 MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, p. ?.
broader socio-economic changes. But the increasingly narrow focus of media studies prevents students from recognising this context.

We see, then, three main currents of objections to what is now recognised as the broad subject area of media studies: it has roots in the turn away from materialist Marxism towards idealism; it is rooted in and is still tainted by strategic uses of communication (propaganda by any other name); and, lastly, the emergence of media studies reflects the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of human knowledge that prevents the establishment of a comprehensive overview of the world as it really is and how it might be.

None of this is to say that there are not excellent wide-ranging, holistic and intelligent studies of the media (for example, the work of Noam Chomsky, James Curran, Nicholas Garnham, Peter Golding, Edward Herman, Douglas Kellner, Robert McChesney, Graham Murdoch, John Thompson, Raymond Williams, and others). What it does point to is the difficulty in teaching such critical studies when they are considered to be superfluous by those who are increasingly dominating the development of courses, practices and students-to-be. The teaching of media, communication and cultural studies has, to an increasing degree, embraced the so-called ‘postmodern age’, which is reflected in the glut of degree courses in journalism, public relations, visual culture, advertising, ‘media consumption’ and audience studies, and so on. The problems of media-centrism, ‘unholy patronages’, consumerism, fetishisation and so on are increased when the media are treated as a separate domain. Despite the shortcomings of some media studies, the constitution of the media is an important area of study, for film, television, radio and newspapers are primary sources of information (and increasingly work) for large swaths of the population. Thus, whilst people’s knowledge of the world is in part derived from their lived experiences, the shared experiences and knowledge of the world are mediated. Therefore, it is important to consider the operation of these mediations without losing sight of the general patterns of production. It is in this context that Pluto Press has published Mike Wayne’s Marxism and Media Studies. At a time in which analysis of relations of production is often abandoned in favour of cultural autonomism, it is refreshing to be faced with a study such as this. Wayne’s central argument is that media cannot be studied without an understanding of the social relations of production that constitute the media environment within capitalist society, and that historical materialism constitutes the framework within which media can be understood.

Whereas many media books take the media as the starting point, Wayne’s places the media very clearly within broader social structures. The architecture of the book works to analyse the media in relation to these structures and the changes they undergo. Though the mode of production acts as the dominant structure, Wayne’s understanding of how the mass media operates as a particular industry is the key contribution of this text. The chapters of the book operate as joists upon which his analysis of the
media is fixed. As such, his chapters on class, political economy, semiotics, fetishism and reification, and knowledge serve to equip the reader with the sharp analytical tools required to understand this sector of the economy clearly. These tools enable Wayne to consider what challenges there are to the media from, for instance, new technologies and how the media industry (and their nemeses) responds to these. The advantage of Wayne’s book is that these tools are not separated from each other, as so often occurs in media analysis, practice and teaching. For example, media policy, practice, semiotics, organisations and so on are usually treated in both teaching and writing as discrete subjects, some of which may be regretfully taught as abstract add-ons to practical media courses. Perhaps one of the most interesting and necessary aspects of the study is the inclusion of a chapter on the state. This is an important inclusion because, as Wayne states, media and cultural studies are taught more often than not with no mention of the state and the role its plays in society (p. 87), except as a source of censorship or propaganda opposed to ‘us’. Even when the state is considered, it is understood as the liberal state (pp. 87–8) and, in media-politics and policy books, the untheorised ‘state’ is often used as a synonym for ‘government’. The conceptual engagements are brought together in the chapter on base-superstructure, in which Wayne develops a model of co-dependency whereby media texts are understood as a result of a complex of production processes. Whilst Wayne attempts to ‘rematerialise’ culture and media, he does not fall back on crude materialism. Rather, his consistent aim is to situate creativity within the social relations of production.

This emphasis on social relations as a whole, enables Wayne to situate media workers in a class akin to Erik Olin Wright’s ‘intellectuals’. For Wayne, ‘the crucial feature of the middle class, which differentiates them from the working class in the social relations of production, is that they are knowledge workers’ (p. 17). However, it is debatable whether the ‘middle class’ and the ‘intellectuals’ are synonymous. Furthermore, as Wayne acknowledges, ‘knowledge’ generation must be considered as part of social relations in general and is largely determined by the needs of capital. The labour of ‘knowledge workers’ is increasingly assuming the characteristics of working-class labour. Nevertheless, intellectuals and ‘cultural workers’ are seen as being able to gain a degree of relative autonomy or independence in the production process. As Wayne puts it, ‘Capital’s control over intellectual labour is somewhat loosened relative to its normal practices at the point of production’ (p. 18). Crucially, however, he recognises that although there is some relative autonomy, control over reproduction, distribution and revenue, is fully integrated into capitalist ‘structures of control’. Therefore, if intellectuals, media and cultural workers are ultimately subject to ‘capitalist structures of control’, then they are also subject to developments within capitalist societies. A key example of how general patterns of capitalist development affect media production

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16 See, for example, Street 2001, Chapter 5.
is the use of technology in the productive process. As in a factory, when new technologies are used in a media company, the logical drive is for increases in productivity rather than an increase in ‘creative space’. To be sure, Wayne argues that new technologies do have a real impact on capitalist relations of production but not of the order claimed by postindustrialists. Computerisation may well facilitate the decentralisation of production, but this does not occur at the expense of concentration of capital and control (p. 72). Indeed, the role of ‘new technologies’ in the production process is also theorised in Marx’s writings.

Though Wayne is not convinced by the claims of the postindustrialists and postmodernists, he does attempt to reintegrate some of their claims into a more explicitly Marxist framework. Engaging with Castells’s work, Wayne suggests that there has been

a general culturalization of the production process, where the forces of communication become absolutely pivotal to the development of the productive forces generally. Hence, for example, a new business management discourse concerning the knowledge resources of the company and the importance within it as vital for retaining competitive edge by making efficiency gains, refining products and responding to rapidly shifting market trends. (p. 45.)

However, the degree to which there is ‘culturalization’ brought about by new communications technologies or discourses is debatable, not least due to the ahistoricism of its claim. For instance, Tom Standage has outlined how new communications technologies in the Victorian era ‘revolutionised’ production and socialisation.17 Understood in this way, perhaps the impact of communications technologies should be considered as a continuation of the existing trends that he highlights elsewhere. That is, the integration of Castells’s notion of the ‘mode of development’ is perhaps unnecessary. Nevertheless, to the degree that it is necessary, its integration into the mode of production is an effective rejection of the claim that we have entered an new ‘information age’.

Whilst Wayne does demonstrate a keen understanding of the impact of new technologies on existing relations of production, his survey of some of the positive impacts is a little narrow. As a key case study of the impacts of new media, Wayne analyses the impact of peer-to-peer file sharing on the music industry.18 In this regard, he is correct in his insistence that we do not separate ‘new’ media from the broader question of the mode of production and that changes in the forces of production can open up contradictions in the relations of production. The limit to this analysis,

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18 Peer-to-peer (p. 2) refers to software that enables different computers to be connected to each other for the purpose of sharing files of different sorts. This sort of network may be describes as ‘what the internet should look like’.
19 Though cable television systems posed a similar threat in the USA in the 1970s by re-broadcasting television transmissions, this was brought to an end by the 1976 Copyright Act. Also, the distribution of information on the internet is hardly cost-free. Internet transmissions are much cheaper than television distribution but it is still scaled in accord with the 'bandwidth' taken up.

20 ‘Open Source’ literally means that the source code of a product is available for copying and alteration, though this might be on a for-profit basis. See <http://www.opensource.org/>.

21 ‘Free Software’ is Open Source software for which no money is exchanged. See <http://www.gnu.org/>.

22 For more on this distinction, see Berry 2003.

however, is that Wayne largely concentrates on the distribution of pre-existing film and music products using peer-to-peer. He states that,

digitalization is incomparably more dangerous to corporate profits [than the VCR] because not only does it amount to a giant copying system but it is also a virtually cost-free distribution system. (p. 57.)

Whilst this only partly true, Wayne takes the opportunity to consider the impact of related movements on potentially alternative methods of production, distinguishing between the ‘Open Source’ (conservative, individualistic and property-oriented) and ‘Free Software’ (radical, collectivist and against property) movements, and how these models relate to production. In the first instance, the Open Source Movement (OSM) fails to introduce a new paradigm into the production process or to property relations. In fact, much Open Source discourse and practice is consciously pro-capitalist arguing that the Open Source method enables a more effective organisation of production unencumbered by bureaucracy or unnecessary hierarchy. For the Open Source ‘community’, development is ‘free’ in the same way as the ‘free’ market. On the other hand, the Free Software Movement (FSM) emphasises the social nature of production, recognising that products do not emerge outside the labour process nor can those products be regarded as the result of individual labour. Whilst the FSM hardly promotes a Marxist position, when considered alongside the conservative orientation of the OSM, it does offer something of an alternative to capitalist relations of production and property. When the method of production of the FSM, which is co-operative, non-exploitative and unalienated labour, is considered alongside the legal régime that it has generated, a more considerable challenge to capitalist relations emerges. For instance, the General Public License (GPL) prevents any monetary value, let alone surplus-value, being attached to the products of collective labour. Though OSM and FSM have traditionally been applied to software development, they are increasingly being applied to other cultural artefacts such as music and film. The resistance to the concretisation of extremely restrictive forms of control over the use and distribution of digital products, as seen in the US Government’s Digital Millennium Copyright Act, in the form of Lawrence Lessig’s ‘Creative Commons’ licence, for example, which gives cultural workers creative control over their products, and not just in software, but in music, film, literature and any other area of culture and media. It does so by
allowing workers to customise a legal licence on the basis of attribution, use, modification, jurisdiction and media format, which then appears as a machine-readable and a human-readable document. Thus, it is not the case that the digitalisation of things distributed over a network creates by itself an alternative method of production. Rather, the ‘network’ makes possible an increased scope for co-operative labour when it is used as such, and especially when such relations generate legal relations. Further examples of this collectivist productivity can be seen in the attempts of the Independent Media Centre\(^\text{23}\) to utilise the distributed structure of the internet that have advanced a great deal the gains of earlier alternative media projects, such as Undercurrents or Schnews.

Though Wayne’s analysis of the implications of new media for new forms of production is limited to a few forms such as file-swapping, it is far from superficial. Against the claim that new technologies will alter the relations of production, Wayne argues that ‘there is no new paradigm by which the economics of capitalism transcends its absolutely fundamental tendency towards overproduction and therefore crisis’ (p. 59). If one considers social relations as a whole, then the alternative methods of production enabled by new technologies become as marginalised as alternative media, alternative medicine or alternative living. Furthermore, Wayne’s analysis of the attempts to suppress radical uses of the internet (as of other media) is correct, and his use of the metaphor of the nineteenth-century English enclosures, and his depiction of a ‘typical process whereby capitalism turns what was once held in various forms of common ownership, into a commodity’ (ibid.), is useful though insufficient. Of course, MP3 music (which, alongside porn, film, and computer software makes up the bulk of material traded on peer-to-peer) was never ‘held in common’ in the first place, that is, it was illegally traded property rather than property held in common.

The critique of production animates Wayne’s argument through the whole of the book. To a degree, the context of media in the system of production acts as a prior constraint on media workers engaging ‘reality’, or at least their ability to represent states of affairs is limited by the mode of producing representation. Wayne also uses the centrality of the mode of production to criticise the sort of media studies and practices that, as I explained above, are increasingly common. The idealist and fragmented philosophical underpinnings of postmodern thought are wholly inadequate bases for understanding the world, which is the ultimate objective of media forms such as documentary and film.

In contrast to Saussurean semiotics, whereby meaning is fixed within a rigid, although somewhat arbitrary (though conventional) sign system, poststructuralist accounts of semiotics invert or even collapse the signified-signifier relation. While a positive move forward from Saussurean semiotics is that the poststructuralists challenge the stability

\(^{23}\) <www.indymedia.org>.\)
and fixity of meaning of the former’s semiotic system, the poststructuralists go too far, arguing that there is nothing but the text. The text comes to replace material reality as the focus of analysis. Therefore, as texts or discourses cannot be resolved in these analyses, social reality is incomprehensible and any sense of ‘adequacy’, as Wayne puts it, in defining the world is lost. Difference becomes the only form of resistance to domination. However, this thesis takes difference and fragmentation to such an extreme that it leaves nothing but difference and fragmentation. Of course, this prevents the establishment of any sort of ‘grand theory’ of society or any organised opposition based on this understanding. For the poststructuralists, language and discourse is a series of games played out by linguistic actors and the outcome of these games comes to constitute the world. Accordingly, utter scepticism means that resistance in the form of discourse or practice cannot be justified. The focus on difference and fragmentation also deflects attention away from the concretely shared aspects of our existence, such as those found in our relation to the means of production. Accordingly, for Wayne, ‘discourse theory is unable to grasp the world, the real, as the accumulated, collective, interdependent outcome of our own social activity’ (pp. 164–5). This state of affairs results from the fact that, for discourse theory, ‘language produces meaning’ and, eventually, reality. Wayne’s focus on production enables him to argue that, contrary to the suppositions of the poststructuralists, language is developed in social practices and social practices are fundamentally formed in the organisation of production. Following Voloshinov, Wayne suggests that, while resistance to dominant discourse is necessary, it is not to say that ‘resistance to discourse’ is necessary in and of itself. Furthermore, as social practices (of varying sorts) that are situated in relation to a system of production direct how language is used, the relations of production must be the main target of resistance. This is not to say that ideology has no power, just that the power of ideology is inextricably linked to real social relations.

Wayne’s focus on the context of media within the system of production goes against the grain of a good deal of recent work in media and cultural studies. For instance, Alan Swingewood’s thesis in *Cultural Theory and the Problem of Modernity* is that Marxist writers used the mode of production as a totalising causal factor, which prevented them from recognising the complexity of social life and the possibility of ‘autonomy’. However, insofar as ‘autonomy’ relates to ‘freedom from’, Wayne’s analysis is by far the more convincing. The problem with ‘autonomy’ and, especially, ‘cultural autonomy’, is that it fails to recognise that the social nature of work and language (whether intellectual, artistic or manual) means that such work and language are always already part of a system in which they are organised. The point is not that we can become ‘autonomous’ because we are always situated – as Wayne points out in his critique of Judith Lichtenberg’s defence of objectivity.24 The point is that one’s position can

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affirm or reject the system in which one is situated. To this end, Wayne suggests that 'neutrally' mediating between classes cedes too much to the exploiting class, in whose interests structures of public discourse are shaped. For instance, Wayne accuses Habermas of relying on what is an essentially bourgeois form of public sphere to underpin his normative concept of public communication:

Habermas wants to retain the capitalist mode of production, but seeks to build up the organs of public communications (in the superstructure) that would ameliorate the conflicts which that mode of production gives rise to.

(p. 239.)

Given the prominence of Habermas in media studies courses, Wayne’s critical take on his work is refreshing. Though Wayne’s criticisms are sound, in the context of a book that places historical materialism at its core, they may have been strengthened by engaging Habermas’s reformulation of historical materialism, which forms the basis of his ‘linguistic turn’ and in which Habermas engages the question of the mode of production at some length. The collection of papers in Communication and Evolution of Society presents a similar argument to that of Swingewood’s, that the mode of production cannot explain social changes that seem to operate independently of the former. Habermas’s point is that certain elements of social evolution are derived not solely from material production but also from social-normative reproduction and regulation, social learning processes, and the institutionalisation of the gains made by social movements. From these insights, Habermas moves on to suggest that ‘the development of normative structures is the pacemaker of social evolution’ and result in new principles of social organisation upon which production is based.26 Habermas’s position on social evolution is made possible by his claim that ‘system’ and the ‘lifeworld’ become ‘uncoupled’ in modernity, and it is in respect to this latter point that Habermas’s theory can be best criticised. At the same time, however, the sociocultural lifeworld can act as a source of resistance to exploitation and as a source of negation. However, Wayne’s argument is that, without dismissing intersubjectivity itself, stressing intersubjective recognition under conditions of severe material inequality can only have inequitable outcomes. Such an objection rests upon whether or not Habermas does want to ‘retain the capitalist mode of production’, which is a question that remains unanswered. At one moment, Habermas claims that he is the ‘last Marxist’ and, in the same breath, that he has been a reformist all of his life; and, on occasion, he maintains that we ought to do away with capitalism. But any focus on the economy in his work is thin and he does seem to have dismissed labour as a site of struggle.

26 Habermas 1979, p. 120.
28 Habermas 2004.
In contrast, Wayne argues that without a material struggle over the organisation of production, ‘labour slips back into its commodity form’ (p. 243) but, at the same time, media workers, especially documentary makers, must engage a ‘radical and committed aesthetics [which] will seek to develop . . . modes of recognition’ (p. 256) appropriate to emancipation. Ultimately, such a project requires that media workers carve out a space akin to Habermas’s periphery public sphere in which movements and intellectuals can challenge the system yet resist co-option and colonisation. However, this space, must always be considered a temporary space formed with the ultimate objective of changing the world.

Marxism and Media Studies is a timely and necessary intervention in media studies. As the teaching of media and culture is becoming increasingly instrumentalised and critical studies tend to be compartmentalised or reception-centred, Wayne’s holistic approach is refreshing. The only problem with the book relates not to its content but to its position in relation to educational provision in media and cultural studies. Perhaps going against the grain of current trends in media studies will cause the book to be marginalised. On the other hand, the analysis is such that it cannot be ignored even by those who reject the practical intention of the book. It is the latter that distinguishes Wayne’s work, culminating in a final chapter that makes a concrete intervention in media practice, encouraging the practical application of the book’s theoretical constructs. A comparison might be made between Marxism and Media Studies and Douglas Kellner’s Television and the Crisis of Democracy, in which Kellner promotes theoretically informed practical alternatives to hegemonic television. In fact, such a comparison serves to highlight the full advantage of Wayne’s treatment of the media as an integrated segment of the capitalist mode of production against conventional Marxian considerations of it as part of the superstructure.

References


Habermas 1996.


Global Unions? Theory and Strategies of Organised Labour in the Global Political Economy
Edited by Jeffrey Harrod and Robert O’Brien
London: Routledge, 2002
Reviewed by Mark O’Brien

The world-wide activist wave against global capitalism, against imperialism and against war which has taken the Left into new and uncharted waters has produced a new generation of internationalists. Outwardly, this new generation appears typically to be one of young and energetic radicals. And yet, when we look more closely, beyond media-constructed images, we find a picture that is at once more complex and more interesting. For a part of the dynamism and the flair of the international protests are the traditional organisations of labour. At Seattle it was the Teamsters and the steelworkers, at Genoa it was the Italian metal-workers, on the historic anti-war march in London on 15 February 2003 it was represented by hundreds of trade-union banners which mingled with the home-made banners and placards carried by protesters.

This situation raises some crucial questions for Marxists. Internationalism, after all, has always been one of the hallmarks of the socialist movement. Socialists must be interested in the extent to which this new internationalism is present in the thinking and practice of organised labour. If there is a new working-class internationalism, what does this mean for the prospects of solidarity and labour renewal? What form is this internationalism taking? What are the responses to this new spirit of internationalism at the various levels of the trade-union movement? How should socialist trade-union activists relate to international issues today?

It is for all of these reasons that a book with the title Global Unions?: Theories and Practice of Organised Labour in the Global Political Economy would be exciting to a socialist reviewer. This book does bring together many of the key themes in the debate about labour internationalism as well as a number of the most prominent names in the relevant academic fields, including industrial relations, social movements theory, international political economy, international relations and human geography. The issues covered include some familiar and traditional themes such as questions regarding the unity of labour, models of trade unionism, and the prospects for multinational collective bargaining. But there are also newer questions to do with the nature of the global economy and the place of labour within it; recent campaigns such as that for core labour standards in the international financial institutions; labour as an actor
within civil society; new coalitions; legislation, governance and labour; the impact of new communications technologies; and strategies of resistance.

Politically, also, this collection is diverse. There are those who are pessimistic about the prospects for labour and those who are optimists; those who concern themselves with institutions and those who are more interested in workers; some for whom internationalism is a necessary strategy in a more internationalised world and some for whom internationalism is a normative value – an end in itself. In their introduction the editors identify four themes which run through the collection: (i) considering companies as the traditional analytical unit of industrial relations; (ii) progressive internationalism and the rise of new forms of organisation; (iii) scales of engagement with capital and the question of strategy; (iv) interdisciplinarity and the question of analytical models for understanding the processes at play.

Louise Amoore’s chapter on work, production and social relations challenges the conceptual use of the ‘firm’ as the traditional analytical unit of industrial relations and international political economy. Amoore argues that the tendency within these disciplines to treat the firm or the company in abstraction from its wider social and cultural setting has led to the distorting notion of the firm as an autonomous actor. Instead she insists upon both the embedded nature of industrial relations within the state-social matrix which surrounds the firm, and also the essentially contested and conflictual nature of those very social relations.

Drawing upon Gramscian perspectives to emphasise the role of cultural and normative themes, Amoore distinguishes between the German and British experience of restructuring. In the German case, the close institutional interconnections between single-owner and family-owned firms, banks, suppliers and shareholders allows for strategies of survival based upon long-term lending and negotiated re-alignment between social groups. In Britain, on the other hand, the central role of the stock market has produced a far more fragmented picture in terms of these networks. The interconnections between financial institutions and firms tend to be weaker in a national business culture dominated by the fluctuations of money markets. This has traditionally made long-term borrowing strategies much more difficult. Restructuring therefore has tended to take the form of dominant players seizing their advantage and then fighting to see off sectional business interests and stakeholder groups fighting for a social agenda. This, then, has been the backdrop to the peculiarly aggressive industrial relations atmosphere in the United Kingdom compared to that of Germany.

Finally, in stressing the place of the firm in wider civil society, Amoore is able to shift ‘labour’ out of its schematised position within the firm and reposition it as an actor in wider society. In this perspective, ‘organized labour’ is considered as an institution of civil society so that trade unions become what elsewhere have been called ‘the most organized actors and the most articulate voices in society’.¹

¹ Somavia 1999, cited at p. 42.
Amoore’s approach is refreshing on a number of levels. It challenges the reification of the firm found in so much globalisation theory. The company – especially the multinational company – is no longer portrayed as an uncontested colossus striding across national boundaries. Instead, it is understood as being subject to pressures and challenges that are locally and culturally grounded. Disputes within the company are seen as reflecting these wider contexts. Most importantly, in Amoore’s account, workers are put back at the centre of things as actors in their own right, capable of resistance.

Continuing the theme of workers determining their situation rather than being simply determined by it is the contribution of Andrew Herod on scales of organisation. Herod’s starting point is not globalisation as such. Indeed, he eschews many of the commonplaces of globalisation theory. He notes, for example, the ways in which the de-regulation of airlines in the US has left many communities more, rather than less, isolated than twenty or thirty years ago. He insists also on capital’s need to embed itself locally. These are examples of what Herod understands as the ‘paradoxes of globalization’ created by the complex dialectic between processes occurring at the global and international scale and those which are more locally rooted. For Herod, understanding these paradoxes is critically important for workers as they fight to defend their conditions in the face of re-structuring and lay-offs. He offers the examples of the US Ravenswood steel-workers dispute of 1990–2 and the US auto-workers dispute of 1998, both of which, in different ways, illustrate the interacting scales of workers’ resistance that Herod is anxious to highlight. The steel-workers at Ravenswood waged a campaign which combined a strategic campaign around the company’s international ownership chains as well as local actions. The autoworkers at General Motor’s Flint plants in Michigan took action which hit at the company’s ‘just-in-time’ (JIT) supply chains halting or affecting production in plants in the US, Canada, Mexico and Singapore. A key conclusion here is that although workers are seen as having to adopt multi-scalar responses to offensives by capital there is equally no ‘scalar formula’ (p. 96) which can be applied in every context. Rather, workers must judge their own situation and identify the scales at which they will have to wage their particular struggle.

The strength of Herod’s analysis is that it reasserts the importance of local action against a contemporary fashion for dismissing such localised struggles as futile. The effectiveness of the auto-workers’ actions of 1998 emphasises the vulnerabilities of multinational capital particularly well. This was, after all, a dispute which, it is thought, wiped 1 per cent off the US GDP in 1998 (p. 93). The example of the Ravenswood steel-workers, however, is problematic. This is an example which Herod uses to argue for the effectiveness of international trade union campaigning. Yet, as Herod himself points out, this company was unusually weak in one crucial respect: the owner was known to US federal authorities and was wanted on serious corruption and tax evasion charges. This meant that, as the union probed the ownership chain, in collaboration with international trade unions, journalists and some states, they were bringing a
pressure to bear on the company that played on themes that were not to do with the
dispute per se. These weaknesses were peculiar to the company and Herod’s suggestion
that this is an example from which we can draw general conclusions for strategy
seems questionable. It is also worth pointing out, as Herod does, that this struggle
resulted in only a qualified victory for the workers involved in that the final deal
struck conceded the loss of 200 jobs through attrition.

Where Andrew Herod seeks to refocus the study of labour through a flexible, multi-
scalar approach, Jeffrey Harrod’s contribution also seeks to redefine the analysis of
labour in its international context. He identifies three disciplines which can be seen
as sharing an overlapping concern with this area: economics and political economy;
comparative labour relations; and comparative politics and political economy. Similarly,
in their introduction, Harrod and O’Brien suggest a convergence between industrial
relations, international relations and international political economy. The aim, then,
for Harrod, is the constructing of a new hybrid discipline – an ‘international political
economy of labour’ (IPEL). This would combine traditional concerns with management
systems, labour process and accumulation régimes and newer concerns with global
labour markets, migration and institutions of regional and global governance. Harrod’s
approach to this, however, is problematic. Taking the assumption of the political
‘neutrality’ of the concept of ‘power-relations’ as his starting point, Harrod argues
that this can provide the theoretical device by which this synthesis might be achieved.

Harrod draws on previous work on relations of production, in which twelve different
sorts of power relation were identified, such as: the relationships between an
entrepreneur and a waged worker; an indebted peasant and a money lender; between
family employers and unwaged labourers; and so on. Harrod argues that an underlying
unity exists between these very different sorts of labour relations: ‘The base uniformity
of all the relations is the nature of degrees of domination and subordination and
authority within production’ (p. 50).

The motivation behind this approach is to achieve a politically neutral analytical
framework which can overarch a number of different ideological perspectives, Marxism
being one among them. Harrod does not mention, however, the obvious ideological
lineage of such an approach, drawing as it does on the poststructuralist tradition. The
main shortcoming of Harrod’s ‘power-relations’ analysis, however, is the way in which
it dissolves the distinctions between different sorts of exploitation. We are left on this
account with an approach which does not allow us to focus properly on the specific
economic character of different kinds of productive relationships and which ends in
a kind of psychological reductionism.

Another contribution in this collection which concerns itself with the theme of
analytical frameworks within industrial relations is that of Nigel Haworth and Steve
Hughes. They chart the internationalisation of capital during the postwar era and
note also its impact upon the field of industrial relations. The key underlying processes
to grasp here, they argue, are: the internationalisation of capital; changes in global trade régimes; and tendencies towards regionalisation. What is distinctive about their approach is that it is ‘epistemic’, paying attention to the values, beliefs and ideologies of different national industrial relations régimes. They rightly highlight the continuing national differentiation of industrial relations régimes and, as they put it, that ‘diversity’, rather than ‘convergence’ still dominates in industrial relations and international-relations theory. These authors, like others in the collection, are keen to identify a basis for new scales of industrial relations. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Treaty of Maastricht and the European Works Councils are all considered as possible candidates. In the end, the pessimistic note running through the piece only reflects the weakness of a purely institutional-regulationist approach to understanding class relations. This is all the more pronounced when the very institutions of capitalist regulation themselves are revealed as being weak when compared to those that dominated at the height of the corporatist era of the 1950s and 1960s.

In a contribution that does not fit neatly into any of the major themes of the collection, Janet Hannah and Maria Clara Bueno Fisher draw attention to another kind of response to economic change. Traditionally a management concern, training is an area that unions are becoming more involved in for employment as well as for organising purposes as a response to intensified competition and tightening labour markets. The authors argue that training in this context can become a way of building resistance to the internationalisation of capital. They compare two case studies: one from Brazil, the other from the United Kingdom.

In the Brazilian case, the training programme of the Confederacao Nacional dos Metalurgicos (CNM) metal workers’ union, organised through the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT) union federation, is discussed. A ‘social-movement’ ethos runs through this programme. Its content includes themes of citizenship and rights, global change and changing patterns of production. Hannah and Fisher argue that the outcomes are political and psychological as well as being practical and skill-based. A challenge to capitalism is an explicit part of the programme.

In the British case, the Graphic Print and Media-Workers Union (GPMU) offered a ‘Charter of Training’ based on a skills audit and a personal development plan for each individual. The background to this shift towards a training agenda was restructuring and union decline in some sectors of British industry in the 1980s. The much more pragmatic and vocational nature of the training offered by this British print union compared to the Brazilian example reflects this experience.

The conclusions reached by the authors – that such training programmes can begin to provide a means by which unions may begin to ‘wrest some control from capital in determining the future trajectory of globalisation’ (p. 114) – seems disproportionately by optimistic in relation to the tasks. The effects of such programmes can only ever be marginal to the broader outlook of the working class movement and will, in any
case, reflect, rather than determine, the culture and traditions of national trade-union movements. More to the point, such training initiatives, whilst no doubt useful to activists in and of themselves, can hardly be seen as a primary strategy for survival against the hard realities of industrial struggle.

Dimitris Stevis, in his chapter on the impact of the regionalisation of capital and its institutions of governance on trade-union practice, combines two of the collection’s key concerns: firstly, the changing scales of capitalist restructuring and labour-capital engagement; and secondly, the variability of trade-union responses to these changes:

These may be collaborative or competitive, inclusive or exclusive, through the state or through direct contacts, nationalist or internationalist. Unions, in short, are not unidimensional entities any more than firms or states are. (p. 131.)

In his discussion of union responses to regional integration in the European Union (EU) and in the Americas, Stevis identifies three levels: attempts to shape the rules of integration; engaging capital; and engaging other unions. His analysis, however, focuses on the first of these.

Within the EU, unions have found themselves included in the formal arrangements of regional integration, although in a marginal role. Attempts to deepen labour integration through the social provision of the Maastricht Treaty have since been blocked by the British and Spanish governments. This weak position for unions within the institutions of the EU is the result partly of the weakness of horizontal business organisations that are available. Stevis suggests that this is a deliberate strategy designed to avoid the emergence of any kind of institutional framework for a new European corporatism.

In the Americas, some parallels exist with the European experience on the question of formal labour integration. Despite lobbying and vigorous campaigning by Canadian, US and Mexican unions labour rules were not included in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The only concession to unions was the eventual agreement of a weak dispute resolution process – the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation. One response of the unions of the Americas to this experience has been that of more vigorous cross-border activism and campaigning, usually at company rather than sectoral level. Stevis, like other authors in the collection, calls for a ‘multi-faceted’ approach for strategic union responses that build on these developments.

In the end, Stevis’s discussion is too institutional. For example, the experience of unions lobbying and manoeuvring for positions within EU governance is only one part of a bigger and more interesting picture. An important development over the last five years has been the increased levels of ‘face-to-face’ transnational activist and worker-to-worker contact. On some of the major trade-union mobilisations such as that at Nice in November 2000 or Florence in November 2002 as well as in some of
the Euro-strikes of recent years, such as that of the GM car workers in January 2001, workers from different countries in Europe have joined together in common action. This is a growing phenomenon. Whether we should call this a ‘Europeanisation’ of worker identities or a ‘new internationalism’ is to pose the question in too formalised a manner. The point is that, as unions attempt with limited success to engage with capital at the level of regional structures, they are creating in their wake an experience for worker members that has the potential to go beyond this formal process through mobilisation and activist perspectives.

One of the most interesting and important chapters is offered by Robert Lambert. Its background is that of the impact of neoliberalism in the Asian Pacific. Broadly speaking, Lambert identifies two responses. Firstly, different versions of business unionism have emerged in which trade unions accept the intensified competition against the workers of other countries and regions and seek to work in a conciliatory fashion with their companies. Lambert effectively illuminates the negative impact of such ‘strategic unionism’ in terms of significant reductions in wage share for workers over the region as well as decreases in union density. The neoliberal period of the 1990s also saw the rise of new ‘authoritarian’ unions which worked with national states to assist in the control of labour militancy. Indonesia, China, Malaysia and the Philippines have all seen forms of this authoritarian unionism become established.

A second response to the ravages of neoliberalism, however, has been the rise of new types of social and political unionism. These unions tend to be independent, democratic and ‘action orientated’. Such unions also show characteristics of social-movement unionism (SMU) in that they form linkages and networks with wider civil society. Examples given include the Kilusang Mayo Uno of the Philippines and Congress of South African Trade Unions. What is most remarkable about this chapter, however, is the description given of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR). SIGTUR represents an alliance of trade unions and their federations which spans much of the southern hemisphere. It is, amongst other things, an attempt to build a global social-movement unionism. In this sense it does represent an important attempt to provide a coherent and strategic working-class response to neoliberalism in the vacuum being created by the crisis of national corporatism. In contrast to the competitive nature of the business unions of the region, ‘solidarity’ is the organisational heart of SIGTUR. The initiative grew out of organic links formed between western Australian trade unionists and South African trade unionists during and after the apartheid years.

SIGTUR is a very significant development in the revitalisation of labour in the twenty-first century. It is also a new and unfolding phenomenon. Any criticism must be made with this in mind. The most serious short-coming, then, in Lambert’s contribution is that he is not clear about the place of politics in the development of SIGTUR. On the one hand, Lambert explains that SIGTUR represents an inversion of...
the northern social-democratic party-union relationship so that the union becomes
the dominant partner: ‘Union subordination to a political party is transformed
into the party’s subordination to the social movement’ (p. 199). In part, this represents
a reaction against some forms of political unionism in which workers are used
opportunistically by the political parties to which their organisations are affiliated.
On the other hand, this remarkable movement, which has already achieved so much,
does not exist in a political vacuum. The global context in which SIGTUR is developing
is intensely political. Imperialism, state responses to terrorism, the activities of
the institutions of global governance, the decline of social democracy and environmental
degradation are dominant issues and the questions of how labour should respond to
them are potentially divisive. Lambert does not address such questions and so we
are left with no real insight into how they have been experienced within SIGTUR.
Thus, the question of deeper political and even ideological commitment remains
unanswered – or, rather, unasked. It may be that this is the result of a reluctance to
address potentially divisive questions, such as what kind of society can we look to
as an alternative to unregulated market capitalism? It could be argued that such
questions are inappropriate to put to a trade-union formation. However, the framing
of SIGTUR in SMU terms as an initiative which seeks to provide an alternative both
to capitalism and to older forms of trade unionism surely makes such questions
important. In the end, in order to achieve an enduring global social-movement unionism,
presaged, in Lambert’s view, by SIGTUR, political responses to these and other
questions, by the workers’ movements concerned, will be necessary.

The final chapter in the collection, by Dan Gallin, addresses the question – present,
though usually implicit, in several of the other contributions – of the prospects for
labour as a global social force. Gallin begins with a useful historical overview. As he
points out, in the immediate postwar era organised business, having for the most part
supported fascism in Europe and Japan, stood discredited before new and restored
liberal-democratic polities. In contrast, organised labour rode high within the national
politics of the respective countries and also won a new legitimacy at the international
level. In many parts of the industrial world, trade unions enjoyed dialogues with
and even roles within government which seemed unimaginable before the war. The
contrast between this situation and the one that prevails today in the neoliberal era.
However, Gallin retains a stoical optimism. International labour, he points out

... has survived two world wars and totalitarian systems with a destructive
capacity without precedent in modern history. The reason is simple: as long
as there will be workers, there will be unions and there will be a labour
movement. (p. 237.)

Of course, the term ‘survived’ does need some comment here. This survival in some
important cases meant political collapse behind war nationalism and, internationally,
organised labour during the Cold-War era, certainly at the official level, did directly
reflect the great divide. International trade unionism has usually not represented the international solidarity of world labour. Gallin acknowledges this. Nonetheless, his essential point regarding the organisational resilience of labour still stands.

In his brief survey of the state of international trade unionism, Gallin points out the effectiveness of some of the campaigns waged by the sectoral trade-union international organisations or global union federations. Examples include: the flag of convenience campaign of the International Transport Federation; the campaigns over labour rights and the defence of trade unionists in Latin America by the Food and Allied Workers’ International; and the striking of international agreements with a number of major multinational companies.

Gallin argues that the tasks of international trade unionism today are threefold: to organise; to democratise; to politicise. On the theme of organisation, he notes the trend towards union mergers and suggests that the revolutionary-syndicalist dream of ‘One Big Union’ may yet come true. On union democracy, Gallin places great hope in electronic communications and worker education. He also rightly acknowledges, however, the fact that these things alone will not suffice to achieve labour renewal. A new political vision is also needed. Here, Gallin points to the possibility of a revived democratic-socialist vision based upon a social-movement union model. The examples he chooses to illustrate his perspective are the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions of South Korea, the CUT of Brazil and the Congress of South-African Trade Unions (COSATU)

... which have taken responsibility for the problems of society in general, who have forged strong links with other elements of civil society, in particular communities, and who have political programmes for social reform. (p. 250.)

Finally, Gallin calls for the establishment of integrated, borderless organisations and the founding of a truly global labour movement. The vision is obviously one that will appeal to socialists. Marx’s famous call for ‘workers of the world’ to unite has never lost its force. Gallin’s global unionism, however, is one of structures rather than of workers per se. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with this. An officially united world trade-union movement would be a truly historic achievement. And, yet, the fact remains that, for the most part, international trade-union organisations remain marginal to the outcome of the majority of trade-union battles. Most disputes still tend to occur between trade unions and local or national employers and governments.

In the end, though the collection is useful in highlighting and exploring many of the key themes of debate and interests amongst academics and trade unionists about labour internationalism, it is unsatisfying in some important respects. Most of the contributions in Global Unions? are essentially about structures and offer primarily institutional analyses at various scales. The exceptions to this, such as the discussion of SIGTUR offered by Lambert and that of the Ravenswood and GM disputes by Herod are the most rewarding chapters. Most of the others, however, do not escape
the industrial-relations and international political-economy frameworks that some of the contributors say they wish to transcend. Of course, the institutions of international labour will be a medium through which any ‘new’ labour internationalism will be expressed. If this could ever have been said to be the whole story, however, it can hardly be said that this is true today.

We began with the world-wide movement which has erupted against global capitalism and against war and we will end with this too. The neoliberal economic and political offensive which has been waged since the end of the Cold War has created a common experience for working people around the world. Governments imposing neoliberal policies have been seen in most countries around the globe. Institutions of global trade and financial regulation – or rather de-regulation – have emerged as the visible enemies of working people around. The conspicuous activities of Western multinationals as they muscle in on previously protected domestic markets are making fortunes for a rapacious few and misery for millions. The role of the US as the dominant military power in the world, supported vigorously by the United Kingdom in its invasion and occupation of Iraq, has intensified anxieties about the state of the world in the new ‘American century’ dreamed of by the US policy elite.

It is for these reasons that the antiglobalisation and antiwar movements of recent years have struck such powerful chords in society. It is for this reason also that the key mobilisations of these movements have attracted evident working-class support. The politics and ideology of workers’ movements, however, are mediated through structures and, for organised workers, in large part, through their trade unions. The relationship between trade unions and the new global social movements, then, is important to understand, in terms of its limitations as well as its potential. The policies and ‘official attitudes’ of international labour organisations and of national centres towards radical anticapitalist and anti-imperialist movements are influenced by a complex of often competing factors.

Conservative trade-union attitudes that act as impediments to the building of an active relationship between unions and radical movements at the official level can result from the following: concerns on the part of the unions as representative membership-based organisations about the lack of formal representation within social movements; the ‘forty-plus’ age demographics of trade-union officialdom; the heterogeneity of the new social movements, that encompass sometimes conflicting interests, such as those of fair-trade organisations and small European farmers seeking government and EU subsidies; an absence of cross-sectoral working on the part of international labour organisations; and a desire to influence policy through engagement with ultra-soft industrial-relations frameworks, such as that of the ‘social dialogue’ process within the EU.

Countering these obstacles are factors which are pushing labour organisations towards serious attempts to engage with these new movements: a desire to relate
more effectively to young people on the part of organisations acutely aware of failure in this area to date; the obvious relevance to trade unions of many of the issues being tackled by these movements, especially in the areas of governance and de-regulation; the marginalisation of international labour bodies from the normal workings of institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, the North Atlantic Free Trade Area and the EU; a need to engage with civil society through increased links with NGOs; shifts towards a ‘mobilising model’ on the part of international trade-union bodies, made easier by new electronic communications; and a desire to achieve greater political hegemony across a broad range of social issues and in relation to state and state-related institutions.

In the end, however, and especially for Marxists, it is the internationalism of workers and particularly of key layers of the most active workers, in terms of their perceptions of the world, of themselves and of their brothers and sisters around the globe, that really matters and of which international trade-union structures give only a faint expression. This internationalism today takes many forms: from the active solidarity of General Motors car workers around the closure of the Vauxhall plant at Luton; to meetings of American and European union activists during the North American United Parcel Service strike; to the interest of British Unison members in the struggles of Colombian public-sector workers; and to the actions of dockworkers across the EU in 2006. There is nothing automatic or guaranteed about this internationalism. It has to be actively built in order to flourish. But these examples point to a potential which is far more promising than that represented by the official structures of the global unions.

*Global Unions?* gives us a collection that will be of use to those who have specialist interest in international trade-union practice at the official level. For those who are looking for something that provides evidence of and insight into the profound shifts of consciousness occurring amongst workers and their movements around the world, however, this is not the book for them.

**Reference**

What Is to Be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the Question of Revolution Today
Edited by WERNER BONEFELD AND SERGIO TISCHLER
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002
Reviewed by CHRIS WRIGHT

‘What is to be done?’ Indeed, this question resonates with us today more than ever, as the world sits gripped in a crisis now some thirty years old, a crisis which has finally, over the last decade, given rise to a renewal of communist theory and hope, grounded in the anticapitalist movements from Chiapas to Brazil to Seattle to Genoa. This book argues that the new movements against globalisation must, in fact, not be lulled back into the quagmire of Leninism, in whatever form, and that it must project a new anticapitalism, but one grounded not in hopes of state power and vanguard parties, but in the self-activity, the emancipatory and revolutionary self-activity of the proletariat.

The book operates on three interrelated levels: a critique of Leninism/Bolshevism in relation to its historical practice under Lenin, a critique of Lenin’s theoretical underpinnings, and a projection of a different understanding of ‘what is to be done’.

The strength of the work lies in the moments where the focus is on the critique of Lenin’s theorisation of the fundamental problems of struggle and revolution, and on the projection of a different notion of class, struggle, revolution and communism. The book founders, however, in those essays which take up the historical practice of the Bolsheviks, too often presenting a caricature of Lenin’s ideas and his relationship to the revolutionaries of the turn of the twentieth century.

Section One focuses on the historical practice of Lenin’s ideas in and through the Bolshevik Party and counterposes the practices of the Left within Social Democracy to Lenin and the Bolsheviks. This more or less fails to satisfy, as it never grapples with either Lenin’s ideas nor with the Bolsheviks’ practice from January 1904 to February 1917. This does, however, make it easier to pose an already-existing anti-Leninist Left within Social Democracy, since taking up the actual history would require explaining how Lenin and the Bolsheviks were themselves an essential component

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1 Thanks to Werner Bonefeld, Cyril Smith, Sabrina and the Historical Materialism Editorial Board for their comments and suggestions. All failings are obviously my own.

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Section Two is more focused on a fundamental critique of Lenin’s notions of revolution, struggle, capital, and of Marx’s own project. This criticises Lenin’s ideas as not merely inapplicable to today, but as pointing to a wholly different, bourgeois, conception of revolution and crisis. On the one side, they posit Lenin’s ideas: the state as an instrument to be smashed, seized, wielded; crisis as flowing from the competition between capitals; the Party as Subject of the revolution, as the real agent of historical forces; and revolution as a question of ‘who controls what’. To this, they counterpose the state as a moment of the capital-labour relation, as a mode of existence of capital, not as an instrument; crisis as flowing from class struggle; the proletariat as subject of the revolution; and revolution as the transformation of all human social relations, not as a delayed effect achieved years after seizing state power, but as the very content of revolution itself.

Section Three is focused more on problems of organisation and how we understand our own activity. The essays criticise the notion of ‘using the state’, of ‘going through the institutions’. They also criticise the idea that revolution is a conflict between two equivalent subjects, two armies. A different activity is posed, one which is about anti-power, an anti-politics, rather than a politics of conquest.

All of the authors share a broadly class-struggle-centric analysis and the possibility of a communist anti-politics which sees itself as the moving negation of the existing social relations, rather than as moving through the institutions of capital. This involves a fundamentally anti-sociological and anti-instrumental approach to class, state and crisis.

In the beginning

The ‘Introduction’ by the two editors, Sergio Tischler and Werner Bonefeld, takes us to the current crisis, the anti-globalisation movement and the notion of freedom, but there is one point in particular that underpins the rest of the book:

What, then, is to be done? The idea of the revolutionary party as the organizational form of revolution has to be abandoned. The form of the party contradicts the content of revolution, and that is, human emancipation – the emancipation of the dependent masses can only be achieved by the dependent masses themselves. The notion of the form of the state as an instrument of revolution has to go. The idea of the seizure of power on behalf of the dependent masses has to be exposed for what it is: the denial of the society of the free and equal. Moaning about the ‘excesses’ of capital has to stop. A lamenting critique merely seeks to create a fairer capitalism,
conferring on capital the capacity to adopt a benevolent developmental logic. Capital is with necessity ‘excessive’ in its exploitation of labour. To lament this is to misunderstand its social constitution. The attempt to define the revolutionary subject has to be abandoned. This subject can neither be derived analytically from the ‘logic’ of capital, nor can its existence be decreed by the party, as if it were a mere foot-soldier. The revolutionary subject develops through a constant conflict with capital and its state, and the social composition of this subject will depend on those who stand on the side of human emancipation. In theoretical terms, the revolutionary subject can only be determined as human dignity.

This section provides us with the terms of a critique of Lenin’s theorisations and sets out an entirely different notion of struggle, revolution and communism.

The historical critique of Lenin and the posing of an anti-Leninist Left

The second chapter, a reprint of council-communist Cajo Brendel’s ‘Kronstadt: Proletarian Spin-Off of the Russian Revolution’ focuses on the Kronstadt Rebellion and its meaning for us today, attempting also to take up how Lenin and the Bolsheviks responded to Kronstadt as an outgrowth of the course of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism’s taking of state power.

Brendel argues that Kronstadt was the last gasp of the revolutionary moment in Russia begun in 1917, and that it represented the beginning of the end of the revolutionary upheaval from 1917 to 1921. Brendel is completely justified in his assessment that the crushing of Kronstadt showed finally and fully the anti-working-class nature of the Bolshevik régime, as it had developed from its first decrees in 1917. Brendel wants to show us that there is something powerful to be learned from the Kronstadt uprising and that this, rather than the Bolsheviks’ régime, points towards a liberatory practice.

The article has two fundamental weaknesses, however, which the third and fourth essays share to one degree or another: a historical determinism that forecloses a really radical critique, and a kind of moral criticism which rests upon this historical determinism and which seeks to create a ‘good Marxism’ which can be counterposed to a ‘bad Leninism’.

First, Brendel discusses the nature of the Russian Revolution and its possibilities. In effect, Brendel argues that the material conditions for a proletarian revolution did not exist in Russia in 1917. This argument forecloses, however, a real critique of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. After all, if the only possibility for Russia was a ‘bourgeois revolution’ (an idea which itself deserves to be criticised along the lines of George C.
Commninel’s *Rethinking the French Revolution,* whereby most Marxists conflate the overthrow of the absolutist state with social revolution, then the Bolsheviks followed a rational policy relative to the tasks at hand and smashing Kronstadt would not, in fact, have mattered since the Kronstadters were, in reality, ‘storming heaven’ in an isolated upsurge anyway. We are left with taking the side of the Kronstadt uprising because we take the side of the workers in all struggles, but with no hope that Kronstadt could have been anything other than an exercise in defeat. Whether or not Brendel in fact wants us to see his point this way, this article seems to leave us with precious little else.

The Bolsheviks, from this point of view, carried out a rigorous line of attack on feudal and semi-feudal social relations and opened up the possibility of the accumulation of capital, that is the expansion of the capital-labour relation into the dominant social relation. Maybe one could criticise Bolshevism for its conscious use of the state in a forced-march primitive accumulation, but this may have less to do with ‘Leninism’ than with the logical conclusion of Social-Democratic conceptions of revolution carried out under Russian conditions. One can condemn the smashing of Kronstadt as anti-working-class, but it ends up being, in fact, the logical conclusion of a bourgeois régime establishing its power over and against the mass of workers and peasants.

Brendel bases his view on historicist comparisons to 1796, 1848 and 1871. Neither the internal conditions in Russia, nor the international conditions, were anything like 1871, much less 1848 or 1796. In 1796, the working class as such barely even existed and the capital-labour relation held sway nowhere outside of England in any substantial way. In 1848 and even in 1871, the working class in France produced in workplaces of generally less than ten workers, in highly skilled labour, and outside of Paris and Lyons, barely existed at all. In Russia, while the working class was small, at less than 10 per cent of the total population in 1913, it was organised in large-scale production facilities, such as the Putilov works where tens of thousands of workers worked together under conditions more similar to their West- and Central-European counterparts. The working class also, despite its small size, accounted for over 40% of the wealth produced in Russia by 1913, giving it disproportional social weight.

Internationally, even in 1871, capital had established itself as the dominant social relation only in England and in a handful of cities and regions in France, Germany, Holland, and the United States. In 1921, the capital-labour relation was the dominant social relation in Central and Western Europe and the United States and was spreading itself into Eastern Europe as well (both Poland and Czechoslovakia were more industrially developed than Russia in 1917.) The mass of workers and their degree of organisation had expanded enormously.

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2 The critique of the notion of bourgeois revolution was specifically taken up in an essay by Heide Gerstenberger in the first volume of the *Open Marxism* trilogy, and subsequently debated in two issues of the journal *Common Sense.* Both *Open Marxism* and *Common Sense* were edited by Werner Bonefeld, making its uncritical appearance here even more bizarre.
The comparison does not hold up and instead, therefore, of a closed, deterministic, objectivist, and narrowly national approach, one should approach Kronstadt from the view that Russia could still have reached out to an actually existing international working-class movement. No one knows what might have happened had the workers’ and peasants’ struggles been allowed to unfold without their suppression by the Bolsheviks. This foreclosure of tremendous possibilities marks the counter-revolutionary nature of the Bolshevik régime, not just its conformity to the ‘bourgeois stage’ of development. But Brendel, seemingly, cannot make this critique and it seriously undermines contemporary attempts to establish a radical basis for the critique of Lenin and Bolshevism in power.

This short-circuits the critique of Lenin theoretically by separating ‘Marxism’ qua ‘Leninism’ from ‘Marxism’ as some kind of positivist ‘proletarian science’. The dualism, between theory and practice/consciousness and matter/economics and politics, in Brendel’s critique testifies to the weaknesses of council communism, which never wholly broke with the Second International’s positivist ‘Marxism’. This problem resurfaces in the next two essays.

Brendel wants to posit Lenin as having nothing to do with ‘Marxism’. Actually, ‘Marxism’ itself had precious little to do with Marx’s work and even much of Engels’s work, though Engels is in part to blame for the propagation of a positivist ‘Marxism’. Lenin did not exist at all outside the ‘Marxism’ of the Second International, which had little to do with Marx. Lenin’s Marxism Russified Second-International ‘Marxism’.3 In this regard, Brendel says something that at first seems incoherent, but which actually replicates his moralistic critique of the Bolsheviks as if ‘Marxism’ did not already accord quite well with bourgeois ends. He writes,

Marxism, as Lenin understood it – and as he had to understand it – made it possible for him to gain deep insight into the essential problems of the Russian Revolution. That same Marxism provided the Bolshevik Party with a conceptual apparatus that stood in the most blatant contradiction to its own tasks and also to its practice.

And, later, Brendel says that

This meant, as Preobraschenski publicly acknowledged during a regional conference in 1925, that Marxism in Russia had become a mere ideology.

One might respond that this was already true of most ‘Marxism’, which via Social Democracy in power, would kill Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and become the platform of capitalist development in Europe, alongside fascism, for the next seventy-five years.

At which point, the reader arrives at Behrens’s account, in the third essay, of some of the ideas of the Left within Social Democracy.

Behrens provides several useful starting points for further study of the Social-Democratic Left, but his treatment suffers from feeling like a hodgepodge of different ideas and critiques. Brendel lumps together a variety of left oppositions to the Centre and Right within Social Democracy, while ignoring Lenin’s presence within this Left. The movements from Luxemburg to the Bremen Left to the formation of the KAPD and the debates and differences between them are lost in what feels like the creation of a too-coherent already-anti-Leninist Left, a Left which, in fact, lacked the coherence one would expect from Behrens’s article. The move to an explicit anti-Leninism, which only some of the Left took, rested upon a critique of Kautsky, Bebel, and German Social Democracy itself.

This is not to devalue showing that a variety of substantive critiques of both Lenin and Kautskyism existed within Social Democracy and that they may have had some common touchstones, but substantive critiques should be treated substantively and critically. Phillippe Bourrinet’s *The Dutch and German Communist Left, 1900–1968* or John Gerber’s *Anton Pannekoek*, which have the benefit of being book-length histories, do a much better job of capturing the complexity of the Social-Democratic Left. The Behrens article, and not simply because it is too short, feels hagiographic and, at best, brings out some crucial aspects of what remains relevant to us from Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin, especially on the differing notions of the dialectic of organisation and class.

This brings us to Simon Clarke’s essay, the fourth in the book. It is actually a reprint of the article he wrote for *Historical Materialism*’s debate on Lenin and organisation. In spite of being aimed at Lenin as a whole, Clarke mostly criticises Plekhanov and Lenin prior to 1902. It is a primer on Russian the revolutionary movement in the nineteenth century, as well as the material situation in Russia up to 1902. His extended critique of Plekhanov and Lenin’s materialism as the recapitulation of eighteenth century French materialism and the linkages between Russian populism and Bolshevism forms a large, and engaging, part of the text. Were it merely that, the piece would have been much better.

Instead, Clarke decides, similarly to Brendel, to set up a fairly tight separation between Social Democracy as a whole and the Bolsheviks, by posing that they owed more to Russian populism than to the SPD and Kautsky. Clarke sites four key ideas Lenin imports from populism that he counterpoises to ‘mainstream’ or ‘orthodox’ Social Democracy.

First, Clarke says that Russian populism

stressed the active role of revolutionary ideas in determining the course of history, and so gave the intellectuals a prominent political role. This was
the element which was developed by Plekhanov and adopted from him by Lenin. The orthodox Marxism of the Second International certainly did not underestimate the role of ideas in historical development, but revolutionary ideas emerged out of the revolutionary movement, however much intellectuals might play a role in their formulation. Although Kautsky’s theory gave the intellectuals a special position in the struggle for socialism, it did not give them any special authority.

The problem is that this is just plain wrong. Karl Kautsky, referred to at the time as the ‘Pope of Marxism’, who looked to Plekhanov for his philosophical ideas, most certainly did give them a special authority. However, the material situation between Germany and Russia differed radically. The dissident intelligentsia in Russia faced repression from Czarism and actively promoted the overthrow of the Czarist state. In 1905, the liberal intelligentsia was calling for the defeat of Russia by Japan in the Russo-Japanese War! The dissident intelligentsia under German capitalism was confronted with a much more open, liberal-monarchist state which appeared to be reformable. Social Democracy even provided a space from which to affect democratic reform through its parliamentary and trade-union organs. To compare the political situations flatly is to violate the vast contextual differences that underlay the different responses.

Supplementing this first claim about populism privileging the intelligentsia over the masses, Clarke then goes on to claim that Kautsky did not separate the political and the economic as Lenin did. But Kautsky clearly separated the parliamentary and trade-union elements within the Party, and narrowed those notions to suit those apparatuses which could most likely affect reform of a state perceived as an instrument whose class character could change depending on who wielded it. This had nothing in common with the struggle to overthrow a feudal, absolutist state that blocked bourgeois-democratic development. Lenin clearly understood this and also understood the unreliability of the bourgeois intelligentsia when he formulated the slogan of the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’.

The second major point for Clarke is that populism stressed the power of the revolutionary will, expressed through a disciplined organisation of dedicated revolutionaries, in realising the revolutionary ideal. This was the idea which Lenin took from his revolutionary mentor, Chernyshevsky, but one which had been rejected by orthodox Marxists, who stressed the mass democratic character of the proletarian movement.

Kautsky and mainstream Social Democracy stressed the bourgeois-democratic character of the movement. A radical, revolutionary will was unnecessary in Germany, according
to the mainstream. Lenin and Kautsky differed, not theoretically, but on the application of that theory to their specific situations.

At this point, a common failing of all three of the ‘historical’ essays stands out. This is a failure prompted and covered by the failure to deal with Lenin and Bolshevism in a genuinely historical manner. If Lenin and Bolshevism were so outside of the mainstream, and if the Left of Social Democracy was, already in 1903, so ‘anti-Leninist’, then why is it that Lenin and the Bolsheviks ended up on the same side as Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Gorter, et al. in the struggles within Social Democracy from 1905 to 1918? Why is Lenin partnered with them at the conferences at Stuttgart and Basel? Why were the Bolsheviks key in the formation of the Kienthal and Zimmerwald Lefts? In fact, in 1918, Luxemburg, for all of her criticism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, says that at least they dared. One could read this as saying, ‘At least they had the revolutionary will!’ Pannekoek, Gorter and the Bremen Left do not break with Lenin and the Third International until 1920 and Luxemburg never did so. None of the three essays can grapple with this history because they construct a counter-ideology, instead of a historically grounded critique of both Lenin and of the rest of the Social-Democratic Left.

The third major point covers Lenin’s critique of the state:

Third, it was marked by a radical rejection of the state, and opposition to any involvement in constitutional politics, on the grounds that the state was essentially the agent of capitalist development, while the basis of the new society lay outside the state, in the commune and in co-operative production. It accordingly had an insurrectionary view of the revolution, the task of which was to destroy the economic and political forces of capitalism to set free the elements of socialism. This idea was also rejected by orthodox Marxists, who certainly did not believe that socialism could be achieved by electoral means, but who regarded the democratisation of the state and the achievement of civil liberties as a primary condition for the development of the workers’ movement, and political agitation as a primary form of propaganda.

I have never heard anyone claim that Lenin rejected the state as such or that the basis of the new society was in the commune (except maybe in the very long term). The anti-statist view was supported by Pannekoek in his fights with Kautsky as early as 1910–11, well ahead of Lenin. Nor did Lenin reject participation in the state, as he argued that presence in the Dumas from the period from 1907–12 was a tactical, not a principled question. Lenin also saw the revolution in terms of the ‘democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasantry’, a dictatorship that ‘regarded the democratization of the state and the achievement of civil liberties as a primary condition for the development of the workers’ movement, and political agitation as a primary
form of propaganda’. At most, one could argue that, unlike mainstream Social Democracy, Lenin understood the revolution as first smashing the old state apparatus and then building a new ‘workers’ state ‘apparatus. But even this did not obviously come from populism, since Lenin only adopts this position in 1916 through a variety of discussions and debates with Nikolai Bukharin.

The fourth point may be summed up in this quote,

Lenin’s conception of revolutionary politics meant that it did not matter that the rural population was not organised as a part of the proletariat, and did not express proletarian or socialist aspirations, for the operative interests and aspirations of the peasantry were not those expressed by the peasants themselves, but those expressed on their behalf by the revolutionary party.

A cursory review of Lenin’s and the Bolsheviks’ works from 1904 to 1912 clearly show that Lenin trusted the bourgeois-revolutionary needs of the peasants more than that of the intelligentsia, but that, beyond this point, the peasantry would follow a directly bourgeois course of development and that would present a major obstacle for the working class.

The last article lacking in real historical grounding is George Caffentzis’s piece. Caffentzis starts from the idea that we need to circulate struggles and create a public domain and public culture of revolution. And he makes a substantive critique of Hardt and Negri’s ‘militantism’, to borrow an apt term from the Situationist International.

However, Caffentzis reads his insights and concerns into Lenin, and therein lies the problem. If anything, Negri’s ‘Militant’, posed as the ‘brain’ of the ‘brainless’ Multitude, remains true to Lenin, or rather to the young Lenin, since a careful reading of Lenin’s work after 1905 shows that he moves away from his notion, taken directly from Kautsky, that ‘socialist consciousness comes from the outside’, from the scientific intellectuals of the party. Lenin goes much further than Kautsky or mainstream Social Democracy on this question, but he never breaks with a statist and state-capitalist conception of the revolution. If Lenin clings to the vanguard party, it is because he clings to the statist notions of revolution appropriate to and reflective of a bourgeois revolution, but not of workers’ revolution.

A non-Leninist practice and theory did develop from 1902 to 1921, and insofar as we see that from the discussion of Kronstadt and the work of people such as Luxemburg and Pannekoek, the first three articles are valuable. But this practice consciously, if only partially, broke with Social Democracy before it broke with Lenin. A more accurate, less demonising, and therefore more genuinely damning historical critique of Bolshevism has yet to be carried out.
What about today?

The more historical articles do not constitute what is most important in this book. The remaining articles take up where the Introduction left off, putting forward very sharp critiques of Lenin’s ideas, often indirectly, by projecting a coherent way of rethinking struggle and revolution.

The re-casting of Marx’s work as critique is taken up in Mike Rooke’s ‘The Dialectic of Labour and Human Emancipation’. His working up of Marx’s ideas as a critique, of a break, with philosophy, is sharp and clear. He shows in detail the critique of Enlightenment dualism by Marx, and its re-emergence in orthodox Marxism, including Plekhanov and Lenin. He shows us the importance of the concepts of alienated labour, of fetishism, and of the dialectic of working-class self-emancipation. His resurrection of communism as ‘the free association of producers’ and as the abolition of classes, including the proletariat, is a welcome return to the core of Marx’s liberatory critique of capital.

He poses Marx’s work as a critique of political economy and philosophy, not a perfection of them. Marx is not creating an alternative, better version, but criticises them as fundamentally the expressions of a society based upon alienated social relations. In the process, he, like the rest of the articles of this book, resituates the activity of the working class as the subject of the revolution, not the party.

Rooke shows how the re-emergence of materialist dualism in the Second and Third Internationals both flowed from the conditions obtaining in Russia and Germany, but also how it played into the Bolshevik conception of a statist revolution that involved a re-imposition of the separation of the producers from the means of producing that is at the heart of the capital-labour relation. He also grounds the various left critiques of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the course of the revolutionary struggles from 1917–23 and demonstrates why Trotskyism, in recapitulating Lenin’s weaknesses, has no real critique, for all of its at times valid criticisms, of what happened with the Russian Revolution.

Rooke’s piece is not without problems, either, however. First, his conception that Marx founded an ‘ontology of labour’, if by this he means what we might refer to as a ‘positive ontology’, seems dubious. The reason I make an issue of this is that a certain brand of ‘Spinozist’ communism descended from Althusser, Deleuze and Guattari, has made its way into serious communist discourse, especially through Negri and Hardt. The nexus of their arguments has a lot to do with reading Marx’s work as ontological in a way which gives us a ‘positive’ ground for communism. The problem is that positive ontology is concerned with Being as ‘is-ness’, and therefore remains within the domain of bourgeois ideology and society. Opposition to dialectic and anti-transcendentalism follow from this, but then so does the scrapping of the core of Marx’s critique of political economy.

This is not to deny the ontological aspects of Marx’s work. However, I would make
an argument that the ontological aspects of Marx’s work are what I would call ‘negatively ontological’ because, as in Hegel, Nothing is a determinate category rich in content. For example, in Volume One of Capital, 4 it becomes clear that the quantification of the product and of labour are both predicated on the determinate absence or negation of material qualities in either the product or labour. The negation of qualities becomes the precondition for their universalised quantifications as equivalents. So it is less the positive Being or the ‘is-ness’ of the product or labouring activity that matters than the loss of specific Being qua products or labour with qualities, in the process of becoming exchange-values.

Marx (and Hegel) put the ontological into its proper place, as part of the process of becoming. Being and its negation (Nothing) form the ground for Becoming and are interlocked moments, although not in a general sense in capital, but in the historically and socially specific modes of existence of the value-form and the form of labour as abstract labour. Being finds itself reified, objectified, under capital, and, as such, appears to be the primary category, when in fact the negation of Being in favour of the non-being of value brought on by the specific social relations of capital dominates. A ‘positive-ontological’ reading of Marx leads us back to the objectivism of the Second and Third Internationals.

Objectivism tends to annihilate the activity of the subject, to reduce capital to a capitalist system and class struggle to a mediating role between structures, reducing practical-critical activity to a question of agency. The self-creating, and therefore the self-liberating, aspect of labour is lost. Communism, of course, is not the obliteration of objectification, but the return of objectification to the flow of life. Objects no longer stand over and against us, as the reason for our activity. Our activity is objectified in one moment only to return to us again because the objects of our self-activity have become subordinated to our conscious social control.

The smaller, second point, involves Rooke’s answer to the implicit question ‘What is to be done?’. We need to give ‘theoretical and programmatic’ form to the dialectic of class struggle. What could this mean? A programme, according to Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary (my italics), is

That which is written or printed as a public notice or advertisement; a scheme; a prospectus; especially, a brief outline or explanation of the order to be pursued, or the subjects embraced, in any public exercise, performance, or entertainment; a preliminary sketch.

Is this the return of the idea of a paedagogical politics, of a politics of ‘showing the way’? This seems like a back door to the kind of party politics Rooke criticises. I see it as connected to the approach to Marx and labour as one which is properly speaking

4 Marx 1976, p. 128.
‘ontological.’ Even if Rooke raises the matter only obliquely, this gets at a question to which we will return in the conclusion, which is the relative absence in the book of any discussion of what pro-revolutionaries should do and what organisational activity, if any, we should embrace.

Opening the second section of the book, we find the extensive piece by Alberto Bonnet, ‘The Command of Money-Capital and the Latin American Crises’. Focusing on Latin America, Bonnet provides a look at the current crisis which goes beyond the typical imperialism-centred analysis. The article does not directly criticise Lenin’s texts, but it does provide a radical alternative grounded in the idea that crisis expresses class struggle. Unlike Lenin’s approach and that of most contemporary Marxists, Bonnet does not situate crisis at the level of the competition between capitals, but on the level of global capital versus global labour.

Through this, Bonnet shows how the crises of the last ten years have been grounded in what he calls ‘the command-in-crisis of money capital’, in which the crisis between capital and labour, over re-establishing the sufficient conditions of accumulation, has taken the form of the flight of capital from the main centres of accumulation in the post-Second-World-War period to the rest of the world in the form of money-capital.

This has involved money-capital taking several forms, first as long-term public debt through loans to the so-called ‘Third World’ in the late 1970s and early 1980s, until the debt crisis of 1982. Then, we see the inflation of the stock market and the financial bubbles which successively blew up in the US in 1987 and then, more seriously, in Germany and Japan in the early 1990s, until the crisis reached a new point around the peso crisis in 1994, brought on, in no small part, by the specific situation created by the uprising in Chiapas.

He shows how money-capital has been the form used by capital to flee insubordinate labour in some places with the hope of finding subordinate labour in other places. Much to capital’s dismay, the ‘other places’ have often turned into sites of increasingly sharp class struggle, such as South Korea, Brazil, Ecuador and now Argentina. In effect, money-capital, transformed in the 1990s, through the Brady Plan, from long-term public debt to long-term private debt by the swapping of debt into title or share equity through the privatisation of state-owned companies, has been an attempt to discipline labour without direct confrontation.

The result has been the increasing inflation of credit and titles which are nothing but a promise that capital will tomorrow or the day after or at some point in the future secure fresh surplus-value from the exploitation of labour. And therein lies the problem of the current crises: labour does not come so willingly and money-capital requires that, at some point, the piper be paid with fresh values, that is, that exploitation resume at a level adequate to a new round of accumulation.

This lengthy article cannot be done justice in a short review, but it is a challenging formulation of the current situation, one which offers a cogent alternative to the capital-
versus-capital model of Lenin’s *Imperialism*, which has no grounding in exploitation. Along the way, Bonnet also problematises the attempt to periodise capital through transformations at the level of capitalist competition, whether Lenin’s imperialism or Aglietta’s ‘régimes of accumulation’.

In his solo essay, Bonefeld takes up the problem of communism as ‘human emancipation’. What is the content of communism, even though we cannot specify its form? It is the abolition of alienated social relations and the reconstitution of society on the basis of the social individual and the freely associated producers.

Where does the state fit into this? Well, quite simply, it does not. The statist notion of revolution is nothing else but the return to capitalism, the subversion of the real movement of the class. Bonefeld shows the state as but one moment of the capital-labour relation, a moment of the very relation it is charged with overcoming. The means must be appropriate to the ends and vice versa. In the process of subjecting the party-state dialectic to critique, Bonefeld resurrects the notion of spontaneity, rescued from the treatment of it as intuitive action counterpoised to conscious action. Bonefeld employs a more Hegelian notion of spontaneity, in which spontaneity depends on the conscious acceptance of the conditions which give rise to activity. Spontaneity is here reflexive and a process of self-determination relative to the conditions which determine my actions.5

Bonefeld’s piece asks us to take very seriously the idea that Marx was not joking when he said that ‘Communism is the real movement of the class’, but where, by ‘real’, Marx was indicating ‘actual’. Communism is not a state or a society ‘out there’, but the real content of our struggles to emancipate ourselves. In the process, he makes a detailed critique of the central tenets of Lenin’s thought.

Sergio Tischler’s own essay starts from Lenin’s reification of the political and economic as separate and separable moments, and the resulting separating of the subject of revolution from the object of revolution. For Tischler, Lenin aims at revolution, but conceives of this within the dominant forms of reified social theory, and therefore ends up mirroring Max Weber. Lenin’s ‘professional revolutionary’ and Weber’s ‘politics as a vocation’ are two sides of the same process, one grounded in the oppositional party and the other grounded in the state, but with the same logic, which Guy Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle*, referred to as the logic of ‘total social management’. The party and the state are granted theoretical and practical autonomy and equivalence, relative to society and social classes, a point reinforced by Lenin’s argument that the vanguard-party form was appropriate to battle with the state under monopoly capital.

Tischler then goes on to situate Lenin’s importance after 1921 on the basis of the

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failure of the European revolutions. Their defeat creates the conditions under which Lenin and Bolshevism appear victorious, to have answers not given by anyone else. This coincides with Lenin theorising the problems of bourgeois-democratic ‘revolution’ in a country with a moribund bourgeois class. The problem then is for the party to take up the role as Subject of the revolution while the working class becomes the Object of the party’s activity, its milieu, its instrument.

Counterposing Luxemburg to Lenin here involves a problem, in that Tischler overlooks the degree to which Luxemburg is involved in, and dedicated to, the importance of Social Democracy as a political organisation, as the organised expression of the working class. She cannot be lumped incautiously, then, with Pannekoek, Gorter and Rühle, who break with this conception, nor could an adequate treatment of Luxemburg’s critique ignore or treat as irrelevant Luxemburg’s own dictatorial control of the Polish Social-Democratic party to which she belonged.

This aside, since a critique of Luxemburg is not Tischler’s object, his treatment of class as an ‘illumination’, as in effect, a defetishising, negative category and social formation, instead of Lenin’s instrumental and objectivist one, is novel.

Finally, Tischler poses revolution as the liberation of time from capital’s homogenous, abstract linearity. Revolution is not ‘progressive’, but negating. We move here from revolutions as the ‘locomotive of history’, but which is also history as the longest-running train wreck, to time as open and uncertain, as multiple and diffuse and non-linear, as non-commodity time. Certainty belongs to capital and its timeline, ours is rather the non-linear time of the Zapatista struggle and discourse, which has refused immediate decisions and fixed timetables because they would assume the ability of the Zapatistas to decide that which can only be decided collectively, by obeying. And this opens us to what is exciting and novel in the Zapatistas’ reformulation of the problem of civil society which goes beyond and therefore escapes the defining and constraining limitations of its Enlightenment (bourgeois) usage.

Finally, in the last section, we come to Johannes Agnoli and John Holloway’s essays. Agnoli’s essay criticises the possibility of institutional politics and the entrapment of resistance in the state. There are no shortcuts through the houses of state power. Using the example of the German Greens, Agnoli makes the point that, instead of entering the front door and then slipping out the back, use of the institutions requires us to enter at the bottom floor and ascend upwards. To use the house, one must ascend to the upper floors, where no backdoors exist and where eventually, one might conclude, even jumping out of a window appears to be suicide.

He concludes that a revolutionary politics must remain rigorously outside the halls of power if it wishes to affect radical social transformation. Put simply, you won’t burn it down if you are inside it and besides, all you can from the inside is to redecorate! But the organisational forms appropriate to this task cannot be given in advance. Eschewing discussions of previous attempts at organisation, Agnoli encourages us to
not think formalistically about the problem, as if we could theorise in advance the ‘correct’ organisational form, but instead challenges us to look for it in our practice, in the conditions of our struggles.

The book ends with John Holloway’s essay. The title, ‘Revolt and Revolution Or Get out of the Way, Capital!’ captures the essence of Holloway’s piece: that we seek to get capital out of the way of our access to the means of creating our own lives (commonly referred to in Marxist literature as the socialisation of the means of production).

Taking up the language and categories of his book, Holloway shows how capital is based on repulsion, on the capacity of capital to flee labour and labour to flee capital. Unlike slavery and feudalism, where flight was not a part of the relationship of exploitation, but rather of its breaking point, the capital-labour relation allows a relative freedom, what Marx called the ‘dual freedom of labour’: free from physical compulsion and free from the means of production. Both labour and capital can and do move, in a dance of repulsion and attraction.

But this dance is not symmetrical. Capital must always come back to labour, must reproduce itself as the conditions of the exploitation of labour, as the extraction of surplus-value from labour as value-creating. Labour, however, is not required to come back to capital. But in refusing to come back, labour faces grave dangers. In refusing to come back as individuals, we risk starvation, imprisonment, ostracisation and ultimately annihilation, socially, physically or both. This means that to really flee, to be done with capital, our flight must be collective.

Our flight must also pose, either before or in the process of fleeing, the means by which we will survive to enjoy and expand on our new found freedom. We must create the conditions for our reproduction and that means that flight is the development of new social relations.

In less literary language, flight is revolt, and collective flight is revolution, but revolution cannot except itself from immediately generating new human relations, new means of living. In other words, we are returned to Werner Bonefeld’s point that means and ends/ends and means, are inextricably intertwined. We cannot struggle alienatedly today with the thought that when we have escaped ‘the capitalists’ then we will build something new. Rather, our escape is not spatial, but an escape from social relations whose conditions we cannot afford to reproduce, lest we, like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, find ourselves creating or becoming new masters imposing the alienated relations of capital we have preserved. Emancipation does not happen after ‘the’ revolution; revolution and emancipation are one and the same process of negation and creation.

Lenin and Social Democracy cut off emancipation from revolution, as did council communism to the degree that it accepted the idea that revolution is about who controls the means of production rather than the total transformation of social relations
in the process of revolution. The only major objection I have to Holloway’s piece is that, in emphasising a dialectic of negativity, Holloway does not emphasise sufficiently the content of communism. Given that other articles did so, this is less of a problem than it might otherwise be.

By way of a conclusion

There are two general problems with the book. The first is its failure to deal accurately and satisfyingly with Leninism in Lenin’s lifetime and its real, historical relationship to the rest of the Social-Democratic Left. I have dealt with this above and will not repeat myself except to say that the articles of which I am largely critical will confuse, not clarify, the questions raised so well in the rest of this book for the reader who is not already well-informed on the history and the theory of early twentieth-century Social Democracy and its oppositions.

The second problem is that, while at times the book does an excellent job of posing the content of the self-organisation of the class, that is, of the content of revolution and communism, it almost never breaches the problem of the role of pro-revolutionaries and their organisation, and the relationship of pro-revolutionaries and pro-revolutionary organisations to the class struggle and the revolutionary organisations of the class as a whole. This is not to say that the book should have speculated on the correct form of such an organisation any more than the essays should have made a fetish out of the councilial form of workers’ anti-power. But one can assume that some of the people who read this book will want to participate with other communists and anarchists in an organised way, to work together collectively, not to lead or direct the class struggle, but to participate in it in a way which is effective and which promotes the struggles of the class.

Therefore, relative to the idea of the book, only Caffentzis’s piece takes up the problem concretely, whether or not he reads Lenin too generously, and proposes that we need to create a culture, a public space, for revolutionary struggle and ideas. He promotes the idea that this be a space open to and designed for us sinners, rather than a space for Negri and Hardt’s saints. This space would circulate the struggles of the class, of all struggles against capital and be a forum for the critique of capital. Tischler and Agnoli also provide us with clues in this direction, as does Bonefeld, albeit only implicitly.

I think that a discussion of the ideas of C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya’s ‘full fountain pen’ idea, that an organisation of revolutionaries provide a medium or multiple media, for the workers to say what they want in their own words, to allow them to hear each other and debate, would have been both useful and appropriate. Or to take up James’s later idea that the task of an organisation of revolutionaries involves recognising and recording the changes and struggles of the class; to, as Rooke
puts it, theorise the developments adequately in order to bring out as clearly as possible the ways in which current, seemingly limited, struggles contain within themselves the seeds of the abolition of capital. Or to take up the practice of the Situationist International as a body that not only attempted to take up these ideas, but to also find a form of organisation in which ends and means reflected each other so that the organisation did not become another bureaucratic organisation existing for its own sake (something which the SI lived up to in dissolving itself when it seemed to no longer have a role to play.) If nothing else, to point the less-than-encyclopaedic among us to people who have grappled seriously with this question of how pro-revolutionaries without access to university publishing houses should take up these tasks.

On the whole, this is an excellent book for those who want a critique of Lenin’s Marxism as an ideology of revolution and who want to wrestle seriously with the relevance and meaning of anticapitalism and revolution. Those searching for an alternative historical critique of the practice of Bolshevism, however, will need to look elsewhere. Whatever its weaknesses, the greatest weakness is the price, the book’s commodity-form! This will require people to come up with novel ways of getting their hands on this important contribution to the critique of capital in all its forms, including in the guise of ‘revolutionary’ ideology, and which resituates dignity as the subject of our struggles.6 This book deserves to be read and circulated widely as a counter to the dead weight of past generations.

References


6 Anyone seeking a common reservoir of texts like these should visit <http://www.endpage.org>, which hosts a large body of material, including texts that might otherwise be unaffordable.
Historical-Critical

As attested by the works of Thucydides and Aristotle, the articulation of history and critique began to develop from the 'Greek enlightenment' onwards, receiving impetus from both the story-telling traditions of the popular classes and celebratory poetry in the service of the rulers. Greek and Roman philology and the practice of critical editions of the Renaissance humanists provided formative elements. However, approaching tradition as such in an historical-critical way is an achievement of intellectuals from the early bourgeois period, developed in permanent confrontation with censorship and persecution mainly from the religious apparatuses. This connection appears systematically for the first time in Pierre Bayle’s Dictionnaire historique et critique (1696) which opened the age of Enlightenment as ‘the actual age of critique’ (Kant). History was still understood by Bayle as histories in the sense of oral or written narratives; critique, as its examination in the ‘natural light of reason’. This rationalism prepared the terrain for historicism and ‘scientific’ historiography (i.e. founded upon the critical use of sources). Marxist, and later Marxist historical materialism attempts to explain history through reference to the mode of production and reproduction of social life.

Just as once Christianity in the course of becoming a state religion (‘the Constantinian turn’) passed into an ideological state apparatus, giving ‘the authoritarian relations iron structures and a centre in their handling of ideas and the transmission of traditions’ (Haug 1983, 6), so Communist Marxism in power underwent a similar transformation. Its ideological apparatuses, in their ‘authoritarian controlled arrangement and concealment’ (ibid.) like a ‘Central Administration of eternal truths’ (Havenmann 1971), operated at the apex of the ‘command-administrative’ régime created by Stalin. Once more, the self-evident right, indeed duty of Marxists to have a critical relation to their own history and an historical relation to their own theories, had to be bitterly fought for. Under European state socialism of the twentieth century it was finally during the five years of perestroika, the attempt at democratisation under Gorbachev, that individuals were liberated from formal constraints. The collapse of European state socialism ‘promoted an “epistemological break” and a stimulus towards historicisation’. This stamped the historical-critical method with ‘an emphatic actuality’ for Marxists. ‘Here it is a case of, on the one hand, the critical (and self-critical) evaluation of historical experiences and, on the other, the analytical survey, development and critical working through of an enormous mass of intellectual material (HKWM 1, Preface).

1. After ‘the remarkable rudiments of an historical-critical treatment of the Bible’ in Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan (Lange, I, III.2, 285), whose fourth book on the intrigues of religious institutions is entitled ‘Of The Kingdom of Darkness’, the ground for Pierre Bayle’s historical-critical dictionary was prepared by, more than any other work, Baruch Spinoza’s critique of the Bible, the Tractatus theologico-politicus, published anonymously in 1670 – a genuinely ‘revolutionary text’ (Giancotti Boscherini 1985, 23), an ‘organ of political struggle’ (Gadamer 1976, 19). According to the subtitle, it claims to show that ‘the Freedom of Philosophising can not only be allowed safe to Piety and a Republic’s Peace: but it cannot be taken away except at the same time with the Republic’s Peace and Piety’.

‘Erreurs’ and ‘fautes’ (mistakes) are key categories in Bayle’s historical-critical dictionary. He had originally planned ‘un Dictionnaire de Fautes’. However, the surfeit of uninteresting mistakes would have made the work ‘pedantic’, a consideration which
led him to a ‘nouvelle Oeconomie’: beginning with what can be historically reported, he added to this (in the form of footnotes, clearly set in smaller type) commentaries, corrections, critiques of inherited judgements and occasionally philosophical reflections. Exemplary is the nineteen-page article on Spinoza, at the time slandered and deeply hated by clerical ideologists of all confessions. In terms of form: the historical part of the article comprises often not more than two or three lines to a page; the rest is taken up, in petit, by the ‘critical’ comments. In terms of content: Bayle indeed names Spinoza’s Tractatus, using the official obligatory terminology, ‘calamitous’ (‘un livre perniciieux et détestable, où il fit glisser toutes les sémences de l’Athéisme’); nevertheless, he presents Spinoza’s personal irreproachability in a thus even better light: ‘c’étoit un homme qui n’aimoit pas la contrainte de la conscience, & grand ennemi de la dissimulation’. He concludes from Spinoza’s ethically exemplary conduct the possibility of a community of atheists living together more peacefully than a community of Christians. ‘Cela est étrange; mais au fond il ne s’en faut pas plus étonner, que de voir des gens qui vivent très-mal, quoiqu’ils aient une pleine persuasion de l’Evangile’.

Leibniz enters into combat against this emancipation of moral criteria from religious conviction in his Theodicy. He criticises Bayle’s historical-critical dictionary ‘where religion and reason appear to be in conflict with each other [en combattantes] and where Mr. Bayle made it known that it was his intention to make speak for only too long’ (‘Preface’, 35; trans. modified). In the second edition of the historical-critical dictionary, Bayle added an essay to his presentation of the Manichean and sceptical positions (which had been reproved ‘by some religious bigots’), which, according to Leibniz, ‘was supposed to present the innocence and utility of his method by means of examples, authorities and reasons (Theodicy, ‘Introduction’, §39; trans. modified). Leibniz sees in such a claimed autonomy of reason the beginning of the end of faith. No opposition between the two orientations should be allowed to come about: reason is ‘just as much a gift of God as belief’; their struggle would therefore be ‘a struggle of God against God’ (ibid.). He appears to sense that the apology for religion was entering dangerous terrain. In no way should it be claimed ‘that that which one believes is untenable: for that means allowing reason for its part to triumph in a way that would destroy belief’ (§41; trans. modified).

While Descartes had tried to demonstrate the compatibility of science and especially his own philosophy with religion, Bayle, in fact, ‘as Voltaire remarks, didn’t openly attack Christianity in a single line, but he also didn’t write a single line which was not intended to awaken doubt’ (Lange, I, IV.1, 11; trans. modified). He indeed maintains the appearance that the contradiction between reason and revelation would be decided in favour of the latter. ‘However, the effect was calculated to produce a decision of the reader in the opposed sense’ (398 et sq.; trans. modified). The effect ‘was one of the greatest which a book can have’, both upon the republic of letters as upon the educated in general (399). ‘His style’, Hettner says, ‘is of the most dramatic vivacity, and fresh, direct, bold, provoking, and yet ever clear and rapid in the attainment of its aim; while he seems only to be skilfully playing with the subject, he probes and dissects it to its inmost depths’ (1894, 48). From here comes ‘the mode of combat of Voltaire and the French Encyclopaedists’ and it still continued to have effects on Lessing’s mode of thinking and writing (ibid.; op. cit. Lange, I, IV.1, 11). A trace can be found in Lessing’s judgement of Alexander Pope: ‘He has read over before the material of this and that writer, and, without investigating them according to their own founding principles, kept from each one whatever he believed would allow itself to be best rhymed together in well-sounding verse. I believe even, in considering his sources, to have undercovered his operations, that I have made some other historical-critical notes’ (Pope, A Metaphysician!, W 3, 663).

Bayle’s historical-critical dictionary opened an epoch in the sense of an irreversible epistemological break. Kant, for example, wished in a review of a work of Herder that ‘an historical-critical mind [...]

...
had done some work in advance'. A criterion of historical-critical competence here was that such a person 'would have, from the immense mass of [...] notices, drawn out primarily those which contradict each other and presented them next to each other (with additional recollections due to the believability of any reporter) and thus would have avoided 'basing [himself] upon one-sided reports without having previously weighed carefully the reports of others' (W 10, 801). This describes the impact of the historical-critical method in the epoch of the Enlightenment. If one abstracts from its objective content, knowledge is, according to Kant, 'subjectively regarded, either historical [historisch] or rational'. Here, 'historical' is still not understood in the sense of real history [Geschichte], but rather, as the reckoning of dates which 'are given' to the knowing subject 'from outside; whether through immediate experience or narration, or (as in the case of general knowledge) through instruction' (CPR, B863 et sq.). The Archimedean counterpoint on which this determination turns is the cognitio ex principiis, according to which the reception of such facts by the cognising subject is not only reasonable, but is drawn from this subject's own reason. Whoever relies upon the 'historical [das Historische]' (here Kant includes also the case of studying already given philosophies rather than philosophising on the basis of principles found in oneself), has formed his mind on another's reason, [...] and although, objectively considered, it is indeed knowledge due to reason, it is yet, in its subjective character, merely historical [historisch]. Whoever has 'grasped and learnt well' such knowledge is, nevertheless, merely 'a plaster-cast of a living man' (B864). Subjectively rational is (objectively rational) knowledge only 'when it has been drawn from universal sources of reason, [...] from which there can also arise critique, nay, even the rejection of what has been learnt' (B864 et sq.; trans. modified). The problem with the historical [das Historische] is that it, like everything 'else which we can only learn from the testimony of the experience of others', must in the first instance be 'believed'. Notwithstanding that, it is 'not in itself a matter of belief', since for some it was once 'personal experience and fact, or is presupposed as such'. Thus 'it must be possible by this path (that of historical belief) to arrive at knowledge; and the objects of history and geography, just as everything which it is possible to know [...] belong [...] to the realm of facts' (C), §91). In this sense of a critical survey of historically passed down facts, Kant's Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View is therefore an historical-critical work.

2. After his first two sensational publications on the censor and the freedom of the press, the twenty-four year old Marx attacks the conservative and even reactionary deployment of the historical-critical method in the 'historical school of law', which has carried its 'love for sources to such an extreme that it calls on the boatman to row not on the river's current, but on its source' (MECW 1, 203; trans. modified). Gustav Hugo, who founded the school, twisted Kant's relativisation of 'historical' knowledge into its opposite since he opined, as Marx notices, 'that because we cannot know what is true, we consequently allow the untrue, if it exists at all, to pass as fully valid' (MECW 1, 204). That the existing state of affairs is irrational – and in so far as it was irrational, bad – hitherto had been the argument for its very transformation. After the Counter-Enlightenment had failed with its attempt to present the ancien régime as rational, it now totalised the verdict of the irrational. If Hegel had posited that rational [vernünftig] = real [wirklich], Hugo posited that the positively real = irrational, and thus, that reason = unreal. 'With self-satisfied zeal he aduces arguments from every region of the world to provide additional evidence that no rational necessity is inherent in the positive institutions, e.g., property, the state constitution, marriage, etc., that they even contradict reason' (ibid. trans. modified). In order to wrest the argument of reason from the Left, Hugo 'profanes all that the just, moral, political man regards as holy, but he smashes these holy things only to be able to worship them as historical relics' (ibid.). His critique 'levels down': 'Everything existing serves him as an authority, every authority serves him as an argument' (ibid.). A radical
relativism neutralises all differences of civilisational development. ‘With him, eighteenth-century scepticism in regard to the rationality of what exists appears as scepticism in regard to the existence of reason. He adopts the Enlightenment [. . .]; he thinks the false flowers have been plucked from the chains in order to wear real chains without any flowers’ (MECW 1, 205; trans. modified). With that, the historical-critical delegitimization of any régime of violence has become the apology for the ‘right of arbitrary violence’ (MECW 1, 210; trans. modified).

Marx then applies the historical-critical method to the less outspoken ‘juridical and historical theories’ subsequent to Hugo, which ‘after some operations of the critical art of separating allow the old original text to be made legible again’ (ibid.; trans. modified).

Subsequently, Marx and Engels transfer the historical-critical claim to the terrain of history, which they survey in a new way in terms of social theory and with a focus upon class struggles. In the meantime, Feuerbach had sublated [aufgehoben] the critique of the Bible into the ‘atheistic’ critique of religion. To transform the critique of Heaven into the critique of the Earth and to broaden the critique of religion into general ideology-critique will be the sense of the practical-materialist conception of history that seeks the ultimate driving forces and ‘elements’ of the historical process in the production and reproduction of social life. Marx’s critique of political economy will allow the historical dimension of the capitalist value-forms to step forward from under the appearance of the natural, an appearance that ensorcer them in the consciousness of everyday life just as in economic theory. The thus uncovered historical-transitory nature of the capitalist relations of production is supposed to nurture the history-making force of the proletariat. The ‘Historical [das Historische]’ is indeed – according to Gramsci’s insight, sharpened through his grappling with Benedetto Croce – not necessarily part of ongoing history [geschichtlich] (cf. Haug 1994, 1214); instead, ‘the tradition of all the dead generations’ can weigh ‘like a nightmare on the brain of the living’ (18th Brumaire, MECW 11, 103). This practical-theoretical impulse, to go to the social roots of that which has become historically concealed in order to help another world become reality, lies at the foundation of Marx’s opening of the ‘continent of history’ (Althusser 1969, 7; 1971, 72), even if this emancipatory sense has often been obscured by discourses invoking objective laws.

3. Henceforth, already in reaction to the socialist labour movement, Friedrich Nietzsche declares ‘history and critique’ to be the epitome of the decadent (The Birth of Tragedy, 23; trans. modified). When a people begins ‘to comprehend itself historically and to smash the mythical bulwarks that surround it’, there occurs a ‘secularisation’ in the sense of a ‘break with the unconscious metaphysics’ (ibid.) which constitute the ‘value’ of a people, thanks to which ‘it is able to press upon its experiences the stamp of the eternal’ (ibid.). This is that which Nietzsche sees ‘corroded by the historical-critical spirit of our culture [Bildung]’ (ibid.). In Beyond Good and Evil (209), he praises, against historical-critical scepticism, ‘the scepticism of daring masculinity, which is closely related to the genius for war and conquest’, and which he sees embodied in Frederick the Great. He praises its paradoxical master-race mindset: ‘It despises and nonetheless seizes to itself; [. . .] It gives the spirit a dangerous freedom, but keeps the heart severe. It is the German form of scepticism, which [. . .] has brought Europe for some time under the dominion of the German spirit and its critical and historical mistrust’ (ibid; trans. modified).

The ‘historical-critical spirit of our culture’ castigated by Nietzsche finds its anti-representative formulation in the Geistesgeschichte coined fundamentally by Wilhelm Dilthey. It demands that we ‘analyze historically and critically the value of the individual procedures which thinking uses in solving its problems in this area; it demands further that we clarify, through observation of that great development whose subject is humanity itself, what the nature of knowledge and understanding is in this field’ (Introduction to the Human Sciences, 78). Dilthey explains the medieval ‘dominance of superstition’ as ‘an abbreviated and falsified passing down of the old world as an authority’ (thus,
essentially, following in Bayle’s footsteps). Against the ‘uncritical’ connection of the ‘epistemological-theoretical presupposition of the historical school and of idealism’ in Humboldt, Dilthey founds the ‘construction of a historical world in the social sciences’ on a ‘critique of historical reason’ (136). He begins from the supposition that psychologically describable inner-structures are expressed in world-views etc. Also here, ‘politics was continued […] on the scientific fronts’ (Krauss, Literaturgeschichte, 30), for Dilthey expected a ‘consolidation of the upper classes’ due to the increase in the ‘independent power of the social sciences’ (Briefwechsel, 29.2.1892).

4. After preparing the way for it, Bayle’s Historical-Critical Dictionary was eclipsed by the success of the Encyclopædia edited by Diderot and d’Alembert. It is only in editorial practice that the concept of the historical-critical has been firmly established. Erich Auerbach’s description of the ‘critical edition’ is particularly valid for the ‘historical-critical edition of texts’: it is regarded among the works of philology in the republic of letters as ‘la plus noble et la plus authentique’ (1965, 9). It ‘investigates primarily the age, the originality and the authenticity of the written works, and evaluates their original accuracy or their occasionally accidental, occasionally deliberate corruption, often up until the point of verifiably re-establishing what an author had really written, or the convincing ascription of that which the supposed author did not write’ (Wolf 1807, 39 et sq.). In order to achieve this in a transparent (verifiable) way, both history and bearers of the tradition (‘textual witnesses’) as well as textual variants should be accounted for, preferably embedded in the history of the conditions of their production and contextual references; insofar as effect and tradition interact, the history of reception is to be included (cf. Grundzüge 1996, 179 et sqq.). Karl Lachmann developed the paradigm of the critical edition for the editing of collected works of the ‘old’ authors (whose aim was the reconstruction of the often only fragmentary or corrupted text passed down by tradition) and later carried it over to the edition of collected works of a modern author such as Lessing (1838–40). ‘The historical-critical edition of Schiller’s works (1867) according to this model’, edited by Karl Goedecke, ‘became authoritative for the subsequent editions’ (Reallexikon 1958, 318). Of course, historical-critical reconstruction aiming at the authenticity of the text is not to be separated from the mediation of meaning: ‘To live classically and to realise antiquity practically in oneself’ was for Friedrich Schlegel the ‘goal of philology’, even if he was uncertain whether this was possible ‘without any cynicism’ (Athenäumsfragmente, Nr. 147).

Regarding authors ostracised for their critique of domination and ideology, or those persecuted due to their fundamentally democratic orientation or their commitment to the cause of the exploited and the oppressed, or those who were censored and whose books were burnt – in other words, precisely those authors which are particularly interesting for an historical-critical dictionary of Marxism –, the concept of the historical-critical refers to the unfinished-historical dimension of social movements and their struggles. More comprehensively than its predecessors in the early bourgeois epoch, the historical-critical method really does live up to its name and thus, from having a merely formal existence, comes into its own in terms of content. For example, in the search for traces of that ‘other history’ of women, which had been effaced or written over in masculine terms in the course of patriarchal oppression, the historical-critical method assumes the additional meaning of brushing history against the grain from the standpoint of the oppressed. This is often the case when it is applied to colonised people or to all those held in subaltern positions. The ‘historical-critical’ censorship of the tradition from the standpoint of the rulers themselves must also be subjected to this procedure. This is what Karl Barth had in his sights when he remarked that ‘the historical-critical [authors] needed to be more critical for me’ (1922/1999, XVIII). What he meant was the then dominant historical-critical interpretation of the Bible, which reduced the subject-matter that is treated in the Bible – liberation from enslaving
relations – to the question of ‘how it really was’. Against this reductive method, which
took the Messiah out to be a ‘historical Jesus’ tailored to fit the bourgeois idea of a
good person, Barth wrote: ‘krinein means for me in relation to an historical document: the
measuring of all words and word groups contained in it against the cause of which
they clearly speak, if appearances are not deceptive’ (XVIII et sq.).

In the history of philosophy and theory, the historical-critical method is fuelled up
when it deals with witnesses of radical critique of domination and ideology, to begin
with Democritus, the materialist and indeed the only democrat among the classical
philosophers (cf. fragment 241, attributed by the tradition, significantly, to a Demokrates),
whose works, according to Aristoxenos,

were bought up by the anti-democrat and
anti-materialist Plato, in order ‘to burn all
of Democritus’s writings which he could
find’ (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent
Philosophers, 9.40). The tradition was
continued by Epicurus, who was slandered
for centuries as the ‘swine’ (c.f. ibid., 10.3 et
sq.; Kimmich 1993), because he declared
fear of death and above all, the notion of a
punishing or rewarding ‘Beyond’ (introduced
into philosophy by Plato and strengthened
by Cicero) as groundless (‘For that which
has been dissolved into its elements ex-
periences no sensations, and that which has
no sensation is nothing to us’ (§2, Principal
Doctrines/Vatican Sayings); by Spinoza, who
as an author was cursed by the Jewish Rabbis
and forbidden by the Christian institutions;
and by the radical-democratic and Marxist
authors caught between the mill stones of
Stalinism and fascism. In all such cases,
where access of the transmission of tradition
has been blocked, hushed up, demolished
or slandered by censors imbued with the
standpoint of the rulers, the historical-critical
fuses with the cause itself. Such an expansion
of the historical-critical method, when
it comes into its own not merely formally
but also at the level of its content, is de-
monstrated by Peter Weiss in a scene of the
Ästhetik des Widerstands. Here, the Pergamon
altar is viewed in the early years of Nazism
through the eyes of young anti-fascists, who
see it in the light of thousands of years of

the history of class oppression and – not
only economic but also corporeal-aesthetic –
exploitation. Thereby is reclaimed, for the
cause of the oppressed, the very power
which has been taken from them and instru-
mentalised for the symbolic reproduction of
the ruling order.

5. The concept of philology makes an aston-
ishing appearance in Gramsci’s Prison
Notebooks, where ‘the theory and practice of
philological critique found in the notebooks
constitute in themselves a most important
contribution to the elaboration of an anti-
dogmatic philosophy of praxis’ (Buttigieg
1991, 64). Gramsci spoke of philology not
only in the technical sense of work with texts
but, rather, uses it to describe any method
which deals with the concrete individual,
including, ultimately, the methodology of a
mass party. He may well have been inspired
by Giambattista Vico. While Vico assigned
to philosophy the ascertainment of the true
[verum] founded upon reason, he entrusted
philology, as a ‘new critical art’, with the
ascertainment of those things which are
certain (certum), because ‘they depend upon
human will’ (The New Science, Element X,
§138, 63).

First, philology for Gramsci has ‘a simply
instrumental value, together with erudition’
(Q 11, §42). In order to study Marx’s
‘conception of the world’, which was never
set forth by its founder systematically (and
whose essential coherence is to be sought
not in each single text or series of texts
but in the whole development of his multi-
form intellectual labour [...]), it is necessary
first to do meticulous philological work
conducted with maximum scrupulosity
with regard to exactitude, scientific honesty,
and intellectual loyalty, and without any
preconception and apriorism or preconceived
idea’ (Q 16, §2). Gramsci then outlines
fundamental principles of an historical-
critical engagement with Marx and a corres-
dondingly historical-critical edition of his
works that offers ‘a text based on a critical
use of sources’ (ibid.). At the same time, ‘the
question of the relations of homogeneity
between the two founders of the philosophy
of praxis must be posed’; one should neither
‘identify’ them with each other ‘nor is it
necessary to think that everything which the second attributed to the first is absolutely authentic and without infiltration’ (ibid.). Such philology acquired immediately explosive political force in the face of the dogmatic tendencies in the Communist International.

Second, against the tendency of making historical materialism into a ‘science of laws’ about (and above) society and history, Gramsci elevates philology to an organon for the logic of the historical, which he saw as being distinguished by the fact that it allowed individual elements to come into their own, all the more so when the subject is an almost integral part of the object, namely insofar as we are dealing with human activity. The experience upon which the philosophy of praxis is founded cannot be schematised; it is history itself in its infinite variety and multiplicity’ (Q 11, §25).

Regarding the study of history, however, he says that it ‘can give place to the birth of “philology” as a method of erudition in the assessment of particular facts’, which made it necessary to enlarge ‘the sphere of philology as it has been traditionally understood’ (ibid.). In these conditions, regular contexts can be reformulated as ‘tendential laws’, ‘which correspond in politics to the statistical laws or the law of great numbers’ (ibid.). The paradigm of an expanded philology aimed not only against scientific objectivism but also against the speculative interpretation of history; in order to free itself from ‘every residue of transcendence and of theology also in their last speculative incarnation’ (Q 10, §8): ‘If the concept of structure is conceived speculatively, it certainly becomes a “hidden God”; but it doesn’t need to be conceived speculatively, but rather, historically, as the ensemble of social relations in which real men move and operate, as an ensemble of objective conditions that can and must be studied with the methods of “philology”’ (ibid.). – ‘The fragmentary character of the notebooks is due’, according to Joseph A. Buttigieg’s insight, ‘at least in part, to the “philological” method governing their composition’ (63).

Third, Gramsci carries over – and here the practical-political quintessence of his intervention can be glimpsed – the concept of philology to the practice of ‘mass parties and their organic adherence to the innermost (productive-economic) life of the masses’; here it is not only a case of ‘knowledge and judgement of the importance’ of the feelings experienced intensely by the masses, but also of an acting upon these by the collective organism through “active and conscious collective participation”, through “compassionateness” [“con-passionalità”], through experience of immediate particulars, through a system that could be called that of a “living philology”. Thus a close tie is formed between the great masses, party and leading group and the entire well articulated whole can move as a “collective-human”’ (Q 11, §25).

6. Regarding the publication of Marx’s work, technical-philological problems are compounded by those connected with the historical-critical reception of these texts. Indeed, thanks to the administrative virtues of the those involved and their followers, if we leave aside the final version of The German Ideology, almost everything is preserved here, and nothing – except for Marx’s handwriting, which only experts are able to decipher – would have stood in the way of publication, were it not for their unparalleled world-historical effects and repercussions. The problem was not simply in the camp of the enemies, the most horrific of whom appeared in the form of Nazi ‘counter-Bolshevism’ (Haug 1980, 59–63). Rather, it was also in the camp of the friends and followers who, whenever they made available to the public something from the mountain of manuscripts, almost always made merely tactical use of it. Indisputably, Friedrich Engels delivered such a great service in bringing Volumes II and III of Capital into print that he could be named the ‘father of Marxism’, and Marxism itself as ‘Engelsism’ (Künzli, cited in Hirsch 1968, 95); nonetheless, he published the Theses on Feuerbach in 1888 with serious changes, which partly create misunderstandings, sometimes coming close to falsification of the text and furnishing material for a vulgarised reception. The form of ‘Works’ into which he brought Marx’s manuscripts of Capital Volumes II and III
was driven by political objectives, not those of historical-critical transparency (cf. MEF 2001). Karl Kautsky edited the *Theories of Surplus Value* with significant interventions, transpositions, and smoothing over, in contempt of all the rules of a critical edition. The underlying manuscripts represent of course, to a large extent, more or less very rough drafts. Beside extensive analysis are short, abrupt sentences, often only references for later elaboration. Marx also regularly changes between three languages [...] - German, French and English. This and other difficulties allow in individual cases several possible readings [...]. It is therefore inappropriate to polish the text here, and completely impossible to fabricate a "fluent" text, if we don’t want something completely different from the work of Marx to be the result’ (MEW 26.1, Vorwort, XIV et sq.; cf. Sander 1983).

A further hindrance is the claim, absoluising a legitimate position, that any text exists ‘as an intellectual production [...] only in its interpretations’ (Heinrich 1991, 22). The perceptions that often overlay the originals like group prejudices led Brecht to say that Marxism has become so unknown ‘chiefly through the many writings about it’ (letter to Korsch, 1939, GA 29, 131). Faced with this situation, the decision of the CPSU to publish ‘the whole “Marx and Engels”’ in an historical-critical form, instead of a merely selected edition, had great significance. The merits of the editor of the first MEGA, David Rjazanov, are immeasurable (cf. Vollgraf et al. 1997). The cunning way in which he got copies of Marx’s manuscripts out of social-democratic custody is a story in and of itself – as is their later rescue from the grasp of the Nazis. But then Stalin had Rjazanov murdered. After the German offensive against the Soviet Union the MEGA project was abandoned. This decision may have been made even easier for the Stalinist leadership by the fact that the complete and authentic Marx who had begun to come to light could not be made to accord with the methods of domination it practised, or with the Marxism-Leninism which it had codified for its own legitimation.

In the 1970s, the second MEGA began as an international project under the auspices of the Moscow and Berlin Institutes for Marxism-Leninism (IML). It is one of the contradictions of the post-Stalinist political structures that, alongside the enormous costs, they also took the ‘ideological’ risk upon themselves of publishing material that, in the last instance, was not compatible with their still powerful forms of command-administrative state domination. While the versions of the texts together with the critical apparatus satisfied the highest ‘technical’ exigencies and represented an enormous achievement, the introductions, not infrequently, locked Marx up unhistorically and uncritically with Byzantine praise in a mausoleum (cf. Haug 1985). This ceremonial and celebratory prison conceded to Marx no problems, no crisis-ridden learning process, no obscurity, no textual ambiguities. However, the mass of manuscripts that were published in the MEGA according to the rules of the historical-critical art speaks another language. It is as if Marx, like a sculptor, had continually relocated his workshop, leaving behind extensive excerpts, sketches and work torsos in the former premises. Even the single volume of *Capital* published by Marx himself contains so many layers of revision in which an undeclared paradigm change occurs that it could be compared with a ‘palimpsest’, an incessantly repainted, layer after layer, time and again newly inscribed parchment (Scaron 1975, VIII; Lefebvre 1983, XXX et sqq.). An historical-critical edition, beginning from the version of the last authorised version (in this case, edited by Engels), would have to make clear the different layers of revisions and, if possible, to historicise them. The Latin American edition of Pedro Scaron for the publishing house Siglo XXI is structured as ‘una primera aproximación a una edición crítica’ of this type, (1975, XI). It documents all of the versions published in Marx’s lifetime as well as giving Engels’s changes to the fourth German edition ‘en conjunto’, albeit not completely. It has the extraordinary advantage of showing Marx’s learning process, whose direction and rationality has been little investigated and even less comprehended and consulted as important for interpretation; indeed, for the Hegelian-Marxist perspective of many interpreters (for
example, Fetscher, Reichelt, Backhaus, Heinrich) it has even appeared as a history of degeneration. Since, however, the critique of political economy only makes sense so long as it allows us to think simultaneously a reality subjected to constant transformation since the time of Marx, the development of Marx’s concepts is to be noted with particular care. The editors of the MEGA, confronted by the extremely complex textual status, decided to publish the different versions not ‘en conjuncto’, but each on its own. Not only different German versions of Capital were to be considered, but also, among others, the French translation modified by Marx. Even (be it as a contrast in order to document Marx’s and Engels’s divergent understanding of method) the English translation was consulted, ‘for whose text’, Engels said, ‘I am responsible in the last instance’ (MECW 37, 5). Of course, any judgment of changes or translations would have required competence in terms of content and any evaluation would have needed to skate on the dangerous slippery ice of censorship, freezing into the text unclarified differences of school and tendency, instead of offering them up to the process of open discussion.

The editors of Volume I of Capital in MEW, in turn, followed the – according to Engels’s statement – ‘most possibly definitive establishment of the text’ in the fourth edition and abstained, with some exceptions, from making known the layers of the text. Engels’s alleged adoption of all essential Marxian changes of the French edition was not completely checked and supplemented. Thus, the standard German edition lacks changes which give decisive clues for the further development of Marx’s version of the dialectic, whose ‘limits’ were so important for Marx that he referred Russian readers of Capital to the French translation, even though there had long been a Russian edition (cf. MECW 24, 200). Instead, the text was all the more pedantically guarded to the extent that even an obvious printer’s error which had escaped Marx in his corrections of the second edition was still hauled out, against all common sense, until the twelfth edition of MEW 23 (1977) (Skambraks 1979). Another that had crept into the third posthumous

edition curated by Engels (53, 5th line from the top: ‘commodity’ instead of ‘com-modities’) and was still faithfully and blindly reproduced in the thirty-third edition (1989). It legitimated Hegelian-dialectical interpretations, even though Marx had angrily thundered against such interpretations in the Marginal Notes on Wagner and had referred to the (still) correct version in the second edition (cf. Haug 1992).

That interpretation and historical-critical editorial technique limited to formal issues cannot be neatly separated is also shown by the MEGA index, not very different from that of the MEW. Under the direction of the IMI until 1989, many of Marx’s concepts that had become important outside the narrow spell of Marxism-Leninism were absent, while concepts were registered which not only were absent from Marx’s text (‘law of surplus-value’) but which also directly contradict Marx’s thought in part: thus, in the index to Volume II.5, the critique of political economy becomes ‘Marxist political economy’, and Marx’s key concept of ‘critique’ is entirely absent (Haug 1985, 216).

The historical-critical character of the MEGA is concentrated in the imperative for transparency of the editorial dossier, under an array of ‘diacritical’ symbols and a ‘critical apparatus’ that provides evidence of corrections and itemises variants. The introduction gives an account, as attested to by the 1993 rules, reformulated for the post-Communist situation, about ‘the constitution of the volume, its demarcation from or rather its relation to other volumes and its inner articulation; – the reasons for the incorporation or exclusion of documents; – the composition of materials, the textual-critical analysis corresponding to their specific character; – the editorial decisions reached as a result of textual critique (e.g. attribution of authorship, dating, reproduction of the text, presentation of variants and other editorial particularities) (Editionsrichtlinien, 30).

7. The collapse of European state socialism ejected Marx and the Marxist universe out of the ‘eternity’ of an ideology orbiting around state rule and its legitimation and has thrown them into the open air of history,
as free floating ‘property without a master’. The task of this Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism has been derived from this world-historical caesura. Its claim can be best expressed by Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘rescuing critique’ (rettende Kritik), together with the image of a ‘Noah’s ark’ of critical knowledge (HKWM I, Vorwort, III). In terms of content, the historical-critical method here responds to ‘a constellation of dangers, which threatens both the tradition and those who receive it’ (AP 475; trans. modified). The intention of rescuing does not disarm the ‘destructive or critical momentum of materialist historiography’ about which Benjamin speaks (ibid.). It is not to be confused with apology.

In dealing with Marx, the first word has a type of analytical philology that expands the ‘love of the word’ to ‘love of the concept’. It is not Plato’s doctrine of ideas and all of its later disguises that should orient this reading. It is, rather, in the first instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s fundamental sentence: ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (Philosophical Investigations, §43). Before a Marxian concept can be followed in historical struggles and in contemporary embroilments, its use by Marx must be secured in philological textual work. In this process we normally see ambiguities that make it impossible to remain stuck to the text. Whoever accepts ‘that it is not a case of the preservation of a monument but rather of a “work in progress”, and that progress consists precisely in continuing the work in an historical-critical manner’ (Knepler 1996, 53), will ask the question about which of the ‘spectral shades’ (to extend Derrida’s metaphor of ‘spectral analysis’) of Marx are to be taken up and which are not. For the Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism, despite the importance which it attributes to the works of the founders of Marxism, the principle of conservative hermeneutics cannot be valid: the latter finds its authoritative essence in the past and sets itself the task of the ‘rehabilitation of authority and tradition’, because its paradigm is formed by the interpretation of juridical laws, holy writings and canonical art works (cf. Gadamer 1989, 277 et sqq.). More than ever is forbidden the pseudo-historical construction of legends aptly formulated by Werner Krauss: ‘History is made by heroes and it can therefore only be interpreted by prophets who resemble such heroes’ (Literaturgeschichte, 42). For Marxists, leaning uncritically on the thought of Marx should be excluded. Among the ‘intellectual restraints’ that the HKWM must always seek to remove (Knepler 1996, 54), not the least are the dogmatic ones. ‘Every term’, Georges Labica wrote in his preface to the Dictionnaire critique du marxisme, ‘was treated like a defendant who couldn’t be believed simply on the basis of what he said about himself. […] Whenever it was necessary, [the investigation] called upon different witnesses, close and distant relations, and resorted to the means of cross-examination and searching’ (vii).

Whenever the Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism subjects the classical texts as well as the most important witnesses of their history of reception and efficacy to an historically informed critical re-reading, it will provide the best weapon against unhistorical and uncritical Marxisms as they will always reappear. It cannot know the historical struggles of the future – but it can prepare the way for them. ‘Which individuals or groups, which organisation or institution could come to an overall view of the research and discourses of the past and the present, even only in their rudiments, paying attention to them and making them useful’, Peter von Oertzen wrote regarding the HKWM, ‘if they were no place where at least a part of them were summarised and made accessible?’ (1996, 68).

The young Hans Magnus Enzensberger declared that it was the ‘task of historical critique not to mummify the past but rather to expose it to the grasp of those who come later on’ (1963, 9). But a mere museum of things from the past, mummified or not, would not be sufficient for the coming generations. Marx’s theories are ‘at the same time a part of the historical process, thus also themselves a process’ (Luxemburg, GW 1/2, 377). As Rudi Dutschke urged the student movement to historical-critical continuity with the socialism of the workers’ movement, he knew that, as indispensable as it was, the matter was not resolved with
historical knowledge alone. The old concepts of socialism must be critically sublated [aufgehoben], not destroyed and not artificially conserved. A new concept cannot yet be at hand, it can only be worked out in practical struggle, in the regular mediation of reflection and action, of praxis and theory’ (1968, 90 et sq.). The never finishing mediation of reflection and action in struggles gives the historical-critical method its non-doctrinal meaning. It is precisely herein that the historical-critical method finds its particular task in a dictionary of Marxism. As a ‘compendium of critical memory and open thought-workshop’ (Behrend 1996), it does not historicise, but rather, philosophises with the hammer and scrutinises the historical [das Historische] with a view to its ongoing historical [geschichtlich] potentialities. This is the difference between an historical-critical dictionary and an Encyclopaedia that claims to reveal a closed circle of circles of knowledge. At the same time, the ‘uncanny dimension’ of work on the HKWM presupposes that it does not ‘stand over’ its object, but in it. It doesn’t simply represent that which existed outside of and without it, but relates to its object in the present or even in certain respects calls it into existence or exerts an influence on its formation (Haug 1999, 95).

The historical-critical question regarding Marxism, with which this dictionary approaches history, is productive not only in relation to its own narrow object. It makes it necessary and possible to read ‘intellectual history’ – first and foremost, the European intellectual history that has become hegemonic on a worldwide scale – against the grain. Thus, it is not only the masses of knowledge of the emancipatory social movements that are taken up here; there are also aspects of another world on originally ‘bourgeois’ terrain if one approaches them with the ‘Marx-probe’. For the Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, model of exemplary scholarship in form but, on the other hand, largely uncritical in terms of content, ‘everything existing [still appears] as an authority, every authority [. . .] as an argument’ (MECW 1, 204). On the other hand, the historically-materialist grounded historical-critical method, where it is successful, can lead to an ‘increasing condensation (integration) of reality’ as Benjamin had in mind, ‘in which everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in its moment of existing’ (AP 392). What appears in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Marx as anti-historical, the shaking off of the ‘tradition of all the dead generations’ (MECW 11, 103), obtains here, as in Gramsci, the meaning of unleashing the formative momentum of history.

Über eine symptomale Fehllektüre des Kapitals’ in Dreizehn Versuche marxistisches Denken zu erneuern

Wolfgang Fritz Haug


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Translation revised and authorised by Wolfgang Fritz Haug

absolute historicism, authority, censor, command-administrative system, critique, critique of religion, death, dialectics, dogmatism, encyclopedia, Engelssism, Enlightenment, epistemology, error, eternity, forgetting/remembering, Geistesgeschichte, the here-after/this world, hermeneutics, history, historical/logical, historical school of law, historicisation, historicism, human sciences, ideology critique, ideology theory, interpretation, irrationality, limits of dialectics, Marxism-Leninism, materialist reading of the Bible, MEGA, mistake, rationalism, reading, reason, reconstruction, rescuing critique, Stalinism, text, Thesen on Feuerbach, tradition.

International Conference

RE-READING CAPITAL. THE LESSON OF LOUIS ALTHUSSER

The conference will be held in Venice at the department of historical studies from the 9th to the 11th of November, 2006. The conference is organised in the context of an intervarsity research project of considerable international interest. The research group, headed by the Università Ca' Foscari of Venice (Maria Turchetto), has published the Italian edition of the collective work *Reading Capital* (on the basis of the edition published by PUF, Paris, 1996), the result of seminars held by Louis Althusser and his students at the Ecole Normale in Paris in 1965. The conference has the goal, on the one hand, of evaluating the importance of the turn represented by this reading of *Capital* in the context of interpretations of Marx; on the other hand, of deepening other aspects of Althusser's thought and the traditions of his reception. The conference will be articulated in four workshops dedicated to specific arguments, each of which will be organised by a prominent Althusserian scholar, to be held on the days of the 9th and the 10th of November, and in a plenary session to be held on the 11th of November, dedicated to a discussion of *Reading Capital*.

The following themes will be treated in the workshops on the 9th and the 10th of November

**Thursday 9th November (morning):**
Althusser and Epistemology (Maria Turchetto);

**Thursday 9th November (afternoon):**
Althusser: Archive, Chronology, Bibliography (Gregory Elliott);

**Friday 10th (morning):**
Althusser and the Philosophical Tradition (Vittorio Morfino);

**Friday 10th (afternoon):**
Althusser and his Contemporaries (Warren Montag).

Among the participants are Etienne Balibar, Andrea Cavazzini, Yves Duroux, Gregory Elliott, Giorgos Fourtounis, Augusto Illuminati, Dominique Lecourt, Cristian Lo Iacono, John Milios, Warren Montag, Vittorio Morfino, Toni Negri, Peter Thomas, Maria Turchetto

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