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Critique and Historical Transformation

I

In *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, I attempt to fundamentally rethink the core categories of Marx's critique of political economy as the basis for a critical reconceptualisation of the nature of modern capitalist society. The critical theory of capitalism that I present differs in important and basic ways from traditional Marxism – that is, from the critique of forms of distribution (such as the market and private ownership of the means of production) from the standpoint of labour and production. The history of the past century strongly suggests that the latter is not fully adequate as a critique of capitalism, and that an adequate critique must be more fundamental than one focused primarily on forms of exploitation within modern society.

Marx's mature critical theory of capitalism, according to my interpretation, provides the basis for such a fundamental critique, for a rigorous and non-romantic critical analysis of modern society itself. Within the framework of this reading, the basic categories of Marx's critique not only delineate a mode of exploitation. They also are temporally dynamic categories that seek to grasp modern capitalist society as a mode of social life characterised

by quasi-objective forms of domination (commodity, capital) that underlie an intrinsic historical dynamic. This dialectical dynamic is a socially-constituted historically-specific core feature of capitalism, one that gives rise to and, at the same time, constrains the possibility of a postcapitalist, emancipated form of life. It is grounded, ultimately, in a form of wealth specific to capitalism, namely value, that is, at the same time, a form of social mediation, which Marx distinguishes sharply from what he terms material wealth.

This attempt to rethink Marx's analysis of the fundamental nature of capitalism was impelled, in part, by the far-reaching transformations of capitalism in the last third of the twentieth century. This period has been characterised by the unravelling of the post-World-War-II state-centric Fordist synthesis in the West, the collapse or fundamental metamorphosis of party-states and their command economies in the East, and the emergence of a neoliberal capitalist global order (which might, in turn, be undermined by the development of huge regional competing blocs). Because these changes have included the dramatic demise of the Soviet Union and of European Communism, they have been interpreted as marking the end of Marxism and of Marx's theoretical relevance. Nevertheless, these recent historical transformations have also reasserted the central importance of historical dynamics and large-scale structural changes. And precisely this problematic is at the heart of Marx's critical analysis.

The central importance of this problematic is reinforced when one considers the overarching trajectory of state-centric capitalism in the twentieth century from its beginnings, which can be located in World War I and the Russian Revolution, through its apogee in the decades following World War II, and its decline after the early 1970s. What is significant about this trajectory is its global character. It encompasses Western capitalist countries and the Soviet Union, as well as colonised lands and decolonised countries. Differences in historical development have, of course, occurred. But, viewed with reference to the trajectory as a whole, they are more a matter of different inflections of a common pattern, and different positions within a complex whole, than of fundamentally different developments. For example, the welfare state was expanded in all Western industrial countries in the twenty-five years after the end of World War II and then limited or partially dismantled beginning in the early 1970s. These developments occurred regardless of whether conservative or social-democratic ('liberal') parties were in power.

Inasmuch as this trajectory of state-centric capitalism encompasses both

Western capitalist countries and the Soviet Union, it very strongly suggests that Soviet 'socialism' should be regarded as a (failed) variant régime of capital accumulation, rather than as an organisation of society that represented the overcoming of capitalism, however flawed that organisation may have been. This, arguably, is the case not only because, as some have noted, the Soviet Union also rested on the exploitation of the working class,¹ but also because the rise and fall of the Soviet Union can be seen, retrospectively, as having been very much part of the temporal structuring and restructuring of capitalism in the twentieth century.

The very processes underlying the collapse of régimes of accumulation that had been declared 'Marxist', then, have reasserted the central importance of the problematic of historical dynamics and large-scale structural changes. Such overarching developments imply the existence of general structural constraints on political, social, and economic decisions. They indicate that capitalist history cannot be adequately grasped as 'diachronic', that is, in terms of contingencies alone, and that attempts to deal with history in those terms are empirically inadequate to the history of capitalist society. Nevertheless, such considerations do not necessarily dispense with what might be regarded as the critical insight driving attempts to deal with history contingently – namely, that history grasped as the unfolding of an immanent necessity is an expression of unfreedom.

The categories of Marx's critical theory, I suggest, allow for a position that can get beyond the classical antinomy of necessity and freedom, recapitulated as one between a conception of history as necessity, and its poststructuralist rejection in the name of contingency (and, presumably, agency). As I shall elaborate, Marx's categories characterise modern capitalist society on a fundamental level with reference to an immanent dynamic, which they grasp in terms of historically determinate forms of social mediation. Within this framework, history, understood as an immanently driven directional dynamic, does exist, but not as a universal characteristic of human social life. Rather, it is a historically specific characteristic of capitalist society that can be, and has been, projected onto all human histories.

The structural constraints and imperatives implied by the large-scale global patterns that characterise capitalist history should be understood as expressions of a peculiar form of domination. A position that grounds such historical

¹ See, for example, Cliff 1975, Mattick 1969, Dunayevskaya 1992.

patterns in the categories of Marx's critique (commodity, capital) does not, then, regard such patterns affirmatively, but takes their existence as a manifestation of heteronomy. Heteronomous history, within such a framework, is not a narrative, which can simply be dispelled discursively, but a structure of domination that both is self-perpetuating and, yet, also gives rise to the conditions of possibility of its own overcoming. From this point of view, attempts to rescue human agency that posit historical contingency abstractly and transhistorically, bracket and veil the existence of historically specific structures of domination. They are thereby, ironically, profoundly disempowering.

My attempt to reinterpret Marx's critical theory of capitalism focuses on the most basic level of analysis of that mode of social life. It has become evident, considered retrospectively from the beginning of the twenty-first century, that the social, political, economic and cultural configuration of capital's hegemony has varied historically – from mercantilism through nineteenth-century liberal capitalism and twentieth-century state-centric Fordist capitalism to contemporary neoliberal global capitalism. Each configuration has elicited a number of penetrating critiques – of exploitation and uneven, inequitable growth, for example, or of technocratic, bureaucratic modes of domination. Each of these critiques, however, is incomplete; as we now see, capitalism cannot be identified fully with any of its historical configurations. This raises the question of the core nature of that social formation.

Traditional Marxist and poststructuralist approaches have in common that they take a historically specific configuration of capitalism to be the essence of the social formation (the free market, the bureaucratic disciplinary state). The traditional Marxist critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour is most plausible when its object is nineteenth-century liberal capitalism. It is fundamentally inadequate as a critical theory of the state-centric Fordist configuration of capitalism that marked much of the twentieth century and that included the Soviet organisation of society. Indeed, some variants of traditional Marxism served as ideologies of legitimation for precisely this epochal configuration of capitalism. Similarly, late twentieth-century critiques that responded critically to the Fordist régime, such as those of the bureaucratic disciplinary state, frequently did so by hypostatizing and dehistoricising that configuration of capitalism. With their critical gaze fixed upon what proved to be another passing configuration of capitalism, poststructuralist approaches backed into a still newer configuration, a neoliberal social universe with which they were ill-prepared to deal.

The reconceptualisation undertaken in my work understands itself as contributing to the formulation of a critical understanding of capitalism that is not limited to any of that social formation's epochs. I argue that, at the heart of capitalism, is a historically dynamic process that is associated with multiple historical configurations. This dynamic process is what Marx sought to grasp with the category of capital. It is a core feature of the modern world, which must be grasped if a critical theory of capitalism is to be adequate to its object. Such an understanding of capitalism can only be achieved on a very high level of abstraction. It could then serve as a point of departure for an analysis of epochal changes in capitalism as well as for the historically changing subjectivities expressed in historically determinate social movements.

II

My work, however, remains focused on working out the core of capitalism as a uniquely dynamic social formation by rethinking Marx's analysis of capitalism's most basic relations and, hence, the nature of its determinate negation, in ways very different from traditional Marxist interpretations. It does so on the basis of a close reading of the basic categories of Marx's critique of political economy. Rather than relying on statements made by Marx, without reference to their locus in the unfolding of his mode of presentation, I attempt to reconstruct the systematic character of Marx's categorial analysis. In particular, my analysis investigates in depth Marx's point of departure – the category of the commodity – as the most fundamental form of social relations in capitalism, and as the basis for his analysis of the category of capital.

I argue that, in his mature works, Marx rigorously treats the categories of capitalist society as historically specific. In working out the non-ontological, historically specific character of the core relations grasped by Marx's basic categories, I also draw attention to their transhistorical, reified modes of appearance. Such a non-reified conception of capitalism's core relations allows for the systematic differentiation, necessary for an adequate critical theory of the present, between that core and capitalism's various historical configurations.

Inasmuch as Marx analyses social objectivity and subjectivity as related intrinsically, this focus on the historical specificity of his categories reflexively implies the historical specificity of his theory. No theory, within this conceptual framework, has transhistorical validity. Rather, the standpoint of critical theory must be intrinsic to its object. Relatedly, this means that transhistorical notions, such as that of a dialectical logic intrinsic to human history, or the notion that

labour is the most central constituting element of social life, become historically relativised. Marx does not claim that such notions were never valid but, instead, restricts their validity to the capitalist social formation, while showing how that which is historically specific in capitalism could be taken to be transhistorical.

At the heart of Marx's analysis of the commodity is his argument that labour in capitalism has a 'double character': it is both 'concrete labour' and 'abstract labour'.² 'Concrete labour' refers to the fact that some form of what we consider labouring activity mediates the interactions of humans with nature in all societies. 'Abstract labour' does not simply refer to concrete labour in the abstract, to 'labour' in general, but is a very different sort of category. It signifies that labour in capitalism also has a unique social dimension that is not intrinsic to labouring activity as such: it mediates a new, quasi-objective form of social interdependence. 'Abstract labour', as a historically specific mediating function of labour, is the content or, better, 'substance' of value.³

Labour in capitalism, then, according to Marx, is not only labour, as we understand it transhistorically and commonsensically, but is also a historically-specific socially-mediating activity. Hence its objectifications – commodity, capital – are both concrete labour products and objectified forms of social mediation. According to this analysis, the social relations that most basically characterise capitalist society are very different from the qualitatively specific, overt social relations – such as kinship relations or relations of personal or direct domination – which characterise non-capitalist societies. Although the latter kind of social relations continue to exist in capitalism, what ultimately structures that society is a new, underlying level of social relations that is constituted by labour. Those relations have a peculiar quasi-objective, formal character and are dualistic – they are characterised by the opposition of an abstract, general, homogeneous dimension and a concrete, particular, material dimension, both of which appear to be 'natural', rather than social, and condition social conceptions of natural reality.

The abstract character of the social mediation underlying capitalism is also expressed in the form of wealth dominant in that society. Marx's 'labour theory of value' is not a labour theory of wealth, that is, a theory that seeks

² See Marx 1976, pp. 128–37.

³ Marx 1976, p. 228.

to explain the workings of the market and prove the existence of exploitation by arguing that labour, at all times and in all places, is the only social source of wealth. Marx analysed value as a historically specific form of wealth, which is bound to the historically unique role of labour in capitalism; as a form of wealth, it is also a form of social mediation.

Marx explicitly distinguished value from material wealth. This distinction is crucially important for his analysis. Material wealth is measured by the quantity of products produced and is a function of a number of factors such as knowledge, social organisation, and natural conditions, in addition to labour. Value is constituted by human labour-time expenditure alone, according to Marx, and is the dominant form of wealth in capitalism. Whereas material wealth, when it is the dominant form of wealth, is mediated by overt social relations, value is a self-mediating form of wealth. As I shall elaborate, Marx's analysis is of a system based on value that both generates and constrains the historical possibility of its own overcoming by one based on material wealth.

Within the framework of this interpretation, then, what fundamentally characterises capitalism is a historically specific abstract form of social mediation – a form of social relations that is unique inasmuch as it is mediated by labour. This historically specific form of mediation is constituted by determinate forms of social practice and, yet, becomes quasi-independent of the people engaged in those practices. The result is a historically new form of social domination – one that subjects people to impersonal, increasingly rationalised, structural imperatives and constraints that cannot adequately be grasped in terms of class domination, or, more generally, in terms of the concrete domination of social groupings or of institutional agencies of the state and/or the economy. It has no determinate locus and, although constituted by determinate forms of social practice, appears not to be social at all.

Significant in this regard is Marx's temporal determination of the magnitude of value. In his discussion of the magnitude of value in terms of socially necessary labour time, Marx alludes to a peculiarity of value as a social form of wealth whose measure is temporal: increasing productivity increases the amount of use-values produced per unit of time, but results only in short-term increases in the magnitude of value created per unit of time. Once that productive increase becomes general, the magnitude of value falls to its base level. The result is a sort of treadmill dynamic.

Early on in his exposition, then, Marx begins to characterise capitalism as a society driven by a peculiar dynamic that leads to ever-increasing levels of

productivity, resulting in great increases in use-value output. These increasing levels of productivity do not, however, signify proportional increases in value, the social form of wealth in capitalism. This peculiar treadmill dynamic is driven by value's temporal dimension. The historically specific and abstract form of social domination intrinsic to capitalism's fundamental forms of social mediation is the domination of people by time. This form of domination is bound to a historically specific and abstract form of temporality – abstract Newtonian time – which is constituted historically with the commodity-form.

This dynamic is at the core of the category of capital. Marx first determines capital as self-valorising value.⁴ That is, capital, for Marx, is a category of movement, of expansion; it is value in motion. Capital, for Marx, has no fixed form, but appears at different moments of its spiralling path in the form of money and commodities.⁵ Capital, according to Marx, then, entails a ceaseless process of value's self-expansion, a directional movement with no external *telos* that generates large-scale cycles of production and consumption, creation and destruction.

Significantly, in introducing the category of capital, Marx describes it with the same language that Hegel used in the *Phenomenology* with reference to *Geist* – the self-moving substance that is the subject of its own process.⁶ In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism. Yet – and this is crucially important – he does not identify that Subject with the proletariat (as does Lukács), or even with humanity. Instead, he does so with reference to capital.

This identification of Hegel's *Geist* with capital represents the full working out of the theory of alienation Marx first articulated in his early works. Marx treats the unfolding of the dialectical logic of capital as a real social expression of alienated social relations that, although constituted by practice, exist quasi-independently. These social relations cannot fully be grasped as class relations but as forms of social mediation expressed by the categories of commodity, value and capital that structure and are restructured by class relations. The logic of capital, then, is not an illusory manifestation of underlying class relations but is a social form of domination inseparable from the fundamental

⁴ Marx 1976, pp. 255–7.

⁵ Marx's unfolding of the category of capital in Chapter 4 of *Capital* retrospectively illuminates his analysis in the first two chapters of the twofold character of the commodity and its externalisation as money and commodities.

⁶ Hegel 1966, p. 28; Marx 1976, pp. 255–6.

social forms/relations characteristic of capitalism. A logic of history and alienated forms of social relations are intrinsically related. By referring to Hegel's initial conceptual determination of *Geist* when introducing the concept of capital, Marx suggests, in other words, that Hegel's notion of history as a directional dialectical unfolding is valid, but only for the capitalist era.

The capitalist social formation is unique, according to Marx's analysis in *Capital*, inasmuch as it is characterised by a qualitatively homogenous social 'substance' (abstract labour). Hence, it exists as a social totality. The fundamental social relations of other societies are not qualitatively homogenous. Hence, they are not totalised – they cannot be grasped by the concept of 'substance', cannot be unfolded from a single, structuring principle, and do not display an immanent, necessary historical logic.

Marx's critique of Hegel in *Capital* suggests, then, that capitalist relations are not extrinsic to the Subject, as that which hinders its full realisation. Rather, he analyses those very relations as constituting the Subject. In his mature theory, then, Marx does not posit a historical meta-subject, such as the proletariat, which will realise itself in a future society, but provides the basis for a critique of such a notion. This implies a position very different from that of theorists such as Lukács, for whom the social totality constituted by labour constituted the *standpoint* of the critique of capitalism, and is to be realised in socialism. In *Capital*, the totality and the labour constituting it have become the *objects* of critique.

The idea that capital is the total Subject, and not the proletariat or humanity, indicates that the historical negation of capitalism involves the abolition of the Subject and of totality, not their realisation. The contradictions of capital, therefore, must point beyond the Subject, beyond totality.

Marx's mature critique of Hegel, therefore, no longer entails a 'materialist' anthropological inversion of the latter's idealistic dialectic (as undertaken by Lukács, for example). Rather, it is that dialectic's materialist 'justification'. Marx implicitly argues that the 'rational core' of Hegel's dialectic is precisely its idealist character. It is an expression of a mode of domination constituted by relations that acquire a quasi-independent existence vis-à-vis the individuals and that, because of their peculiar dualistic nature, are dialectical in character. The historical Subject is the alienated structure of social mediation that is constitutive of the capitalist formation.

The historical logic Marx unfolds in *Capital* is rooted ultimately in the double character of the commodity and, hence, capital-form. As noted above,

value, as a temporally determined form of wealth, underlies an ongoing drive for increased productivity that is a hallmark of capitalist production. Because value is a function of socially necessary labour time alone, however, higher socially general levels of productivity result in greater amounts of material wealth, but not in higher levels of value per unit of time. The use-value dimension of labour, which underlies increasing productivity, does not change the amount of value produced per unit of time, but changes the determination of what counts as a determinate unit of time – for example, a social labour hour – which now serves as a new base level. With general increases in productivity, the unit of (abstract) time has been pushed forward, as it were, in (historical) time.

This dialectical dynamic of value and use-value is logically implied by Marx's treatment of socially necessary labour time in his preliminary analysis of the commodity-form. It emerges overtly when he begins elaborating the concept of capital with respect to that of surplus-value. The latter category has generally been understood as one of exploitation, as indicating that, in spite of appearances, the surplus product in capitalism is not constituted by a number of factors of production, such as labour, land, and machinery, but by labour alone. Surplus-value, generally, has been taken as a category of class-based exploitation.

While not disagreeing with this analysis of surplus-value, I regard it as partial. The conventional understanding of surplus-value focuses exclusively on the creation of the *surplus*, but does not sufficiently consider the significance in Marx's analysis of the form of wealth involved, namely *value*, and its associated treadmill dynamic.

Marx analytically distinguishes two aspects of the capitalist mode of production: it is a process for the production of use-values (labour process) and a process of generating (surplus-) value (valorisation process). Analysing the latter, Marx distinguishes between the production of absolute surplus-value, where increases in the surplus-value are generated by increasing total labour time, and relative surplus-value, where increases in the surplus-value are effected by increasing general productivity, which lowers the value of workers' means of reproduction.

With the introduction of the category of relative surplus-value, the logic of Marx's exposition becomes a historical logic, one that is characterised by temporal acceleration. What characterises relative surplus-value in Marx's account is that, the higher the socially general level of productivity, the more

productivity must be still further increased in order to generate a determinate increase in surplus-value. Yet the ever-increasing amounts of material wealth produced do not represent correspondingly high levels of social wealth in the form of value. In capitalism, according to this analysis, higher socially general levels of productivity do not proportionately diminish the socially general necessity for labour-time expenditure (which would be the case if material wealth were the dominant form of wealth). Instead, that necessity is constantly reconstituted. Consequently, labour remains the necessary means of individual reproduction and labour-time expenditure remains fundamental to the process of production (on the level of society as a whole), regardless of the level of productivity.

The result is a very complex historical dynamic of transformation and reconstitution that is directional, but not linear. History in capitalism is not a simple story of progress – technical or otherwise. Rather, it is bifurcated: on the one hand, the dialectic of value and use-value generates a dynamic that is characterised by ongoing and even accelerating transformations of technical processes, of the social and detail division of labour and, more generally, of social life – of the nature, structure and interrelations of social classes and other groupings, the nature of production, transportation, circulation, patterns of living, the form of the family, and so on. On the other hand, the historical dynamic of capitalism entails the ongoing reconstitution of its own fundamental condition as an unchanging feature of social life – namely, that social mediation ultimately is effected by labour and, hence, that living labour remains integral to the process of production of society as a whole, regardless of the level of productivity. It increasingly points beyond the necessity of value, and, hence, proletarian labour, while reconstituting that very necessity as a condition of life of capitalism. The accelerating rate of change and the reconstitution of the underlying structural core of the social formation are interrelated. The historical dynamic of capitalism ceaselessly generates what is ‘new’, while regenerating what is the ‘same’. This dynamic both generates the possibility of another organisation of social life and, yet, hinders that possibility from being realised.

The dynamic implied by the category of surplus-value indicates that the temporal form of domination that Marx places at the heart of capitalism is not simply that of the present; it cannot be understood adequately with reference to the abstract value dimension of the commodity alone. Rather, the unstable duality of the forms commodity and capital entails a dialectical

interaction of value and use-value that underlies a complex historical dynamic that is at the heart of the modern world.

This approach grounds the dynamic of capitalism in historically specific social forms; it abandons the transhistorical assumption that human history in general has a dynamic, by showing that a historical dynamic is a historically specific characteristic of capitalism. This dialectical dynamic can be grasped neither in terms of the state nor in terms of civil society. Rather, it exists 'behind' them, moulding each as well as their relation. Within the framework of this approach, then, the dichotomy of state and civil society is a surface phenomenon of a more fundamental historical process. This historical dynamic is at the core of a historically specific form of heteronomy that severely constrains democratic processes and meaningful self-determination. This suggests that the question of the conditions of democratic self-determination as promulgated by theories of civil society and the public sphere has to be rethought.

The historical dynamic of the modern capitalist world, within this framework, then, is not simply a linear succession of presents but entails a complex dialectic of two forms of constituted time. This dialectic involves the accumulation of the past, Marx's 'dead labour', that undermines the necessity of the present, of value. It does so, however, in a form that entails the ongoing reconstruction of the fundamental features of capitalism as an apparently necessary present – even as it is hurtled forward by another form of time, which is concrete, heterogeneous, and directional. This latter movement of time is 'historical time'. Historical time and abstract time are interrelated; both are forms of domination.

Within this framework, people constitute historical time; they do not, however, dispose of it. Rather, historical time in capitalism is constituted in an alienated form that reinforces the necessity of the present.⁷ The existence of a historical dynamic, then, is not viewed affirmatively within the framework of such an understanding, as the positive motor of human social life, but is grasped critically, as a form of heteronomy related to the domination of abstract time, to the accumulation of the past in a form that reinforces the present. On the other hand, according to this reading, it is precisely the same

⁷ It is in this sense that Marx's well-known statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* should be understood – that the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. See Marx 1979, p. 103.

accumulation of the past that comes into increasing tension with the necessity of the present and makes possible a future time. Hence, the future is made possible by the *appropriation* of the past.

This understanding of capitalism's complex dynamic is, of course, only a very abstract initial determination. Capital's drive for expansion, for example, need not always entail increasing productivity. It can also be effected by lowering wages, for example, or lengthening the working day. Nevertheless, it delineates an overarching logic of capital. Within this framework, the non-linear historical dynamic elucidated by Marx's categorial analysis and his distinction between 'value' and 'material wealth' provide the basis for a critical social understanding of both the form of economic growth characteristic of capitalism as well as the proletarian-based form of industrial production as moulded by capital (rather than as technical processes manipulated by capitalists for their own ends).

On the one hand, the temporal dimension of value underlies a determinate pattern of 'growth' – one in which increased human productive abilities exist in a limitless runaway form over which people have little control. This pattern, which gives rise to increases in material wealth greater than those in surplus-value (which remains the relevant form of the surplus in capitalism), leads to the accelerating destruction of the natural environment. Within this framework, then, the problem with economic growth in capitalism is not only that it is crisis-ridden, but also that the form of growth itself is problematic. The trajectory of growth would be different if the ultimate goal of production were increased quantities of goods, rather than surplus-value.

The distinction between material wealth and value, then, allows for a critique of the negative ecological consequences of modern capitalist production within the framework of a critical theory of capitalism. As such, it points beyond the opposition between runaway, ecologically destructive growth as a condition of social wealth, and austerity as a condition of an ecologically sound organisation of social life.

This approach also provides the basis for an analysis of the structure of social labour and the nature of production in capitalism that is social rather than technological. This approach does not treat the capitalist process of production as a technical process that, although increasingly socialised, is used by private capitalists for their own individual ends. Instead, it begins with Marx's analysis of the two dimensions of the capitalist process of production – the labour process and the valorisation process. At first, according

to Marx, the valorisation process remains extrinsic to the labour process (what he calls the ‘formal subsumption of labour under capital’).⁸ At this point, production is not yet intrinsically capitalist. The valorisation process, however, comes to mould the nature of the labour process itself (the ‘real subsumption of labour under capital’).⁹ The notion of the real subsumption of labour under capital means that production has become intrinsically capitalist, which, in turn, implies that production in a postcapitalist social order entails a transformation of the structures and organisation of production under capitalism; it should not be conceived of as the same mode of producing under public rather than private ownership.

On a very logically abstract level, the real subsumption of labour under capital can be understood as a process ultimately grounded in the dual imperatives of capital – the drive for ongoing increases in productivity and the structural reconstitution of the necessity of direct human labour-power expenditure on a total social level. The material form of fully developed capitalist production can be grasped, according to such an approach, with reference to contradictory pressures generated by these two increasingly opposed imperatives. This allows for the beginnings of a structural explanation for a central paradox of production in capitalism. On the one hand, capital’s drive for ongoing increases in productivity gives rise to a technologically sophisticated productive apparatus that renders the production of material wealth essentially independent of direct human labour-time expenditure. This opens the possibility of large-scale socially generated reductions in labour time and fundamental changes in the nature and social organisation of labour. Yet these possibilities are not realised in capitalism. The development of technologically sophisticated production does not liberate most people from one-sided and fragmented labour. Similarly, labour time is not reduced on a socially total level, but is distributed unequally, even increasing for many. The actual structure and organisation of production cannot, then, be adequately understood in technological terms alone, but must also be understood socially, with reference to the social mediations expressed by the categories of commodity and capital. Marx’s critical theory, then, is *not* one that posits the primacy of production, of materiality, but of a form of social mediation that moulds production, distribution, and consumption. Class struggle is an integral part of capitalism’s dynamic. It does not, however, ultimately ground that

⁸ Marx 1976, p. 645.

⁹ *Ibid.*

dynamic, which is rooted in the dualistic character of social mediation in capitalism.

At this point, we can return to the issue of capital and labour. Labour in capitalism, as we have seen, has two analytically separable social dimensions, a use-value dimension ('concrete labour') and a value dimension ('abstract'). The use-value dimension of labour refers to labour as a social activity that mediates humans and nature by producing goods that are consumed socially. Marx treats productivity as the productivity of useful, concrete labour. It is determined by the social organisation of production, the level of the development and application of science, and the acquired skills of the working population.¹⁰ That is, the social character of the use-value dimension of labour encompasses social organisation and social knowledge and is not restricted to the expenditure of direct labour. Productivity, in Marx's analysis, is an expression of the social character of concrete labour, of the acquired productive abilities of humanity. The value dimension of labour ('abstract labour') however, is quite different. It refers to labour's historically unique function in capitalism as a socially mediating activity. The production of value, unlike that of material wealth, necessarily is bound to the expenditure of direct human labour.

As we have seen, Marx first introduces the category of capital in terms of the latter social dimension of labour alone, as self-valorising value. In the course of his presentation of the development of production in *Capital*, however, Marx argues that the use-value dimension of labour historically becomes an attribute of capital.

Initially, in Marx's treatment of co-operation and manufacture, this appropriation of concrete labour's productive powers by capital seems to be simply a matter of private ownership, inasmuch as these productive powers are still constituted by direct human labour in production. Once large-scale industry has developed, however, the social productive powers of concrete labour appropriated by capital no longer are those of the immediate producers. They do not exist first as powers of the workers that are then taken from them. Rather, they are socially general productive powers. The condition for their coming into being historically is precisely that they are constituted in an alienated form, separate from and opposed to, the immediate producers.

This form is what Marx seeks to grasp with his category of capital. Capital, as it develops, is not the mystified form of powers that 'actually' are those

¹⁰ Marx 1976, pp. 130–7.

of the workers. Rather, it is the real form of existence of 'species capacities' that are constituted historically in alienated form. Capital, then, is the alienated form of both dimensions of social labour in capitalism. On the one hand, it confronts the individuals as an alien, totalistic Other. On the other hand, the species capacities constituted historically in the form of capital open up the historical possibility of a form of social production that no longer is based on a surplus produced by the expenditure of direct human labour in production, that is, on the labour of a surplus-producing class.

One implication of this analysis of capital is that capital does not exist as a unitary totality, and that the Marxian notion of the dialectical contradiction between the 'forces' and 'relations' of production does not refer to a contradiction between 'relations' that are intrinsically capitalist (such as the market and private property) and 'forces' that purportedly are extrinsic to capital. Rather, that dialectical contradiction is one between the two dimensions of capital. As a contradictory totality, capital is generative of the complex historical dynamic I began to outline, a dynamic that points to the possibility of its own overcoming.

The approach to capitalism's dynamic that I have outlined, neither posits a linear developmental schema that points beyond the existing structure and organisation of labour (as do theories of postindustrial society), nor does it treat industrial production and the proletariat as the bases for a future society (as do many traditional-Marxist approaches). Rather, it indicates that capitalism gives rise to the historical possibility of a different form of growth and of production; at the same time, however, capitalism structurally undermines the realisation of those possibilities. The structural contradiction of capitalism, according to this interpretation, is not one between distribution (the market, private property) and production, between existing property relations and industrial production. Rather, it emerges as a contradiction between existing forms of growth and production, and what could be the case if social relations no longer were mediated in a quasi-objective fashion by labour.

By grounding the contradictory character of the social formation in the dualistic forms expressed by the categories of the commodity and capital, Marx implies that structurally based social contradiction is specific to capitalism. In light of this analysis, the notion that reality or social relations in general are essentially contradictory and dialectical can only be assumed metaphysically, not explained. Marx's analysis, within this framework, suggests that any theory that posits an intrinsic developmental logic to history as such, whether

dialectical or evolutionary, projects what is the case for capitalism onto history in general.

As noted above, whereas, in traditional Marxism, labour is treated transhistorically, as constituting the quasi-ontological *standpoint* of the critique of capitalism, within this framework, labour constitutes the *object* of the critique. In the former, the categorical forms of capital *veil* the 'real' social relations of capitalism, in the latter they *are* those social relations. In other words, the quasi-objective structures of mediation grasped by the categories of Marx's critique of political economy do not veil the 'real' social relations of capitalism, that is, class relations, just as they do not hide the 'real' historical Subject, that is, the proletariat. Rather, those historically dynamic mediating structures *are* the fundamental relations of capitalist society and constitute the Subject.

This emphasis on social mediation has implications for the question of the relation of social labour and social meaning in Marx's theory. Most discussions of this issue conceptualise the problem as one of the relation between labour, understood transhistorically, and forms of thought. This is the assumption underlying the common idea that, for Marx, material production constitutes the fundamental 'base' of society, whereas ideas are part of the more epiphenomenal 'superstructure', or, relatedly, that beliefs, for Marx, are determined by material interests. However, as I have been arguing, Marx's mature theory of social constitution is not one of labour per se, but of labour acting as a socially mediating activity in capitalism. This interpretation transforms the terms of the problem of the relationship between labour and thought. The relationship he delineates is not one between concrete labour and thought, but one between mediated social relations and thought. The specificity of the forms of thought (or, more broadly, of subjectivity) characteristic of modern society can be understood with reference to those forms of mediation. The categories of the mature critique of political economy, in other words, purport to be determinations of social subjectivity and objectivity at once. They represent an attempt to get beyond a subject-object dualism, an attempt to grasp socially aspects of modern views of nature, society, and history, with reference to historically specific forms of social mediation constituted by determinate forms of social practice. This approach entails a very different theory of knowledge than that implied by the well-known base-superstructure model, where thought is a mere reflection of a material base. It also is not a functionalist approach – either in the sense of

explaining ideas because they are functional for capitalist society or for the capitalist class.

III

The reinterpretation of Marx's theory I have outlined constitutes a basic break with, and critique of, more traditional interpretations. As we have seen, such interpretations understand capitalism in terms of class relations structured by the market and private property, grasp its form of domination primarily in terms of class domination and exploitation, and formulate a normative and historical critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour and production (understood transhistorically in terms of the interactions of humans with material nature). I have argued that Marx's analysis of labour in capitalism as historically specific seeks to elucidate a peculiar quasi-objective form of social mediation and wealth (value) that constitutes a form of domination which structures the process of production in capitalism and generates a historically unique dynamic. Hence, labour and the process of production are not separable from, and opposed to, the social relations of capitalism, but constitute their very core. Marx's theory, then, extends far beyond the traditional critique of the bourgeois relations of distribution (the market and private property); it grasps modern industrial society itself as capitalist. It treats the working class as the basic element of capitalism rather than as the embodiment of its negation, and does not conceptualise socialism in terms of the realisation of labour and of industrial production, but in terms of the possible abolition of the proletariat and of the organisation of production based on proletarian labour, as well as of the dynamic system of abstract compulsions constituted by labour as a socially mediating activity.

This approach, then, reconceptualises postcapitalist society in terms of a transformation of the general structure of labour and of time. In this sense, it differs both from the traditional Marxist notions of the realisation of the proletariat, and from the capitalist mode of 'abolishing' national working classes by creating an underclass within the framework of the unequal distribution of labour and time, nationally and globally. The approach I have outlined seeks to grasp capital as the dynamic core of the social formation, which underlies the more historically determinate configurations of capitalism. At the same time, this approach could help illuminate some dimensions of capitalism today. By relating the overcoming of capital to the overcoming of

proletarian labour, this approach could begin to approach the historical emergence of post-proletarian self-understandings and subjectivities. It opens the possibility for a theory that can reflect historically on the new social movements of the last decades of the twentieth century, whose demands and expressed needs have had very little to do with capitalism as traditionally understood. An adequate theory of capitalism – one that is not bound to any epochal configuration of capitalism and is able to grasp capitalism's epochal changes – should be able to address such movements, explain historically their emergence and the nature of the subjectivities expressed.

By shifting the focus of the critique away from an exclusive concern with the market and private property, this approach seeks to provide the basis for a critical theory of postliberal society as capitalist and also of the so-called 'actually-existing socialist' countries as alternative (and failed) forms of capital accumulation, rather than as social modes that represented the historical negation of capital, in however imperfect a form. It also allows for an analysis of the newest configuration of capitalism – of neoliberal global capitalism – in ways that avoid returning to a traditionalist Marxist framework.

This reinterpretation thus implies a fundamental rethinking of the nature of capitalism and of its possible historical transformation. It implicitly suggests that an adequate theory of modernity should be a self-reflexive theory capable of overcoming the theoretical dichotomies of culture and material life, structure and action, while grounding socially the overarching non-linear directional dynamic of the modern world, its form of economic growth, and the nature and trajectory of its production process. That is, such a theory must be capable of providing a social account of the paradoxical features of modernity outlined above.

In general, the approach I have outlined seeks to contribute to the discourse of contemporary social theory and, relatedly, to our understanding of the far-reaching transformations of our social universe in ways that could contribute to its fundamental transformation.

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