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Editorial Perspective



The Future is the Termination Shock: On the Antinomies and Psychopathologies of Geoengineering. Part Two

Andreas Malm

Associate Professor, Department of Human Geography,
Human Ecology Division, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
andreas.malm@hek.lu.se

Abstract

As capitalist society remains incapable of addressing climate breakdown, one measure is waiting in the wings: solar geoengineering. No other technology can cut global temperatures immediately. It would alleviate the symptoms of the crisis, not its causes. But might it be combined with radical emissions cuts? This essay, the final instalment of two, subjects geoengineering to a materialist psychoanalysis and argues that it represents a fantasy of repression, setting itself up for a dreadful return of the repressed.

Keywords

geoengineering – climate change – Marxism – symptom

1 A Hard Struggle with Reason

Can the Earth be successfully cooled with sulphate planes? Rationalist-optimists believe so. They are, we argued in the first instalment of this essay, prone to

illusions. Solar geoengineering is rather hardwired to produce a rising tide of side effects and likely to set off a termination shock when the technology is eventually, at some point, switched off. Building directly on the first instalment, here we shall deepen the analysis of geoengineering in general and its rationalist-optimist champions in particular. We must begin with the category of reason, much beloved by the latter. The rationalist-optimists tend to perceive themselves as besieged by unreasonable people. Critics of geoengineering are ‘driven by intuition, ideology, and pre-existing conclusions instead of empiricism and rationality’, asseverates Jesse Reynolds; in the eyes of Gernot Wagner, the negative reactions are ‘visceral’, emotional, clouded by bias.¹ Those in opposition do not honour evidence and logic. But do the rationalist-optimists themselves uphold such virtues of reason?

Next to the termination shock, the problem that has most doggedly haunted geoengineering is that of ‘moral hazard’. The term – first used, ironically, by the master rationalist-optimist himself, David Keith – is adapted from economics, where it designates a situation in which agents take greater risks because someone covers their backs. They feel protected and therefore indulge in the hazardous conduct. By analogy, geoengineering – even the mere *thought* of it, as a hypothetical future arrangement – would function as an insurance, lulling actors into the belief that they will be buffered against catastrophe and enticing them to keep emitting.² In response, rationalist-optimists have compared geoengineering to seatbelts, which seem to inspire more incautious driving, since drivers feel safe anyway; and, more incongruently, to condoms – another ‘technofix’ that ‘increases risky behavior’.³ The recent literature has converged on ‘mitigation deterrence’ as a more precise term than ‘moral hazard’.⁴ We argued in the first part that geoengineering would deter mitigation at the

1 Reynolds 2019, p. 222 (cf. e.g. pp. 45, 53); Wagner 2021, p. 73 (cf. e.g. pp. 82–3). And cf. Keith 2000, p. 277.

2 Keith 2000, p. 276; on this as the first use of the term, and its significance more generally, see Lockley and Coffman 2016.

3 Wagner and Zizzamia 2021, pp. 1–2; cf. Keith 2013, pp. 130–1, Reynolds 2019, p. 37. The latter belief can be traced to Benedict XVI. It was he who argued that condoms make the AIDS epidemic worse. Butt 2009. Without such a faith, it is hard to see how condoms would fit into this analytical mould, as their use actually *does* remove the risk of both unwanted pregnancies and transmitted diseases; the only problematic behaviour that it facilitates – and surely this is what the pope had in mind – would be promiscuity or some other sexual deviances. The idea of condoms as a moral hazard thus presupposes moralism. If geoengineering is posited as analogous to it, there must be some pseudo-libidinal subtext to the contention. Are we to conclude that fossil fuel combustion is a sexual perversion? If geoengineering is a hazard similar to condoms, this would seem to be the hidden premise.

4 Beginning with McLaren 2016; see further e.g. Markusson, McLaren, Szerszynski *et al.* 2022; and cf. Wagner 2021, p. 118.

moment of its deployment, but most discussions have focused on the gestational period: the research itself as a decoy leading actors to neglect their duties. Whether it has actually had that effect so far is disputable and, by definition, impossible to measure.⁵ But what if geoengineering – if still only on the drawing board – attracts more attention? Will it then discourage people from doing what must be done? Likening it to everyday paraphernalia like seatbelts or condoms is one ploy for mollifying this concern, but lately the rationalist-optimists have developed another line of defence: what they call ‘inverse moral hazard’.

If people get to know about geoengineering, the argument goes, they will be scared out of their wits. The spectre of the side effects and the shock and other disagreeable aspects will make them yearn for mitigation so powerful that none of this will ever come to pass.⁶ There are empirical studies supposedly suggesting as much: one found that subjects informed about geoengineering were more inclined to buy voluntary offsets.⁷ Another fed participants with particulars that led them to support a carbon tax.⁸ A handful of other papers – including a strictly game-theoretical ‘proof’ – lend credence to the notion of geoengineering *inciting* mitigation, but one can poke holes in them: a declared preference to purchase offsets is hardly a reliable indicator of emissions cuts.⁹ (As a matter of fact, it is the exact opposite: the well-known function of voluntary offsets is to enable emissions to continue.) Individual responses to questionnaires do not predict government policy. Reynolds believes to the contrary. Policy can in fact be read off from experimental polls – including that pursued by dictatorships, because ‘even authoritarian leaders are partially constrained by public opinion’; so if one or two studies suggest that the public will be sufficiently unnerved by geoengineering to jump into mitigation, then that is how states – all states – will act.¹⁰ The idealism of such an argument merits no further comment. Of greater interest are the contradictions at the heart of this line of reasoning.

5 Cf. NASEM 2021, p. 76. It has been argued that the knowledge of geoengineering has barely percolated into the public sphere and so cannot have had much of a deterrence effect, and there is something to this. E.g. Halstead 2018, p. 72. Carbon dioxide removal is, again, another matter. The recent output on mitigation deterrence has focused on this sphere: e.g. Markusson, McLaren and Tyfield 2018.

6 E.g. Reynolds 2021, p. 3; NASEM 2021, p. 84.

7 Merk, Pönitzsch and Rehdanz 2016.

8 Cherry, Kallbekken, Kroll and McEvoy 2021.

9 Polborn and Tintelnot 2009; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, Tarantola *et al.* 2015; and for games theory, Fabre and Wagner 2020, repeated in Wagner 2021, pp. 29–34. Further problems with these studies are highlighted by Smith 2022, pp. 310–11.

10 Reynolds 2021, p. 3.

Geoengineering, we are now told, is so good because it's so bad that it will terrify people into dealing with the roots of the climate crisis when they learn about it. 'That may well be the best use of solar geoengineering today: scare people into wanting to mitigate more', contends Wagner; indeed, here is 'the largest role for solar geoengineering research: not for its own sake, but as a wake-up call for broader climate action.'¹¹ But the argument deflates itself. If the main objective of geoengineering is to inspire mitigation, then clearly there is nothing to be afraid of. People who read these sentences from Wagner would presumably feel calm, not alarm. Moreover, the 'inverse moral hazard' goes against the grain of the highest purpose of the rationalist-optimists – namely, to come up with evidence *about how good geoengineering will be* when deployed. 'I am confident that we could eventually find "clean" ways to alter radiative forcing – methods that have negligible side effects', Keith asserts.¹² In one of the many papers he has co-authored, the danger of pollution and ozone depletion is greatly downplayed.¹³ Likewise, Wagner spends much of his book dispelling – supposedly – worries about monsoons and precipitation and oceans and plants, ticking off one side effect after another as exaggerated, arguing that the purpose of the research should be to ferret out any remaining risks and master them.¹⁴ All of this is obviously to pull the rug out from under any inverse moral hazard that may exist. Geoengineering cannot both be so good because it is so terrifying and so good because it is actually benign. Even rationalist-optimists need to abide by the laws of logic, and if they do not, there is reason to suspect that their relation to reason is more troubled than it appears at first sight – particularly if the gaps and contortions are recurring.

In a highly creative feat of modelling and argument, one team of rationalist-optimists has contended that geoengineering will increase equality in the world. Poor countries in the tropics currently suffer from a regional climate that is 'warmer-than-optimal'. Their temperatures are, by some objective standard, too high for affluence to evolve. Because sulphate injections would overcool the tropics, they would also give a shot in the arm to GDP growth and improve chances of catch-up with the global North, where average temperatures already hover 'around the optimum'. Better yet, by flattening the gradient between tropics and poles, geoengineering would bring 'all countries' climates slightly closer'.¹⁵ By this sleight of hand, one of the most disconcerting

11 Wagner 2021, pp. 144, 140. Cf. pp. 69, 130; Fabre and Wagner 2020, p. 3; Wagner and Zizzamia 2021, p. 12; Reynolds 2021, p. 3; Reynolds 2022, pp. 287, 295.

12 Keith 2013, p. 110.

13 Eastham *et al.* 2018.

14 Wagner 2021, e.g. pp. 36–60, 71, 145. The same quest is endorsed by another fan of the inverse moral hazard: Reynolds 2019, p. 201.

15 Harding, Ricke, Heyen *et al.* 2020, p. 4.

categories of side effects is transmuted into blessings of egalitarianism and gifts to the global South. (One more reversal of the inverse moral hazard, it could be added.) If this is an argument shrouded in reason, it wears a very thin version of it indeed.

As we saw in the first part, the rationalist-optimist confession of faith begins with renouncing the idea that sulphate planes can substitute for emissions cuts and instead postulating a combination of the two. But even the most fervent believers cannot help themselves slipping into a zero-sum game: they deplore the fact that climate disasters so far seem to have piqued public interest in the former rather than the latter.¹⁶ They are, in other words, jealous of the attention mitigation has received. Given how limited it has been, this does not bode well for their commitment to that pursuit. They know how pregnant with catastrophe full substitution would be, but ‘more plausibly, SRM [solar radiation management] could be a partial substitute’ for cuts.¹⁷ If geoengineering ends up squeezing out mitigation altogether, it would be ‘both rational and net beneficial to humans and the environment’, because on the assumptions of neoclassical economics, the welfare of a cooled climate would be bought at a lower price this way.¹⁸ Reynolds can invoke the inverse moral hazard in one sentence and the ‘net benefit’ from substitution in the next.¹⁹ The real danger is that obsession with mitigation deters from geoengineering, and so on.²⁰ The slips accumulate. The rationalist-optimists seem quite unable to avoid blurring out the subtraction and preference they had purportedly overcome. Might there be something deeper going on here?

1.1 *A Rational World and Other Fairy Tales*

When computers are made to simulate the fallout from geoengineering, the identity of the subject is never specified. The models do not tell us if it is the Pentagon or G7 or India or the UN General Assembly or some other body that shoulders the task, but they do assign certain attributes to whoever it is: rationality, above all.²¹ Only if the geoengineer is rational can the technology be installed in working order and misuse avoided. The way to ‘predict state’s

16 Felgenhauer, Horton and Keith 2022, pp. 509–10.

17 Keith and MacMartin 2015, p. 205.

18 Reynolds 2015, p. 180. Or: comparing the cost of mitigation with that of geoengineering is ‘relevant because the comparison is to other means of achieving the same result’. Keith, Wagner and Zabel 2017, p. 618. For similar arguments, cf. p. 185; Belaia, Moreno-Cruz and Keith 2021, p. 18; Khabbazan, Stankoweit, Roshan *et al.* 2021, p. 1539; Wagner 2021, p. 59.

19 Reynolds 2021, p. 3.

20 Reynolds 2019, p. 45; Reynolds 2022, p. 297.

21 On the role of this attribute in the modelling, see McLaren and Corry 2021, pp. 23, 25, 30.

behavior', Reynolds explains, 'is to explicitly model them as rational actors.'²² This is how things are and ought to be. 'Policy should be *rationally designed* and based upon the central goal of minimizing net climate risks to humans and the environment in accordance with society's preferences', runs a typical antiseptic line; unperturbed by indications to the contrary, the 'assumption of rationality will be maintained'.²³ Other rationalist-optimists have added more character traits. Wake Smith assumes that geoengineering will be 'undertaken by a single, rational, and legitimate global monopolist deployer operating on a not-for-profit basis', with nothing but the noblest of motives.²⁴ 'Any entity that intends to engineer the climate of the entire globe must act – and be seen to act – purely out of humanitarian and environmental considerations unclouded by aspirations of direct financial gain', conclude Smith and Wagner.²⁵ That is a one-of-a-kind entity.

Where on Earth does it exist? It has never been spotted in the realm of politics from which candidates for injectors could emerge – recall that a major economy is required – at least not in this century. Geoengineering is here placed squarely in utopia, among the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the goat, and occasionally the rationalist-optimists admit as much: towards the end of one long modelling exercise, again co-authored by Keith, the reader is informed that 'our centralized, benevolent decision-maker is a fiction'.²⁶ So the reader had been perusing fiction all along. This escape from reality is not accidental or tangential to the argument, for geoengineering cannot be made to seem like a sensible proposition if the subject behind it were irrational, reckless, short-sighted, self-serving, beholden to private pecuniary interests or in any other way predisposed to realise malignant potentials.²⁷ The modelled world must be sterilised of any such presences and lesser imperfections as well. But by the same measure, of course, geoengineering is driven out of observable reality. The assumption of rationality, so fundamental to the case, can be maintained only at the cost of descending into fabulation.

It does not get much better when the rationalist-optimists deal with the side effects by positing a subject that is all of the above plus responsive: the commander of the fleets must monitor developments and adjust injections. If, to take but the most obvious problem, a massive volcano eruption were to occur during deployment, doses would have to be swiftly reduced to avoid

22 Reynolds 2019, p. 67; see further e.g. pp. 5–6, 54, 68–9.

23 Reynolds 2015, pp. 186, 179. Emphasis added. For more similar assumptions, see e.g. Keith and Irvine 2016, p. 551; Rabitz 2019, p. 506; Reynolds 2022, p. 290.

24 Smith 2020, p. 5.

25 Smith and Wagner 2018, p. 9. Cf. Smith 2022, p. 245.

26 Belaia, Moreno-Cruz and Keith 2021, p. 18.

27 Here following the excellent critique developed by McKinnon 2020, p. 586.

overcooling of the planet. The subject in charge ought to behave like a captain navigating his ship through a field of icebergs, engaging in ‘feedback’ as new information is received along the way. Models provide only the crudest of maps.²⁸ The fully enlightened subject must fill in the details. If bad by-products materialise, it would be up to him to recalibrate the shots – for instance, parrying overcooling of the tropics by injecting more aerosols closer to the poles, or administering extra jabs in wintertime to keep the seasons in place.²⁹ But simulations then hint at *other* secondary effects and trade-offs. Greater precision would be achieved if the aerosols were diffused lower down, in the troposphere; but then pollution would spike.³⁰ Nonetheless, the idea persists of the geoengineered Earth as ‘a design problem’ or ‘an optimisation problem’, a machine to be tweaked to perfection by the owner and overseer varying the magnitude, altitude, latitude and timing of the injections.³¹ If one button flashes red, push another.

The first problem with this ideal of successive fine-tuning is attribution: how will the subject know that a particular effect is caused by its actions and not by something else? What would it take, for example, to establish that an epic drought in the Sahel is induced by the ongoing geoengineering, rather than by some teleconnection to residual underlying warming or natural variability or other ‘noise’ in the system? It might take years to find out. Hence the subject would also have to possess the virtue of ‘extreme patience’.³² And that is still not the end of the requirements.

Because so many parameters are perturbed – not only temperature, but precipitation, humidity, CO₂ concentration, surface energy balance, quality and quantity of sunlight and any number of regional factors correlating with any of these – a geoengineered Earth would be a computational apparatus tending towards infinite complexity.³³ The ideal is that the subject in

28 MacMartin, Irvine, Kravitz and Horton 2019, pp. 1328–32. Cf. MacMartin, Irvine, Kravitz and Horton 2014, pp. 2–3; Keith and MacMartin 2015, p. 204. In the case of a volcano eruption, the injection would also have to increase in the opposite hemisphere, so as to avoid overloading of sulphur in one hemisphere – an imbalance that can upset precipitation patterns. Tang and Kemp 2021, p. 6. On the intricacies of an eruption in a geoengineered world, see further Laakso, Kokkola, Partanen *et al.* 2016.

29 Kravitz, MacMartin, Tilmes *et al.* 2019; Visioni, MacMartin, Kravitz *et al.* 2020. Or time the injections in the Arctic to the spring, when they have the greatest effect: Lee, MacMartin, Visioni and Kravitz 2021.

30 Dai, Weisenstein and Keith 2018, p. 1030.

31 Kravitz, MacMartin, Wang and Rasch 2016; Ban-Weiss and Caldeira 2010; see further e.g. MacMartin, Keith, Kravitz and Caldeira 2013; Smith 2022, p. 232.

32 MacMartin, Irvine, Kravitz and Horton 2019, p. 1328. For the general problem, cf. NASEM 2021, pp. 69–71; Smith 2022, p. 278.

33 Cf. NASEM 2021, pp. 59, 64; Smith 2022, p. 226.

question, whoever it is, would exercise ‘improved control over more aspects of the climate system’.³⁴ One after the other, they should be integrated into the calculus; perhaps the fine-grained details of Californian or Congolese climate will eventually be amenable to administration from the sky. And if sulphate injection is not perfectible on its own, it could be supplemented with marine cloud brightening or cirrus cloud thinning or some other technique of manipulation in what is referred to as ‘cocktail geoengineering’.³⁵ The planet would be set up for ‘an infinite regress of further interventions’, in the words of Mike Hulme: the defects of Plan B patched up by Plan C, then Plan D, Plan E, and so on.³⁶ The ideal of total domination of the nature of the planet is likely to be elusive.³⁷ Every concrete step towards it, however – and attempts cannot be ruled out – raises the demands on the subject: it would have to be not only rational, legitimate and altruistic, but also patient and all-but-omniscient. Impulsiveness and ignorance would wreck the machine in no time.

Who could this possibly be? One rationalist-optimist of lesser prominence has a proposal: the IPCC. ‘Pre-existing scientific bodies, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, possess large credibility, predisposing them toward an oversight role’, and ‘states will be receptive to the scientific body tasked with the monitoring of SRM implementation’.³⁸ Of course states will listen to the IPCC! The naivety of the argument is astounding, as if the thought had not struck this author that an inclination to comply with the IPCC would have long ago obviated a deteriorating climate crisis and thereby any considerations of geoengineering. Similar amnesia is on display in Reynolds’s proposal for how to ensure that deploying states also cut their emissions: trust them to avoid ‘reputational damage’.³⁹ If they do not live up to

34 Kravitz, MacMartin, Tilmes *et al.* 2019, p. 7913.

35 Cao, Lei, Bala and Caldeira 2017. In a variation on the same theme, ‘the potential detrimental effects of SAG [stratospheric aerosol geoengineering] on agriculture could be compensated for by changes in fertilizer use.’ Kravitz and MacMartin 2020, p. 69.

36 Hulme 2014, pp. 92, 100–1.

37 This is because nature has irreducible autonomy and cannot be fully subsumed under any controlling subject or mechanical intelligence, however refined; some elements will always slip away and create further trouble in another part of the system – not because of imperfect knowledge, whether in the phase of deployment or that of modelling, but because of the intrinsic autonomy of nature: see further Malm 2018.

38 Rabitz 2019, p. 513.

39 Reynolds 2022, p. 293. This proposal has the merit of being perhaps the only one from the rationalist-optimists to, at the very least, raise the question of how to ensure that mitigation happens alongside geoengineering (an exception to the rule of the deafening silence on this issue). What the answer amounts to, however, is precisely to trust in the

their mitigation duty, they will discredit themselves in the eyes of the world, so of course they will be conscientious about it. Again, the presupposition here seems to be that geoengineering will be implemented in a moment of civilisational catharsis, in which every flaw and blemish of hitherto existing climate politics are converted into their angelic opposites.

At other moments, however, rationalist-optimists suddenly remember what world they live in. Once the assumption of rationality is lifted, Reynolds confesses, the possibility emerges that states could abandon their declared aspirations to mitigate.⁴⁰ ‘In the world of selfish “great powers”, geoengineering ‘is likely to be overproduced’ – that is, there will be immoderate amounts of it.⁴¹ But it is Wagner who is most conflicted about the status of rationality. ‘Of course, we don’t live in a rational world’, he can add as postscript to a sanguine thought experiment; or, ‘there is no such thing as “rational” climate policy in the real world’ – the keyword often placed in scare quotes – or, ‘political actors aren’t always that responsible and rational’. On the one hand are the idealised model settings in which rationalist-optimists generate their results. On the other ‘is the real world, governed by political whims and forces that are better summarized by Richard Hofstadter’s *Paranoid Style in American Politics*, or treatises like Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, or, we might add, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. ‘Vested interests dominate.’⁴² As discoveries go, this one is belated, but it marks a significant concession from the rationalist-optimist camp: once geoengineering is placed in the real world, its home is in murky hell. What if this is treated as more than an afterthought? What if the irrational ways of capitalist society are not an extra parameter to acknowledge in the end, but the point of departure for understanding the very enterprise of geoengineering itself?

goodness of states. ‘In the linkage [between geoengineering and emissions reductions] which I believe has the greatest potential, one or more states would proclaim their right to deploy solar geoengineering if and only if they meet their own mitigation goals and the rest of the world insufficiently mitigates, and would promise to forego deployment if either condition is not met.’ Reynolds 2022, p. 1. So the linkage – the ideal combination – would be upheld through the scrupulous crackdown on emissions, undertaken by a state so devoted to that crusade and so honourable in character that it would give up its other project – geoengineering – if it could be seen to fail. This is an ethics more reminiscent of Arthurian romance than twenty-first century climate politics as we know it.

40 Reynolds 2022, p. 296.

41 Reynolds 2015, p. 181.

42 Wagner 2021, pp. 20, 99, 109, 113–14.

2 Towards a Freudo-Marxist Theory of Geoengineering

There is now a budding – to call it rich would be to underrate the subject matter it has yet to deal with – psychoanalytical literature on the climate crisis.⁴³ Its foundational insight, somewhat like the equivalent of the greenhouse effect in the physical sciences, concerns denial. The progression of this crisis is *constituted* by denial. It originated in and is perpetuated and aggravated by denial in multifarious forms.⁴⁴ In a powerful meditation on how it can work, Lee Zimmerman draws on the case of a dream reported by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: a father was watching his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end, until the child died. The father then moved into the next room, to a bed from which he could see the corpse laid out. After a few hours of sleep, he had a 'dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?"*'⁴⁵ In Zimmerman's reading, the child's question captures the essence of the denial of the ongoing catastrophe. 'Don't you see that I am burning?', the red-hot child asks the father, entreating him to open his eyes and intervene before the body is consumed, but despairing about his willingness to do so. Is he even mentally present, there at the bedside? Or has he turned away from the trauma in front of him?

The essence of denial, on this view, is the shutting out of a reality too painful to take in: the climate catastrophe is a trauma in motion, and like the father in the eyes of his dying child, people in capitalist society respond by turning away from it. They develop a myriad of strategies for knowing what is going on and at the same time not knowing.⁴⁶ They keep on living as normal, as though

43 Key titles include Dodds 2011; Weintrobe (ed.) 2013; Kaplan 2016; Orange 2017; Zimmerman 2020; Weintrobe 2021; and, of course, although her debt to psychoanalysis (via Stanley Cohen) is not explicitly acknowledged, Norgaard 2011. A poor contribution to the genre is Schinaia 2022. A succinct survey of the research, with a focus on the problem of climate anxiety, is Dodds 2021. A selection of stimulating papers would include Fletcher 2018, LaMoth 2021 and Kassouf 2022.

44 On the causal role of climate denial in the origins of the crisis, its many forms and their interrelations, see Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021, particularly chapters 1 and 11.

45 Freud quoted in Zimmerman 2020, p. 126. Emphasis in original. The dream is reported (in a slightly different translation) and discussed in Freud 2008, pp. 329–30, 347. Zimmerman rightly points out that Freud's own interpretation of it is of no use for the matter at hand, since it alludes neither to anxiety nor guilt or any other possible mechanism of climate denial; caught within the paradigm of the dream as wish fulfilment, for Freud the meaningful core of the dream is simply that the child has come alive again. Freud 2008, pp. 330, 347.

46 E.g. Weintrobe 2013, pp. 36–8; Hoggett 2013, pp. 60–3; Orange 2017, p. 19.

nothing deeply troubling was happening in front of their eyes, no child set on fire; and *only because* they behave in this fashion can the burning progress towards its end. Had they intervened in time, they could have doused the flames. Such denial is a psychic process at the level of the individual, but above all – on this the literature is in resounding agreement – it is *organised* or *produced*, by material and ideological processes distinctive to a capitalist society based on fossil fuels. Denial is not an idiosyncrasy or private pathology, but a certificate of membership in this particular society, a kind of credit card, perhaps, necessary for moving around in it and accessing its commodities and living without going crazy.⁴⁷

Importantly, this denial is protean enough to embrace all classes. It can be exercised by the most villainous personifications of fossil capital as well as the most innocent subalterns at the base of the pyramid. It can cloak crime and failure. As for the former, a sense of omnipotence breeds a refusal to acknowledge an external world that belies it. Sally Weintrobe, a pioneer of psychoanalytical climate studies, has recently emphasised this aspect: people on top of the pile cannot own up to a crisis resolvable only by them stepping down, and so ‘they live in a bubble-like psychic retreat from reality.’ To those who feel entitled to the gifts of the fossil economy, the full reality of climate breakdown is ‘anathema.’⁴⁸ There is a photograph less famous than it should be, of three golfers – with calm composure, to all appearances – putting while the hillside behind them is aglow with fire. Taken during the 2017 wildfire season in the Pacific Northwest, the shot unobtrusively captures the bubble as it approaches bursting point: should we pack away our golf clubs, just because the world around us is on fire?⁴⁹ A talk show host at a Canadian golf programme chose these words to accompany the picture: ‘So many natural disasters, poor people in Houston, poor people in Florida, it also continues in Oregon and the west coast of Canada, the wildfires – and look at these guys, they are finishing their round, maybe 600 or 700 yards away from this fire. They have to be ... absolutely ... insane’, but it is an insanity that rarely raises eyebrows, a psychopathology at one with life as such for dominant classes.⁵⁰ It became spectacular in the golf photo because it was caught in a moment at once overly typical and untypical.

47 The most powerful study of these mechanisms remains – more than a decade later, rather a testament to the *poverty* of this literature – Norgaard 2011.

48 Weintrobe 2021, pp. 23, 18. Schinaia 2022, p. 49.

49 See e.g. Grovier 2017.

50 Golf Talk Canada TV & Radio 2017.

By far the more common case is that the fire rages at a distance. The burning child can normally be regarded from a safe room, noticed, ignored, forgotten without risk. In this type of denial, there is a salient callousness or, as Adorno would have it, ‘coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity’ – the father as cold onlooker.⁵¹ Dominant classes have a renowned capacity to turn on the ‘blindness of the seeing eye’ (Freud) when faced with the suffering that they themselves cause.⁵² Here the trauma against which denial protects would be the loss of fossilised privilege.⁵³

On the other hand, those most utterly deprived of any such privilege have their own reason to slump into denial. For them, it is the *powerlessness* that is so agonising. They, or ‘we find ourselves overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis, and by the enormity of the power and money arrayed against those who want to turn a corner to keep our planet liveable for all’, Donna Orange observes.⁵⁴ Here the trauma, prototypical for psychoanalysis, is helplessness – the father genuinely incapable of helping his burning child, in possession of no means for intervention and unable to bear the pain of recognising it. Between these opposite class positions of denial, as it were, there are all sorts of intermediate locations and articulations, coming together in a society-wide psychopathology of everyday life. The ideas of this epoch as of every other are the ruling ideas – the ideas, that is, of the class that rules and plays golf as the world burns. ‘In the minds of the subjects, too, a bourgeois society will choose total destruction, its objective potential, rather than rise to reflections that would threaten its basic stratum’ (Adorno).⁵⁵

Denial, then, is a structural condition in a capitalist society making its way towards unmitigated out-and-out climate emergency. It encompasses a much wider set of practices than the literal, organised denialism now predominantly found on the far right. More prevalent may be the interpretive form of denial: climate change exists, but it isn’t much of a problem. More universal still is the implicatory version.⁵⁶ Here the father does not say anything to deny or downplay the fact that the child is burning – he merely *acts* as if it were not the case, standing there next to the bed, his attention focused elsewhere. He might just

51 Adorno 2014, p. 363. With thanks to Henrike Kohpeiß for drawing our attention to the key Adornian concept of ‘bourgeois coldness’. Kohpeiß 2022.

52 The Freudian phrase quoted in Cohen 2001, p. 29; of dominant groups having this capacity, Cohen provides ample documentation in his classic work.

53 Cf. Fletcher 2018, pp. 49, 63–4.

54 Orange 2017, pp. 80–1; cf. e.g. p. 14; Hoggett 2013, p. 57.

55 Adorno 2014, p. 398.

56 Here following the typology of denial first developed in Cohen 2001 and applied to climate in Norgaard 2011.

be going about his day. He might be finishing his round. In the circumstances, that, too, counts as a flight from reality.

And flight from reality is the hallmark of the irrational. Conversely, rationality can be defined, with Adorno, ‘as the organ of adjustment to reality – or, as contemporary psychoanalysis calls it, testing reality.’⁵⁷ It is the faculty by which the subject recognises and tests reality and adjusts her actions to what she finds there – limits, demands, opportunities – or, the part of the mind that manoeuvres through the reality principle, not ignoring it, not repudiating it. The innumerable antithetical ways of being are the professional preoccupations of psychoanalysis. ‘Every neurosis has the effect, and so probably the purpose, of forcing the patient out of real life, of alienating him from reality’, Freud remarks. The flight spans the gamut of disorders, from the neurotic who ‘turns away from reality because he finds either the whole or parts of it unbearable’ to the hallucinatory psychotic who ‘attempts to deny the event that has triggered his insanity’. In either case, and in all cases in between, ‘we are presented with the task of studying the developments of the relationship of neurotics – *and mankind in general* – to reality’: psychoanalysis as the study of the fate of the rational in humanity.⁵⁸

That faculty has not fared well recently. Weintrobe quite adequately dates a turning-point to the 1980s, the decade when the climate crisis (and other aspects of the ecological crisis) entered the consciousness of capitalist society, never again to leave it in peace, insisting on real limits coming closer: and precisely in this moment, neoliberalism opened up venues for fleeing. Through deregulation and privatisation, organised denialism and the cult of egoism, it encouraged aggressive escape from reality. Nearly half a century later, the cumulative result, Weintrobe goes so far as saying, is a ‘collective psychosis.’⁵⁹ It follows that the climate crisis *is determined by irrational forces through and through* – and into this forcefield, the rationalist-optimists throw their project, with hopes that amount to giving a hallucinatory psychotic the keys to a nuclear power-plant, or even the codes to an atomic bomb, and expecting that it will work out just fine. A more promising approach might be to analyse geo-engineering as a spin-off of those forces themselves.

2.1 *From Denial to Repression*

To see geoengineering in this light, we might use a little help from the second, political generation of psychoanalysts. Based in Berlin during the Weimar

57 Adorno 2019, p. 5; cf. p. 95.

58 Freud 2005a. Emphasis added.

59 Weintrobe 2021, p. 114. For the analysis of the 1980s, see e.g. pp. 65–71.

years, they were animated by a belief in the self-evident affinity between psychoanalysis and Marxism, moved in Communist circles, offered therapy to the proletariat and fought the onrushing catastrophe. If they had a credo, it was that psychic processes are subject to the vagaries of history.⁶⁰ One of their most brilliant minds was Edith Jacobson – anti-fascist activist, feminist, sex therapist counselling working-class youth in Berlin, stubborn enough to stay after the *Machtergreifung*. The Gestapo nabbed her in 1936, but she became so ill in prison that the Nazi authorities let her out, at which point her friends whisked her away to the US; like the rest of her generation, she is all but forgotten today.⁶¹ She is also the author of perhaps the clearest attempt to parse the relation between denial and repression.

There comes a point when denial shades into repression. The two processes are functionally related, but not identical. For Jacobson, denial targets outside reality. Repression specialises in internal drives. The former works on a broad, ‘global’ canvass, whereas the latter has more of a laser-focus. More significantly, however, there is a chronological and causal relation between the two: ‘Clinical observations leave no doubt that denial is a more archaic, more primitive, and historically earlier mechanism than repression – in fact, its forerunner’. Denial will ‘normally prepare and assist repression’, which supersedes the former in the struggle against reality and lends it finer precision.⁶² It is because denial has ruptured the relation between ego and reality that repression comes into play, as a successor, a more diligent executioner of the task bequeathed.

While these distinctions have not made it into the psychoanalytical canon, the basics of repression are not in much dispute.⁶³ Here we might return to the founding father. *‘The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious’*, writes Freud, immediately pointing to the overlap with denial.⁶⁴ Repression is all about keeping something unpleasant tucked away, out of sight, under the lid. It entails that

60 The classic account is Jacoby 1983.

61 Jacobson is mentioned in passing exactly once in Pavón-Cuéllar 2017, p. 127. She is given somewhat more attention as a member (and analyst) of the innovative Leninist group New Beginning in Renaud 2021, pp. 66–70, 80. For a report in English on her psychoanalytic work and prison writings (published in German in 2015), see Kolb 2020.

62 Jacobson 1957, pp. 81, 75, 83. It should be noted that this paper was written in the American exile in which Jacobson’s relation to Marxist theory and working-class politics was severed; the tragedy befalling her generation is detailed in Jacoby 1983.

63 A more common distinction is to reserve ‘denial’ for present material and ‘repression’ for past, but more common still is to treat them as essentially synonymous: see e.g. Cohen 2001, pp. 118–19. The fullest up-to-date account and critical analysis of the Freudian theory of repression is Boag 2012. For shorter surveys, see Boag 2006; Akhtar 2020.

64 Freud 2001d, p. 147. Emphasis in original. Cf. e.g. Freud 2008, p. 396; Freud 2001f, p. 342.

the subject simultaneously will know about this thing and not know about it. She does not *want* to know and so pushes the material down into the unconscious, in yet another version of flight from reality: there is some trauma, some painful stimuli that cannot be borne out in the open.⁶⁵ We can then move on and hazard the proposition that *geoengineering would represent a materialised and institutionalised repression of the climate crisis*.

It all begins with a moment of danger. 'The Ego guards against this danger by repression.'⁶⁶ Called forth by a drive internal to the ego, a real external menace is breathing down its neck. There has arisen a clash between reality and drive that is dangerous to the ego, which reacts by 'freeing itself from the contradiction' through an act of flying away: repression, Freud stresses again and again, is 'an attempt at flight'.⁶⁷ (The English words fusing the aerial and the elusive, one is here tempted to see the aviation technology of geoengineering literally fulfilling the scenario.) In his characteristic blend of psychology and thermodynamics, he conceives of the drive as a quantum of psychic energy pushing against the surrounding world; and when the energy reaches 'a certain level of intensity', the conflict 'becomes active, and precisely this activation elicits repression.'⁶⁸ We recognise here the emergency and the decision to deploy. This is the moment when the flames from the child have leapt onto the clothes of the father; or, when the wildfire has entered the lawn and the grass itself starts burning. Now something else has to be done. To endure, denial must make the leap into repression.

But the energy repressed does not thereby go out of existence. Rather it stays active down below, bubbling, simmering, exerting pressure on the forces above, seeking to break through the lid and discharge itself. Repression cannot be like a volcano that erupts in one moment and goes quiet the next. 'We should not think of the process of repression as a single event with permanent results, as when, say, a living thing is killed and from then on remains dead; repression demands, rather, a constant expenditure of energy and would be undermined if this were relaxed'. Maintaining the equilibrium requires an

65 Boag 2012, e.g. pp. xiii, 5, 9, 28, 61, 193–8.

66 Freud 1967, p. 163.

67 Freud 2001a, p. 91; Freud 2001g, p. 92 (cf. pp. 145, 153). Elsewhere, Freud, in the English translation, refers to the contradiction as an 'incompatibility', e.g. Freud 2001g, p. 47; Freud 2001b, p. 162.

68 Here using the alternative translation in Freud 2005b, p. 40. On psychic energy in this context, see Boag 2012, pp. 14–15.

equally ‘unrelenting counterpressure’ in an ‘unending conflict’: the injections must not cease; repression is a long-term commitment.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, in this overheated cauldron, the energy – indestructible by definition – must find other outlets. They can appear far removed from the original source. The negated energy succeeds in getting its way ‘by certain roundabout paths’, but not without ‘submitting to some distortions.’⁷⁰ Here come the side effects: the fractured regional climates, the lacking rainfall, the diffuse sunlight, the white sky, the blistering sunsets and all the far-fetched rest. The repressed material ‘proliferates in the dark, so to speak, and finds extreme forms of expression’, remote derivatives that can take the subject and those around her by surprise.⁷¹ They too must be dammed up, through new rounds of repression (feedback, cocktail geoengineering).⁷² But in the end, all of this, of course, is in vain. ‘A ceaseless struggle is being waged against the repressed, in which the repressing forces steadily lose ground’ (the law of the tendency of side effects to rise).⁷³ Ultimately the defences fail. The more heavily the dam is reinforced, the greater the pressure, until there is the inevitable ‘*return of the repressed*’: and of this, science knows no better picture than the termination shock.⁷⁴ The “return of the repressed” takes place at the fearful turning points of history’, notes Herbert Marcuse.⁷⁵ The research has described in some detail what it would look like.

This correspondence between the structure of geoengineering and that of repression seems nearly uncanny, but it is not, needless to say, perfect. In Freud, the secondary output from the repressed material chiefly consists in fantasies, not exactly analogous to side effects in the climate system.⁷⁶ On the other hand, geoengineering almost realises other elements of his model. He famously compartmentalises the mind and likens it to a building with two

69 Freud 2005b, p. 39; Freud 2001c, p. 124. Cf. e.g. Freud 2001f, p. 373; Boag 2012, pp. 23, 53–4, 115–16.

70 Freud 2001f, p. 350. Cf. e.g. p. 259; Freud 1967, pp. 120–5, 164.

71 Freud 2005b, pp. 37–8. Freud does not use the term ‘side effects’, of course, but speaks of the formation of ‘substitutes’ or simply ‘symptoms’. See further e.g. pp. 41–2; Freud 2001e, pp. 180–5; Freud 2002, p. 75; Boag 2012, pp. 13, 35, 55.

72 Freud 2001g, p. 94; Boag 2012, pp. 55–6, 203.

73 Freud 2001g, p. 113.

74 Freud 2005b, p. 42. Cf. Boag 2012, p. 52.

75 Marcuse 1970, p. 26.

76 Furthermore, space beyond the stratosphere is not the unconscious of the Earth. In line with Freud’s general topographic axis, the dangerous surplus energy is indeed repressed from above, but through a blockage directed towards the exterior source of energy from which everything in the interior is derived: a loop that does not quite map onto anything in Freud.

rooms, a large entrance hall and a drawing-room, with a threshold in between. Facing the entrance hall into which impulses stream, positioned on the threshold, 'a watchman performs his function: he examines the different mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing-room if they displease him.'⁷⁷ This metaphor has given rise to heated dispute between psychoanalysts and them and their critics, as it seems to imply that the mind is inhabited by an extra agent. The 'watchman' or 'censor' appears to be a subject in his own right, a homunculus inside the human, who can monitor prospective infiltrating forces, evaluate them and block the door if he judges it for the best. In a coherent theory of the mind, this kind of presence and activity are difficult to integrate.⁷⁸ In our case, however, it is exactly how things are supposed to work: the geoengineer would be the *Instanz* endowed with intelligence, its extended arms stationed on the threshold to select among the radiation seeking entrance. Something similar goes for another problem in the Freudian theory, namely that of initial knowledge. Repression appears to require a 'traumatic moment', in which the mind knows perfectly well the danger it will pretend does not exist. Lucidity must supervene on at least *one* occasion for the flight to get underway.⁷⁹ And, again, this is precisely how geoengineering would present itself. To these two outstanding problems in the theory of repression, an empirical solution has now been drafted.

Geoengineering does not address the causes of global warming; it represses it, exclusively and literally. It maps nearly perfectly onto the Freudian model of repression. The point, however, is not merely the *formal* resemblance or isomorphism between geoengineering and Freudian repression; rather, the former should be seen as a *substantive* instance of the latter, by dint of its functional relation to denial. Capitalist society will have moved all the way into the emergency on the psychic fuel of denial, which, beyond that point, must enter into the engines of the sulphate planes. The sole way for it to persist henceforth is to flip into repression: geoengineering is the single available measure by which this society can convince itself that the fire is not happening, even after it has become unignorable. There is no other practical proposition for the long-term survival of denial. And denial resists its own end.

Or, following Jacobson's temporal schema, we can say that if geoengineering follows next, it will happen only because the prior phase has laid down the tracks for it. *So strong as to drive society into the emergency, denial will also*

77 Freud 2001f, p. 295.

78 The problem is ably discussed in Boag 2012, pp. 145–66.

79 Boag 2012, pp. 9, 20, 61–2. Renewed repression of side effects would count as 'auxiliary traumatic moments'. Boag 2012, p. 10.

determine the technology for treating its symptoms (unlike a technology for attacking the root causes). Denial is the ‘forerunner’, preparing and assisting and initiating the higher phase of repression.⁸⁰ Precisely because it is this fuel that has taken society so deep into the conflagration, we should expect its energies to flow over into the emergency response and upgrade themselves into an unrelenting effort to keep the heating at a distance. If we accept that denial is constitutive of the climate crisis, we should expect it to infuse geoengineering, which would be merely a continuation, a transmutation of the processes that have brought the catastrophe about. If the emergency is an eye of a needle for denial, it – and the rich man – can enter only by actually suppressing climate change, through technologies that constitute *means of repression*.⁸¹

The genius of David Keith might lie in his personal prefiguration of this upgrading. He is on record as making the following statement, in a book published in 2010:

I’m not sure that global warming is such a threat to human civilization. I think we have to be honest with ourselves – there will be winners and losers. Some places will experience more productivity. Some people will enjoy warmer weather. This is not to deny or minimize the suffering and hardship that others will experience, especially in poor countries. But the fact is, human beings are a remarkably adaptive species. And I believe that, by and large, people will adapt to the changing climate. If it’s just the human race you’re worried about, I’m not sure global warming is such a big problem.⁸²

80 Less immediately applicable is her distinction between denial targeting external reality and repression specialising in internal drives. This distinction is muddled in Freud too: he will sometimes say that repression is identical to running away from a dangerous external object, sometimes that ‘the protective shield’ of repression ‘exists only in regard to external stimuli, not in regard to instinctual demands’, sometimes other, even less clear-cut things about the external/internal boundary. Freud 2001g, pp. 92, 94; cf. e.g. 145, 155–6. The difficulty of separating the two realms probably stems from the circumstance that repression is constituted by their interpenetration. Moreover, the distinction is muddled in geoengineering as well: once the stratosphere has been subjected to sulphate planes, what counts as internal and what as external? Perhaps the whole biosphere will then have been internalised and subsumed under the rule of capital, which engages extra-stratospheric space as an external accessory in the struggle to keep the surplus energy at a distance. That energy, on the other hand, is entirely internal to capital. Far less ambiguous is the temporal, historical aspect of Jacobson’s theory: denial as the precursor of repression.

81 Or, we might say that denial has given a decisive contribution to the constitution of a crisis that will ultimately subject it to overwhelming selective pressure; rather than going extinct, it will mutate into repression.

82 Keith in Goodell 2010, pp. 39–40.

Along with the blatant racism and classism on display here – the distinction between the fate of non-white others in poor countries and that of the human race – one could hardly find a more perfect example of interpretive denial. The same book has Keith talking down solar and wind power.⁸³ Today, however, he would be careful to avoid any such vulgar errors and instead consistently refers to the urgency of saving human civilisation – poor people in particular – from global heating, by means of solar and wind, yes, but first of all some rational geoengineering. He has made the volte-face for which he and his cohort are grooming others.⁸⁴ If, or when, it happens *en masse*, it might well sweep up the most obdurate far-right denialists too; this has not transpired yet, precisely because the moment of emergency, as we have defined it here, still lies in the future. Denialism will remain a viable project for some time more.⁸⁵ So will the ‘bubble-like psychic retreat from reality’ in which dominant classes are engaged – until reality pierces the bubble, and the retreat must continue in another form. After that traumatic moment, geoengineering alone would allow these classes to protect their fossilised privilege (finishing another round, as it were).⁸⁶

If repression sublates denial and takes it to a higher, more refined stage, it also blends with symptom formation. Indeed, these two can be all but indistinguishable. Jamieson Webster points out that repression needs the symptom, in which psychic contradictions are converted into corporeal acts. She brings out the materialist character of the Freudian theory: the ego removes itself from danger by inventing a somatic symptom, as in a lady compulsively washing her hands. Likewise, geoengineering would activate a symptom through the mobilisation of substances around the body of the planet. It is through these conversions into physical symptoms that the ego runs away from the conflict, and in the process, she becomes dependent on them – obsessively so. Fidelity to the symptom is her persistent flight. ‘The force of repression creates a new relationship to the way the hysteric relates to knowledge, namely, that she does not know, and this not-knowing – far from being a problem – becomes her virtue.’⁸⁷ Or, in Freud’s own words, apparently inspired by *Macbeth*, symptom

83 Goodell 2010, p. 38.

84 His (late) recognition of the very real dangers of global warming would then constitute a prefiguration of the traumatic moment.

85 Cf. Michaelowa 2021, p. 120. Obviously this would be consistent with some scenarios of fossil fascism: see further below, and Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021.

86 On the affinity between geoengineering and the denial in which conservative white men are invested, see Hamilton 2013, pp. 91–3.

87 Webster 2019, p. 69. See further e.g. pp. 65–8, 73; and further Freud 2001a, pp. 49–50; Freud 2001b, pp. 171–3; Freud 2001g, pp. 91–8.

formation is about ‘undoing what has been done’.⁸⁸ Through such undoing, the subject can divest herself of knowledge of the real events. This, of course, is precisely the script Lady Macbeth tries to follow, but the brilliance of her creator lies in the repeated disclosures of its futility.

Macbeth himself is the first to doubt that the washing really will have the desired effect. ‘Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No – this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red.’ The repression exercised through the symptom will merely spread the blood to all corners of the system. But his wife insists, and drifts ever further from reality: ‘You see her eyes are open’, says a doctor; ‘Ay but their sense is shut’, answers a gentlewoman. She suffers the blindness of the seeing eye, but eventually gives up too, when forced to realise that no amount of washing will in fact remove the deed: ‘Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O!’, and more acutely: ‘What’s done, cannot be undone.’⁸⁹ All that then remains is the couple’s bloody downfall.

Geoengineering is about undoing what has been done – the recipe, in *Macbeth*, for going off the rails. A Freudo-Marxist theory would not only give a more realistic picture of what this enterprise would mean and what psychic energies it would run on than roseate premisses of rationality. It would also imply that a geoengineered world would be *less* governed by rationality than one that simply warms up. Repression marks one step not closer to reality, but away from it. Otto Fenichel – spiritual leader of the second generation, close comrade of Jacobson – intimated as much: ‘Anyone who must keep repressed material in a state of repression has to act inappropriately and is handicapped in his judgement and his sense of reality.’⁹⁰ If that sounds like an abstract theorem, we can fill it only with speculative concretion.

2.2 *Under the Blood-Red Sunsets*

What would actual living people feel and think in a geoengineered world? It is impossible to know in advance, of course, but this factor warrants speculation as much as any other. One thing we know for a certainty: fossil capital will not die a natural death, not go into the night without defending itself, either

88 Freud 2001g, p. 119. Emphasis in original.

89 Shakespeare 2008, pp. 129, 194–5.

90 Fenichel 1938, p. 86. Fenichel has scarcely been treated better than Jacobson: he is summarily dealt with over two pages in Pavón-Cuellar 2017, pp. 127–8, without mention of the seminal paper just quoted. His Marxist writings were omitted from his *Collected Papers*. Jacoby 1983, p. 11. For a recent (somewhat underwhelming) attempt to apply Fenichel to the ecological crisis, see Dodds 2019.

before or after the onset of geoengineering. The miracle would require a massive thrust from below. Whether as the Children of Kali or some other incarnation of popular agency, there would have to be a force pulling off disruption on a scale never yet seen, inflicting material costs on fossil capital so injurious that it – presumably under the guidance of some states – would have to be conclusively liquidated. The question then becomes: would a geoengineered world be conducive to the formation of such subjectivity? Or would it be detrimental to it, thereby reducing not only the first incentive for mitigation worthy of the name (climate impacts) but the second (climate revolt) too?

If geoengineering works reasonably well, it will keep the reality of global heating away from the conscious, at a distance. But because this veil of repression would be wrapped around the entire planet, it would be visible to the naked eye. Sunsets would be reminders. Merely by turning the gaze skyward, at least outside conurbations, one would acquire proof of the procedure. How might people react to such atmospheric enclosure? One eminent scholar of geoengineering, Alan Robock, had the sagacity to raise that question in his classic catalogue of 20 side effects: ‘Both the disappearance of blue skies and the appearance of red sunsets could have strong psychological impacts on humanity.’⁹¹ It is not a theme that has been further explored. Psychological approaches are conspicuous by their absence in research on geoengineering, and the rationalist-optimists have no idea how to treat parameters of this stripe, except by bracketing them out; in his attempt to allay concerns about all of the 20 side effects, Wagner skips over this particular warning from Robock and leaves it ‘as an open question.’⁹² No rationalist-optimist could ponder it for long and stay true to his axioms.

But since a counterforce to take the place of the reduced first incentive – and hence any post-deployment future for mitigation – hinges on popular reactions and actions, the question should at least be elaborated. One possibility is awakening. One could imagine outpourings of revulsion and fury at this ultimate act of dispossession: not even the sky and the stars available for common appreciation any more. People might rise up against the tyrannical classes that first stabbed the climate so insistently that it collapsed and then sought to cover up the deed by this disgusting pollution. They might be provoked to

91 Robock 2008, p. 16.

92 Wagner 2021, p. 58. In his response to the first instalment of this essay, one of the rationalist-optimists, Pete Irvine, makes a similar move, adding a footnote that says: ‘He [the present author] also makes literary and psycho-analytical allusions but I’ll leave those out for the sake of clarity.’ Irvine 2023. Things like literature and psychoanalysis are not comprehensible to people whose ideal of intellectual clarity is a computer model.

mobilise all available force behind demands for expropriation of fossil fuel property and restoration of a liveable climate. Perhaps they might even win.

Or, things could go the other way around: geoengineering could hone the skill of blindness in the seeing eye. Flagrant manifestations of wrongness are evidently not a sufficient condition for indignant protest. If people have opted for an ‘ostrich-like policy’ (Freud) towards climate impacts raining down all around them, surely they would be capable of habituating themselves to an engineered atmosphere and accept it as one more token of contemporary life.⁹³ (By the same token, the *visibility* of geoengineering-as-repression would not reduce its effectiveness as such – just as denial can be entirely open-eyed.) Catriona McKinnon has speculated that the generation growing up in the decades spanning intense research, launch and early deployment might decry the losses, but maybe not so their children. Acclimatisation could ensue. Several decades into geoengineering, ‘perhaps only nostalgic “old fools” with “lighted rooms” inside their heads would mourn for lost blue skies and starry nights.’⁹⁴ Resignation should be expected to deepen over time.

But a scenario where geoengineering has *no* psychic effects on those below is improbable. Robock is onto something: merely the altered make-up of the sky (leaving other effects aside for the moment) may well induce inner turmoil. Anxiety could follow. Robock nods toward ‘The Scream’ by Edward Munch, the visual locus classicus for – not to say clichéd image of – that particular emotion, the vibrating blood-red sunset enhancing the anguish of the wailing figure: a composition possibly inspired by the effects of the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano in 1883 (the blast of sulphate from which cut average temperatures on Earth by 1.2 degrees for a year).⁹⁵ Of what does the feeling speak? ‘*Angst*’, Adorno lays down, ‘is the claustrophobia of a systematized society’, a gut response to ‘the closed system’.⁹⁶ Geoengineering might take closure and claustrophobia to new heights. Capitalist society is like a ‘brick wall’, into which people bang their heads: and it expands, ‘leaving less and less outside.’⁹⁷ The diagnosis fits: the wall enwrapping the sky itself, there to intensify the

93 Freud 1958, p. 152.

94 McKinnon 2019, p. 449. Moreover, the goalposts of what is considered rational may well move, so that later generations consider a geoengineered world an ingrained, naturalised reality, which they might even defend. The rationalism on which the rationalist-optimists bank could mean one thing in 2023 and something totally different in 2043.

95 Robock 2008, p. 2016; for a discussion of the causal connection Munch/Krakatau, see Zerefos, Gerogiannis, Balis *et al.* 2007, p. 4033. 1.2 degrees: Smith 2022, p. 219.

96 Adorno 2014, pp. 24, 347. Emphasis in original.

97 Adorno 2022, p. 34; Adorno 2008b, p. 129. Cf. e.g. Adorno 2000, p. 50; Adorno 2005, p. 193; Adorno 2014, p. 23.

experience of powerlessness. It is through technology introduced from above that society integrates its populations ever more tightly and confines them in inferiority. ‘The individual is wholly devalued in relation to the economic powers, which at the same time press the control of society over nature to hitherto unsuspected heights.’⁹⁸ Is geoengineering likely to herald empowerment? A season of confidence in the self-activity of the masses? Nothing less would be prerequisite to mitigation.

But white sky and red sunsets would be an index of epochal failure: the utter inadequacy of the forces taking on fossil capital; the stupefying power of this enemy, certified through a seal in heaven. The reminders would be of repression (perhaps in the dual sense) and defeat. An individual, a subaltern class might feel diminished to the point of nullity under this vault of stratospheric brick – psychologically, a strong deterrence to activism. In this scenario, a geo-engineered world is ‘one that secretly everyone finds deeply dubious, but it is also one that is so overpowering that people feel they can do nothing about it’; one where the ‘incredible disproportion between all individuals, every individual, wherever they might be, and the concentrated power of society’ has increased even further, so that ‘the notion of resisting this agglomerated power seems illusory.’⁹⁹ This would indeed be something like *The Scream*.

Effects of such nature could have their own temporal arc. The sigh of relief when the emergency is palliated might usher in positive acquiescence, as the first popular science book on the topic intuited: ‘The illusion of control – “Everything’s okay, the scientists have fixed the problem” – could engender apathy at a time when we desperately need to stop pouring carbon dioxide into the sky.’¹⁰⁰ Deeper into the operation, the risk of termination shock might generate late submission. Who would dare to rise up against the powers in the sky, if their coming down to Earth would spell doom? People would be forced ‘to turn the realities that have been foisted on them into their own business simply in order to survive.’¹⁰¹ Needless to say, there would also be plenty of potential for bourgeois coldness towards victims of side effects. If things go this way, the repression above would be internalised below, shading back into the original denial; and to the same degree, the return of the repressed would become more inevitable, more frightful.

98 Adorno and Horkheimer 2008, p. xiv. Cf. Adorno 2019, p. 65.

99 Adorno 2008b, p. 17; Adorno 2019, p. 43.

100 Kintisch 2010, p. 243.

101 Adorno 2008a, p. 72. Cf. e.g. Adorno 2019, pp. 54, 134–5. Or, put differently, the threat of the shock will stimulate further repression, along the lines of a client resisting the therapist’s call to lift it: “See what happens if I really give way to such things. Was I not right to consign them to repression?” Freud 1958, pp. 152–3.

On the other hand, again, there is a distinct potential for politicisation of the weather. For the first time in history, some human giant would have his hands on clouds and rains, atmospheric rivers and air currents. Extreme weather events could no longer be dismissed as flukes, accepted as acts of God or, indeed, deplored as outcomes of global heating. A suspicion might take hold that they stem from the deliberate manipulation – this parching of our fields is your fault!¹⁰² Because weather would be subjected to intentions – the defining attribute of human agency – it would also enter the realm of political contestation; but as we have seen, satisfactory attribution would require painstaking scientific work. One scholar aligned with the rationalist-optimist position has thus identified a potential for mayhem: if bad weather happens under stratospheric aerosol injection, ‘the response is likely to be angry and irrational’.¹⁰³ One can imagine people traumatised by suffering in the emergency carrying their rage into the geoengineered world and lashing out against presumed offenders. All sorts of dominant class interests could gain from scapegoating – say, an Indian government deflecting blame for an agricultural crisis onto the Chinese state spearheading injections.¹⁰⁴ The crux of the matter is that an entire sphere of tellurian existence – weather – would be incorporated into the struggle between nations, classes, left and far right and scores of other contenders: and the result might be, rather than anxious lethargy, an immense volatility.

The less rational and savoury side of popular engagement with the phenomenon has prematurely rushed onto the stage, in the form of the chemtrails conspiracy theory. It holds that ‘geoengineering’ is already very much in progress. Planes operated by some Big Brother or other are secretly spraying the atmosphere with toxic chemicals. According to different renditions, it is the military, a cabal of businessmen or shady strata of states mixing aluminium, pathogens or even desiccated blood into the trails left by aeroplanes – not the contrails of gullible brains, but *chemtrails* – so as to murder unwanted parts of the population, control minds or simply manipulate the weather.¹⁰⁵ In this internet-driven dust cloud of theory production, ‘geoengineering’ is used interchangeably with ‘chemtrails’; prominent websites have precocious names such as ‘geoengineering watch’ or ‘bye bye blue sky’.¹⁰⁶ All versions are bogus. No evidence exists that any of this is taking place in the real world. And yet, a

102 This scenario is discussed in e.g. Corry 2017, pp. 306–8.

103 Halstead 2018, p. 70. Or, in the words of the key thinkers themselves: ‘any unusual weather extremes may be blamed on the SRM deployment’. Keith and MacMartin 2015, p. 205.

104 Cf. Michaelowa 2021, p. 124.

105 For a good survey, see Cairns 2016.

106 Cairns 2016, p. 74; Jack and Panchal 2021, p. 211.

survey undertaken by Wagner and a colleague in 2017 found that 10 per cent of the American population held the chemtrails theory to be ‘completely’ true, while another 20 to 30 per cent thought it ‘somewhat’ true (up from 2.6 and 14 per cent, respectively, in 2010) – in other words, nearly half of Americans seeing some truth content in the fable. Furthermore, conversations about ‘geo-engineering’ on social media were totally dominated by the chemtrails, outweighing more factually grounded posts – neutral or critical – by a ratio of more than 4 to 1. ‘Positive portrayal’ of stratospheric aerosol injection ‘barely registered at <1%’.¹⁰⁷

One here pities the rationalist-optimists. They are like a guild of skilled artisans working hard in the shipyard to manufacture the mightiest, most magnificent new ship, so as to facilitate travel needed for common subsistence and survival, but the superstitious people of the region have already scaled the walls and pelted the prototype with stones, in the belief that the ship is in fact a dragon: how misunderstood they must feel. The prodigious popularity of the chemtrails theory – in the homeland of rationalism-optimism to boot – ‘renders rational conversations around solar geoengineering and its potential role in climate policy even more difficult’, Wagner and colleague lament.¹⁰⁸ And this *even before* geoengineering has become a real thing. ‘If conspiracists are gyrating now about secret deployments that are in fact not happening, imagine the world’s trepidation once they actually are!’, Smith exclaims.¹⁰⁹ But such trepidation does not require secrecy on the part of the geoengineers. Even the most transparent take-off would be an earth-shattering event, entirely likely to arouse emotional storms – of apprehension, disorientation, incomprehension and, of course, again, angst. A launch of this ship into calm waters is inconceivable.¹¹⁰ Rather, if irrational forces in popular politics – if only online – have submerged geoengineering *ex ante*, we should expect them to influence its course *ex post* too.

Indeed, when (if) the thing becomes real, the stimulants to conspiracy theories should be more, not less, potent. To a higher degree than when contrails stand in for a diffuse sense of victimisation, plenty of people under actual sulphate planes can be expected to feel ‘that everything is linked up with

107 Tingley and Wagner 2017; quotation from p. 3.

108 Tingley and Wagner 2017, p. 5. Cf. Wagner 2021, pp. 66–9; Smith 2022, p. 308.

109 Smith 2022, p. 226; cf. p. 308.

110 A scenario where geoengineering is rolled out without attracting popular attention, humanity sleepwalking into a geoengineered world much as it has into a warming one, perhaps lies within the conceivable; however, we have here assumed that it would be implemented in a situation of extreme emergency, in which silence and indifference are less likely than now to be the predominant attitudes.

everything else and that they have no way out, but at the same time the whole mechanism is so complicated that they fail to understand its *raison d'être* and even more, they suspect that this closed and systematic organization of society does not really serve their wants and needs, and so they develop 'a feeling of being "caught"'. There is widespread 'insecurity and anxiety'. The condition spawns 'paranoid tendencies in people' – the chemtrails theory as another prefiguration, a hanel of political pathologies to come.¹¹¹ Paralysis and paranoia are co-constitutive.

Pandemonium, then, could be a general psychic result. If so, prospects for rational treatment of the underlying causes – fossil fuel production, above all – would diminish or vanish. The apparatus of repression would make people take issue with and bicker over and hallucinate about a thousand *other* things than what brought them into their mess in the first place. This, of course, is analogous to how a patient behaves in therapy, when his symptoms have pushed him to a point of misery but he cannot face up to its causes; rather he resists attempts at their unearthing.¹¹² He is exercised by more immediate woes. The repression has buried the trauma under layer after layer of distraction and distortion: and 'one cannot overcome an enemy who is absent or not within range.'¹¹³ This would seem to be the logical situation in a geoengineered world. In every scenario except for that of mass outrage provoked by the double offence, coming to grips with the primary drivers would be harder, since they would be overlaid by heaps of diversions. There would have to be a whole lot of remembering and working-through to get to the bottom of the predicament. Until then, the second incentive would be dulled too.

2.3 *The Insane Root that Takes Reason Prisoner*

None of this is to say that geoengineering, as an idea in the present and possible practice in the future, is irrational all the way through. In some respects, it displays a keen sense of reality. The notion of feedback, for instance, adumbrates an assiduous application of the reality principle: the captain that steers around any snags appearing on the radar. He continuously tests and adjusts his course to the surroundings. Or, consider this passage from the pen of Smith:

The high-bypass engines installed on current production airliners, with big front-end fans that route most of the air around the engine core rather

111 Adorno 2002, pp. 155–6, 165–6. Cf. Adorno 2014, p. 89; Adorno 2019, p. 68; Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford 2019, pp. 658, 663–5, 671; Cairns 2016, pp. 76–7.

112 E.g. Freud 2001f, p. 286; Freud 2001g, pp. 99–100.

113 Freud 1958, p. 152.

than through it, operate very poorly above 15 km, so SAIL-01 [the sulphate planes to be constructed] would utilize medium bypass engines such as the F1118 GE-101 high-altitude turbofan. The engines would be mounted on four pylon nacelles on the wings, and inboard twin pod (two engines) and a mid-span single pod.¹¹⁴

However much it might sound like it to the uninitiated, this is not a magical incantation or fever dream. These sentences are, in a sense, written in hyper-rational code, in the style of the manual that tells the reader how to use a machine. Geoengineering research is intensely preoccupied with material properties of the world: the size of aerosols, the density and dispersal of plumes, the chemical reactions between particles.¹¹⁵ It seeks a path through thick clouds of intransigent realities, a method that will take it securely to the goal. It scans the shelves for the best precursors, engines, wings, points of injection and other items to be assembled into the most efficient possible hardware.

There are no difficulties in classifying this rationality: it is *instrumental*. The concern is with the means. These must be optimised, so as to provide the shortest route to the fixed and set end. Presumptive geoengineers strive to excel in the ‘handling of matter as the mere stuff of control’: to make their way in the world, conceived as a design problem.¹¹⁶ What is lacking, however, is a reflective relation to ‘the real end or purpose of society’, which ought to be – but isn’t: hence the work assignment of the geoengineers – the ‘preservation of the species as a whole in a way conferring fulfilment and happiness.’¹¹⁷ Because this higher perspective is missing, rationality regresses to a constricted obsession with technology. Adorno speaks of an ‘infantile and repressed behaviour’, similar to ‘that of the child, which cannot rest until the clock has been opened up and it can see how the little cogs work inside it’; and such micro-rationality is the only fare on offer, when the question of the very point of society has been taken off the table.¹¹⁸

114 Smith 2022, p. 236. This choice of quotation is, however, somewhat unfair to Smith. He is undoubtedly the most charming of the rationalist-optimists, the only one a Marxist could possibly read with some enjoyment, alone in stylistic ambitions and – rarely heard of among bourgeois intellectuals – a degree of soul-searching and humility. His opposite in both regards is Jesse Reynolds, whose dullness of prose is matched by an absolute rigidity of thinking.

115 Cf NASEM 2021, pp. 207–10.

116 Marcuse 2002, p. 159; see further Gunderson, Petersen and Stuart 2018, e.g. pp. 12, 14.

117 Adorno 2000, p. 133.

118 Adorno 2019, p. 112.

This classic argument from critical theory seems tailor-made for geoengineering, but it can be taken one step further. The ruling order to be served by these instruments is not merely failing to raise the preservation of the species to the overarching goal. It is more assertively and aggressively irrational than that, along lines first sketched by Marx in the chapter on the working day. His account opens with the observation that reality exhibits certain physical limits, boundaries that inhere in the diurnal cycle and the needs of a body; within the 24 hours of ‘the natural day’, there are only so many a human being can possibly expend on labour. Capital, however, has no regard for such limits. It refuses to see them. This is because it has ‘one sole driving force, the drive to valorise itself’, a point repeated throughout the chapter: here is ‘a blind and measureless drive’, a ‘blind desire for profit’ that cannot, by its own reason, stop before external barriers, which do not even come into sight.¹¹⁹

The word for ‘drive’ in the German original is *Trieb*, incidentally a keyword of Freud’s. When Marx writes of the ‘driving force’ of capital, he uses the term *Lebenstrieb*, a Freudian synonym for Eros. Elsewhere in the first volume, he refers to the drive for enrichment (*Beriechtungstrieb*), the drive of accumulation (*Akkumulationstrieb*), the drive of self-valorisation (*Selbstverwertungstrieb*).¹²⁰ But it is in the analysis of the working day that the logic is most sharply in focus. While Marx here varies his portrait of the capitalist with phrases like ‘insatiable appetite’ and ‘werewolf-like hunger’, drive – *Trieb* – is the central category and propulsive force of the mechanisms laid out in the chapter: above all, the tendency to push the worker beyond the limits of endurance, into 12 or 14 or even more hours of labour per day.¹²¹ The driving force destroys the worker’s body. She becomes ‘an absolutely exhausted organism’, on the brink of death.¹²² To illustrate the surreally detached mentality, Marx famously borrows the French expression *après moi, le deluge*, with renewed resonance in the age of global heating; and just before these words, he comments on the bourgeois attitude to extinction. Capital is guilty of ‘denying the sufferings of the legions of workers surrounding it’ – a primitive accumulation of denial, as it were – as perturbed by ‘the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun’.¹²³ Capital, in short, does not care. Capital ‘asks no questions’ about the misery it creates,

119 Marx 1990, pp. 342, 375, 348.

120 This overlap with Freudian terminology is noted and discussed by e.g. Khatib 2021; Pohl and Tomšič 2022; and most extensively Johnston 2017. In Freudian contexts, *Trieb*, of course, is often mistranslated as ‘instinct’.

121 Marx 1990, pp. 375, 353.

122 Marx 1990, p. 376.

123 Marx 1990, p. 381.

and, most significantly, it is here that Marx draws his parallels between the exploitation of the worker and that of the soil: capital abuses both with the same indifference to their limits.¹²⁴

It appears as a matter of pain and pleasure. Faced with an outcry over the degradation of life, capital responds: ‘Should that pain trouble us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)?’ – and again, the term for pleasure, *Lust*, is the one used by Freud.¹²⁵ The proto-Freudian nomenclature of the chapter is striking. Translated fully, it seems to suggest that capital has no other agent in its psychic apparatus than an id. Capital knows no reality principle: capital possesses only its own inner *Trieb*, the *Lust* for profit and ever more profit, for whose sake it will literally kill (and in this regard, the drive is closer to Thanatos than to Eros).¹²⁶ But – needless to remind readers – this bloodthirsty avarice does not sit at the level of the character, as in the tragedy of *Macbeth*. Marx does not ascribe the predispositions to the individual capitalist, who, in his private life, need not be a psychopath.¹²⁷ He can be a mature family man with years of healing therapy behind him. Be that as it may, ‘as a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital’, forged in competition, enforced through the immanent laws of this mode of production. Impersonal forces compel him onwards, however many bodies and ecosystems he must trample underfoot: the owner of an oil company who does not reinvest his profits in fresh wells will be squeezed out before long.¹²⁸

Such external origins of this particular *Trieb* form the hinge in Fenichel’s seminal essay ‘The Drive to Amass Wealth’. What does it mean to say that a child likes to collect stones? For Sándor Ferenczi, such ubiquitous behaviour among children – searching for cherished objects, hoarding them, turning them into exclusive possessions – is the instinctual source of capitalism. Ultimately anal in origin, the drive will seize on sticks or pearls or any objects in the surroundings, before hitting on the natural solution of money. But a capitalist, Fenichel retorts, *has no choice* but to amass wealth – if he fails to do so, he is done for. The sole drive required to explain such amassment is that of self-preservation. That is not the end of the story, however, for ‘a social system of this kind *makes use of* and strengthens erogenous drives that serve the necessity for accumulating’: the best capitalist is the one who can put a desire for maximum power and self-regard in the service of value.¹²⁹ Capitalism has not entered history as ‘the

124 Marx 1990, p. 376; also p. 348.

125 Marx 1990, p. 381.

126 Cf. Pohl and Tomšič 2022, pp. 144–7.

127 This has been pointed out too many times to mention, e.g. in Johnston 2017, p. 310.

128 Marx 1990, p. 342.

129 Fenichel 1938, p. 83. Emphasis in original.

result of an “anal-erotic mutation” that has fallen from heaven’; in his polemics with Ferenczi, Fenichel sets down the *differentia specifica* of a Marxist as opposed to a bourgeois psychoanalysis.¹³⁰ The former rejects any recourse to timeless, pseudo-biological factors when trying to explain novelties in history. Something as eccentric and epochal as capitalism cannot be attributed to children’s fondness for their faeces. Conversely, however, the *success* of capitalism is inexplicable without reference to the drives it mobilises: turning Ferenczi inside out, Fenichel argues that this mode of production stimulates, demands, thrives on and gives direction to the sordid motives.¹³¹ Much like tennis exercises certain muscles in the arm, capitalist property relations call forth the lust it needs.

Playing by the rules of the competitive game, then, does not leave the soul unaffected. Rather, the game comes to constitute a soul of its own, a meta-soul of a kind, hovering above the personifications of capital and taking up residence in their interior, as soon as they behave *as capitalists* in the public arena of production. David Pavón-Cuéllar puts it vividly: ‘Brains, neurons and nervous fibres are required by capital for it to acquire its characteristic ambitious and ruthless psyche. However, once acquired, this is no longer the psyche of people who possess capital, but of capital that possesses, like a demon, the people who have sold their souls to it.’¹³² And this soul of capital – the soul of ‘the automatic subject’ – has no appreciation for boundaries in external reality, neither corporeal ones nor their planetary equivalents. There is, however, a critical difference between these two kinds.

Marx’s story of the struggle over the working day memorably ends on a positive note. The workers of Britain rose up against overexploitation and, after decades of organising, petitioning, marching, striking and threatening revolution, managed to put a limit on it. The Ten Hours Act of 1847 was the fruit of resistance. Because of the pressure from organised labour, the state had to step into the fray and bridle capital – left to its own devices, endlessly ravenous for working hours – and impose on it a minimal sense of where reality ended.¹³³ Capital ‘takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so.’¹³⁴ We can then say that *resistance from below is the source of the reality principle in capitalist society*, and where

130 Fenichel 1938, p. 94. On this as the essence of Fenichel and the second generation, cf. Jacoby 1983, e.g. pp. 74–5, 102–3, 113, 120–1. For a compelling contemporary case for the historicity of drives, see Fong 2016, pp. 10–18.

131 Fenichel 1938, pp. 83, 94. Emphasis in original.

132 Pavón-Cuéllar 2017, p. 18.

133 Marx 1990, e.g. pp. 390, 395.

134 Marx 1990, p. 381.

such resistance is missing, there is only the blind drive ('resistance' here not in the Freudian, but in the strictly political sense). As for the working day, its extension in early capitalist development triggered resistance 'as soon as the working class, stunned at first by the noise and turmoil of the new system of production, had recovered its senses'.¹³⁵ Because the abused bodies had minds of their own, the transgression provoked a counterforce. There is in *Capital* a one-to-one correspondence between the extension of the working day and the formation of the working class as a class for itself. As for planetary boundaries, matters are not that straightforward.

The breach of a tolerable atmospheric concentration of CO₂ does not elicit the same spontaneous or organised fightback. Most fundamentally, the delayed reaction time probably has some relation to the fact that there is no agency in the carbon cycle: neither the atmosphere nor the forests or peatlands or oceans have minds of their own and so cannot turn on the capitalists that overburden them. In the sphere of ecology, and more particularly the climate crisis, the formation of a force of resistance tends to come about – if at all – only through qualitatively different mediations. The historical task the climate movement has set itself is to fill the yawning hole where the ten-hour movement once confronted the same demonic drive; but so far it has succeeded in wringing but 'purely nominal' concessions from states, barely advancing further than the factory legislation of, say, 1802.¹³⁶ It has yet to develop anything like the striking force of the early proletariat.

There is a gap in this analogy, of course, in that fossil fuels cannot be limited to certain hours of the day – they must be abolished *in toto* – but even a reform analogous to a Ten Hours Act, such as the moratorium on new fossil fuel installations long asked for by scientific and other bodies, appears impossibly irreconcilable with the *Trieb*.¹³⁷ Such an 'all-powerful social barrier' to guard the number-one planetary boundary would evidently require mass resistance on a scale hitherto unseen.¹³⁸ Here, the chapter on the working day serves as a negative foil for the irrationality currently running rampant.¹³⁹ Because

135 Marx 1990, p. 390.

136 Ibid.

137 The analogy is strengthened, on the other hand, by the circumstance that fossil energy is only slightly less essential to modern capital accumulation than labour. Indeed, fossil fuels are the energetic substance of the measureless drive. This is why the climate crisis is a moment of truth, or litmus test, for the existence of a reality principle in capital; and so far, all empirical indications are negative.

138 Marx 1990, p. 416.

139 Marx seems to miss the difference when he writes that 'the limiting of factory labour was dictated by the same necessity as forced the manuring of English fields with guano'. Marx 1990, p. 348. However necessary it might have been, the former limit was solely the deed

ecological limits and climatic thresholds are not embodied in a class, breaking them does not call forth the same near-immediate and mighty response as the breaking down of workers' bodies did, in Marx's chapter and beyond. The formation of a subject of resistance is here a far more circuitous, drawn-out and uncertain affair.

It follows that capitalist society in the age of the climate crisis is *more thoroughly and uninhibitedly irrational* than in the classical era of the struggle between labour and capital: the source of the reality principle – from below, outside of capital – is orders of magnitude weaker. But this disappearance of a medium for reminding capital of reality is also, of course, a result of the political decomposition of the working class itself. The historical antagonist of capital is no longer strong enough to force it to come to its senses.¹⁴⁰ Up until the defeat of the class across the globe in the 1980s, there could still be something like enlightened liberalism, a bourgeois politics loyal to states vulnerable to the power of labour and hence capable of discerning at least a few realities. (Indeed, as late as in the early 1980s, the prospect of nuclear winter contributed to disarmament efforts – in comparison with the present, a marvel of reason. The Montreal Protocol is another case in point.) But with the triumph of neoliberalism, in keeping with Weintrobe's chronology, the world was flung into the universe precociously explored by critical theory: one where the slide into catastrophe appears inexorable, since there are (as yet) no oppositional forces capable of blocking it.

The whole is now unrestrainedly irrational. Little cogs and turbofans might work perfectly, but the totality of which they are part has become rudderless in the extreme. This is not, as Adorno never tired of pointing out, because class antagonism has disappeared – to the contrary, it is as alive and determinant as ever, only one side is crushingly victorious. The profit motive has been set free to rule alone, and it tears society apart.¹⁴¹ Or, in the condensed-but-elaborate syntax of *Negative Dialectics*: 'Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism,

of the class. On the other hand, the switch to guano was not induced by any uprising: the exhausted soils of England did not revolt, nor was there a farmers' or environmentalist movement commensurate with the ten-hour movement. And, crucially, the switch did not constitute a real limit to the exploitation of the soil, on a par with the Ten Hours Act (an actual victory, however partial, for anti-capitalist forces) but rather a displacement and intensification of it (later taken to new heights with the production of synthetic fertilisers): see the classic analysis of Foster 2000; Foster, Clark and York 2010. Unaided by resistance, necessity – understood as the imperatives arising from capital breaking boundaries – could only dictate the latter types of exacerbation.

140 Put differently: had the class been what it was in, say, 1918 or 1969, the landscape of political subjectivity in the age of the climate crisis might have looked very different.

141 Adorno 2003a; Adorno 2003b; Adorno 2008b, p. 9.

but by means of it; the profit interest and thus the class relationship make up the objective motor of the production process which the life of all men hangs by, and the primacy of which has its vanishing point *in the death of all*.¹⁴²

One tragedy of the climate crisis is that its outbreak in the 1980s and '90s coincided with the defeat of the working class *and* failed to spur any class-based or other system-wide resistance. Whether the latter might happen in deeper, more desperate phases remains an open question. In the first four decades, it evidently did not. The irrationality of the whole stands in direct proportion to this double absence – of a subject of resistance defending the limits of the climate system, like the English workers defended their own bodies; of working-class politics itself, enfeebled beyond historical recognition – reflected at the summit of society in the lack of a 'self-conscious global subject'.¹⁴³ Such a subject would have to be some kind of state apparatus, under the sway of forces of resistance; but when these are missing in action, the state regresses to a committee for smoothing out the affairs of the bourgeoisie. At the centre is then the void of the blind drive. 'What carries anxiety' – and here Adorno could have referred directly to climate anxiety – 'is the fact that society is not in control of itself; there is no overall social subject' that can turn the supertanker around and discard it.¹⁴⁴ And it is precisely on this giant drifting vessel that geoengineering piggybacks.

On the subjective plane, the relation is expressed in a bond of loyalty: in its moment of unmitigated irrationality, the rationalist-optimists affirm their allegiance to capitalist society. 'Must we fix capitalism in order to fix the climate?', asks Keith (as though capitalism were a broken entity like climate, in need of repair rather than destruction). His answer is no. 'Any serious argument in favor of this proposition must confront the fact that Western democracies have made enormous progress in managing environmental problems over the last half century.'¹⁴⁵ It would be superfluous to list all the errors in this statement, sufficient simply to state that if it were true, there would be zero demand for the services of this same Keith. Wagner is responsible for the following sentence: 'Far from posing a fundamental problem to capitalism, it's capitalism with all its innovative and entrepreneurial powers that is our only hope of steering clear of the looming climate shock.'¹⁴⁶ Reynolds doubts that there can

142 Adorno 2014, p. 320. Emphasis added. Cf. e.g. pp. 334–5, 362.

143 Adorno 2005, p. 144. Cf. Adorno 2000, pp. 43–4, 66–8; Adorno 2008a, p. 143.

144 Adorno 2019, p. 127.

145 Keith 2013, pp. 143–4.

146 Wagner and Weitzman 2016, p. 151.

be anything valuable about a ‘restraint of capitalism’.¹⁴⁷ With such declarations of faith and love, the rationalist-optimists tie themselves to capitalist society as the best of all possible worlds, and the single possible one to boot. They are wont to writing off any rupture with business-as-usual as a pie in the sky. ‘We suffer from the persistent illusion that we can rapidly accomplish the deep structural change necessary to decarbonize our economy’, Keith affirms, going on to remind us that ‘cutting emissions to zero means replacing a big chunk of the heavy infrastructure on which our society rests’.¹⁴⁸ It apparently goes without saying that such a shake-up is out of the question. The inertia is a fact before we must bow. Social fixes being unfeasible, we must instead embrace techno-fixes – a no-choice situation that is all for the better, since capitalism is doing such an awesome job anyway.¹⁴⁹

On this score, the rationalist-optimists suffer from not a deficit but an excess of attachment to reality.¹⁵⁰ Their instrumental reason is coupled to a social order accepted as both desirable and irreplaceable.¹⁵¹ Theirs is ‘a mode of thought immune against any other than the established rationality’ – although ‘blind to’ would perhaps be more apt, and more in line with the ocular metaphors of Marx and Freud.¹⁵² The geoengineering enterprise as formulated by Keith *et al.* is premised on blindness to any other property relations than those that happen to reign. To their forces, there can be only acquiescence and assistance. Given just how irrational they are, however, the enterprise thereby puts itself wide open for psychopathological processes and primes itself as their technical conduit: what happens when the allegiance is re-affirmed in the moment of free drifting.

Rationalist-optimists rarely if ever champion radical emissions cuts. Their policy preferences tend to be located at the moderate, incremental, pro-market end of the spectrum.¹⁵³ The suspicion then arises that geoengineering has the merit of rescuing capital from liquidation. By decoupling temperatures from CO₂ in the moment of emergency, it would deliver a planet of value from the verdict of instant destruction, saving it for the long haul – the objective role

147 And if there is, that value will be ‘outweighed by the reduction in climate change by solar geoengineering’. Reynolds 2019, p. 41.

148 Keith 2013, pp. 29, 31.

149 Keith 2013, p. 147.

150 Such an admixture is eminently possible because social and natural realities are on an extreme collision course.

151 Talberg, Thomas, Christoff and Karoly 2018, pp. 1098–9; Gunderson, Petersen and Stuart 2018, p. 6; Gunderson, Petersen and Stuart 2020, p. 400.

152 Marcuse 2002, p. 148.

153 Stephens and Surprise 2020, p. 3.

geoengineering would play for fossil capital. It spills out from the literature every now and then. Shaving off the peak of the heat would allow ‘emissions cuts and adaptation measures to be made in an orderly program of technology deployment and capital turnover, at much lower cost and disruption’ than under mitigation at speed.¹⁵⁴ Capital would be spared severe losses. Trillions of dollars of investments might yet be harvested at profit.¹⁵⁵ If this is the function of the operation at the moment of its launch, it is unlikely to fade over the years and decades, for capital accumulation is by nature a self-sustaining, expanding circuit.

Geoengineering, as we have seen, would not act on the contradiction between this drive and reality, in the manner of the Ten Hours Act: it would merely repress it. But repression can, Freud suggests, paradoxically serve to liberate that which is being repressed, by transposing the conflict onto somatic symptoms that allow the drive to run amok.¹⁵⁶ Under the white sky, the supertanker would again be free to drift aimlessly. The more efficient the hardware, the greater the latitude of the drifting: the micro-rational instruments, Adorno points out, buttress the irrational whole and make it stronger not weaker. Advancing technological prowess ‘takes on a threatening and terrifying character’, pushing the contradictions onto other trajectories, where they might ‘eventually even destroy the whole interconnected system’ – the better it works, the worse it will be.¹⁵⁷ The blame for this danse macabre should be put not on reason or rationality as such, but on the totality so deficient in both.¹⁵⁸ Or, as Banquo, the comrade-in-arms of Macbeth, apprehensively asks: ‘have we eaten on the insane root / that takes the reason prisoner?’¹⁵⁹

The id, then, is not really all that exists immanent to capital. It must be escorted by an ego. In a brilliant essay, Benjamin Fong has drawn a portrait of a ‘new anthropological type’ that corresponds perfectly with the psychic

154 Parson and Ernst 2013, p. 318. Cf. the more roundabout formulations in one of the seminal texts: ‘Mitigation is therefore necessary, but geoengineering could provide additional time to address the economic and technological challenges faced by a mitigation-only approach. [...] [It] could reduce the economic and technological burden on mitigation substantially, by deferring the need for immediate or near-future cuts in CO₂ emissions.’ Wigley 2006, pp. 452, 454.

155 Ott 2018, pp. 5–6; Surprise 2021, pp. 190, 197–8.

156 Freud 2001a, pp. 52–4. Note that a Freudian account of repression does not necessarily require any other agents than the drives themselves: it can play out through a conflict in the id, provoked by its clash with external reality. Boag 2012, e.g. pp. 189–92.

157 Adorno 2022, pp. 78, 137. Cf. Adorno 2000, p. 132; Adorno 2014, p. 268; Adorno 2019, p. 8; Marcuse 2002, pp. xliii–xliv, 11, 19, 35, 55, 194; Marcuse 1970, pp. 24–5.

158 Adorno 2008a, p. 62.

159 Shakespeare 2008, p. 104.

apparatus producing geoengineering: at the core is ‘the overgrown child’, the person who has failed the transition from pleasure to reality principle.¹⁶⁰ That bloated and boundless id, however, is paired with an ego that alone can pilot it through refractory realities. Flight combines with able execution: there is a peculiar ‘alternation between an exacting rationality, efficiency, and technical skill in certain parts of life and a blinding stupidity in others’, and the two go together.¹⁶¹ Macbethian symptom-formation exhibits the same mix. Hand-washing is a transaction with physical reality that produces an intended local effect, while amplifying a larger insanity: ‘the precautionary measures are rational, while trying to get rid of something by “making it not to have happened” is irrational and in the nature of magic.’¹⁶² Marx too sketches a similar profile: ‘This boundless drive’ – the *Trieb* again – ‘for enrichment, this passionate chase after value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser.’¹⁶³ He also possesses a competent ego. What he sorely lacks, with Fong, following Adorno, is a superego. There is no inner agency to challenge the blind drive or the instrumentalist ego, bring them down to earth, converse with them in a critical tone, speak for the needs of others and, when necessary, disrupt their self-propelled ride.¹⁶⁴

At the end of this duality – id and ego but no superego – stands a fusion between libido and instrumentality in the desire for the machine. The heralds of geoengineering every so often let slip their cathexis to the object.¹⁶⁵ ‘It is hard not to delight in these newfound tools’, Keith comes clean.¹⁶⁶ Smith shares the feeling: ‘The SAIL-01 wing geometry would be selected to substantially reduce drag. Check out the cool renderings in Figures 15.1 to 15.3!’, where readers can salivate over images of the planes to come.¹⁶⁷

160 Fong 2018, p. 761.

161 Fong 2018, p. 765.

162 Freud 2001g, p. 119.

163 Marx 1990, p. 254.

164 Fong 2018, pp. 765–8.

165 Such cathexis is, of course, another prominent theme in critical theory: see e.g. Adorno 2000, p. 76; Adorno 2005, p. 201; Marcuse 1970, pp. 54–5. Also cf. Dodds 2011, pp. 71–2. One could deepen the psychoanalytical speculation and consider the phallic character of these technologies as particularly attractive to some men: geoengineering as a perpetual cumshot.

166 Keith 2013, pp. 173–4.

167 Smith 2022, p. 236.

2.4 *A Machine with a Ghost in It*

The hard reality of a geoengineered planet is still in the future. One must hope that it never comes to pass. Already now, however, the ideology of geoengineering, while awaiting materialisation, is an actual phenomenon, in a superstructure saturated with impulses from the base. With its programme for symptom formation, it is symptomatic of the dead ends capitalist climate governance has reached. Oddly, it represents a *fantasy* of repression, a yearning for the impacts of climate breakdown to be undone by technical means. Or, we might say that denial is plotting a course to its long-term endurance, *even as* the proponents of the venture justify it with the severity of the crisis (thereby recognising the traumatic moment to come). We here have the opportunity to study psychic processes feeding into a technology *in statu nascendi*. Considered from this angle, geoengineering – if only as a scientific blueprint – issues from and partakes in ‘the psychic state of deep cultural anxiety about the future for the planet and for humans’, with E. Ann Kaplan, or, with Adorno, ‘the dizziness that overcomes a society threatened by total destruction’.¹⁶⁸ There really seems to be a ghost in the machine this time. If this is a valid perspective, it comes with the irony that geoengineering is normally defined as the *conscious* or deliberate manipulation of the climate system; we are suggesting that it has unconscious dimensions of import.¹⁶⁹ Beneath the level of the ego, a desire for repression may already be operational.

This would be the latest nail in the coffin for the notion of the neutrality of technology, *pace* Smith: ‘As regards how climate intervention might actually be used in the future, the capacity for evil lies not in the tools, but in the hands in which the tools are placed, which would make geoengineering like artificial intelligence, recombinant DNA, and lots of other emergent technology.’¹⁷⁰ Leaving the other cases aside, our argument so far suggests that the capacity for evil – or, perhaps better, harm and degeneration – does in fact lie in the constitution of the tools. Like a computer its code, they bear within them a defining encryption of dynamics with streaks of psychopathology. The notion

168 Kaplan 2016, p. 143; Adorno 2014, p. 93.

169 Smith correctly points out that the old distinction between geoengineering as intentional climate change and greenhouse-gas driven as unintentional climate change has long been obsolete. After the maturation of climate science – he dates the break to the turn of the millennium – large-scale fossil fuel combustion was conducted with knowledge of the results. Smith 2022, p. 290. Cf. already Ridgwell, Freeman and Lampitt 2012, p. 4164. The collapse of this distinction, however, merely implies that *both* forms of conscious intervention in the climate system are also fuelled by unconscious processes, first and foremost, respectively, repression and denial.

170 Smith 2022, p. 291.

of neutral technology has, of course, been called into question by theorists like Marcuse and Adorno, the former going so far as to suggest that Thanatos, or the death drive, provides the psychic fuel for technological development: an instinct for destruction is extroverted and applied to nature, which humans have for millennia been hacking up, reassembling, slaughtering and trying to control.¹⁷¹ The hypothesis is sweepingly formulated for all of civilisation. Here, we have argued that the psychic fuel for geoengineering is rather synthesised *at a particular conjuncture in history*, when repression is the only way out of an otherwise unmanageable contradiction.¹⁷²

Indeed, in the spirit of the second generation, we should resist more or less flippant attempts to explain the climate crisis with transhistorical complexes or drives – notably, the hypothesis that the present generation is bent on destroying the Earth in a murderous act of sibling rivalry with future generations, which would thereby be denied a liveable planet; or, the idea that humans fill the atmosphere with emissions because as infants they become used to their mothers taking away waste products.¹⁷³ Likewise with the technologies for treating the symptoms of global warming. These cannot possibly have arisen as a result of phenomena always and everywhere present in the psyche. Fenichel offers the following synoptic formulations:

Let us think of an invention with a practical and at the same time a sexual symbolic value, for example, a Zeppelin airship which is certainly a sexual symbol but on which people can also fly. In order to understand inventions we must not overlook the *rational necessity* which must be present before an invention can result, and which arises only in a certain social situation. The task which is imposed in reality, can evidently be completed with the help of instinctual drives [...] [– indeed, it can] only be performed with the aid of a certain instinctual structure.¹⁷⁴

Substitute the sulphate planes for the Zeppelins, and we get the following: an invention of such a kind can only come about in a highly determinate situation. A ‘rational necessity’ – doing something about the emergency – calls forth the novel productive force. But the task is completed with the help of instinctual

171 Marcuse 1974, pp. 52, 86. For a reformulation of Marcuse’s thesis, which argues for a sublimated death drive as the psychic fuel of technological development – i.e., not all of it is destructive; a lot of it is constructive and salutary – see Fong 2013.

172 On the fallacies of transhistorical psychoanalysis and the necessity of historical concretion, see e.g. Gay 1985, pp. 27–8, 82, 88–91, 166. A model of the latter is Weintrobe 2021.

173 Dodds 2011, p. 61; Keene 2013, p. 146.

174 Fenichel 1938, pp. 90–1, 93. Emphasis in original.

drives, notably the lust for profit, to which it gives extended reign; moreover, the emergency is the *product* of the previous work of that drive, as it clashes with biophysical reality. We then get precisely the recursive spiral Fenichel seeks to outline. 'Not only do social influences alter the instinctual structure, but the thus modified instinctual structure reacts again upon social reality through the actions of individuals.'¹⁷⁵ In schematic terms: capitalist property relations elevate the drive to amass wealth into the engine of the social order; this drive runs without a superego; when it collides with the climate system, denial is the paramount response; in the moment of all-out emergency, means of repression are rolled out; these productive forces have an indelible moment of psychopathology in them. In a damaged life, the psychic is the endpoint, in its most material form.

But as already noted, psychology – psychoanalysis included – has so far stood outside, or been shut out from, research on geoengineering.¹⁷⁶ To the best of our knowledge, there is one paper explicitly viewing the phenomenon through a psychological lens, published in 2013, making an argument based on substitution. Imagine that geoengineering works perfectly fine! Then emissions cuts will be supererogatory. This, contends the author, would spell psychic loss for anti-capitalists and other extreme alarmists who have built an identity around the doctrine that only system change can save the planet. They would be shattered, virtually castrated by the spectacle of a tech that easily fills the bill.¹⁷⁷ Whatever else could be said about such a speculation, it belongs to the era when substitution was still a credible idea; since 2013, the consensus has, as we have seen, moved towards combination, the controversy restricted to whether this scenario is likely or not. It follows that geoengineering would not be a psychological blow to the left, other than as a defeat uncommonly epochal even as left defeats go. Radical or even revolutionary emissions cuts would be just as urgently needed after as before the launch; the risk is merely that geoengineering – by dint of its psychological implications – makes them even harder to achieve.

The paucity of psychology stands in sharp contrast to ethics. Hard-working moral philosophers have made it impossible for hard-nosed rationalist-optimists

175 Fenichel 1938, p. 71.

176 Hulme calls for interventions on the subject from 'anthropologists, artists, historians, philosophers, poets', all needed 'to bring us to our senses' – no mention of psychologists or psychoanalytical theorists. Hulme 2014, p. 111.

177 Davies 2013. A weak case for the importance of emotions in understanding geoengineering is made in Roeser, Taebi and Doorn 2020. The one book on geoengineering with a psychological sensibility (but no direct engagement with psychoanalysis or some other school of psychological theory) is Hamilton 2013.

to ignore their objections; no one can claim to write comprehensively on the topic today without displaying an ethical literacy.¹⁷⁸ But ethics is by nature a normative business. While it can inform the discussion about what is good and evil in geoengineering, it has no explanatory power as regards its development in the real world. If, however, the progression of the climate crisis is constituted by denial, then psychology ought to have an authoritative position in this field. ‘The realm specific to psychology is the realm of irrationality’, and this crisis is a journey ever deeper into that realm, even if the rationalist-optimists take the helm: for precisely their rationalism is irrational.¹⁷⁹ Insofar as reality is determined by irrational forces, positing a rational world means departing from that reality – while thereby also sinking headlong, without resistance, into it. Truly rational research on geoengineering would place the irrational front and centre.¹⁸⁰ ‘Truly rational behaviour’, in this era as in Marcuse’s, would mean ‘the refusal to go along, and the effort to do away with the conditions which produce the insanity.’¹⁸¹

3 Free Driving into Hell

So who will do it? The prime candidate for setting off geoengineering remains the US. That is where the vast bulk of research is conducted, the US being far ahead of everyone else – an edge NASEM apparently wants to sharpen – and home to the requisite platforms of technological, logistical and, not to be forgotten, military capacities.¹⁸² Geoengineering cannot be considered apart from the projection of imperial power. The very notion of weather manipulation has its roots in military planning, and the present enterprise bears plenty of bootprints from the US military-industrial complex: the basic research at Harvard has links to the defence and intelligence communities; when Smith consulted companies for the design of planes, he also sat down with Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin and other suppliers of American aerial supremacy.¹⁸³ The rationalist-optimists do not shy away from the connection. ‘Military possess useful equipment and knowledge regarding complex logistical operations at high altitudes and at sea’, Reynolds justifies their involvement – but

178 See e.g. NASEM 2021, p. 74; Smith 2022, pp. 290–1.

179 Adorno 2008a, p. 71.

180 Cf. e.g. Marcuse 2002, pp. 227–32; Adorno 2000, pp. 133–4.

181 Marcuse 2002, p. 194.

182 On this aspect of the NASEM report, see Stephens, Kashwan, McLaren and Surprise 2021, pp. 2–4, 8.

183 Surprise 2020, pp. 218–19.

the militaries in question are unlikely to be North Korean or Iranian.¹⁸⁴ Given the stakes, the US will not stand by idly as someone else – least of all a rival or ‘rogue state’ – sends up the planes. At the very least, the US will, if it continues to exist in its current form, under any configurations of geopolitical power conceivable from the present, insist on having the last word. Junior partners might be given a go-ahead. But the US will seek to ensure that geoengineering stays within the fold of its empire.¹⁸⁵

The irreducibly military character of the enterprise pertains not only to congenial skills and research settings: once underway, the bases would have to be vigilantly guarded against any malefactors, as would the supply chains, from sulphate mines to engine factories. This would be ‘critical national infrastructure’ stretching across the globe, to be sheathed in imperial power; a military staying within its national borders could not accomplish the mission. The risk of the termination shock would make armed protection all the more essential.¹⁸⁶ Candidates other than the US can be imagined, however. The Chinese state has tried its hand at rainfall manipulation in recent years. It has experience of large-scale engineering projects, an efficient top-down command structure, much to lose from accelerating climate breakdown, much to lose from serious mitigation too: the People’s Republic might have reason to move first.¹⁸⁷ So might India, or Russia, or the European Union, or any other ‘major economy’ required for the task. But what is scarcely in doubt is that the agent of geoengineering, whoever it is, will be embroiled in the inter-imperialist rivalry that looks set to be a defining feature of the middle of this century.¹⁸⁸

Any rationalist-optimist assumptions about bridged divides and smooth co-operation and parasol-induced world peace belong to the category of escapism. Due to its propensity to scramble regional climates and scatter uneven impacts, geoengineering rather seems predestined to foment conflict: actors will have divergent preferences.¹⁸⁹ Some might want more soot to be

184 Reynolds 2019, p. 207.

185 For a detailed argument, see Surprise 2020; cf. e.g. Nightingale and Cairns 2014, pp. 5, 10.

186 Nightingale and Cairns 2014, pp. 5, 9–10; Parker and Irvine 2018, p. 460; Surprise 2020, p. 227; McKinnon 2020, p. 590.

187 Hamilton 2013, pp. 141–5; Moore, Ying, Cui *et al.* 2016; Bluemling, Kim and Biermann 2020; Michaelowa 2021, pp. 121, 124.

188 Cf. Surprise 2020, e.g. p. 222. There is also a subset of scenarios in which ‘decentralised’ or ‘DIY’ geoengineering is launched by non-state actors; this would take the form of thousands of small balloons released into the stratosphere. See e.g. Reynolds and Wagner 2020. Distinctly less likely than state action, it should be sorted under the rubric of fanciful fiction.

189 The inevitable divergence is recognised by e.g. Harding and Moreno-Cruz 2016, p. 573; MacMartin, Irvine, Kravitz and Horton 2019, p. 1334; Visioni, MacMartin, Kravitz *et al.*

injected. Some might prefer less, or elsewhere, or another schedule or substance; there is no shortage of possible bones of contention. Life and death on a mass scale could be at stake. The by-now usual suspects have suggested that conflicts can be avoided by a compensation mechanism: if one country suffers loss and damage, others would pay indemnities.¹⁹⁰ ‘Some sort of international fund to share this burden seems logical.’¹⁹¹ Oh does it seem logical. Once again, geoengineering is here placed in a universe – a possible world of logics – other than that of the climate crisis, where negotiations over loss and damage have proved singularly unsuccessful from the standpoint of the aggrieved and funds for sharing the burden have remained glaringly empty chests.¹⁹²

‘One rational approach might be to coordinate any efforts’ to intervene into the stratosphere ‘at the highest level possible. Ideally that might mean the UN General Assembly’, writes Wagner, ‘ideally’ being the signifier that carries meaning: here is an idealism that long ago bid farewell to planet Earth, a methodology perhaps concordant with the technology.¹⁹³ The cacophony of preferences is quite unlikely to be graciously managed by the same ‘world community’ that failed to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with

2020, p. 8; Smith and Henly 2021, pp. 10–11. The latter paper also – in a not untypical incoherence – contains the argument that geoengineering will ‘make all regions better off’ compared to unhampered global heating and therefore put a damper on conflicts. Smith and Henly 2021, p. 5. The argument presumes that if actor B suffers adverse consequences from the geoengineering amply and fully benefiting actor A, it will refrain from any hostile move because it remembers the even worse consequences of pre-injection global heating, or compares the present with a counterfactual world without geoengineering – yet another rationalist assumption detached from how conflicts develop in the real world.

190 Reynolds 2019, pp. 178–95; cf. e.g. Halstead 2018, p. 70.

191 Reynolds 2019, p. 191. This scholar really does push rationalism-optimism to its most whimsical extreme. Consider the following dream sentence: ‘A hypothetical global administrator could – at least in principle – gather, assess, and share information regarding efficient precautions; identify the injurers, the victims, and the harm; determine the extent to which the harm was caused by solar geoengineering; punish injurers that failed to take these precautions; consider external benefits to third parties; collect funds for compensation, perhaps from those who benefitted and have the ability to pay; and compensate victims that had taken appropriate caution.’ Reynolds 2019, p. 193. Perhaps it could also bring dead victims back to life? (But at the same time, Reynolds thinks the idea of compensating victims might, after all, do more harm than good: it would cause administrative expenses, fuel a culture of victims demanding redress and compromise state sovereignty. Reynolds 2019, p. 194.)

192 And in a geoengineered world, such negotiations would inevitably prove *more* difficult because of the greater problems of attribution. These points are made in McLaren and Corry 2021, p. 30.

193 Wagner 2021, p. 98. Similar extreme idealism is on display in Nicholson, Jinnah and Gillespie 2018; and cf. Reynolds 2019, e.g. p. 218.

the climate system, any number of annual summits to uphold the UNFCCC notwithstanding. Friction and fracas will continue beyond the emergency, and move upwards, into the stratosphere: a Sky Wars, perhaps an airborne *bellum omnium contra omnes*, for control over the thermostat.¹⁹⁴

But in any such conflict, the upper hand will stay with those who prefer maximum injection. Adversaries might want to see smaller amounts of sulphate. There will then be a battlefield where some try to inject a little and others a lot, which means the latter are guaranteed victory: geoengineering lends itself to ‘over-provisioning’. If one state has the capabilities to loft the greatest quantity of soot into the air and wants to exercise them, it will carry the day.¹⁹⁵ In game-theoretical terms, geoengineering here inverts the structure of mitigation, which is supposedly plagued by the problem of the ‘free rider’: if some states cut their emissions and render the climate stable, one selfish state will have an incentive to benefit from their services while letting its own emissions grow. And if one has that incentive, everyone has. In the end, no one will find it in their interest to go zero; everyone will seek to free-ride on the cuts of everyone else. Aggregate mitigation will not happen.¹⁹⁶ But in geoengineering, to the contrary, the problem is that of the ‘free driver’: it is enough that *one* single state pulls it off for the whole thing to happen, even if others do not want it.¹⁹⁷ This structure, this inherent momentum towards the maximum, is as damaging for any notions of ‘tremendous potential for security and peace’ (Buck) as for the axioms of moderation and modesty (and the rationalist-optimists know this).¹⁹⁸ But it is remarkably consonant with the boundlessness of the drives of capital.

Those who want to reduce injection might resort to shooting down planes. Or, they could engage in ‘counter-geoengineering’: deliberately releasing ultra-potent greenhouse gases, chemicals with exotic names such as sulphur

194 As argued by Hulme 2014, pp. 51–3; cf. e.g. Tang and Kemp 2021, p. 13.

195 Abatayo, Bosetti, Casari *et al.* 2020. Cf. eg. Moreno-Cruz 2015, pp. 260–1; Emmerling and Tavoni 2018.

196 Bourgeois political science has made far too much of free-riding as the explanation for the failure of mitigation. For an empirical refutation – which stays within the confines of such science – see Aklin and Mildenerger 2020. The alternative, of course, is to explain the failure with distributive conflicts: a clash of interests, in which those opposing mitigation have been (mostly) victorious. This alternative is sketched in fairly bland terms in Aklin and Mildenerger 2020. The low explanatory power of mainstream game theory as regards non-mitigation does not, however, subtract from the free-driving structure of geoengineering.

197 Weitzman 2015.

198 For rationalist-optimist comments on the free-driver problem, see e.g. Harding and Moreno-Cruz 2016, pp. 569, 573; Wagner 2021, pp. 10, 16.

hexafluoride and difluoromethane, to overtop the sulphate and reheat the planet. An arms race may ensue. Rationalist-optimist attempts to discredit this scenario descend into the usual ultra-charitable interpretations of the world: states with countervailing stockpiles will use them no more than those with atomic bombs; the mere threat will contribute to peace and understanding (and mitigation no less); no one would ever do something so destructive.¹⁹⁹ (That is, no one would ever release great quantities of greenhouse gases.) Only one insurance against counter-geoengineering carries actual weight. Not everyone can be allowed to engineer the planet according to taste: the capabilities will have to 'be limited to major powers or coalitions' (think NATO, G7).²⁰⁰ Put differently, the geoengineering state or conglomerate must establish a monopoly on stratospheric violence. A central actor has to impose its will on everyone else, the repression of global heating executed through a repressive apparatus capable of projecting its power across the globe. It is a case of either counter-geoengineering and *bellum omnium contra omnes* or a full-spectrum-dominant Leviathan.²⁰¹

'Geoengineering seems to demand centralized control', Keith blithely accepts.²⁰² Not everyone can be allowed a say in these matters. Decisions about how to proceed with the operation – how to assess info, modulate feedback, update tech – must 'rely on expert analysis' and 'be institutionally insulated from broader debates'. In short, 'some degree of technocracy will be necessary.'²⁰³ And this philosopher-king will have come to world power in an acute emergency.²⁰⁴ But if the rationalist-optimists call forth the spectre of tyranny, they must swiftly bury it: technocratic geoengineering is not, we are now told, incompatible with a democracy – for do not central banks regulate the economy shielded from popular oversight?²⁰⁵ And is not democracy

199 Parker, Horton and Keith 2018; and for an ultra-formulaic attempt to turn the threat of counter-geoengineering into a stimulus for co-operation, see also Heyen *et al.* 2019.

200 Parker, Horton and Keith 2018, p. 1062.

201 Cf. Szerszynski, Kearnes, Macnaghten *et al.* 2013, p. 2812; Mann and Wainwright 2018, p. 222.

202 Keith 2013, p. 153.

203 MacMartin, Irvine, Kravitz and Horton 2019, pp. 1135–6. On this preference for technocracy among geoengineering modellers, cf. McLaren and Corry 2021, p. 25.

204 For worries about the authoritarian potentials of emergency-induced geoengineering, see e.g. Hulme 2014, p. 25; Markusson, Ginn, Ghaleigh and Scott 2014; Sillmann, Lenton, Levermann *et al.* 2015. A further worry is that decision-making would be outsourced to artificial intelligence, in a sort of post-human planetary technocracy: Tang and Kemp 2021, p. 12.

205 MacMartin, Irvine, Kravitz and Horton 2019, p. 1335. Arguments for the incompatibility are outlined in Szerszynski, Kearnes, Macnaghten *et al.* 2013; cf. Lawford-Smith 2020.

everywhere circumscribed?²⁰⁶ And is it not always the case that ‘wealth and power shape individuals’ control over their own lives and their access to decision-making’?²⁰⁷ Here, at last, the rationalist-optimists explicitly align with the bleak realities of capitalist society, of which their geoengineered world will be an extension and intensification. No leap into fairyland on the field of democracy. Non-rationalist, non-optimist, more reality-attuned scholars have suggested that geoengineering fits the mould of emerging twenty-first century authoritarianism: under ‘slogans like “Hundred aircraft shielding us from global warming”’, strongmen could appear to control the climate for the benefit of their people.²⁰⁸ There is something totalitarian – and this goes even for the most liberal versions – about the technology.²⁰⁹

A subject of this kind would, needless to say, be a far cry from that posited as absent by Adorno: the ‘global social subject’ in which humanity ‘possesses genuine control of its own destiny right down to the concrete details’ and comes to its own ‘rescue after all’.²¹⁰ It would be a poor substitute for collective rationality on a systemic scale. Since no one is ready to shoulder such a burden, the task of repression devolves to a lesser, partial subject, an imperialist power pitted against rivals; repression of the contradiction takes on repressive political features, in a manner Adorno would have recognised. The US state seems positioned to play this role, as the best-armed wing of capital, a representative of the demon left to figure out how to parley with the reality that it denies. Indeed, were the US to initiate geoengineering, the switch from denial to repression would be consummate. For about half of the time since the signing of the UNFCCC in 1992, this country has been governed by literal climate denialists; for the other half, by implicatory ditto. Throughout the period, no other state has done more to obstruct mitigation.²¹¹ All the more logical that it would also be the first to fire this gun.

3.1 *The Fantasy of Never Termination*

‘From my current vantage point,’ writes Smith, the commencement of geoengineering ‘looks as if it would be among the most consequential decisions in human history.’²¹² On this, he cannot be gainsaid. It is only slightly easier to

²⁰⁶ Horton, Reynolds, Buck *et al.* 2018.

²⁰⁷ Horton, Reynolds, Buck *et al.* 2018, p. 8.

²⁰⁸ Michaelowa 2021, p. 123. Cf. Hamilton 2013, p. 119.

²⁰⁹ Intriguing comments on the totalitarian tendencies of climate denial in general and geoengineering in particular can be found in Busk 2023.

²¹⁰ Adorno 2008a, p. 143.

²¹¹ For the first decades of this obstruction, see Ciplet, Timmons Roberts and Khan 2015.

²¹² Smith 2022, pp. 276–7.

shake off the impression shared by so many students of the phenomenon: that it is inevitable.²¹³ Geoengineering is simply too easy to do, with too immediate gains in temperature reduction, poised against too overwhelming and extreme dangers from untreated heating, for it to go untested. One day, someone will do it; perhaps one day soon, perhaps in the early 2030s, perhaps a little later.²¹⁴ The pace of the breakdown will have some bearing on the timing. But if geoengineering is among the most consequential things that can happen and nearly inevitable, the termination shock, in turn, looks only slightly less so.

The dynamics impelling the operation towards that endpoint is, as we have seen, immanent to it; but the rationalist-optimists have focused their rebuttals on the exogenous triggers. Terrorists can be stopped in their tracks. Just guard the facilities.²¹⁵ In the unlikely event that they were to succeed and paralyse the global injection system, ‘humanity would have a period of several months’ to turn it back on, a job made easier if there is back-up hardware.²¹⁶ In other words, the infrastructure should have a copy in reserve that can be activated in case of a knock-out blow. But this would, of course, duplicate the sensitivities, guard duties, coordination requirements and other logistical challenges: instead of one system, the geoengineer would have to maintain two. (Or perhaps three, an additional shadow infrastructure to protect against a crash in the second?)²¹⁷ Moreover, this particular threat might as well come from within as from without. Geoengineering would presumably rely on a great deal of advanced software and algorithmic programmes vulnerable to cyberattack, including from disgruntled workers. The system ‘would likely depend on a large workforce and have numerous reasons for controversy’: anti-geoengineering cyber-terrorism, of proletarian or other subaltern character, as an inherent risk.²¹⁸

In their efforts to belittle the problem, the rationalist-optimists habitually point to other systems that have been kept in unbroken operation despite stress. Did not the Dutch maintain their dikes through two world wars?²¹⁹ Has not the world succeeded in maintaining ‘trans-oceanic communication links

213 E.g. Kintisch 2010, p. 69; Barrett 2008, pp. 45–6, 53; Michaelson 2013, pp. 107–8; Harding and Moreno-Cruz 2016, p. 574; Fabre and Wagner 2020, p. 3; Wagner 2021, pp. 16, 63, 75, 89.

214 The early 2030s is suggested as a realistic starting date by Smith and Wagner 2018, p. 124; NASEM 2021, p. 124.

215 Parker and Irvine 2018, p. 460.

216 Parker and Irvine 2018, p. 461. Cf. e.g. Halstead 2018, p. 69; Reynolds 2021, p. 4.

217 As argued by McKinnon 2020, pp. 588–9. Another proposal for effective defence is geographical dispersion of the system, equally elegantly debunked as illusory in McKinnon 2020, pp. 587–8.

218 Tang and Kemp 2021, p. 9.

219 Wagner 2021, p. 61.

and electric power grids for more than a century in spite of horrific wars', or healthcare and farming systems, not to mention satellites?²²⁰ And the internet? All these vast, complex technological apparatuses have withstood strain and continued to function 24/7 worldwide, and so, the argument goes, we should expect the same resilience from stratospheric aerosol injection. But it overlooks one difference: none of these putative analogues has a tendency to produce a rising tide of negative side effects on ecosystems. Dikes and satellites do not tip clouds or crops into collapse after some decades of enhanced operation. They do not tend towards a termination shock, since they lack that inbuilt law.

But, the rationalist-optimists continue, geoengineering will be done moderately and temporarily – this is how we want it! – so the mask will remain thin, the combination rigorous, the risk low, as prescribed in our idealised models.²²¹ Groundless as this optimism is, it sits alongside the opposite argument, advanced whenever the shock is mentioned: 'if the world wanted to continue flying dozens of planes into the stratosphere around the clock, chances are it would be able to do so.'²²² That is, termination will not happen. We need not lose any sleep over it, because the world will find a way to keep injecting aerosols in perpetuity.²²³ We can do it forever, so let's go – an argument that obviously undercuts any pretensions to minimalism and sets up precisely the journey towards inevitable shock; for the longer the journey goes on, the more severe the risk, the greater the incentive to continue, the worse the accumulation of side effects (and the longer the exposure to exogenous jolts to boot) until the geoengineered world reaches some breaking point.²²⁴ The same applies to the argument that if the ensuing shock really is that bad, it will serve to remind the world that it needs to resume operations.²²⁵ The antinomy of geoengineering without a termination shock is that of geoengineering everlasting (which, on purely logical grounds, would offer the shock so many more points of entry).

220 Keith and MacMartin 2015, p. 204. Healthcare and farming: Parker and Irvine 2018, p. 465. Satellites and internet: Rabitz 2019, p. 518.

221 Reynolds *et al.* 2016, p. 563; Rabitz 2019, pp. 508–9.

222 Wagner 2021, p. 61.

223 E.g. Parker and Irvine 2018, pp. 463–4; Halstead 2018, p. 69; Rabitz 2019, pp. 505–6; Reynolds 2019, p. 66. The rationalist Reynolds thus manages to argue that no termination shock will happen because (1) any negative side effects will be discovered and the system discontinued early on, and (2) the system will continue in operation for however long it's needed, beyond any risk of shock. Reynolds 2019, pp. 40, 66.

224 The argument is made in all its naivety in Rabitz 2016, p. 105; Rabitz 2019, p. 512. On the long exposure to exogenous shocks, see Tang and Kemp 2021, p. 10.

225 Irvine 2023.

But rationalist-optimists would like to think that if the side effects become unendurable, the sunshade can be dialled down gradually, gently, to avoid the shock; this would be the rational way to do it.²²⁶ ‘The risk of termination might not be so great. Unexpected negative environmental effects might be detected early [*sic*], and solar geoengineering could be ended slowly instead of suddenly.’²²⁷ This wish seems as pious as that for a similarly charted inauguration. Just as the climate crisis will have to reach some critical state before geoengineering is switched on, so will a crisis of side effects before it is switched off. If there is anything the former has taught us, it is that capitalist society is inert and blocks incremental change. It is more likely than not to let pressures build up to a point where it eventually flips into another state or course: non-linear, punctuated change is the rule, not the exception. Geoengineering will be a shock when it comes and when it goes.

3.2 *A Combat Line*

But in human history, of course, nothing is truly inevitable. Nightmares may weigh on even the most alert brains of the living, but human beings do, at the end of the day, make their own history. Whether geoengineering will occur depends, among dozens of other variables, on what position popular and progressive forces take on it. From what we have seen here, there is nothing to indicate that advocacy is sensible: there can be no left case for solar geoengineering. Rationalist-optimist approaches deserve implacable hostility and should be countered with consistently critical pessimism, anchored in the realities of capitalist society under a sky filled with carbon.

Does that mean that if geoengineering gets going, we should take aim at the planes? Not necessarily: the historical mission is to train any fire that can be mustered on fossil capital. Posterior as much as prior to a launch, the principal contradiction is that between the climate of planet Earth and the accumulation of capital through the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels, and it is on that contradiction it behoves the left to act. If anyone sends up sulphate planes, the demand should be to bring them back as fast as possible, one more demand to add on top of an immediate phase-out of all fossil fuels. But the praxis ought to be close to that of the Children of Kali.²²⁸

226 E.g. Reynolds *et al.* 2016, p. 563; Parker and Irvine 2018, p. 459; Wagner 2021, p. 60.

227 Reynolds 2019, p. 40.

228 Unlike the Children of Kali, however, the actually existing climate movement ought to limit its violence to property destruction. The debate over tactics is now in full swing; for a remarkably far-reaching survey, see Sovacool and Dunlap 2022.

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Humanism Contra Post-humanism

Sunyoung Ahn

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Language and Literature,
College of Liberal Arts, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea
sunyoungahn@korea.ac.kr

Abstract

Post-humanism accuses humanism of inventing a human subject who is domineering and destructive. As a remedy, it redefines the human as a being informed by passivity and finitude and bound by ontological vulnerability. In so doing, it undermines the creative and transformative power of human agency and obliterates politics and history as shaped by human actions. Noting how this intensifies the experience of alienation and de-humanisation, the essay looks to Marxist and socialist humanism to resuscitate the idea of humans as agents of history. Humans are not a problem to be overcome; rather, they are the means through which a more viable world can be achieved, for humans and non-humans alike.

Keywords

Marxist and socialist humanism – anti-humanism – post-humanism

From Humanism to Post-humanism

Humanism and its variants – Renaissance, Enlightenment, and secular, to name but a few – arguably went into decline when the atrocities of World War II made it no longer possible to have confidence in such humanist attributes as reason and progress. When Frantz Fanon famously advised that we ‘leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners’,¹ many indeed seemed to agree and went even further to jettison humanism entirely, characterising it as primarily a European

¹ Fanon 2004, p. 235.

affair that tends to bolster the logic of domination and promotes tirelessly the 'Man's' masterly position. Theory after World War II was thus to be predominantly anti-humanist in its orientation, whose arguments were most clearly heard where it concerned divesting the human of its allegedly Eurocentric and imperialist agency, which it regarded as outgrowths of humanist philosophy. Marxism, too, was not free from such accusations, as its discussion of alienation and the emphasis on the possibility of historical transformation propelled by human action, for example, were often understood as stemming from the Enlightenment influence that promotes the centrality of the human. In fact, Marxism arguably became anti-humanism's (unmentioned but) central target because, as Kate Soper suggests, the idea of humans-make-history in the modern sense of the phrase emerged only with the 'advent of Marxist theory'.² When, in the aftermath of and in reaction to the failure of Soviet Marxism, some strands of Marxism evolved into Marxist and socialist humanism via works by Raya Dunayevskaya and the News and Letters Committees, the Praxis School of Yugoslavia, the Frankfurt School, and anti-colonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon and C.L.R. James, their influence was to be curtailed and much adumbrated by (post-)structuralist and post-modernist theories that took for granted the anti-humanist proposition of the death of the human subject.³ A thinker whose works not only reflect but also actually promote this shift from philosophical humanism to a more 'scientific' anti-humanism is of course Louis Althusser, who, as an anti-humanist Marxist, sought to expunge from Marx and Marxism what he regarded as its humanist vestiges – mainly, the idea of the subject as a creator of social reality who therefore can also change that reality. Althusser saw the human subject as itself an ideology fortifying the overdetermining structures of capitalism; capitalist ideology therefore could only be unravelled by eradicating the subject and replacing it with a scientific theory of capitalism, which, precisely because it approaches reality as effects, functions, and processes, can create ruptures in a structure *without* having to rely on false, bourgeois notions of human will and determination.

The problem, however, is that in order for Althusser's 'orrery', as E.P. Thompson calls his structures of ideology, to have ruptures and open itself to alternatives, it requires the 'most acrobatic formulations' and intricate theoretical explanation of the process of interpellation precisely because the orrery

2 Soper 1986, p. 26.

3 For a detailed history of the rise, decline, and re-emergence of Marxist and socialist humanism since 1945, see *For Humanism* (2017), which I cite on numerous occasions elsewhere in this essay.

is inexorable.⁴ A related concern is that placing emphasis on the scientific reading of this orrery substitutes theory for actual historical practice, as if the most elaborate reading of the effects of ideology itself can serve as an adequate form of social intervention. Hence, the reading becomes a ‘theoretical practice’ bestowed with an aura of scientificity.

This anti-humanist fascination with structures that constitute the subject rather than the other way around is important to note, for this was to be the persistent tendency in subsequent (Marxist or otherwise) anti-humanist theories, as found, for instance, in Michel Foucault’s notion of the author-function and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s desiring machines. Regarding this aspect, Thompson’s diagnosis could not be more apt: the construction of reality as a process without a subject, Thompson argues, is in part attributable to the living and working conditions of contemporary theorists like Althusser, who are ‘segregated more than ever from practice’ and ‘work within institutions, which are complexly-structured, according to “schedules” and programmes’.⁵ They are thus placed in conditions in which technology, too, becomes a ‘matter of circuits, intricate gearing, automated programmes’ and ‘within all this there arrives, with inevitable punctuality, cybernetics and the computer, which sieves, sorts, and organises impartially all languages ... on one condition only: that the categories which it ingests shall be unambiguous and constant in conformity with the constancy of its own complex binary programme’.⁶

That is, the progress of science and technology affects the very ways in which we conceptualise reality and build knowledge, and the theorists’ choice here, as Thompson argues, is not to approach these changing conditions with a grain of salt, to say the least, but in fact to give in and *reinforce* the operational and technical nature of society by replacing agency with function, and history with circuitous processes. Thompson’s diagnosis, then, adds up to this question: ‘But as the observational field of today’s theorists becomes more specialised and more segregated from practice, where are they to turn for comparable analogies, for a vocabulary of interaction and eventuation? We might start, I suggest, by observing ourselves’.⁷

Thompson’s implication is that anti-humanist theorists precisely abandon this option of ‘observing ourselves’ and focus instead on circuits, processes, and systems. Today, this legacy of anti-humanist thought and its attempt to

4 Thompson 1981, p. 98

5 Thompson 1981, p. 108.

6 Thompson 1981, p. 109.

7 Ibid.

marginalise the human is most adamantly carried on by post-humanism and its related fields including, but not limited to, animal studies, New Materialism, object-oriented ontology (OOO), and political ecology, which all emerged as a constellation of similar ideas roughly around and after the turn of the new millennium to further decentre the subject and redefine the world as richly populated by the non-human presence within ecological networks. Raising the stakes of its predecessor, i.e., anti-humanism, post-humanism claims that the very fate of the *planet* itself now depends on the abandonment of humanism. The erasure of the human subject is not only crucial for ideological reasons but also for ecological and ontological reasons.

Compared to anti-humanism, then, post-humanism is most distinctly characterised by its adherence to ecological and planetary sciences that stress human–animal continuity bound by finitude. Another difference is that, if Marxist anti-humanists like Althusser were acutely aware of the institutions of power and of capitalism as ideologies, post-humanism mostly abandons criticism that involves the discussion of capitalist market economies. To counter what it perceives to be humanism's speciesism and aggression, post-humanism re-defines humans as a contingently evolved and evolving species, whose conditions of existence are dependent not only on their own doing but on the activities and conditions of other beings. Placing great emphasis on the non-historical, non-social, and thereby non-human dimensions that constitute the world – the reality of the deep space and deep time whose magnitude we still strive to understand, for example – post-humanism inspires humility and offers passivity as a way of being.

I must also add here that, along these lines, post-humanism differs from what is called trans-humanism, which enthusiastically seeks to obtain human transcendence and immortality through technoscientific enhancement and modification. Post-humanism is critical of this very idea of transcendence and progress that harbours the desire to 'perfect' humans. Emphasising the *limit* of the human, it argues that they are essentially conditioned, delimited, and determined by external forces they do not control. Thus, if trans-humanism utilises science and technology to enhance the human, post-humanism theoretically mobilises them to demote the human – to suggest, with scientific corroboration, that she is a human *animal* and a mere speck in evolutionary time, whose claimed superiority is a disguise and an illusion.

In so doing, however, post-humanism overplays the significance of the world that is moved by biological, natural, and contingent processes while greatly diminishing – if not entirely obliterating – those which are planned and activated by humans. This emphasis on non-human processes, I further

argue, has the linked effect of estranging humans from the very world they inhabit, undermining all that humans endeavour to accomplish. The result is that humans are pitted against themselves, as if their very existence is antithetical to their own as well as the planet's well-being.

For Humanism

This essay's tasks, then, are twofold: firstly, to point out the limits of post-humanism and secondly to offer humanism, particularly Marxist and socialist humanism, as a counterpoint. I thus make an argument *for* humanism and for further development of its core ideas, not because it serves as the only true statement concerning humans or because it affords a remedy for all problems, but because it affirms the power of human thinking and action through which ethical and political paradigms can be altered – the minimal prerequisite if there is ever to be social change.

To a certain extent, the post-humanist attempt to recreate subjectivity emptied of all humanist signifiers may even be welcome; by doing so, it offers a rightful criticism of the violence enacted in the name of humanism. Humanism has indeed been used to justify European colonialism, whose forms and strategies are still being deployed in contemporary diplomacy to chastise anti-European and anti-American regimes. A liberalist version of humanism has also been linked inseparably to the rise of the bourgeoisie, whose culture lays emphasis on the right to private property, self-preservation, acquisitiveness that antagonises the Other, and overconfidence in economic liberalism.

Distinguished from these humanisms are perhaps democratic humanisms stemming from modern progressive thought, in which the human subject is more than the self-aggrandising and imperial figure, for she is also inseparably linked to the historically developed vision of egalitarianism, wherein every person's choice and action weigh equally. This figure of the human also stems from a democratic ethos that strives for individual freedom in coordination with collective visions. Also inherent in these versions of humanism is the notion of self-realisation that prioritises learning and inquiries into the self and the world. In fact, humanism in this sense shares with post-humanism the same aim of overcoming exclusionism based on dogma and bias, cultivating intellectual openness, and enacting egalitarian principles, all for the sake of a more diverse, inclusive, and creative world. Yet, although democratic humanisms are admirable for their universalist scope and marked emphasis on learning and development, they often show themselves to be limited particularly

where economic rationality pervades, by succumbing to the putative imperatives of the economy.

In contrast to but also in conjunction with democratic humanisms, I wish to focus on the legacies of humanism that emerge from Marx and Marxism, which entail a vision of countering the dehumanising and fragmentating force that operates under an ever-intensifying capitalism within various forms of polity of both the right and the left. Marxist and socialist humanism are set apart from a wide array of other modern humanistic traditions by always determining human capacities and freedom in response and in relation to historical specificities. Thus, freedom is a historically determined concept, not an abstract *a priori* category that redeems humans from dehumanising conditions. It arises in response to such historical events as the failure of Soviet Marxism, strikes and crises of the working people, as well as the outbreak of the Cold War and the ensuing wave of McCarthyism, and the rise of Third World independence movements. The problem of human agency and freedom – or the problem of theorising and enacting a *revolutionary subject* – is thus regarded always in its historical specificity and with a particular understanding that humans are conditioned by modes of production. At the same time, however, it does not satisfy itself with strictly materialist economic analyses and class-based programmes, for material conditions of course intersect with larger issues of imperialism, racism, and sexism, which necessitate philosophical reflection upon the problems of alienation and liberation on the international level. Marxist humanism thus considers Marx's oeuvre in its totality, with a significant affirmation of the earlier, philosophical Marx and his Hegelian traces. As Dunayevskaya writes, however, it is also crucial for Marxist humanism to elucidate that there is 'no division between thought-activity and demonstration-activity',⁸ and hence the reason why Marxist humanists describe themselves as such rather than simply as Marxists: it is because 'the humanism has been removed from Marx to such an extent that people thought they could come with certain theories and ideas just from the top – the intellectuals theorizing and telling the people how to liberate themselves'.⁹

Marxist and socialist humanism has had a lasting impact on how we think about autonomy, social transformation, and radical democracy, not to mention on the rhetoric of social protests in contemporary times, even when there is no explicit show of allegiance to the visions of socialism and to class-based protests. Today, the influence of Marxist humanism, particularly as developed by Dunayevskaya's merging of philosophy and practice, as well as her

8 Dunayevskaya 1986, p. 26.

9 Dunayevskaya 1986, p. 12.

intersectional analysis of race, class, and gender formulated long before the term intersectionality came into vogue, are to be traced in such organisations as the International Marxist-Humanist Organization (IMHO) and the Marxist-Humanist Initiative (MHI). The cultural analyses of the Frankfurt School (although it remains debatable as to how humanist or Marxist they may be), in addition to Erich Fromm's 1965 collection *Socialist Humanism*, are also examples of Marxist and socialist humanism, which for all the differences and disagreements argued within the circle, are forceful ideas that can serve as a counterpoint to anti- and post-humanism. The concluding sections of the essay thus discuss the legacies of Marxist and socialist humanism broadly defined, which provide us with rich resources on how we can respond to current exigencies, rather than throw ourselves into the post-humanist, 'flattened' world of non-distinction, losing the very ground upon which we act and do critical thinking.

The Apoliticism of Post-humanism

Post-humanism highlights how humans are not only subjects who think but also objects that are *thought*. It thus aims to destabilise the subject–object binary that so strongly affects the ways we undertake philosophical inquiry and to elucidate instead the materiality (*vis-à-vis* transcendence) of human existence, especially in the context where science discovers anew the material plasticity of the human, from its genetic composition to cerebral function. Cary Wolfe, for example, argues how the human is a 'prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality'; a being that is defined not by transcendence or pre-eminence but by 'constitutive dependency and finitude'.¹⁰ Wolfe indeed explains, by means of Derrida, that 'mortality' is what 'resides as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals'; the precarity of all lives, put another way, is the basis for the 'experience of compassion'.¹¹ But finitude is not only limited to mortality, as it can also refer to an *a priori* condition that one is born into, such as human systems of communication. According to Wolfe, the utterance of the 'I' does not lead to the experience of selfhood but to that of subjection to the *a priori* nature of the semiotic system, or to 'a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language'.¹² Uttering a word, therefore, does not authorise the

¹⁰ Wolfe 2010, pp. xxv ff.

¹¹ Wolfe 2010, p. 81.

¹² Wolfe 2010, p. 88.

speaking subject but submits the subject to the extraneous, foreign arrangement that is language.

For Wolfe, then, there is the falsity of ‘the notion of the human that it “gives to itself”’.¹³ This means that subjects – or what he calls ‘first-order observers’ (borrowing from the terminology of systems theory) – are not so transcendent as to be able to ‘reflect on their latencies and blind spots while at the same time deploying them’.¹⁴ That can only be done by ‘another observer’, not necessarily even a human one, for the very limited ‘conditions of cognition and communication’ necessitate the presence of the Other.¹⁵ The human mind is therefore incapable of thinking at its own behest, independently of the Other.

Leaving aside the point that this is a re-iteration of the poststructuralist position, there is the problem of how the very necessity of ethics and politics is erased in Wolfe’s arguments. Wolfe is indeed right to highlight how the human is always dependent on and indebted to the presence of the Other, but his push to the utmost passivity leads him to argue, for example, that the human partakes in considering the ‘alterity of the other’ not by ‘benevolent reflection but by the very ... conditions that, in their constitutive “blindness,” generate the *necessity* of the other’.¹⁶ According to this argument, we are already ethical because we constitutively necessitate the Other and are Otherised. One need not accommodate, negotiate, or persuade – one needs merely to contemplate the passivity that is structured into her very relationship to the world, which of its own nature brings her to acknowledge the Other’s alterity.

Arguing that this post-humanism is too negative because it is rooted in ideas of finitude and vulnerability that ‘fuel an affective economy of loss and melancholia at the heart of the subject’,¹⁷ Rosi Braidotti offers a more ‘affirmative brand of posthuman thought’,¹⁸ one that does not make all species’ conditions evenly and universally vulnerable. Resisting what she regards as the element of necro-politics or *Thanatos* in many post-humanist discourses, Braidotti replaces Wolfe’s ontological finitude and passivity with the affirmative condition of being embedded, embodied, and relational in the forcefield of Life.¹⁹ That is, humans are part of the ‘non-human, vital force of Life’ or ‘zoe’ wherein they recognise that human life is a ‘process, interactive and open-ended’, not some

13 Wolfe 2010, p. 126.

14 Wolfe 2010, p. 122.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Braidotti 2013, pp. 120 ff.

18 Braidotti 2013, p. 80.

19 Braidotti 2013, p. 121.

'exclusive property or the unalienable right'.²⁰ Radically open and mutable by nature, post-human subjectivity ideally is post-nationalist, with a 'pan-human cosmopolitan bond', 'becoming-minoritarian', and 'becoming-nomad of Europe'.²¹

Few would disagree with Braidotti's catholic vision, or with her insistence that we recognise the specific material situatedness of each subject position. Yet, Braidotti's theoretical anchoring onto what she terms a Spinozist 'monistic philosophy of becomings' leads one to wonder whether her sensitivity to such politics of locations and identities carry any weight in the end, for by positing that matter is 'intelligent and self-organizing' she also reasons that 'matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation, but continuous with them'.²² Subjectivity, also a kind of matter, is thus a 'process of auto-poiesis or self-styling' that involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values.²³ This means for Braidotti that subjectivity 'need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed ... at the production of counter-subjectivities'.²⁴ Her monism, in other words, which she argues is now corroborated 'by an updated scientific understanding of self-organizing ... matter',²⁵ obviates the need for negative oppositions, confrontations, and refusals, because in matter unity is already achieved. Politics then becomes a question of letting the immanent, auto-poietic, self-styling principles unfold; the fact that humans risk their lives for their political and religious beliefs, for example, somehow loses its ideological stakes and gravity within this monistic worldview.

Braidotti's affirmative post-humanism also leads her to see current events a little too conveniently and sanguinely, such as when she suggests that the 'commodification of Life' in fact is an opportunity to propel the post-anthropocentric turn and initiate a more creative subject-formation,²⁶ or when she states that a 'more egalitarian road, in a *zoe*-centred way, requires a modicum of goodwill on the part of the dominant party ... although this is asking a lot'.²⁷ Because she denies that there are 'counter-subjectivities', Braidotti can only hope contingency will do its benign work. Not only that, she ends up allowing more agency and leverage to the dominant party.

20 Braidotti 2013, p. 68.

21 Braidotti 2013, p. 61.

22 Braidotti 2013, p. 35.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Braidotti 2013, p. 57.

26 Braidotti 2013, p. 59.

27 Braidotti 2013, p. 88.

At first glance, there is a big difference between the two approaches outlined by Wolfe and Braidotti, as one bases itself on the ontological finitude of all beings and the other on ontological openness. I want to focus more on their possible points of convergence, however, for present in both is the reduction of the social that entails civic engagement, cultural (and countercultural) life, and political endeavours. To varying degrees of intensity, they focus more on the effects and functions of systems, autopoiesis, and *zōē*, than they do on humans within social institutions and polities (democratic or otherwise). Post-humanism's intention is to highlight the inseparability – or perhaps the always-already meshed realms of the natural and the cultural – but it ends up shelving the political dimension of human life, including the partisan, the parliamentary, the civil, as well as what erupts on the street.

The Discursivity of Post-humanism

Post-humanism's erasure of the political highlights yet another problem, which is that it is predominantly discursive. That is, it focuses more on scrutinising how the human can be theoretically undone or be succeeded by a new theory than on resolving the material and practical challenges posed by and for the human. Once extrapolated onto the social terrain, post-humanist argument thus loses its radical appearance to become a theory without political enactment. The issues central to post-humanists include how humanism reinforces human exceptionalism and aggravates human domination of nature, all of which in fact can only be undone by human praxis in recognition of a common social vision. Because they minimise or even obliterate human agency, however, they render their goal politically unviable. They see history as the effects of non-causative events without human agents, and as mere functions of inexplicable affects and forces. In this sense, it is worth considering that where post-humanist thinking is frequently evoked, for example, in the field of animal studies, it merely repeats discursive analyses by commenting on how anthropocentric the humanist tradition is. For post-humanists, although legal amendments and activism are indispensable, they remain insufficient because they still operate within humanist frameworks. Thus, it transports itself to the realm of the affect where a rapport with the nonhuman takes place in an extra-legal, pre-social, and intuitive space that shelves the material determinants that shape human–animal relationships. Humanism, on the other hand, although not without some significant limitations, can find realisation in such socio-political projects as animal-rights and animal-liberation movements. Humanism has this capacity because it envisages humans as agents of change,

and not in some romantic way that elevates humans into those who redeem animals, but as agents who compromise, negotiate, and oppose.

Post-humanism is thus effective insofar as it makes attempts at a poetic and stylistic retort against the anthropocentric epistemologies – the emergence of the field of bio-art is telling in its aesthetic rendering of biological matter, presenting nature as the object of the sublime on a petri dish while bracketing off social and historical processes. Abstracted from a sociohistorical context, post-humanism in this sense is a theory that is merely performative without concrete action: it covers up the messy terrain where problems ranging from de-humanisation to animalisation to mechanisation occur – all of which are aggravated and reinforced by capitalist logic – by coining a new term (post-humanism), creating a new reality (post-humanity), and assuming that it is (always) already here. Not only that, post-humanism shows itself to be essentialising when it claims that humans have always-already been post-human, neglecting different conditions of existence and the uneven ways in which humanity develops. One could argue that to be a post-humanist on these theoretical levels may not be the same as denying humans the capacity to politically mobilise – that is to say, one can be a post-humanist and a revolutionary at the same time. But to argue thus would be to have it both ways, an untenable position that only highlights its contradiction, which devalues human agency while also reverting right back to it.

The Trouble with Reason

Equally necessary to consider is whether it would be possible to undermine, or even abandon the idea of human reason in the way post-humanists argue we should. They call into question the putative rationality of the human mind, arguing that reason and Enlightenment thinking are too often used as self-serving means to crown humans with omniscience and authority. It is true that, as Adorno and Horkheimer note, the Enlightenment's intellectual curiosity and urge to know developed into a consuming drive – an obsession with chasing away the unknown that ultimately became a desire to appraise, measure, and rationalise everything that it lays its eyes on. Post-humanism's emphasis on indeterminate modes of thinking, understandably, is an attempt to counter the Enlightenment's compulsion to control and govern. But in so doing, it also bypasses aspects of Enlightenment thinking that have historically generated debates about universal suffrage and criticism against European monarchies, for example; it also overlooks what drives Enlightenment reason to its narrow, rigid instrumentality, which is the capitalist mode of production

combined with a commodified and regimented everyday life. Rather than draw distinctions between objective reason and subjective reason – the latter of which in Horkheimer’s words is devoid of truth-seeking ends and is reduced to the means that suit subjective interests – post-humanism portrays reason in its entirety as delimiting and rigidifying human thinking. And to free human thinking from such rigidity, it argues that the human mind has always-already been embodied, distributed, and dispersed.

It is in such a context that N. Katherine Hayles seeks to question the self-confidence humans have concerning their cognition, arguing how in the intermeshed world of the biological and the technological, cognition needs to be understood as something not centralised, consummate, or transcendental, but distributed.²⁸ Braidotti likewise problematises the ‘hubris of rational consciousness’ for engaging in an ‘act of vertical transcendence’, and suggests that against these soaring, self-authenticating operations, reason must be recast in terms of a ‘grounding exercise of radical immanence’.²⁹ This is to lead one to a humbling self-realisation, prompting one to ask oneself: ‘What if, by comparison with the immanent know-how of animals, conscious self-representation were blighted by narcissistic delusions of transcendence and consequently blinded by its own aspirations to self-transparency?’³⁰

There is no question that human consciousness and reason have always entailed fallibility, carrying risks of misapprehension and misrepresentation. The numerous models for discerning truth, from idealism to empiricism to relativism, originate precisely from this characteristic that is prone to error and subjectivism. This only proves that human thinking always requires tasks of corroboration, correction, and modification, as well as radical undoing; post-humanism, however, assigns a kind of constitutive ambiguity and incertitude to the thinking mind.

Wolfe, also challenging the idea that human thinking emanates from the integral and transcendental mind, calls for a ‘mutational, viral, or parasitic form of thinking’³¹ that ‘exceeds and encompasses the boundary not just between human and animal but also between the living or organic and the mechanical or technical’.³² As inherently non-unitary and dissilient, the post-humanist mode of thinking ‘infects and mutates through the very structures, privileged terms, and discursive nodes of power on which it is parasitical’.³³ The

28 Hayles 1999.

29 Braidotti 2013, p. 193.

30 Ibid.

31 Wolfe 2010, p. xix.

32 Wolfe 2010, p. xvii.

33 Wolfe 2010, p. xix.

post-humanist mode of thinking, in other words, ‘permanently destabilises the boundaries between “our” thinking and anyone – or more radically, *anything* – else’s.’³⁴ But such viral forms of thinking are not by default more subversive of rigidity and bias that may exist in our thinking; they may as well be aleatory and erratic without meaning and effect, incapable of disrupting privileged terms and norms. Moreover, the focus on viral and parasitic nature neglects thinking that arises from different points of view and vested interests, such that might resist so-called infectious and transmissive movements. That is, the supposed viral characteristic of thought prevents one from examining the very ideological content it might be harbouring, whose viral traces one can only study etiologically but not assess for political content or legitimacy. There is a strange, passive freedom in this kind of viral thinking, for it lets the etiological and parasitic movements do the thinking.

Post-humanism’s Scientism

As can be seen from its deployment of concepts such as autopoiesis, ecology, evolution, vitality, and the viral, post-humanism prominently evokes science and scientific terminology. Through recourse to science, it seeks to refute the idealism that posits the world as the creation of the human mind and aims at a depiction presumably more neutral and objective. There is thus an aspiration to communicate processes of nature as technically as possible without being tainted by subjective representations, which are, in fact, the very cultural, economic, and political explanations that humans develop in order to make sense of the world. Timothy Brennan argues that the evocation of science and the scientific reflects a larger trend within contemporary humanities that makes ‘concessions to scientism’³⁵ in order to respond to the crisis of the humanities, ‘maneuver[ing] within a business climate and a media culture that assumes the supremacy of the natural sciences, above all the managerial wing of the applied sciences’.³⁶ The result is a description of the world where there are ‘events without agents’, as Brennan also argues elsewhere, ‘in which deliberative thought and interests have been surgically excised’.³⁷ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg also observe this in the context of discussing the narratives of the Anthropocene, interrogating why the ‘growing acknowledgement of the

34 Wolfe 2010, p. 36.

35 Brennan 2014, p. 230.

36 Brennan 2014, p. 225.

37 Brennan 2016, p. 533.

impact of societal forces on the biosphere should be couched in terms of a narrative so completely dominated by natural science³⁸ when this only obliterates the human, 'block[ing] off any prospect for change'.³⁹

Science in post-humanism, then, is deployed to *excuse* inaction and passivity even for matters that can and must be addressed by human agents. Put another way, post-humanism 'gives alienation a philosophical and scientific respectability' by indicating that helplessness and passivity are inevitable given what science tells about the material world and the human as a biological entity – in so doing, it has the effect of legitimatising today's economic and political impulse to 'disembody human skill and intelligence, to de-realise human will and effort, [and] to unthink the human'.⁴⁰ One might add that this alienation is also given a poetic touch, by being cast not as a social problem but as an ontological condition created by the essentially unknowable and awesome environment.

Consider, for example, the post-humanist explanation of environmental crises such as climate change. Rather than regarding the advent of the so-called Anthropocene as the very moment to acknowledge the full responsibility of humans for warming the planet, it recognises the moment as demonstrating the dynamic character of Earth itself. Bruno Latour exemplifies this post-humanist position when referring to the increasing volatility of the climate. He wonders 'what sort of agency this new Earth should be granted',⁴¹ answering that we should regard Earth as an animate agent that should go by the mythic name of Gaia, who is 'a very ticklish sort of Goddess' that is 'agitated and sensitive'.⁴² *Kakosmos*, meaning unruly and messy, is another name Latour offers, because Earth has never been a *cosmos* in the true sense of the term, namely 'a handsome and well-composed arrangement'.⁴³ The agency of Earth is such that it has 'no order, no God, no hierarchy, [and] no authority'.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the only 'crucial political task' that humans can perform is firstly to recognise that 'all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed ... by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity'.⁴⁵ Their next task is to 'distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible', instead of garnering more power to try to

38 Malm and Hornborg 2014, p. 63.

39 Malm and Hornborg 2014, p. 67.

40 Brennan 2014, pp. 231 ff.

41 Latour 2014, p. 4.

42 Latour 2014, p. 3.

43 Latour 2014, p. 4.

44 Ibid.

45 Latour 2014, p. 15.

control nature.⁴⁶ Living in the Anthropocene is about ingraining into our ways of thinking the fact that there are forces of things that display 'sovereignty'.⁴⁷ Just when the most rigorous forms of scientific thinking might actually be useful, Latour poeticises the planet and gives back to it an awesome, sublime aura.

Dipesh Chakrabarty offers another 'scientific' reading of climate change when he argues that it compels humans to experience the 'rude shock of the planet's otherness'.⁴⁸ According to Chakrabarty, the processes of the planet are not only 'global' – in the sense that they entail 'the more recent history of industrial civilization' – but also 'planetary', encompassing at least two other time scales, namely the 'history of the earth system' and the 'history of life including that of human evolution on the planet'.⁴⁹ These are, in other words, 'coactors in the drama of global warming', revealing the fact that the 'logics of capital'⁵⁰ are not all there is to understanding the climate. In fact, global warming is understood best through the 'science of climate change',⁵¹ which involves 'digging up 800,000 year-old ice-core samples or making satellite observations of changes in the mean temperature of the planet's surface'.⁵² In other words, humans are 'passing guests' and have 'no intrinsic role to play in the science of planetary warming'; the attempt to understand the processes of global warming does not 'belong to an earth-bound imagination'⁵³ or to a 'human-centered' one.⁵⁴ Thus, while humans should by all means 'pursue [their] all-too-human but legitimate quest for justice on issues to do with the iniquitous impact of anthropogenic climate change', they must also concede that the processes of the earth system are essentially beyond human control.⁵⁵

Chakrabarty is right to suggest that there will always be more to the planet than humankind can ever hope to know: ice-core samples and satellite observations indeed only reveal glimpses of the magnitude of planetary processes, illuminating the irrelevance of human activities in the larger scheme of the planetary system. But between planetary science's 'passing guest' and the specificity of the 'all-too-human' subject who pursues environmental justice in the realm of everyday politics, I think we have no option but to choose the

46 Ibid.

47 Latour 2014, p. 16.

48 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 23.

49 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 1.

50 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 21.

51 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 22.

52 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 21.

53 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 22.

54 Chakrabarty 2014, p. 23.

55 Ibid.

latter. This is because otherwise, humans are let off the hook, relieved of the responsibility to tackle climate change observed in the present moment. The proposition of the human as a guest may help fix the problem of human vanity, but it also provides an excuse to evade confronting the consequences of human dominion over nature by quizzically suggesting that agency has never been monopolised by humans.

The Unexceptional Human

By calling attention to the scientism of post-humanism, obviously I do not seek to suggest that science in itself is harmful. But it does become such when there is excessive confidence in science to ‘repair’ the environment. As John Bellamy Foster argues, one is tempted to exercise a ‘Promethean control of nature through science and technology’⁵⁶ without fixing the fundamental problems that are causing environmental crises, such as the compulsion towards capital accumulation and infinite growth, which is itself based on the logic of waste built ‘into the very structure of production’.⁵⁷ Science, then, should be developed ‘at a higher level’, one that enables ‘ecological planning’ facilitated by changes in social relations.⁵⁸

Yet, overreliance on scientific explanation occurs too often, which, in the case of post-humanist arguments strangely also leads to the conviction that the world, as science tells it, is too complex and intricate to properly grasp, thereby requiring from humans humility, an awareness that they rest on ground no higher than that of their fellow animals, either epistemologically or morally. The post-humanist discussions of dark matter and *Umwelt* are a case in point, the former serving the purpose of allegedly proving, in the words of Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, how the world is structured more by the ‘posthumanist sense of material agency’ than by ‘humans’ agentic efficacy’.⁵⁹ By mobilising terms borrowed from physics – such as ‘dark matter’ and ‘chaos and complexity theory’ – they highlight that the world is ‘far more complex, unstable, fragile, and interactive’ than is usually understood.⁶⁰ They do not mention, however, that dark matter – while admittedly very mysterious to us so far – inspires human agents to establish transnational collaborations of the

56 Foster 2017, p. 7.

57 Foster 2017, p. 13.

58 Foster 2017, p. 12.

59 Coole and Frost 2010, p. 14.

60 Coole and Frost 2010, p. 13.

largest and most expensive kind.⁶¹ The discovery of dark matter is itself a result of the exercise of mind, as is the ensuing realisation of just how much humans do not yet know about the universe.

The post-humanist study of *Umwelt*, an ethological term expounded by Jakob von Uexküll, is also typical in its adherence to a scientism that obliterates the human agent. *Umwelt* emphasises that what we call the environment is not a singular, unitary world as perceived and experienced by humans, but rather a set of multiple worlds constructed heterogeneously according to the physiological structures and biological needs of each species. *Umwelt* is indeed notably mentioned by Agamben as a concept that helps dispel the primacy of human perception and the myth of the singular world, for it postulates an ‘infinite variety of perceptual worlds that, though they are uncommunicating and reciprocally exclusive, are all equally perfect and linked together as if in a gigantic musical score.’⁶² An Afterword to Uexküll’s work published in translation in 2010 – *A Foray into the World of Animals and Humans*, in the *Posthumanities* series of the University of Minnesota Press – discusses *Umwelt*’s resonance with post-humanism, since it counters the claim that ‘nonhuman subjectivity’ does not exist and dispels the myth of the ‘abyss between animals and humans’.⁶³

The overlooked fact here, however, is that *Umwelt* is a concept theorised by the human researcher who studies organisms and formulates hypotheses about their modes of perception and experience. Uexküll himself writes about the human researcher who must perceive the environment with the ‘mind’s eye’⁶⁴ and ‘imagine’ – clearly an index of the fact that the enterprise is human-centred, enacted by a studious researcher who sets up the conditions for scientific observations of various organisms.⁶⁵ *Umwelt*, then, is a construct of humans undertaking the act of imagining the organism’s unique environment. The post-humanist removal of the human thus entails a performative contradiction, for those who theorise post-humanism are still fully using the power of thinking, explicating post-humanism from their all-too-human standpoints.

As post-humanists argue, it is imperative that we extricate ourselves from deeply rooted anthropocentrism and reconsider the world as something shared and not exclusively owned. However, it is quite another thing to suggest

61 See, for example, McKie 2015.

62 Agamben 2003, p. 40.

63 Winthrop-Young 2010, p. 222.

64 Uexküll 2010, p. 43.

65 Uexküll 2010, p. 206.

that transspecies egalitarianism necessitates the abandonment of the notion of human distinctiveness or severance from the idea of political agency, with which humans change the conditions in which they live. As Kate Soper argues, the idea of human distinctiveness or exceptionality need not be conflated with 'speciesist arrogance licensing cruelty to ... other species'.⁶⁶ Human exceptionality must simply be taken to mean that humans are beings capable of carving out a 'distinctive role of human imagination and sympathy in generating moral response', which is in fact precisely what post-humanism purports to do.⁶⁷ Moreover, the 'irony of any posthumanist invitation to collapse these distinctions is that if we were wholly able to do so, we would no longer recognise the force of the moral issues we are being called upon to address'.⁶⁸ In other words, collapsing the human–nonhuman distinction obviates the very necessity of human thought, moral response, and political community. The task then is not to cultivate self-denying humility by assuming that agency is shared, or that consciousness is distributed, but to acknowledge that no matter how open, multiple, and viral one imagines the subject to be, she will always be marked by the 'I' that cannot but think with her human perceptions and act with human motivations.

The Endurance of the Human

Indeed, contrary to how Foucault presaged that 'man' would be erased someday like a 'face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'⁶⁹ – the point being that 'man' is a flimsy invention, a fragile and 'strange empirico-transcendental doublet'⁷⁰ – it has made repeated comebacks, following erasure upon erasure. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter recognise this problem when they write that post-humanism is not so much about turning away from the idea of subjectivity itself as it is about theorising 'posthumanist subjectivities'.⁷¹ Christopher Peterson also notes post-humanism's inadvertent returns to humanist ideas (as understood by post-humanists) when, for example, the attempt to 'render the face of the human unknowable and unrecognizable' has the unintended consequence of *naming* the human as the 'posthuman', thereby 'lay[ing] claim

66 Soper 1986, p. 370.

67 Ibid.

68 Soper 1986, p. 375.

69 Foucault 1994, p. 387.

70 Foucault 1994, p. 318.

71 Callus and Herbrechter 2012, p. 261.

once again to a dubious self-knowledge'.⁷² Likewise, the attempt to break from humanism paradoxically reaffirms humanist ideas such as human perfectibility, for post-humanism's 'accretion of posts'⁷³ connotes the idea of making progressive transitions.

Referring to this persistence of humanism, Neil Badmington has likened it to a Lernaean hydra that regenerates itself each time parts of it are severed,⁷⁴ tacitly acknowledging the impossibility of erasing the traces of humanism. The critique of humanism thus cannot but 'take the form of a critical practice that occurs inside humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse'.⁷⁵ Such an exercise is about 'reading humanism *in a certain way*, against itself and the grain',⁷⁶ which will ultimately reveal that humanism is 'always already in disharmony with itself'.⁷⁷ It is overlooked that this resolution echoes the immanent critique of Hegelian philosophy, which recognises first and foremost that there is no external position from which to enact critique, so that it is always about opening up new possibilities from within by parsing out internal disharmony or contradiction. Badmington's post-humanist critique does acknowledge, however, that the subject is an inescapable concept – the minimum requirement for thinking *any* thoughts at all, post-humanist ones included.

Examining this abiding presence of the notion of the human subject, it may be helpful here to invoke Adorno's rendition of the subject–object relationship, the gist of which is that 'subjectivity ... becomes a moment that lasts'.⁷⁸ That is, the objective materiality that conditions, determines, and delimits human subjectivity does not so much extinguish the subject as perpetuate it, for the object becomes object only in relation to the subject. Only by being marked by subjectivity through 'reflection on the subject and subjective reflection'⁷⁹ does the object maintain objectivity.

In addition to this philosophical explanation, there is an even more explicit reason for humanism's endurance, which is simply that it contains positive qualities that post-humanism cannot entirely disown. As Braidotti states, while explaining her 'unresolved' relationship to humanism,⁸⁰ 'emancipation

72 Peterson 2011, p. 129.

73 Peterson 2011, p. 137.

74 Badmington 2003, pp. 10 ff.

75 Badmington 2003, p. 22.

76 Badmington 2003, p. 19.

77 Badmington 2003, p. 22.

78 Adorno 2000, p. 144.

79 Ibid.

80 Braidotti 2013, p. 25.

and progressive politics in general' is 'one of the most valuable aspects of the humanistic tradition and its most enduring legacy'.⁸¹ Its 'liberal side' advocates 'individualism, autonomy, responsibility and self-determination', while its 'more radical front ... promote[s] solidarity, community-bonding, social justice and principles of equality'.⁸²

These values are of absolute importance and now more urgently in need of being vigorously endorsed and practised. And a theory to be 'practised' is a notion that I want to emphasise here as what distinguishes humanism from post-humanism, for it implies a human agent that not only affirms but also negates, refusing to conform by being in constant critical movement by way of opposition. My argument is that Marxist and socialist humanism best theorises this kind of active, social human subject in a concrete relationship to her world.

By way of getting into the discussion of this line of humanism, however, I must first mention Edward Said, who although not a Marxist or a socialist,⁸³ is unique in envisioning and practising a similar kind of humanism that is emancipatory, progressive, and oppositional. His seeming borrowing from Foucault is well-noted, which might, with the kind of discursive analysis he offers especially regarding Orientalism, have placed him closer to the anti-humanists and poststructuralists. But there is a declared distance between Said's project and that of Foucault even in *Orientalism*: in the Introduction he writes that whereas for Foucault 'the individual text or author counts for very little',⁸⁴ for himself the crucial goal is to 'reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his work is a contribution'.⁸⁵ Said never forsakes the idea that it is the human agent who makes history; indeed, more than an analysis of Orientalist discourse as a faceless function, his work describes the processes of formations, circulations, receptions, and rejections as enacted by humans as they interact. These humans are specifically the 'individual writers' of Orientalism⁸⁶ as well as those peoples subjected to Orientalist discourse who might be internalising it and appropriating it.⁸⁷ Michael Sprinker describes Said as a 'non-communist

81 Braidotti 2013, p. 29.

82 Ibid.

83 See for example, Brennan 2013, Howe 2007 and Parry 2013.

84 Said 1979, p. 23.

85 Said 1979, p. 24.

86 Said 1979, p. 23.

87 Said 1979, p. 25.

intellectual on the anti-imperialist left,⁸⁸ and one might add here that he is also a non-communist humanist on the anti-imperialist left.

Defending the principles of intellectual openness (but not without being aware of the consequences of affiliating with particular intellectual lineages), Said defines humanism such that it is not a ready-made theory or a 'possession'⁸⁹ but a 'process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation'.⁹⁰ Although these unfixed and open characteristics render humanism vulnerable to distortions and misuses, this is perhaps in itself a sign of its pliability that can be directed towards self-critique and transformation. As Said argues, 'it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism'.⁹¹

In Defence of Humanism

Let me re-emphasise this idea of humanism as a dynamic, open-ended practice, for it preserves the idea that humans make history; a much-needed idea in the present theoretical milieu, which renders history opaque by de-subjectifying the subject while also subjectifying the object. Of course, as Soper writes, not all humanisms – such as scientific humanism,⁹² the 'anti-clericalism' of Enlightenment humanism,⁹³ or 'Romantic humanism'⁹⁴ – maintain this idea of humans-make-history with the same level of intensity and consistency. The idea became most distinct with Marxism, which Soper sums up as a theory in which 'people are conscious agents ... whose actions have real impact upon their conditions of existence'.⁹⁵ At the same time, however, 'these conditions are not themselves freely chosen',⁹⁶ meaning that there is neither agency so free that it is able to determine historical outcomes nor agency so completely conditioned by social structures as to be virtually ineffective. Limited though the parameters of human agency may be, one cannot '*explain it away*', for the people's 'will to change' undoubtedly affects the 'formation of the circumstances which provide the context of subsequent action and reaction'.⁹⁷

88 Sprinker 1993, p. 13.

89 Said 2004, p. 6.

90 Said 2004, pp. 21 ff.

91 Said 2004, p. 10.

92 Soper 1986, p. 14.

93 Soper 1986, p. 15.

94 Soper 1986, p. 16.

95 Soper 1986, p. 146.

96 Soper 1986, p. 147.

97 Soper 1986, p. 152.

This does not mean that the idea of human agency is without problems, as it can turn into an idealistic rendering of the ‘universal man as the creator of history’,⁹⁸ a concern Martin Jay argues is rightly raised by the Frankfurt School, and specifically by Adorno and Horkheimer who were increasingly suspicious of the idealistic and anthropocentric rendering of the human as the maker of the world. Indeed, Marxist and socialist humanism is not a unified theory, as the debates surrounding the issues of alienation and human nature make especially clear. There are disagreements, for example, around the question of whether the idea of human alienation posits an innately non-alienated unity, whose answer in the affirmative might raise concerns of descending into Romanticism. Or is the concept of alienation specific to the rise of capitalism? If so, do the efforts to overcome alienation also imply a historically developed idea of common humanity with a common goal? Does this, in turn, evince the possibility of a harmonious or reconciled world, whether in the past or in the future? As Jay explains, Marxist humanism can seem dubious to some anti-humanists and Marxists alike because it seems liable to slip into a reactionary, bourgeois, and metaphysical idea in responding to these questions.⁹⁹

Kevin Anderson concurs when he writes that some of the ‘creative aspects of the socialist humanist tradition ... remained too often in the realm of the abstract universal’.¹⁰⁰ Yet, the problem is not insurmountable, as he finds instances in which ‘forms of socialist humanism ... allow for the universal to particularise itself’, as it did in Dunayevskaya and Fanon.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Marxist and socialist humanism brings to the fore the non-identity between the human and the world as their relationship unfolds in lived history – that is, they show that humans make history, but in the context wherein the human is constantly made a stranger to the self, to the labour process, and to nature. This prompts humans to reflect on themselves as beings who shape cultural and social institutions, build systems of knowledge, and partake in the determination of social conditions, not as they wish but as they struggle under unyielding conditions. It highlights, in other words, that Marxist and socialist humanism is for transforming the lived ground that is increasingly de-humanising. Of course, as Barbara Epstein writes, socialist and Marxist humanism was short-lived for reasons ranging from disappointment in Soviet socialism to misreadings of Marx and the rise of poststructuralism.¹⁰² Despite its short-lived influence,

98 Jay 1972, p. 304.

99 Jay 1972.

100 Anderson 2017, p. 112.

101 Anderson 2017, p. 113.

102 Epstein 2017.

however, its affirmation of human freedom and human praxis is reflected in contemporary human rights and labour rights movements, as well as in discussions that dismantle the conceits of imperialism and racism. Dunayevskaya, for example, singles out the 'Hungarian Revolution of 1956', the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign, and 'African revolutions' as instances of liberation movements influenced by Marxist humanism.¹⁰³

The task that confronts us, then, is not the formation of a new theory that refashions the human into the post-human, but a strengthening of humanist thought that sustains the trajectory of progressive humanism and progressive modernity. By the latter, I do not mean the relentless march towards quantitative development using instrumental reason, but that which concerns the development of humans as social beings, transforming the ever-reifying world into a realm that accommodates human needs and growth. As Crystal Bartolovich argues, some irreversible and by-no-means trivial progress has been made for the sake of human well-being, and to carry on this project of modernity one must be selective and choose the modernity that is 'affirmatively human and progressive for all' over the 'modernity that *capitalism* makes'.¹⁰⁴ That humanity generates calamities is undeniable, but it is also equally true, as Göran Therborn argues, that 'humankind today is at a historical peak of its possibilities, in the sense of its capability and resources to shape the world, and itself'.¹⁰⁵ That we oftentimes forget this fact or meet it with scepticism is because historical progress entails setbacks and appears accidental, and because we are so much affected by the anti-democratic or neoliberal logic that presumes the non-existence of social freedom.¹⁰⁶

In truth, there are human accomplishments that propel processes of emancipation within various material as well as political constraints, not just in the field of medicine and technology but also in the more general field of 'art and craftsmanship' that involves human learning in all areas.¹⁰⁷ History not only reflects human-made calamities but also accomplishments, and in order to incorporate this complexity into our thinking about humanity we need a two-track endeavour: one involving the development of new, critical humanisms, and the other a revisiting of past iterations of humanisms, for they are being buried without having been fully realised or even modified to meet new historical conditions. Indeed, as Brennan observes, more attention is given to

103 Dunayevskaya 1965, p. 70.

104 Bartolovich 2010, p. 30.

105 Therborn 2016, p. 27.

106 Therborn 2016, p. 31.

107 Therborn 2016, p. 27.

the histories of anti-humanism than to the forms of modern humanism that appear, for example, in important statements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which itself was not an isolated expression but part of the larger global movement in which manifestos, constitutions, and declarations on human rights were written.¹⁰⁸

Another kind of revisiting the past is called for, as Shu-mei Shih argues, for we find that post-humanism is far from being a term that definitively describes the present epoch. Those yet denied freedom and rights would rather discuss the unresolved problems of dehumanisation on the grounds of humanist causes than shift to the discussion of non-human subjectivities. In other words, without consideration of the ‘agency of the anticolonial or decolonial human subject’,¹⁰⁹ post-humanism merely ‘serves as an alibi for further denial of humanity’.¹¹⁰ Moreover, given how the ‘collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War reconfigured the world in specific ways’, post-socialism, rather than post-humanism, may be the term more applicable worldwide.¹¹¹ The world of post-socialism sheds light on the forgotten values of Marxist humanism, which can be a ‘viable alternative to totalitarian socialism and neo-liberal humanism of the market’.¹¹² As an emancipatory and democratic project, Marxist humanism offers a viable figure of the ‘post-socialist human’, ‘post’ here not meaning moving beyond but following after and in relation to the unrealised projects of humanism and socialism.¹¹³

Humanism contra Post-humanism

In the light of such a re-envisioning of history, one realises that post-humanism is an anglocentric outlook that in fact bears no historical inevitability. For many around the world, post-humanity as a condition is not pervasive at all. In fact, the unfinished business of the twentieth century – from the issues of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to the tug-of-war over denuclearisation involving Iran and the Korean peninsula, the refugee crises and abiding xenophobia, or the increasing vulnerability of people amid global pandemics and decrepit healthcare systems – still necessitates a struggle for human rights and an establishment of common political goals through which alliances can be built

108 Brennan 2014, pp. 233 ff.

109 Shih 2012, p. 43.

110 Shih 2012, p. 30.

111 Shih 2012, p. 28.

112 Shih 2012, pp. 30 ff.

113 Shih 2012, p. 42.

across lines of class, ethnicity, and nationality. These issues hardly beckon the coming of post-humanity but rather portend the possibility of destruction and dehumanisation. They are also a far cry from evincing post-humanism's distributed, shared agency that overturns the simple us–them dynamic; if anything, they are evidence of how a supposedly old-fashioned struggle over hegemony and brute politics involving economic and military power persists more than two decades into the twenty-first century. Even the advances in the fields of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and nanotechnology – knowledges supposedly pushing humans to rethink the very meaning of the human – do not presage dashing liberating social relations but a continuation of capitalist logic. Glenn Rikowski argues that today's new sciences are a 'practical manifestation of [the] deep possession of the human by capital'; the new technologies, in other words, may serve to utilise the human as '*capitalised life-forms*'.¹¹⁴ This is the reason why, as Nick Dyer-Witherford observes, there are social movements – which he calls 'species-being movements' – that aim to 'intervene from below in technoscientific alteration, and to open channels for it other than those determined by commodification'.¹¹⁵

A look back into the history of progressive and Marxist humanism suggests that it has always been in the vanguard of understanding humans as altering and transforming beings, long before the post-humanist conception of the human as always in a state of 'becoming'. If for post-humanism the idea of the human-as-becoming lies in the tireless adaptation to and relating to the complexities of the world without really understanding the whole, so that, curiously, it bars possibilities from becoming actual, for humanism the idea of becoming is always directed at tapping into human creativities and actualising their potentialities. In humanism, the human is in the process of becoming 'for' and 'against', always with the intention to realise freedom in concrete terms. If this argument seems to suggest that humans innately and ontologically yearn for freedom, that is only because, in the face of several centuries of a fragmenting and antagonising politico-economic system, humans learned historically to develop and nurture the idea of freedom as the means to counter it.

Erich Fromm, for example, characterised humanism as a system of thought that always emerges as a 'reaction to a threat to mankind',¹¹⁶ not as a static philosophy that relegates humans to a safe, higher moral ground. It entails a more socially dynamic idea of humans as historically constituted and socially

114 Rikowski 2003, p. 122.

115 Dyer-Witherford 2004, p. 14.

116 Fromm 1965, p. viii.

mediated, engendered in a revolutionary spirit in anticipation of freedom and progress. For Ernst Bloch, following Marx, the idea of the human encapsulated in the notion of the 'citizen' was such a historically developed example, arising from the understanding that humans are those who engage in praxes to realise a common social vision. Although the idea of the citizen found its home in the bourgeoisie and its ideologies, for Bloch, humanity is what develops jointly with a revolutionary spirit, whose 'common tendency' is 'of a leap into freedom'.¹¹⁷ There is, then, no quintessential human nature that sustains humanism and that can be immortalised. As E.P. Thompson also notes, there is only a 'constantly developing *human potential*' that the humanism of a particular moment must be able to identify and name.¹¹⁸ Max Horkheimer, speaking of the historical nature of humanist thought, called such a characteristic 'active' – the human in 'active humanism' therefore is a social being that establishes a 'clear position toward the historical problems of the epoch',¹¹⁹ not an archetypal Man constituted out of an unchanging essence. Humanism is therefore not 'a mere profession of faith to itself'¹²⁰ but a position that arises in response to situations particular to the time. This is not to suggest that humanism is a kind of relativism that spurns appraisal and judgement, but that it is a historically specific idea, albeit with an unchanging impetus to explore what fully realises human freedom and potential. Humanism implies the knowledge that the social system, totalising as it may seem, always includes spaces from which one can cogitate on the alternatives. Another way of expressing this would be that humanism is liable to run amok, or be abused, because of its historical and practical character that operates on the ground and in reality. It is post-humanism, in that sense, that is the essentialising theory since it *insists* on the non-determinate, non-dualistic, and non-oppositional character of the human, who is always-already immanent in ecological relationships.

Post-humanism does not tackle what it deems to be complex problems of contemporary times; it gives into them by internalising the complexities of the world and seeing humans as inextricably embedded in them. Is it not the case, then, that post-humanism ends up reinforcing ongoing processes of human alienation, thereby reflecting the logic of capitalist society that alienates humans from the activities they undertake? Unable to break through the intensifying process of reification and objectification of all beings and things,

117 Bloch 1965, p. 227.

118 Thompson 1957, p. 124.

119 Horkheimer 1995, p. 307.

120 Ibid.

post-humanism attempts to outmanoeuvre alienation by rendering alienation a *de facto* condition of human existence. It naturalises alienation by turning passivity and finitude into an ontological condition that cannot be overcome, and by submitting humans to the forces and processes of nature that are always greater and grander than them.

To that end, revisiting Fanon's critical assessment of the human sciences is helpful, although he himself writes as a psychiatrist conducting a 'clinical study'.¹²¹ Referring to the scientific mode of inquiry that erases the social dimension of human existence, Fanon states that 'this is nothing more or less than the *capitulation of man*',¹²² for science's phylogenetic and ontogenetic approach and its tendency to read human psychology as 'biological processes'¹²³ insinuate that humans are no different from other animals and machines.¹²⁴ Human sciences, in other words, if wrongly conceived, 'get man to admit he is nothing, absolutely nothing'.¹²⁵ Against such reduction of humans into nothingness, Fanon's resolution is for humans to 'grasp [their] narcissism with both hands' and reject those who dehumanise them. Importantly, narcissism here does not mean moral and intellectual superiority but the impulse to understand humans 'in an everchanging light'.¹²⁶ As beings capable of constant self-reflection and transformation, humans keep the future open and envision the human that is yet to come. Humanist thought at its best enacts this definition, rejecting the claims of the obsolescence of the idea of the human, which in fact is still meaningfully operative for many people who assess that the problem is rather that we have not yet been human and humanistic enough. Post-humanism, seeing the same de-humanising conditions, devises two responses: it insists that the subject is always-already immanently connected, interdependent, and reciprocal, obviating the very need to address the issues of de-humanisation. It also argues, contradictorily, that the human is in fact irrelevant in the larger planetary context, even as it remains part of that dynamic world. An antidote to this self-annihilating and paralysing image of the human, humanism reminds us that, historically, humans have never been what post-humanism makes them out to be.

121 Fanon 2008, p. xvi.

122 Fanon 2008, p. 6.

123 Fanon 2008, p. xv.

124 Fanon 2008, p. 6.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

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Pandemic Capitalism: Metabolic Rift, World-Ecology Crossing Dialectical Biology

Jacopo Nicola Bergamo | ORCID: 0000-0002-1634-2094

Post-growth Innovation Lab, University of Vigo, Vigo, Galicia, Spain

jacoponicola.bergamo@uvigo.es

Abstract

In this article, I contrast two of the main schools of thought within eco-Marxism, namely Metabolic Rift (MR) and World-Ecology (WE). These differ above all else in their accounts of the ontological status of society and nature. The Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a moment of concretisation of this long-standing debate, which is able to dissolve at least in part its issues. The article consists of four parts. I begin with a summary of the two schools of thought and their core stances, before proceeding to unpack their respective theoretical points of contention. I subsequently proceed to explore the conceptualisation of health according to the Marxist scientists Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin through the model of dialectical biology. In the third section, I unpack the conceptualisation of the Covid-19 pandemic by the epidemiologist Robert Wallace, before finally concluding with the contrasts of the two schools in the light of dialectical biology.

Keywords

capitalism – pandemic – metabolic rift – World-Ecology – Marxism – dialectics

Introduction

In this article, I will address the theoretical-political questions that arose from the Covid-19 health crisis. Thus, I will show how the tradition of ecological Marxism constitutes an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that can provide an adequate understanding of the capitalist aetiology of the pandemic.

I will additionally illustrate how the pandemic constitutes a moment in which capitalist contradictions have been catalysed, and how this can resolve the existing problems in eco-Marxist debate.

In addition to the obvious reference to Marx's thought, the eco-Marxist field shares two cornerstones. From the historical point of view, it can be argued that the ecological crisis depends on the intrinsically harmful character of capitalism. From the methodological perspective, it is considered that the most promising approach for conducting the analysis of the impact of accumulation on the biosphere is dialectical materialism. However, it is possible to interpret in different ways both the concept of capital and the method of investigating its operation; hence, the profound differentiation and the perennial conflictuality within eco-Marxist thought.

I will examine two different schools of thought that have interpreted differently the Marxian framework in their analyses of ecological issues, *Metabolic Rift* (hereafter, MR) and *World-Ecology* (hereafter, WE). These are understood as the two extremes in an ongoing debate within eco-Marxism in recent years. The debate takes place around three central pillars: the relationship between nature and society; the relationship between economic crisis and ecological crisis with regards to the value theory of Marx; and the convenience of using or rejecting the scientific concept of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch. The different conceptualisations around these three aspects stem from a deeper ontological antithesis, which will be explained below.

The article is divided into four parts. First, I schematically outline the controversies around the theoretical conceptualisations of MR and WE. The object of contention in the debate between the two has ended up revolving around the ontological status of society and nature. While supporters of MR opt for a monism of substance and dualism of properties, supporters of WE prefer a radical monist approach based on a constitutive co-belonging.

In the second part, I critically discuss the interpretive foundation of both schools of thought, namely the dialectical biology of Levins and Lewontin. The reflections of the two Marxist scientists regarding the ideological critique of current models of public health will be addressed, in particular the narrative of epidemiological transition.

In the third part, I show how Robert Wallace, an evolutionary epidemiologist who has offered a Marxist analysis of epidemic emergence, adopted the tradition of Levins and Lewontin. Wallace proposes an interpretive paradigm of epidemic phenomena that integrates current World Health Organization models within class-based analytical frameworks. This highlights the potential and scientific correctness of Levins and Lewontin's approach.

The fourth and final part, the use of dialectical biology, allows for a comparative cross-examination of the two eco-Marxist schools against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. This highlights how the observations of MR and WE overlap and diverge from the dialectical approach of Levins and Lewontin.

The purpose of this article is to review the terms of the aforementioned debate and advance the hypothesis that the apparent impasse can, in fact, be at least partially resolved through analyses of the pandemic crisis. This case study allows for a kind of concretisation of the issues that have emerged. Further, it stands as an appropriate place for the unravelling of persistent theoretical knots.

The Controversy between Metabolic Rift and World-Ecology

In the last decade, two schools in eco-Marxism have clashed fiercely over the ontological status of society and nature: MR, headed by *Monthly Review* editor John Bellamy Foster, and Jason W. Moore's concept of WE.¹

MR is rooted in the Marxian tradition interpreting society and nature through the logic of relative autonomy and dialectical relations. Foster bases his proposal on a systematic interpretation of Marxian work from an ecological perspective.² He identifies work – as understood in the interpretative proposal of the mature Marx, i.e. in *Capital* – as the mediating element between society and nature. Work, in its metahistorical meaning, is conceived by Marx as a process in which humans regulate and control their metabolism with nature through their own actions.³ What determines the metabolic rift is the alienated condition of work in capitalist society, which is linked to the alienation from nature.⁴ Marx had already grasped the alienated dimension of nature, first in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*⁵ and then in the manuscript in collaboration with Engels, *The German Ideology*, through the concept of the antagonism between town and country.⁶ Essentially, this represents the matrix of the overall rift between the universal metabolism of nature and the alienated social metabolism. Marx would have understood that the separation between workers and the means of production of the primitive accumulation

1 For an exhaustive discussion, see Bergamo 2022.

2 Foster 2000.

3 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 35, p. 187.

4 Saito 2017a, 2017b; Foster 2000.

5 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 266.

6 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 32.

also separates the human being from the earth and thus from the immediate link between nature and human production.⁷ The latter becomes increasingly socially mediated to the extent that production under capitalism acquires a character apparently independent of nature.⁸ Foster invites us to think of his theoretical effort in tandem with that of economist Paul Burkett,⁹ who analysed the concept of value in Marxian work from an ecological perspective as ‘alienated use value’. Value is a historically determined category, typically, for capitalism, based on (abstract) labour. Wealth, on the other hand, is a meta-historical concept linked to use values whose contribution derives both from (concrete) labour and from nature, which, when it does not directly provide use values to satisfy human needs, constitutes the material substratum of all production.¹⁰

WE, in contrast, proposes to radicalise the Marxian dialectic with the concept of *Oikeios*.¹¹ Although Moore’s references to Bruno Latour are limited, Alf Hornborg argues that the common monistic jargon, through which Moore gives a posthuman twist to Marxism, is evident.¹² It is therefore possible to grasp a common hybrid conception, according to which there are no absolute discontinuities between society and nature, on either an epistemological or ontological level.¹³ This school of thought assumes that implementing the separation between nature and society would be functional to the capitalist world-ecology, conceived as ‘a way of organizing nature’.¹⁴ The accumulation process of the capitalist world-ecology is analysed under its triple aspects of capital, science and empire.¹⁵ Additionally, it is based on *Cheap Nature*, also understood in its derogatory meaning, in the sense of ‘degraded’ nature.¹⁶ It is indeed central to WE’s theoretical conception to think of nature as a historically specific product of the social relations defined by the world-ecology complex. Nature is what can be appropriated without being paid for, regardless of being human or not.¹⁷ This separating process between humanity and nature consists of a real – and violent – abstraction that facilitates the unpaid

7 Foster 2000.

8 Ibid.

9 Foster 2014.

10 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 24, p. 81.

11 This means ecological niche, and stands for the inseparability of organism and environment. Moore 2015b.

12 Hornborg 2020.

13 Latour 2013.

14 Moore 2015b, p. 160.

15 Moore 2015b, p. 150.

16 Moore 2014, p. 250.

17 Moore 2015a, p. 54.

appropriation of the labour/energy of nature, women and colonies. The capitalist world-ecology has its roots in the long sixteenth century's material as well as symbolic accumulation processes, philosophically abetted by Cartesian rationalism. In other words, the dualism between society and nature constitutes the very engine of capitalist world-ecology. The process of accumulation proceeds through two successive moments: the first extends the frontiers of appropriation, producing Cheap Nature; the second intensifies the dynamic of exploitation based on the commodification of labour-power.¹⁸

The debate between the two schools has thus far been fierce. On the one hand, Jason Moore accuses Foster of repositing the nature–society dualism within the concept of MR. According to Moore, Foster bifurcates metabolism into the social and the natural rather than conceiving it in its deepest unity. For Moore, this means that, in Foster's vision, nature is once again proposed as a background passive element, in 'crisis' or disturbed by capitalist social metabolism, and thus stripped of the element of irreducible creativity that every conformation of the WE would instead highlight. Foster, on the other hand, posits that Moore's monistic radicalisation of the *Oikeios* is nothing more than a hyper-constructivist approach estranged from Marx's dialectical tradition. According to Foster, Moore's hybrid ontology would as such become 'flat', tending to obscure the extent of the ecological crisis behind a rhetoric that is easily recuperated by neoliberalism, especially by concepts such as the green economy and other purely techno-scientific solutions to the ecological crisis.¹⁹

The above debate has sparked vivid and international engagement in recent years.²⁰ However, for the purposes of this article, I argue that the conceptual backbone of eco-Marxism is both validated and challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic. This argument lies in the assumption that the ecological crisis depends on the intrinsically harmful character of capital as a social relation. Further, this destructiveness is first and foremost inflicted upon the bodies of those who work. In the words of Marx:

Such economy extends to overcrowding close and unsanitary premises with labourers, or, as capitalists put it, to space saving; to crowding dangerous machinery into close quarters without using safety devices, to neglecting safety rules in production processes pernicious to health, or, as in mining, bound up with danger, etc. Not to mention the absence of all provisions to render the production process human, agreeable, or at

18 Moore 2015b, pp. 99–105.

19 Foster 2016.

20 Leonardi 2019a, 2019b; Malm 2017, 2018; Angus 2016; Murphy 2016; Saito 2017a.

least bearable. From the capitalist point of view this would be quite a useless and senseless waste. [...] Capitalist production [...] is very economical with the materialised labour objectified in commodities. Yet, more than any other mode of production, it squanders human lives, or living labour, and not only blood and flesh, but also nerve and brain.²¹

However, in the second instance, the co-determining dimension of production and health reveals how the harmful dimension of capitalism goes beyond the narrow confines of the place of production to invest the entire socio-ecological complex on a regional and global scale.²² This forces us to think about biology in new terms, by socialising it. To clarify this aspect, it is therefore necessary to retrace the origins of the eco-Marxist reflection inscribed in the dialectical biology of Levins and Lewontin, a legacy to which both MR and WE refer.

The Dialectical Biology of Levins and Lewontin

In this section, I propose an aetiological and structural interpretation of the pandemic. In the next section, I will show the effectiveness of this approach with the evolutionary epidemiology of Rob Wallace. Finally, I will trace the ontological conceptions underlying Levins and Lewontin's method to show its compatibilities and incompatibilities with both MR and WE. In short, I posit that the recent pandemic is an unprecedented vector of concretisation for the debate that has recently divided eco-Marxism.

No one has contributed more than Rob Wallace to providing a solid Marxist interpretation of the origins of Covid-19.²³ As I will describe below, Wallace's approach is explicitly indebted to the fathers of dialectical biology, namely Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin.²⁴

Before addressing Levins' and Lewontin's reflections on dialectical biology, it is necessary to unpack the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has been received in the public sphere.

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was met with disbelief and astonishment by the general public, the media, and governments. Although it was evident as early as November

21 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 37, pp. 90, 92.

22 An argument that I previously suggested in conjunction with Leonardi, but with a different conclusion. See Bergamo and Leonardi 2020.

23 Wallace 2020a.

24 Wallace explicitly acknowledges his theoretical debt to Levins. Wallace, Kock, Bergmann, Gilbert, Hogerwerf, Pittiglio, Mattioli and Wallace 2018, p. 114.

2019 that an unusually potent epidemic had struck the Chinese city of Wuhan, the spread of the epidemic to the West appeared impossible.

Two elements have produced an imaginary distance between what happens in a Chinese metropolis and what is perceived as possible in the West. Firstly, the image of ‘wild’ food consumption has contributed to the notion that the spread of epidemics is a Chinese issue and a Chinese issue alone due to the ‘inappropriate’ consumption of exotic animals and their commercialisation. While it is true that scientific hypotheses identify the Wuhan wet market as the presumed site of spillover – the species jump that the virus made between bat, pangolin and human²⁵ –, this has been politically exploited by the right to racialise the virus and spread Sinophobia. Secondly, the mobility freeze imposed in Hubei province, however drastic, fitted the Eurocentric imaginary perfectly. This imaginary has always cultivated the idea of a substantial dissonance between the democratic West and the authoritarian East. As a result, the introduction of lockdowns in Europe through March and April 2020 was even more disorienting for the general public of Western countries.²⁶ These two aspects are rooted in an ideological dimension, which in turn is anchored in the idea of progress. Even if in a state of crisis, progress ultimately remains part of Western collective common sense, explaining why the imaginary has conceived of epidemics as unthinkable in Western countries.

This ideological conception is based on the belief that different regions of the world are in different historical phases in line with their economic and social development. Progress, as conceived in the above way, also contains a conception of public health.²⁷ The perception is that with economic market development comes more resources for innovative advances in the medical sciences. New treatments are discovered, life expectancy is extended, and cutting-edge vaccines or antibiotics see the light of day. This leads to the gradual disappearance of infectious diseases, which are replaced by chronic or degenerative diseases, such as the cardio-vascular and oncological. This process has traditionally been described by the concept of *epidemiological transition*.²⁸

Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin have highlighted that this ideological conception is due to the dual nature of science: it constitutes ‘the generic

25 Quammen 2012; while this is the main hypothesis, it is important to note that the WHO calls for new studies and reiterates that all hypotheses remain open. World Health Organization 2021a; Zhou and Shi 2021.

26 For a discussion on the limits of the lockdown strategy and state intervention, see: Sotiris 2020; Dale 2021; Toscano 2020; Malm 2020.

27 Pansera and Owen 2018a, 2018b.

28 Theory first presented by Abdel R. Omran in 1971. See Omran 1971.

development of human knowledge over millennia'; on the other hand, it is also 'the specific, increasingly commodified product of a capitalist knowledge industry'.²⁹ This duality is a result of modern social asymmetry, which develops technological tools and laboratories while leaving social organisation, including public health, to the anarchy of competition. For Levins and Lewontin, however, it is important to highlight the dialectical relationships within society and between society and the rest of nature in the emergence of new diseases. This means that every major change in society, population, land use, the global climate, nutrition, or migration is also a public health event with its own pattern of diseases.³⁰

The reasons behind this scientific blind spot can be found in the ideology of health progress. The theoretical assumptions of most public health specialists have historically suffered from several constraints:

- i. Short-termism
- ii. Public health being reduced to human health
- iii. Disregard for ecology and the evolution of species
- iv. Oversight as to how responses to pathogens can affect their evolution
- v. The expectation that development will generate widespread prosperity and more resources for public health³¹

In contrast, Levins and Lewontin developed a dialectical conception of biology that emphasises the link between the natural-science conceptions of biology/evolution and social structuring. From this perspective, the emergence of new pathogens and diseases originates in the dialectics between the organic and the inorganic as well as between the social and the natural.³² The ideological dimension of biology occludes this reality. Levins and Lewontin argue:

While change and motion were the intellectual motifs of the bourgeois revolution, as a legitimisation of the overturning of old class relations, the consolidation of that revolution in the latter part of the nineteenth and in the twentieth century has required a different view, consonant with a

29 Levins and Lewontin 2007, p. 9.

30 Levins and Lewontin 2007, p. 19.

31 Levins and Lewontin 2007, pp. 19–20.

32 Levins and Lewontin's dialectical biology is based on a reinterpretation of dialectical materialism, no longer understood in the positivist and mechanistic sense with which it was canonised under Soviet Stalinism, but by grasping the primacy of processes over entities, overcoming on the one hand reductionist materialist conceptions and on the other holistic idealist ones, and in general dichotomous oppositions. The ecological and biological sciences are in a sense the demonstration of the validity of the materialist dialectic thus understood. See Levins and Lewontin 1985, pp. 269 ff.

newly stabilized society. Change had to be tamed in science as it was in society. The result has been an emphasis in modern evolutionary theories on dynamic stability. Although individual elements in the system are changing place, the system as a whole remains in a steady state; in the same way individuals may rise and fall in the social scale, but the hierarchy of social relations is thought to be unchanging. [...] The description of the evolution of biological systems is a mirror of the supposed evolution of modern bourgeois society.³³

Thus, the epidemiological-transition approach should be replaced by a dynamic and ecological perspective on health. Meaning that ‘with any major change in the way of life of a population (such as population density, patterns of residence, means of production), there will also be a change in our relations with pathogens, their reservoirs, and with the vectors of diseases’.³⁴ Current public-health ideology is characterised by reductionism and a vision that is too focused on the immediate. Although the *One Health* model adopted by the WHO – which is based on the recognition of human health, animal health and ecosystem health as inextricably linked processes – has an ecological perspective,³⁵ it continues to abstract from the class character of society and thus of health. Levins and Lewontin propose a socialisation of biology that recognises the biological conditions of the human body in relation to the social dimension; a different perspective aimed at extending the right to health, but also at changing the forms in which it is implemented. Levins and Lewontin argue that ‘[a] Marxist approach to health would attempt to integrate the insights of ecosystem health, environmental justice, the social determination of health, “health care for all”, and alternative medicine’.³⁶

Levins and Lewontin repeatedly emphasise that the link between ecology and health is mediated by the social. The clash between vulgar socio-biological determinism and subjectivism, namely between a conception according to which human biological characteristics immediately determine social characteristics or the almost total independence of the latter from the former, leads to the dividing line between biological and social. Liberal thought attempts to combine them through statistical models, assigning them relative

33 Levins and Lewontin 1985, p. 22.

34 Levins and Lewontin 2007, p. 300.

35 World Health Organization 2017.

36 Levins and Lewontin 2007, p. 310.

weights and some mechanism of interaction, without understanding their co-determination.³⁷

An infection or chronic exhaustion may be mere biological facts, but health is a social category defined through the power relations between dominant and subordinate classes.³⁸ Therefore, in line with this dialectical approach, infectious diseases are defined as diseases in which the pathogen is *one* of the components, but not the only one.³⁹ The SARS-CoV-2 virus may well be a biological agent, yet the greater Covid-19 pandemic it would go on to engender remains a social phenomenon as health outcomes are determined by differing levels of vulnerability and susceptibility within the population.⁴⁰

In the book *At Risk*, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis and Ben Wisner highlight how vulnerable conditions limit the ability to respond to natural disasters or pandemics.⁴¹ Vulnerable people are thus squeezed between previous unequal conditions and the increased pressure generated by catastrophic events. However, this model remains partial, and has recently been complemented by that of Andreas Malm. Malm argues that capitalism and imperialism not only generate the social inequalities at the origin of the conditions of vulnerability, in which the majority of the world's population finds itself, albeit with considerable differences, within, but it is also the driving force behind some of these same 'natural' disasters.⁴² I will discuss this further below.

What is essential to highlight is that, in line and congruent with the view of dialectical biology, Panagiotis Sotiris shows that the current pandemic has its own ecology, and further that it is fully social. For example, some of the social conditions for the virus' lethality lie in the concentration of frail individuals in old people's homes. This phenomenon is determined by the forms of social reproduction, which conceive of the elderly and frail as important clients of (private) healthcare services and at the same time as a supernumerary population. Growing inequalities, such as poor housing and environmental conditions, or the scarcity of local health facilities, as well as the spread of co-morbidities such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension and asthma are part of

37 Levins and Lewontin 2007, p. 35; Compare Haila and Levins 1992, pp. 146 and following.

38 Haila and Levins 1992, p. 117.

39 Haila and Levins 1992, p. 118.

40 Levins and Lewontin 2007, pp. 297 and following; Sotiris 2020.

41 The essay 'At Risk' constitutes a Marxist investigation of the link between natural catastrophes and social inequalities, showing how fragile subjects find themselves squeezed between the social context and the increased pressure of the catastrophe in an increased vulnerability that does not allow them to cope with the event. Blaikie, Cannon, Davis and Wisner 2014.

42 Malm 2020.

the ecology of the actual pandemic. Furthermore, all these factors are often linked to unhealthy lifestyles intertwined with class conditions or polluted environments, as well as racism. This theory is amply supported by data showing huge differences in mortality rates according to geographical area, ethnic group membership, and social group.⁴³ These differences are now also evident at the global level with unequal distribution of vaccines.⁴⁴ Everything points in one direction: 'Infection is not simply a biological event; in many respects it is a social process'.⁴⁵

Marxism and Epidemiology

Robert Wallace, a US epidemiologist whose fame grew following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, developed his analysis from Levins and Lewontin's theoretical standpoint. Indeed, the theoretical principles set out by Levins and Lewontin underpin Wallace's investigations into evolutionary epidemiology.⁴⁶ In studying the spread of Ebola in West Africa around 2015, Robert Wallace and colleagues tested a new epidemiological study model,⁴⁷ later expounded in *Big Farms Make Big Flu* as *Structural One Health*. Wallace and colleagues quantify the relationships between the capital circuits through which new diseases arise and their subsequent dynamics. Their argument is that capital circuits provide advantages to pathogens for their genetic evolution and spatial spread. This approach 'empirically formalizes the connections among capital-led changes in the landscape and shifts in wildlife, agricultural, and human health'.⁴⁸

Observing the evolution of the ongoing pandemic, Wallace's analysis seems to be confirmed:

The capital backing the kinds of development and production driving disease emergence in the underdeveloped parts of the globe potentially reverses causality, turning New York, London, and Hong Kong, key centers of global capital, into three of the world's worst 'hotspots' instead.⁴⁹

43 Sotiris 2020.

44 This will be discussed in a moment, but suffice it to note that not only does access to vaccines totally change the risks involved and the spread of contagion, but that areas with high vaccination rates and areas without generate a new ecology of contagion.

45 Sotiris 2020, p. 7.

46 Wallace, Kock, Bergmann, Gilbert, Hogerwerf, Pittiglio, Mattioli and Wallace 2018, p. 114.

47 Wallace and Wallace (eds.) 2016.

48 Wallace 2016, p. 300.

49 Wallace 2016, p. 302.

The scientific process of managing outbreaks of epidemics is based on the reification of the status quo and the deep social costs associated with it. Epidemic research acts ideologically within a narrow approach and implicitly delegitimises alternatives. Epidemic research assumes that both the state and the market are part of a supposedly natural order. This assumption obscures the fact that the mechanisms of the capitalist system are fundamental to the emergence and spread of pathogens, as well as playing a further role in the proliferation and spread of variants and heterogeneous mortality rates.⁵⁰ Drawing on an insight of Jason W. Moore,⁵¹ Wallace shows how the complex structuring circuit of capital, with its incessant commodifying movement, does not *have* an epidemiology but rather *is* an epidemiology.⁵²

Structural One Health presents a profound approach, located at the fundamentals of epidemiological and health research. Wallace places emergency

50 At the time of writing this article, the phenomenon of SARS-CoV-2 variants was not yet the main concern related to the pandemic phenomenon. Now [September 2021] it is becoming clear that not only in the genesis and spread of the Covid-19 virus, but also in its evolution, spread and geographical distribution of the variants, capital circuits must be taken into account according to Structural One Health criteria. In the first phase, the rich countries of the West staked their entire pandemic containment strategy on more or less tight and effective lockdowns, alternating between open and closed periods. As vaccines were developed and distributed, these states moved into a second phase of decisive openings in order to safeguard economic growth, strategically focusing on rapid mass vaccination. Despite the WHO's attempts to promote the COVAX programme for vaccination in developing countries, the decision not to suspend patents on vaccines, the pharmaceutical industry's monopoly and the hoarding of doses by rich countries in the West are leading to vaccine apartheid. Class divisions in access to vaccines were initially excluded, since vaccines were not a freely purchasable commodity, and later returned in the form of economic disparities between states. While in Europe, the United States, Israel and Japan between 60 and 80% of the population are vaccinated with a first dose, in low-income countries this figure only amounts to 2%. In the West we talk of third, sometimes fourth doses, while in Africa almost the entire population has not had access to a first dose. This means areas exist where the virus circulates more slowly, while in others it spreads practically unhindered. This 'vaccine nationalism' could be a recipe for the emergence of resistant variants, as well as a strategy failure to eradicate Covid. The inequitable distribution of vaccines is mainly attributable to the West, and in particular to the USA and Europe. Nations in the West hoard vaccines to accelerate the economic rebound, promote domestic political stability, and favour their own pharmaceutical companies, which in turn take advantage of this to raise prices. It should be noted that China's policy is much more oriented towards exporting or distributing its vaccines free of charge, as well as advocating the suspension of patents. Compare Foster 2021; World Health Organization 2021b; Reuters 2021; Our World in Data [25 September] 2021; United Nations 2021.

51 'Capitalism does not *have* an ecological regime; it *is* an ecological regime'. Moore 2015a, p. 161.

52 Wallace 2016, p. 305.

medicine, or for that matter treatment, vaccination, and animal culling, at the top of a pyramidal visualisation of health management. This addresses the immediate causes of illness and operates within a crisis-management scenario. At the second level is preventive medicine, which works through precautionary vaccinations, public hygiene measures, diets, and other measures. This level tries to anticipate the spread of disease between humans and animals. One Health is placed on the third level. One Health operates through studies integrating the area of human health with animal and environmental health. By selecting specific diseases, it studies the increasing pressures between the human environment, natural ecosystems, and agriculture. Underlying this third level, Structural One Health aims to incorporate structural inputs into its field of study. This includes deep historical time, cultural infrastructure, and capital circuits. Structural One Health investigates structural crises of fundamental unsustainability and imbalances in the global social and natural system that produce the conditions for the emergence of diseases.⁵³ Synthetically, Structural One Health does not replace the One Health approach but adapts it from local to global levels and extends it in its temporal analysis. This vision brings together the concrete and universal dimensions. It is thus able to generate the dialectical effect of integrating the ecosystem analysis of health phenomena into the critique of capitalism.

Wallace paints a disconcerting picture:

The lengthier the associated supply chains and the greater the extent of adjunct deforestation, the more diverse (and exotic) the zoonotic pathogens that enter the food chain. Among recent emergent and reemergent farm and foodborne pathogens, originating from across the anthropogenic domain, are African swine fever, *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Cyclospora*, Ebola Reston, *E. coli* O157:H7, foot-and-mouth disease, hepatitis E, *Listeria*, Nipah virus, Q fever, *Salmonella*, *Vibrio*, *Yersinia*, and a variety of novel influenza variants, including H1N1 (2009), H1N2v, H3N2v, H5N1, H5N2, H5Nx, H6N1, H7N1, H7N3, H7N7, H7N9, and H9N2.⁵⁴

It is possible to trace a continuity between these assessments of epidemic emergence and the statements made by both Paul Burkett and David Harvey at different times. For both of them money is a real abstraction shaping an atomistic world whose components can be added or subtracted in its incessant profit-driven motion, under the illusion that this does not affect the

53 Wallace 2016, p. 307.

54 Wallace, Liebman, Chaves and Rodrick 2020.

socio-ecological totality.⁵⁵ In this regard, Friedrich Engels warned against this way of conceiving socio-ecological interaction:

[N]ature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first.⁵⁶

From the perspective of the socio-ecological totality, the epidemic is determined at several levels:

- i. In the simplification of natural habitats. Deforestation as well as monocultures simplify the ecosystem, increase interactions with ‘wild viruses’, and increase the spillover phenomenon.
- ii. Through intensive monoclonal livestock breeding. This favours more virulent and contagious pathogens, which are in turn liable to create spillover (as has already happened with epidemics such as bird flu or swine fever).⁵⁷
- iii. In the commodification of wild animals. This activity increases interactions between zoonotic vectors and humans, as humans venture into the middle of forests for hunting and expose themselves to new pathogens.⁵⁸
- iv. In the global circuit of supply chains. Pathogens spread along with humans, goods, and live animals along global trade routes. Thus, localised epidemic effects have the potential to become global pandemics.⁵⁹

Wallace and his research group challenge two of the best-known approaches to pandemic management, namely Imperial College’s approach as well as the approach of the research group around Nassim Taleb.⁶⁰ Wallace argues that both approaches naturalise the social in order to focus solely on the health emergency. In particular, the epistemology of the *black swan* – namely, an anomalous, extreme event that can only be explained *a posteriori*⁶¹ – is said to be flawed because it assumes a failure to predict as an epistemic opacity, as

55 Burkett 2014, p. 86; Harvey 1993, p. 6.

56 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 25, pp. 460–1.

57 Compare Davis 2005; Wallace 2016.

58 Compare Di Marco *et al.* 2020; Malm 2020.

59 Compare Foster and Suwandi 2020. See also Genovese, Acquaye, Figueroa and Koh 2017 for a critique of the sustainability of the supply chain in relation to the circular economy.

60 Compare Shen, Taleb and Bar-Yam 2020, available at: <<https://necsi.edu/review-of-ferguson-et-al-impact-of-non-pharmaceutical-interventions>>; Walker *et al.* 2020, available at: <<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/mrc-gida/2020-03-26-COVID19-Report-12.pdf>>.

61 Taleb 2007.

if this were equivalent to physical randomness. Black swan theory starts from assumptions typical of methodological individualism, eternalising the social and making it anti-historical.⁶² In contrast, from an epidemiological perspective, the commodification of livestock and poultry is seen as the root of deadly epidemics. According to Wallace such conclusions have been suppressed by US agribusiness.⁶³ Wallace's method echoes that of Levins and Lewontin. Levins and Lewontin argue that the mistake lies in taking the individual as the causal element that precedes the whole and not appreciating that the social has causal properties within which individual consciousness and action are framed.⁶⁴

Wallace proposes that there should be an interpenetration rather than a juxtaposition of chance and necessity. It is vital to determine the cause of an emergency in order to plan for its management. Since structural factors have been shown to act as contributing causes, integrating them helps one understand how to respond in a way that goes beyond merely restarting the very economy that caused the damage in the first place. Capitalist rationality is based on the practice of continually externalising social and environmental costs of production.⁶⁵ This is also in accordance with the principle of unequal ecological exchange, such as particularly affects the global South.⁶⁶ With this *modus operandi*, business as usual represents a dangerous game of brinkmanship that gambles with the greater good of humanity's collective health in the interest of short-term profit.⁶⁷

From the above perspective, eco-Marxism very clearly highlights the irreconcilable antithesis between the (ir)rationality of (individual) profit and the rationality of (collective) well-being. While the former tends to homogenise genetic crops with a view to cutting costs (thereby creating conditions conducive to the accelerated circulation of pathogens), the latter suggests raising the level of biodiversity in each sector with a view to minimising risks. For example, from the perspective of large multinationals it makes perfect sense to take the risk of triggering an epidemic (or worse). In favourable circumstances, profits are internalised without redistribution, whereas in unfavourable circumstances, the costs are externalised to society – as is now the case with public health services – and to the natural environment.

62 Wallace 2016, p. 219.

63 Wallace 2016, p. 208.

64 Levins and Lewontin 2007, p. 30.

65 O'Connor 2021.

66 Compare Wallace 2020b.

67 Wallace 2020b.

Another aspect of fundamental importance is the relationship between the Covid-19 health crisis and global warming. Even though it may seem counter-intuitive to relate the two phenomena, it should be stressed that the underlying drivers of both are largely the same.⁶⁸ In this context, the Covid-19 health crisis and global warming correspond in magnitude to Andreas Malm's metaphor of a bullet and a war, respectively. For example, deforestation, as previously argued, is a major cause of zoonosis. It is also an activity that removes one of the most important loci for the absorption of CO₂ (the atmosphere's principal greenhouse gas). Furthermore, extensive livestock production is a major cause of forest clearing in equatorial areas, while intensive livestock production is a major source of pathogens. Both are also a huge source of greenhouse gases.⁶⁹

One Step Back, Two Steps Forward

So far, I have highlighted how, deriving from Levins and Lewontin's socialised biology, Wallace's conception of health arrives at an interpretative model of epidemic phenomena that integrates the current WHO paradigm with the structural dimension of capital circuits and class relations. It is now possible to analyse the positions of the previously mentioned two eco-Marxist schools of thought in this context. Foster and Suwandi follow Wallace's analysis to argue that the Covid-19 pandemic represents the first crisis in the global supply chain. For them, the new pathogens are (un)intentionally generated by the agri-food business. These pathogens are not 'natural-material use values', but 'toxic residues of the capitalist production system', traceable to the global 'commodity chains of the agri-food business'.⁷⁰ Moore, for his part, has not engaged directly with the topic. However, he has argued previously that the capitalist world-ecology is producing negative values, which correspond to the tendency of extra-human natures to evolve faster than the technological disciplines of capitalist agriculture. The emergence and spread of new viruses imply the co-evolution of labour/energy forms that are unfavourable to capital accumulation, a problem that cannot easily be fixed with strategies of world-ecology.⁷¹ Following this interpretation, for Moore, rather than 'toxic waste', the viruses at the origin of the new epidemics are negative values that

68 Malm 2020, Chapter 3.

69 Malm 2020, chapters 1–2; Gibbs, Harris and Seymour 2018.

70 Foster and Suwandi 2020.

71 Moore 2015a, p. 283.

escape the rational capacity of capital while constituting both destructive and creative acts. The evolution of viruses marks an insurmountable limit for the capitalist world-ecology.

At a first glance, if one considers Foster's theory of MR exclusively in its best known and most popular form, that is through the logical matrix of the antagonism between town and country that has as its object the rupture of natural cycles, it seems logical to concur with Moore; in other words, agreeing that Foster's theory is deficient because it makes nature passive without recognising its 'creative acts'. By analogy with the exchange of metabolites, the virus becomes a toxic waste of production, much like excrement and scrapped raw materials in the separation of town and country. Waste products are massively accumulated and become toxic residues, since they are not returned to the countryside by fertilising the land.⁷² From this perspective, the concept of the MR remains appropriate in analysing some phenomena of capitalist ecological degradation, such as the impoverishment of farmland, but it is not exhaustive. However, going back to the ontological analysis and situating it at a deeper level, it appears that this first impression is reversed, showing the accuracy of MR. On the contrary, I would argue that the dialectical materialism of Foster's school is fully consistent with the dialectical thought of Levins and Lewontin; and furthermore, much more so than Moore's approach. Let us proceed step by step, firstly highlighting some key passages in Levins' and Lewontin's dialectical biology, and secondly by showing the full consequence with MR and the distance with WE.

Because it would contradict the fluidity and historicity of Marxist thought, Levins and Lewontin's idea of dialectics is not a formal, rigid, and dogmatic set of rules. Since the dialectical worldview considers the world as a heterogeneous realm in which at every level there is a relationship of co-implication between the whole and the parts, the aim of dialectical science is to grasp the object of study in all its dimensions without reductionism.⁷³ Another central element is the primacy of processes over entities. While the reductionist looks at invariance as a normal condition until this is proven otherwise, the dialectician expects change but recognises the apparent constant.⁷⁴ To this another critique of fixity must be added. Systems destroy the laws that brought them into being and thus create new conditions. Hence, not only are entities not fixed, neither are the laws of change themselves fixed.

72 Compare Foster 2000, pp. 147–9.

73 Levins and Lewontin 1985, p. 271.

74 Levins and Lewontin 1985, p. 277.

Foster together with his colleagues Brett Clark and Richard York have discussed dialectical materialism on several occasions. In their work a great theoretical complicity with the insights of dialectical biology can be observed. Further, for Foster and his colleagues, Marx's materialism is dialectical and processual (and in particular historical), and entities are but contingent stabilisations of different forces.⁷⁵ 'Marx's basic ontological scheme for understanding the world, as with Hegel, was one of internal relations' whereby each part is embedded in its relation to the others with which it constitutes a whole.⁷⁶ This reasoning also applies to nature, which, contrary to Moore's critique, is rendered anything but passive for two reasons. Firstly, because for Foster and colleagues, following Marx, 'reality is first and foremost historical, and Natural history has to be studied along with social history – neither was to be viewed as passive; both were characterized by complex laws of change and contradiction'.⁷⁷ Secondly, because nature is neither mechanical nor teleological, but open to contingency.⁷⁸ Moreover, Foster and colleagues, following Levins and Lewontin, in their dialectical-materialist ontology reject any reductionism, be it that of materialist essentialism or idealist holism.⁷⁹ The latter is in fact reflected in Naess's deep-ecology theories or Lovelock's Gaia hypotheses, which see nature as 'a passive, harmonious realm "out there" beyond the bounds of urban society'.⁸⁰ Finally, unlike Moore's *Oikeios* theory of the double internality of society and nature, Foster and colleagues recognise an internality, but through an emergence of properties. Just as the organic emerges from the inorganic, so the social emerges from the organic.⁸¹ In short:

[H]uman history remains part of natural history but is not subsumed by it – that is, society is embedded in nature and dependent on it, although there are distinct social and natural processes. A dialectical relationship exists between society and nature, as they continually transform each

75 Foster, Clark and York 2011, Chapter 13, p. 20.52.

76 Foster, Clark and York 2011, Chapter 13, p. 20.53.

77 Foster, Clark and York 2011, Chapter 13, p. 20.55.

78 Foster, Clark and York 2011, Chapter 13, p. 20.80.

79 It is beyond the scope of this paper to expand on these two trends in the biological sciences. The biological sphere sees a clash between idealistic holistic positions and mechanistic materialist positions, which, although apparently antithetical, are said to be the bearers of a reductionism whose emphasis is on the whole, or the parts, according to the case. These tendencies would include the superorganism theories and the selfish-genotypic theories of Richard Dawkins. Levins and Lewontin 1985.

80 Foster, Clark and York 2011, Chapter 14, p. 21.4.

81 Foster and Burkett 2016.

other in their coevolutionary development. The direction of this relationship is not predetermined; the future remains open.⁸²

On the other hand, Moore's ontology, in rejecting all dualism, also rejects an essential category of dialectics, namely that of mediation, which, as Malm points out,⁸³ is more necessary than ever for identifying the social causes of the capitalist ecological crisis and its determinations. Without mediation, the plan of analysis and structural intervention proposed by Wallace would be inconceivable.

For Levins and Lewontin, the organism is the point of encounter and mediation between internal (genetic) and external (environmental) forces. Organisms are not passive elements resulting from some sort of teleological evolution, but actors transforming the external environment through constructing their abode, obtaining their food, etc. Organisms are at the same time limited and enabled by their natural condition to a certain kind of interaction with the environment. However, there are great differences between organisms, which furthermore have different degrees of complexity. According to Marx, human beings are characterised by the fact that their activity is teleologically oriented. This in turn constitutes a qualitative difference from the other animal organisms.⁸⁴ On closer inspection, in Moore's conception, there is a theory of agency that is a direct consequence of his ontological approach. According to his conception there would be no difference between human beings, non-humans and, according to certain statements, even inorganic elements in their capacity to make history (history that at this point would no longer make sense to divide into the 'natural' and 'social'). Now, leaving aside the capacity of inorganic elements to act,⁸⁵ let us consider Moore's provocative question: how come 'when humans alter ecosystem flows they disturb them, whereas they are natural when beavers alter water flows by building dams?'⁸⁶ All organisms are formed through natural evolution in their dialectical metabolic relationship between organism and environment.⁸⁷ The fact that the organism is only a contingently-stable result of an interaction/modification

82 Foster, Clark and York 2011, Chapter 14, p. 21.27.

83 Malm 2017, p. 52.

84 As, for example, in the famous passage on the bee and the architect, in which the bee's work is defined as unilateral while that of the architect as teleological. Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 35, p. 188.

85 'Specific geological formations, under definite historical circumstances, can become at once objects of human activity and *subjects* of historical change'. Moore 2015a, p. 180.

86 Moore 2015b, p. 151.

87 Lewontin 1993.

process with the environment is evidenced by the fact both that it itself consists of an environment for other organisms and that the environment with which it interacts metabolically is made of and by other organisms. In this sense humans and beavers are both natural and their productions are the result of a natural process. Natural is used here in the sense of the material, and so may be predicated of both the beaver dam and the atomic bomb. What distinguishes beaver activity from human activity is that the beaver's activity of building a dam is more or less identical to itself whereas human production varies over the millennia and has accelerated at a dizzying pace since the industrial revolution. The beaver's activity is shaped by a slow interaction with the environment and the other beings that make up its ecosystem through natural evolution. The point is not to dispute that some animal species may also have their own 'culture', but that it is inherent to their being that they can make only a limited number of mental inferences and therefore their work is qualitatively different from that of humans. Human production, although also natural, has acquired social-historical properties that have emerged through natural evolution. Human nature is thus the co-evolutionary product of both natural and social history, and human labour is the element of mediation between nature and society. There is thus a discontinuity in continuity, not a flat homogeneity. Human production is never the same because the human being is a *tool-making animal*.⁸⁸ The point is not that human labour is natural/material, but that it is also social. Human labour has an historical specificity that concerns forms of consciousness, alienation, and relations with other human beings and between them and the rest of nature. Humans in the act of their production also produce themselves and, in particular, forms that change their nature, which in Marxian terms must be conceived in historical form. Thus, as Levins and Lewontin report concerning an example of dialectical interaction mediated by labour:

A person cannot fly by flapping her arms, no *matter* how much she tries, nor can a group of people fly by all flapping their arms simultaneously. But people do fly, as a consequence of the social organization that has created airplanes, pilots, and fuel. It is not society that flies, however, but individuals in society, who have acquired a property they do not have

88 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 35, p. 189. Some animals also use tools, but, unlike humans, they do not keep them or use them only to a limited extent to make other tools.

outside society. The limitations of individual physical beings are negated by social interactions.⁸⁹

Human production therefore has a quality different from that of other animals. Further, labour organised in historically determined forms is the mediating element between society and nature. Society is always in a relationship of internality with nature, but in a mediated form. The mediating element in this context is labour, which constitutes the organic exchange between human beings and nature. Moore, through the radical dissolution of all dualism, is unable to recognise this specificity. So much so that for him work exists only in a physiological sense (hence meta-historical) as work/energy to which the entire ecosystem contributes and which is appropriated by the capitalist world-ecology through *Cheap Nature*.⁹⁰

Following on from the above, it can be argued that MR has a greater ontological affinity with the dialectical biology of Levins and Lewontin vis-à-vis WE.⁹¹ However, one question remains: why is it that when Foster conceives of viruses as a toxic residue we get the feeling of a passivisation of nature? The answer arguably lies in the pluralisation of the concept of MR. Foster attempts to make us understand how Marx, through the developments in nineteenth-century science, arrived at the concept of metabolic rift thanks to Von Liebig's studies on the fall in fertility of agricultural land. However, this better-known illustration of what metabolic rift constitutes is not the ultimate sense of the term's meaning. Marx took English capitalism and the social relations it enacted as the point of departure for his studies. However, this does not mean that the object of his critique was nineteenth-century English capitalism, but rather a

89 Levins and Lewontin 1985, p. 273.

90 Isaak Rubin discussed the concept of abstract labour extensively. On the one hand, abstract labour can be conceived in a physiological sense, as a pure expenditure of energy, because in mercantile exchange labour is abstracted from its concrete qualities; on the other hand, in a social-historical sense, as a labour form characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, i.e. wage labour. Isaak Rubin was probably the most important theorist and expert on the theory of value of the early Soviet Union. Rubin's conclusion was that to not conceive labour in a social-historical sense would contradict the fact that for Marx value is a purely social category. Rubin 1972; Foster and Burkett 2018.

91 The affinity between MR and dialectical biology can obviously also be explained in logico-historical terms. As confirmed in a private conversation, Foster, but also Brett Clark and others have had a professional and militant relationship with Levins and Lewontin for some years, mainly thanks to Monthly Review. Some of Levins' and Lewontin's contributions are published in *Monthly Review*, and by Monthly Review Press.

more profound critique of capital as a social relation.⁹² His observations are at a deep and abstract level that retain their validity even after changes in context. The ecological critique of capitalism is part of Marx's critique of political economy; both the former and the latter remain an unfinished project.⁹³ Foster together with Clark and Holleman discuss viruses as the toxic residue of production only because he treasures Engels' lesson on nature's revenge.⁹⁴ Yet, as we have seen on the ontological level, nature is not conceived in a passive form and it is and remains a complex system of creative processes. MR is, in other words, a method for analysing forms of ecosystem degradation linked to a full understanding of capitalism and dialectical materialism. Foster and colleagues have already embarked on this process of pluralising the concept of metabolic rift. They have done so not by restricting it to metabolite exchanges in soils, but, for example, by speaking of 'bodily rift' or 'epidemiological rift'.⁹⁵ Arguably, even Malm's general formula of fossil capital and fossil economy can be considered from this point of view as a pluralisation of that original Marxian aspect. It puts a method into practice that can be reiterated for the epidemiological analyses presented here.⁹⁶ WE, for its part, speaks of negative values to describe a wide range of phenomena such as climate change, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, pesticide-resistant weeds, and potentially also the current SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, as there is no distinction drawn between social and natural, it is not clear what the proposal for policy intervention might be here. The element of policy intervention within MR is, on the other hand, clear. It is located in the social. The result is that, with WE's ontological perspective, it is possible to conceive of solutions to the ecological crisis in an ecomodernist guise, as is actually happening with the Breakthrough Institute.⁹⁷ Moreover, Moore oscillates between environmental and economic determinism. Indeed, reading Malm's historical reconstruction of Fossil Capital shows that for long periods water mills and sailing were a cheaper option than coal. This means that Cheap Nature cannot be the engine of accumulation, since 'a history of the fossil economy must juggle many more factors than price levels'.⁹⁸

92 Heinrich 2012, pp. 29 and following.

93 Saito 2017b.

94 See also Foster's recent analysis on the dialectics of history and nature (Foster 2022).

95 Foster, Clark and Holleman 2021.

96 Malm 2013.

97 Foster 2016.

98 Malm 2013; Malm 2018, Chapter 6.

Contrary to Moore's critique, it seems that, in a certain sense, it is WE that makes nature passive. That happens because Moore conceives of the phenomena of environmental degradation only reflexively as economic crises. This is despite its undermining the reproductive conditions within capital's own conditions of production.⁹⁹ Hence, it can be argued that there is a simplification of the feedback mechanism between the degradation of nature and economic crisis, or capitalist world-ecology in Moore's conceptualisation. The fact that the ecological crisis undermines the condition of capital accumulation is possible but not necessary. Capital could very well continue to degrade nature by undermining some sectors and opening up new ones, simply feeding a predatory and resource-depleting mechanism. Indeed, it is possible to see how the negative externalities of production on the environment do not necessarily translate into increased costs for capital. For example, the current phenomenon of the melting of the Arctic ice cap is opening up unprecedented possibilities for the establishment of new trade routes, the exploitation of new resources, and the extension of agriculture. Likewise, the case of the current pandemic, after an initial freeze in the production system, is assuming the guise of both a revival of the pharmaceutical sector and an acceleration of digitalisation.¹⁰⁰

Conclusions

The theoretical divergences between MR and WE – described in the first section of this paper – are anything but incidental and the pandemic case study becomes a concretisation of them. In the second section, I re-established the sense of the materialist dialectic given by Levins and Lewontin. In the third part, Rob Wallace facilitated an investigation into the controversy via the political ecology of Covid-19. In the fourth and final part, I have found that beyond first impressions the real theoretical limits of WE emerge when it engages in a close confrontation with Levins' and Lewontin's dialectical biology – fundamental to a Marxist analysis of pandemic aetiology. The concept of MR is arguably not only better able to describe, on a general level, the disruption to the delicate biospheric equilibrium by capitalism; when pluralised, i.e. taken as a

99 Taken up by O'Connor from his theory of the second contradiction, but aggravated in its economicism and functionalism by the hybrid ontological framework. See Bergamo and Leonardi 2021.

100 Foster 2002, pp. 6–16; Burkett 2014, pp. 193–7. Foster and Burkett 2016, pp. 5–7.

method inscribed in dialectical-materialist ontology, it becomes a tool for the analysis of different types of ecological degradation by capitalist society. It is important to note, as WE also states, that these natural balances are not immutable. Natural history is far from over, with or without the actions of humans. Conceiving nature only as dynamic equilibrium without regard to the permanent transformative processual level constitutes a serious theoretical error. In order to grasp the real ecosystem dynamics, it is vital to go back to the origin of the encounter between ecology and Marxism in the dialectical-materialist elaboration of the scientists Levins and Lewontin. Through the thought of these authors, the primacy of processes over entities becomes clear, and it is therefore easier to recognise how the entire ecosystem is subject to a dialectical movement whose stabilisations are only contingent. Pandemic analysis has made it possible to describe this behaviour precisely. In fact, the article proceeded from the abstract of the theoretical debate to the concrete of the pandemic event, discovering the concrete stakes of that clash. If the positions of WE do not allow the causes of the ecological crisis to be clarified by its falling into functionalism, it is also true that a narrow interpretation of MR founded exclusively upon the blockage of metabolites is inadequate. It must rather be pluralised as a method for investigating all forms of ecological degradation in capitalism, and this is precisely the project of the MR school of thought, something that its critics have yet to understand. Once it is pluralised and clarified that the rift is produced not inside a closed and final equilibrium, the concept of MR shows that it also includes those 'creative acts' of nature claimed by Moore, which Engels described as 'nature's revenge'.

Finally, it should be pointed out that theoretical affinities can be explained through genealogical development itself. Moore borrows some concepts from Levins' and Lewontin's dialectical biology within an ontological and epistemological framework that is fundamentally foreign to the Marxist tradition to which he refers. On the other hand, the genesis of MR's eco-Marxism can be explained through the decades-long interaction of its protagonists within *Monthly Review*.

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Passages of a Marxist Critique of Art in Peru: From Artworks to *Plastic Objects* (1976–82)

Mijaíl Mitrović Pease | ORCID: 0000-0002-9232-5472

Department of Art and Design, Pontificia Universidad Católica
del Perú, Lima, Peru

m.mitrovic@pucp.edu.pe

Abstract

This essay explores the theory of the plastic object as it was developed by the Peruvian art critic Mirko Lauer in the 1970s and 1980s, in dialogue with other ideas related to the *Teoría Social del Arte* (Social Theory of Art) developed in Latin America. Focusing on the Peruvian cultural debate, the author reconstructs Lauer's trajectory and emphasises his critique of 'Marxist aesthetics', and explores them as conceptual tools for discussing the horizon of contemporary art today.

Keywords

Marxist aesthetics – Latin American art – Mirko Lauer – Juan Acha – contemporary art – art theory – crafts

1 Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America, certain Marxist theoretical developments moved away from a prescriptive notion of Marxist aesthetics that seeks to establish the bourgeois or proletarian character of a given cultural practice. These new approaches aimed to study art's concrete forms of social existence in the region through the lens of its economico-political and ideological determinations. They also aspired to contribute to the classic Benjaminian debate on the politicisation of art, but they focused *first* on understanding art as part of Latin American history and social dynamics. Seen as crystallised

praxis, the work of art appeared in the thought of Mirko Lauer (Peru), Juan Acha (Peru/Mexico), and Nestor García Canclini (Argentina/Mexico) – among others – as a condensation of past and present social, economic and political determinations, from which it would be possible to reconstruct Latin American cultural history, marked by colonial and imperial domination. At the same time, they understood art as a terrain that dramatically expressed the region's situation of cultural dependency – such as Dependency Theory had been denouncing since the 1960s – and called for new approaches to the history and conflicts in the artistic field, as well as a new perspective on its role in national liberation.

For these critics, the rigorous study of artistic production in its technical and institutional determinations would allow for a better understanding of its ideological functioning. These two dimensions require linking the epistemological and praxeological approaches to art that, according to Giuseppe Prestipino, Marxism has developed historically, while the sociology of art, which the author also recognises as an important vector of Marxist thought, provides the necessary empirical dimension for the analysis to overcome the one-sidedness of exclusively aesthetic perspectives.¹ If Adorno understood the work of art as *sedimented social content* (*Inhalt*), we could say that these Latin-American Marxist art theories aspired to analyse the social process of sedimentation itself; that is, the *social production of form*.²

In this essay I will concentrate on how a Marxist theory of art and cultural production developed in the Latin American region during the 1970s and '80s, in particular Lauer's theory of the *plastic object*, developed in close connection with the Peruvian political and cultural scene of the '70s. As we shall see, Lauer's theory was an integral part of what the author, together with the Mexican art historian Rita Eder, called the Social Theory of Art (*Teoría Social del Arte*) during the 1980s. In the sections that follow, I will focus mainly on two books by Lauer, with occasional references to other authors mentioned above, for an account of how a Marxist understanding of art emerged as part of a broader reflection on Peruvian history, its forms of domination and the possibilities of its transformation. I will then explore how Lauer and others questioned Marxist aesthetics as they understood it at the time.

This historical exploration also allows us to recognise certain trends in Peruvian and Latin American Marxism in the final decades of the last century. As the Peruvian socialist offensive that emerged in the mid-70s found itself

1 Prestipino 1980. In the same vein, see García Canclini 2010.

2 Adorno 2002, p. 5.

blocked in the '80s by the violent war between the Shining Path Maoist guerrillas and the State forces, and by the imposition of the neoliberal order under the Fujimori dictatorship in the '90s, these critics' theory and methodology became destabilised, and began to respond to more global trends in social and aesthetic thought after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. In acknowledging that fate, however, my wish is to take up some of the ideas formulated then in order to incorporate them into a Marxist perspective on art and cultural production as it is configured today.

2 Marxism and Culture in Peru

After the premature death of Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui in 1930, Marxist reflection on art, modernism and the avant-garde came to a standstill in Peru. Mariátegui's work as a writer and editor on the journal *Amauta* (1926–30) marked a peculiar moment when the artistic and political avant-garde converged towards what the author understood as an Indo-American socialism (*socialismo indoamericano*). Furthermore, in the last of his *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), he proposed a historical interpretation of the literary process in the country.

For the author, the historical development of literature responds to the dialectic between colonial forms imposed after the Conquest, cosmopolitan forms that progressively landed in the country after Independence (1821) and early modernisation in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and, finally, the possibility of a *national moment* announced by indigenist literature and the work of the poet César Vallejo. Without delving into a Marxist aesthetic *per se*, Mariátegui achieved a synthetic vision of literature analysed against the background of the social totality in its historical development. This project of cultural analysis would resurface later under new circumstances, after decades in which the Socialist Party founded by Mariátegui in 1928 went from proscription under military governments to full identification with the Soviet Union.

During the 1950s and 1960s, it was the peasant movement and the Cuban-inspired guerrillas that energised Peruvian leftist politics. After the Cuban Revolution (1959) a model of the committed artist spread, with Javier Heraud – a guerrilla poet who died in combat at the age of 20 – as its greatest exponent in Peru. Under this model, the artist or poet embodied the New Man to serve as an example to the masses, who would be drawn to join the armed struggle in the *foco* as a new revolutionary spatiality that expands until it seizes power.³

3 On the new political subjectivity introduced by Cuban *foquismo*, see Jameson 2008.

However, in these decades, the efforts of Peruvian Marxist intellectuals were oriented towards discussing the national political economy and cultural issues took a back seat. And the same happened with the Mariáteguian perspective on the organisation of culture as an indispensable terrain of struggle for the construction of socialism.⁴

By the 1970s this situation would change drastically, however. It was precisely under the cultural debates sparked by the progressive military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–75) that a Marxist perspective on art and cultural production in the country re-emerged. After decades of oscillating between conservative military coups and reformist civilian governments, and after the defeat of the guerrillas who tried to apply the *foquista* method during the first half of the 1960s in the Andean countryside, the Velasco government burst onto the Peruvian political scene as a way of putting an end to oligarchic power, on the one hand, and of carrying out the reforms that the peasant movement and the left had been demanding, on the other.⁵

If the right wing rejected the military regime because of its anti-imperialist stance (the International Petroleum Company's installations were expropriated and nationalised a few days after the coup), the New Left that emerged after the Sino-Soviet break saw it as a bourgeois reformist regime that illegitimately appropriated the word 'revolution'. The nationalist character of the regime was viewed with suspicion from both sides of the political spectrum, but it was precisely this feature of the military government that marked a progressive trend in the country's historical development and had a particular impact on the cultural field. By adhering to or opposing the military, the popular masses in the cities and the countryside came to the forefront of national politics, which meant that previous revolutionary strategies and the models of cultural work associated with them were dislocated.

It was a 'Peculiar' Revolution, as Eric Hobsbawm stated in 1971, carried out by the military and not by the masses in revolt. But the new ruling class required rallying broad popular support in order to sustain the military's revolutionary project, as the historian noted.⁶ On the political level, the military regime meant the redefinition of the notion of 'the popular', which now included the working class (industrial proletariat, peasantry), informal urban sectors, professional middle classes, students, housewives, etc. Moreover, its re-vindication

4 On Mariátegui's political communication strategy and cultural experiences during the 1920s, see García Liendo 2016. On the relationship between indigenism and socialism after Mariátegui's death, see Mitrovic 2021a.

5 An excellent introduction to the Velasco period from new perspectives can be found in Aguirre and Drinot 2017.

6 Hobsbawm 1971.

of a rebellious Andean nationality – as was the case with the raising of Túpac Amaru II as the first anti-colonial leader of the eighteenth century, or the officialisation of Quechua as a national language – produced a new field of popular identifications, unprecedented in the country since the 1920s. In the face of this, the different tendencies of the New Left were focusing on one of these actors, without realising that the military were betting on the articulation of the masses as the heterogeneous subject of their revolution. After the Velasco government, the left seemed to realise that it was necessary to think about the construction of the national-popular and to understand that the Peruvian revolutionary subject had specific cultural characteristics, just as the political scene demanded a mass front policy to replace the vanguard parties that practically all the organisations had been rehearsing since the end of the 1960s.

In this sense, and as I have examined elsewhere, the Velasco government offered unprecedented state support to neo-avant-garde artists, who had access to mass media (posters, cinema, public art events, etc.) to promote reforms in agriculture and industry, as well as to combat the enemies of the revolution through propaganda.⁷ This was a time when aesthetic innovations went beyond the artistic field and became widespread.

This socialisation of art during the 1970s sought to close the gap between the international postwar avant-garde and the popular masses, breaking out of the enclave to which art had been confined throughout the twentieth century. It was under these circumstances – and their effects during the 1980s – that a Marxist critique of art was articulated in Lima, in a regional context where the ideas of Acha, García Canclini and others circulated rapidly.

The military regime's orientation towards the promotion and protection of the domestic market was particularly favourable to the development of the art market. By the mid-70s, the number of commercial galleries in Lima had doubled, and with this began to come questions about the power of intermediaries (commercial capital) in artistic production, as well as criticisms of the idea of art reduced to an 'investment good'. While galleries believed that their expansion would stimulate production, many artists felt that the market would limit them by imposing guidelines to satisfy the demands of collectors. The figure of the art critic thus acquired new functions, for to the commentary on novelties, typical of the nineteenth-century *connoisseur*, now had to be added critical discussion of the economic and political dynamics of the artistic field.

This was the atmosphere in which Lauer's *Introducción a la pintura peruana del siglo XX* (Introduction to Peruvian Painting in the Twentieth Century) (1976) appeared. In addition to being an already published poet, Lauer had

⁷ See Mitrovic 2019.

been a collaborator of the Velasco regime in the first experiences of propaganda for the Agrarian Reform (1969–71), but then moved to the leftist opposition, close to Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano and the Marxist intellectuals who had published the journal *Sociedad y Política* (Society and Politics) since 1972. Soon after, the same group would form the *Movimiento Revolucionario Socialista* (Revolutionary Socialist Movement), linked to workers' organisations in Lima.

It is important to note that Lauer's book was an exception among the Marxist publications of the 1970s in Peru, which were mainly oriented towards clarifying the political scene of the military regime and discussing the revolutionary strategy of the various leftist organisations. Although public questioning of the art market contributed to the emergence of Marxist reflection in that field, much of the critical commentary along those lines was rather short, and journalistic in nature, so that Lauer's effort deserves to be considered the only *systematic* contribution on art to the Peruvian Marxist intellectual milieu of that decade.

3 Beyond (or Behind) the Painting

The main goal of *Introducción* was to analyse painting as one of the mechanisms of social domination that the Peruvian ruling classes, in their successive historical configurations since the nineteenth century, have put into play in order to keep the vast majority of the people excluded from the cultural field. Here, painting – a virtual stand-in for the work of art in general – appears as something given, while the historical process is traced through the positions that creators occupy in society and their crystallisation in pictorial representations. Towards the end, the book attempted to understand the historical development of Peruvian art in order to grasp the conflicts generated in the cultural sphere by the military regime and to discuss its revolutionary overcoming.

Lauer proposed to name the formative Peruvian artists' sojourns to metropolitan centres during the nineteenth century, which later resulted in the importation of European art trends, 'external borders'; in turn, the term 'internal borders' would name the process by which, in the twentieth century, indigenism would counter European academicism and seek to consolidate a so-called national art – linked to Mariátegui's socialism during the 1920s. Ultimately, Peruvian painting would arrive at the '60s freighted with a succession of oppositions between universalism and localism, solved dialectically in what Lauer called the *Teoría de las raíces nacionales* (Theory of National Roots), whose main exponent was Peruvian modernist painter Fernando

De Szyszlo. De Szyszlo's individual trajectory exemplifies the passage from a denial of indigenism ('There are no [modern] painters in Peru', he said in 1951, upon his return from Paris) to an understanding that in order to bring Peru and its particularities, as condensed in painting, into the international modern art circuit, High Modernist forms – abstract expressionism or lyrical abstraction, for example – needed to be infused with 'national content', such as figurative and poetic allusions to pre-Columbian cultures.⁸ Locally, the goal was to consolidate what appeared to be a genuine national art in an ancestralist fashion, protected by the pan-Americanist atmosphere promoted by the United States during the Cold War which was also installed in Peru during the first government of Fernando Belaunde (1963–8), the very figure who was overthrown by Velasco in 1968.

Lauer's scheme for the historical process of Peruvian painting was shaped by the contradictions between the foreign and the national, but his method understood the work of art as a static object to which something external can be anchored, namely, social domination. Thus, art appears as a constant in the analysis, with artists' social classes and aesthetic ideologies orbiting around it, as do the cultural projects of the dominant classes and the attempts to overcome them by radicalised intellectuals and artists. Finally, with the massive rural–urban migration process across the country that had been taking place since the 1940s (but was only recognised as such at the beginning of the '60s, in part due to the development of the social sciences in the country), a number of social – or rather, *sociological* – conditions evolved that led painting to concern itself more and more with the experiences of the masses – as began to happen under the military government of Velasco in 1968.

From Lauer's vantage point as he sought to provide an account of the historical process of Peruvian painting, a different history seemed to be taking shape on the horizon, and everything examined in the book could actually be seen as a 'prehistory' – as Marx thought of the whole of human history before socialism –, a prelude to a near future when art would no longer be a 'closed dialogue within the dominant culture', as Peruvian painting had been up to that moment, in Lauer's words. For the author, Peruvian art history after the 1960s should be analysed

from an altogether different angle, inasmuch as adopting the popular perspective with regards to painting became indispensable then, and the years that go from the end of the '60s to the end of the '70s must be

8 The Theory of National Roots can be understood as an Andean version of what David Harvey (1990) calls 'High Modernism', that is, the dominant aesthetic ideology in the post-war capitalist world.

understood as a foundational time for a popular tradition within painting, as well as a time for the confluence of these foundational efforts with the rise of the values coming from folk crafts.⁹

The intense process of migration to the cities, the guerrillas of the 1960s, the peasant movements and the rise of class consciousness thanks to or against the military regime, led the author, as well as many Marxist intellectuals of the 1970s in Peru, to the certainty that a socialist revolution was just around the corner. In that sense, Lauer thought that ‘the fundamental aspects of the contemporary Peruvian artistic process’ cited above were directly linked to the mobilisation of the working classes in recent decades. Nevertheless, this project of historical analysis would take a back seat during the years following the publication of the *Introducción*. Lauer himself recognised that the previous quotation announced a shift in his own critical focus towards the study of crafts.¹⁰ This shift was not merely a personal decision of the researcher, as I will show in the next section.

On a first level, then, Lauer’s solitary Marxist contribution to the Peruvian debate about art sought to provide an account of social domination through painting, but he believed his analytical premises to be pushing against the boundaries of the very historical process of the present (i.e. the 1970s).¹¹ Following Mariátegui’s ideas mentioned above and some unwritten intuitions of Aníbal Quijano, rather than ‘Marxist aesthetics’, Lauer’s *Introducción* proposed a functionalist analysis of painting as an element of social domination:

Shortly after the Conquest, Inca Garcilaso created an attractive Inca paradise of ‘order and concert’ [...] but the idea did not prosper visually anywhere: during the colonial period, because it would have been deemed

9 Lauer 2007, p. 32.

10 Lauer quoted in Gris 1982.

11 A solitary contribution not only because of the nonexistence of other Marxist or Marxist-adjacent analyses of the process of Peruvian art, but also because of the scant debate that Lauer’s *Introducción* generated in the years immediately following its publication. Today, however, the text is widely celebrated – albeit perhaps seldom re-read – in the fields of curatorship and historiography of local art. To trace the effects of the book on local critics, see Ortiz de Zevallos 1977 and Rodríguez Prampolini 1977. In short, the debate raises the usual criticisms of all Marxist attempts to talk about art: Peruvian architect Augusto Ortiz de Zevallos objected to Lauer’s economic and ideological reductionism, and defended the aesthetic specificity of the artistic; Mexican art critic Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, on her part, defended Lauer’s method by placing it in a Latin American context of critical reflection on art, noting the need to frame the debate in ideological terms that would make it possible to account for art’s participation in social domination. See also Castro-Klarén 1977.

subversive; during the first Republican century, because the new masters had their own War of Independence-era feats and glories to memorialise. However, as the real, routinely exploited Indian came within closer view of the urban population in everyday life, and as the needs of the twentieth century bourgeoisie began to demand an embryonic national integration of the exploited and the exploiters, the dominant culture was forced to seek a place for the Indian within the national self-image it advocated, and this place was first found in the development of an 'Inca' mythology and iconography.¹²

For Lauer, the presence of Indians in Peruvian painting should be understood as an 'allegory of the victors' in which those characters, anonymous and custom-made for the gaze of the ruling class, also served to define the national artistic process and to create the fiction of a progressive social integration through representation. However, he adds:

It would be misleading to claim – as once suggested by a populist perspective – that the dominated culture imposes its presence on the canvases and walls of urban houses; rather, this has been an attempt by the dominant culture to incorporate images and mythologies of culturally subordinated men, not so much in a process of discovery or revelation as through the artist's (often involuntary) mystification of a reality pre-described in the collective consciousness by relationships of economic and social domination.¹³

Painting operates here as an access route to the national ideological universe, to the class conflicts it helps silence, and to the repressed or sublimated desires that animate it. This analysis understands art as part of the superstructure – as an ideological form –, but it does not go so far as to question the *formal determinations* of art itself as both a practice and a historical category, where relations of production not only are *represented* – as in a superstructural reflection of the base –, but are *realised*, as Nestor García Canclini put it.¹⁴ However, in this book, the author introduced the notion of the *plastic market* (mercado plástico) to account for the entire social process hidden in the canvases. Lauer

12 Lauer 2007, p. 113. Lauer follows the scheme of cultural domination Quijano proposed in his essay 'Domination and Culture: Notes on the Problem of Cultural Participation' (originally published in 1971). See Quijano 1980.

13 Lauer 2007, p. 104.

14 García Canclini 2010, p. 73.

sought to incorporate the instances of distribution and consumption into the analysis, although in this book we could say that the history of painting and the market advance in parallel, but do not examine both as two intertwined levels of the same historical process. Thus, despite its not being the focus of the analysis, there was already a conceptual and methodological space in which to develop a critique of art's political economy.

Years later, Lauer's *Crítica de la artesanía* (Critique of Crafts) (1982) distanced itself somewhat from the premises of the *Introducción* or, better, developed them critically: if in the first book he argued that alongside painting there were popular crafts that were denied artistic value, now Lauer understood that crafts were *another* system of production, distribution and consumption. A system developed historically in the Peruvian Andes from colonial times to the present, different from that of art and whose reality was obscured by the aesthetic debate. In order to apprehend *contemporary pre-capitalist crafts*, it was necessary to analyse them from outside the category of the artistic, thus revealing both categories – arts and crafts – as ideological sedimentations of multiple cultural, economic, technical, and political determinations.

4 Crafts as a Problem: The López Antay Debate and its Consequences

By the mid-1970s, Velasco's government had reconfigured the artistic and cultural discussion both in terms of the significance of the notion of the avant-garde and of the role that the so-called *popular arts* came to stand 'in virtual representation of all dominated art', as Lauer put it.¹⁵ The concept of *popular arts* acquired public centrality after the National Institute of Culture awarded the National Culture Prize in the 'arts' to the Ayacucho *retablista* – maker of altarpieces – Joaquín López Antay, prompting a heated debate which appeared in Lima's main newspapers during the first months of 1976.

The controversy was led by artists situated in the so-called *high art* sphere who considered the *retablista* to be a craftsman who did not deserve the prize because he was repeating traditions instead of 'creating authentically'.¹⁶ Furthermore, they argued that the retablo was a colonial form that had become an object of tourist consumption, 'uninhabited', as De Szyzlo used to say. Thus, crafts were seen as a cultural leftover product of the transition from tradition to commodity, part of the general process of modernisation. In fact, the retablo originated in portable altarpieces used for evangelisation during

¹⁵ Lauer 1982, pp. 137–8.

¹⁶ I have summarised this controversy in Mitrovic 2019.

colonial times, but these artists did not realise that between those colonial forms and López Antay's *retablos* there had been several transformations with the object within peasant rituals, first, and then, throughout the twentieth century, in its integration into the artistic circuit under the action of the *indigenistas* and its serialised production for increasingly large markets. By that time, the prize-winning *retablos* were seen for decades as popular arts, which had succeeded in introducing 'profane' themes into traditional peasant forms. In this context, Lauer argued:

For visual artists – who could be described, not altogether inaccurately, as practitioners of a sophisticated branch of interior decoration for the well-to-do – to dismiss crafts as mere 'objects of consumption' is ridiculous, to say the least. That they attribute the expansion of folk art in recent times to a series of misguided skills only reveals a radical inability to understand that handicrafts, and very specifically *retablos* [altarpieces], are one of the great ways of cultural rapprochement between two *Perús* (or will it be *Perúes*?) deliberately kept apart. Very few Western-style visual artists manage to fulfil a similar function.¹⁷

Peruvian art historian Alfonso Castrillón, who was one of the jury members, offered a Marxist-inspired argument for the decision: according to him, the divide between arts and popular arts (note that he does not use the term 'crafts' here) represents class differences between dominant and dominated cultures, with the former enjoying a monopoly on cultural value at the expense of the latter.¹⁸ The gambit in favour of the notion of popular arts as an intermediate solution to the hierarchical opposition between art and crafts made by Castrillón and the rest of the jury, theorised by the former based only on the idea that what is common to the two categories is that they are mainly expressive cultural forms – whereas crafts are merely a mechanical repetition of tradition –, was an attempt to make both practices equivalent, although it retained the adjective 'popular' to specify a difference between creators – class and ethnic differences, in the final instance.¹⁹ On his part, Lauer warned that the controversy initiated by the 'high' artists was based on a blindness to art's real social roles, but he distanced himself from the conceptual solution proposed by Castrillón and others who intervened in the debate.

17 Lauer 2007, p. 8.

18 See Castrillón Vizcarra 2001.

19 Castrillón Vizcarra 2001, p. 147.

By 1982, Lauer thought that the award had not really succeeded in democratising the cultural field, instead replacing ‘the popular with the symbol of the popular’ and turning ‘seigniorial art’ – the artistic forms characteristic of the *hacienda* regime in the Andes – into an image emptied of the contradictions that this form of visual production carries with it.²⁰ Meanwhile, the appeal to the popular functioned as an ‘indeterminating element’ that hid ‘how the structure of relations of production determines a human group’s shared belonging to a type of social existence: a class’.²¹ Moreover, just seven years after the award (today considered a milestone in the history of Peruvian contemporary art, one that could presumably have rendered any distinction between the artistic and the artisanal untenable, as if official recognition really dissolved social differences), Lauer said that the event had become nothing more than ‘a memory for some people, and a collection of clippings that I keep in my archives’.²² For the author, the award given to the *retablista* should lead not only to celebrating the inclusion of popular artists in the art world – López Antay had been fully integrated into the art circuit for decades, something his detractors did not realise at the time –, but to discuss the possibility for artisans to become political actors in their own right, beyond the art world and its aesthetic ideologies.

In fact, after the intense political struggle against Morales Bermúdez – who deposed Velasco in a coup in mid-1975 and moved quickly to dismantle the reforms of the previous period – by the popular movement and the socialist left, which in 1977 led to the biggest General Strike in Peruvian history, in 1980 the general elections returned Belaunde to power. This meant a restoration of the oligarchic order, although a new sector of the bourgeoisie that had benefitted from the late developmentalist impulse of the military regime claimed its new place in ruling the country. For certain socialist sectors, such as the one to which Lauer belonged (close to Quijano), the new context of the 1980s meant rethinking the role of the military regime in the acceleration of capitalist modernity in the country and discussing how a *socialist modernity* could take place in which the working class – and the artisanate as part of it – would take control of national politics.

In the art world, this restoration of class power was expressed in the growth of the galleries which, after the phase of building the domestic market, began their projection towards new cosmopolitan markets such as New York. Indeed, the ‘disorder’ of aesthetic categories brought about by the Velasco government

20 Lauer 1982, pp. 137–8.

21 Lauer 1982, p. 49.

22 Lauer quoted in Gris 1982.

was nothing more than the memory of a progressive moment in the country's cultural policies, but the problem of crafts still deserved to be approached theoretically as an investigation of a form that develops in its own social spaces and is only occasionally articulated within the artistic field.

While today the notion of craft is pejorative in the Peruvian artistic field after the López Antay debate, in 1982 Lauer sought to destabilise the idea that the notion of popular arts resolved the contradictions that the prize controversy revealed. It was a matter of questioning an idealistic solution to class differences within the cultural field, which replaced the real knowledge of the different economic and ideological dynamics of arts and crafts with vindictive symbols, integrated into the hegemonic system. On the contrary, the author proposed to study not only *what* crafts are, but *who* the craftsmen are, how they organise their production (peasant communities, informal workshops, factories, etc.) and what conflicts they encounter with other social groups. These aspects, scarcely studied by the social sciences and art history, implicitly raised the question of the possibilities for craftsmen to organise themselves as a class and participate in the political arena.

This vision of craft production meant countering the idea of the Andes as a monolithic cultural area, and rather assuming that it is a space where different modes of production coexist, usually made invisible by the romantic vision of Andean culture. It was necessary to understand what happened to that culture once 'it began to dissolve all its aspects (forms, processes, supports, representations) in the acids of capitalism'.²³ In other words, what are the consequences of the predominance of exchange-value over use-value that has been installed throughout the twentieth century, during the process of capitalist modernisation in the country. This perspective required a clear theoretical positioning.

Following Juan Acha's *socioaesthetic* proposal which I will explore shortly, Lauer maintained that the *theoretical* relationship between the categories of art, crafts, and design does not imply a hierarchical differentiation, but rather describes the three components of the *system of cultural production* or 'the aesthetic' (Lauer used the term *plastique*), each involving specific processes – forms of production and consumption, and different circuits of circulation and distribution – but above all a differentiated historicity based on the genesis of the phenomena and processes subsumed by each category.

For Acha, crafts have their historical basis in pre-capitalist societies, art corresponds to the worldwide expansion of commercial capital since the sixteenth century, and designs – the predominant form of today's global media

23 Lauer 1982, p. 65.

and advertising – ultimately developed in the heat of the dynamics of monopoly capital through the mid-twentieth century.²⁴ In his words:

Capitalism is certainly unfavourable to crafts and arts, in the traditional sense of the latter term [fine arts]. But this is because it encourages mass consumption, not because the traditional sense of the arts is absolute and prevails until now, nor because capitalism is hostile to the technology involved in current procedures for audio-visual image production, derived from languages or technologies developed in society for practical, collective, and everyday needs. The arts are also derived from languages and technologies. The difference is that these arts are predominantly sensorial, while in the designs and the crafts, the sensorial and the practical-utilitarian coexist.²⁵

Acha sought to connect the material dimensions of the three aesthetic sub-systems to the sensorial possibilities that each one entails, tracing at the same time the coordinates of their operation within the capitalist mode of production in Latin America. Thus, by the early 1980s, both Acha and Lauer – along with other Latin American authors such as García Canclini, Mario Pedrosa (Brazil) and Victoria Novelo (Mexico) – sought to overcome the false problem of the artistic vs. non-artistic character of crafts, moving towards an understanding of their differences within a larger system of cultural production.²⁶

If the category of art or the artistic is historically sustained by the development and imperial expansion of bourgeois society, extending it to the cultural production of pre-capitalist or non-capitalist societies would mean extending the symbolic and material dominance of the bourgeois cultural universe. The notion of crafts, while freighted with the disdain of the artistic system, makes it possible for these products and producers to be differentiated and analysed in their own terms, which also entails the possibility of capturing their transformations and possibilities for an autonomous development, regardless of what

24 Acha 2011, p. 82.

25 Acha 1983.

26 Although they are in agreement on many aspects of their analyses, there are also differences between the authors mentioned. In a review of the first volume of *Arte y Sociedad: Latinoamérica* (1979), the first instalment of Acha's colossal three-volume project, Lauer noted a certain eclecticism in the former's use of Marxian categories – since it assumed historical materialism only as a method of analysis, in addition to its systematic evasion of the notion of social class and class struggle, which led to its 'system giving the impression of a machine without real movement, and its "laws of motion" of that system [...] giving in turn the impression of operating in a vacuum'. See Lauer 1980a, p. 113.

the art field dictates about their aesthetic or cultural relevance. Hence, these authors considered it idealistic to maintain that class differences in the plastique realm were nothing more than a problem of nomenclature, the solution to which consisted in absorbing the variety of cultural forms under the notion of the artistic.

Although Lauer had recognised the differences between art and crafts already in his *Introducción*, now a consideration of the role of art in social domination acquired new prominence in the analysis of more systemic dimensions, which centred ideological dismantling as a moment in the critique of the *plastic process* (Lauer's proposed term) or of *symbolic production* (a more general category proposed by García Canclini).²⁷ It was already clear that the different aesthetic forms in the region do not respond to 'a mere juxtaposition of neutral alternatives, but [to] a dynamic and even dramatic coexistence, in which artistic form itself bears witness to the routine confrontations between oppression and the struggle for survival'.²⁸ In other words, class conflict determines the plastic object *internally*, not only as external content to be represented or figured; as the result of social praxis, class conflict intervenes at the level of forms – which are always *forms of social existence*, not just formal aspects (colour, composition, etc.), as we will see below.

The ultimate aim of Lauer's *Crítica* (1982) was to clarify 'the problem of articulation in the field of plastic production', i.e.

articulation of what is ideology with what is a form of production, articulation of some forms of production with others, articulation of what is separated by class dividing lines. A vision from the perspective of articulation becomes indispensable in order to approach from the social totality a phenomenon that, like the plastique, has been presented in isolated compartments.²⁹

This question about the articulation of the different forms of the plastique is also an attempt to clarify the ways in which capitalism structures culture in a country (and region) where several modes of production coexist and, therefore, it is necessary to understand the subjects that each one has at its disposal

27 If, as we will see, the notion of the plastique emphasises the particularity of the object – the attribution of an 'immaterial' representational effect –, symbolic production refers to a set of practices that shape the symbolic aspects of every social formation. Both categories distance themselves from art, crafts, and design, as these carry with them the mystifications of their spontaneous usage in bourgeois society.

28 Lauer 1980b, p. 42.

29 Lauer 1982, p. 10

for a political strategy, here seen from the cultural field. Let us see then how this framework proposes to approach the plastic object.

5 Unpacking Lauer's Idea of the Double Nature of the Plastic Object

The main theoretical innovation of this new moment in Lauer's research was the notion of the *plastic object* as a replacement for the concepts of artwork or handcraft. These categories conceal the object's multiple historical determinations, and its phenomonic form – its mode of appearance, socially concealed by the categories of arts and crafts – renders the object's concrete history invisible as social praxis. Each plastic object, then, must be understood as a sedimentation or particular stabilisation of three different determinations: 'those that come from its character as process (activity, work); those of its eventual existence as an object (product, commodity); those of its representational aspect (image)'.³⁰ Only then could a social theory of the *plastique* undertake the totality of determinations that converge on the plastic object without dismissing its individuality, i.e., what Lukács would call its *particularity*, which includes the creator's subjectivity.³¹

For all these reasons, Lauer proposes that the plastic object and its determinations be analysed on the basis of the two aspects of their unfolding (Figure 1). On the one hand, the dimension of the *material support* (soporte material), i.e.:

all that materiality present in the plastic object, in relation to which the immaterial aspects of creation are organised. It is not a question, let us be specific here, of a physical medium (the materials of which the work is 'made' and the configuration of these materials), but of a material support in a broad sense; this is to say, all those forms of the social that mould the presence and the configuration of the physical: aspects of the market, of the institutions that converge on it, of the general economy, of the technology (process and techniques), etc.³²

30 Lauer 1982, p. 60.

31 Lukács's well-known argument on the partisanship (*Parteilichkeit*) or part-taking of the work of art accounts for the introduction of the artist's subjectivity into artistic reflection, which differentiates it from scientific reflection, since it is oriented towards the possibility of universalising the experience contained in its form. See Lukács 1969.

32 Lauer 1982, p. 61.

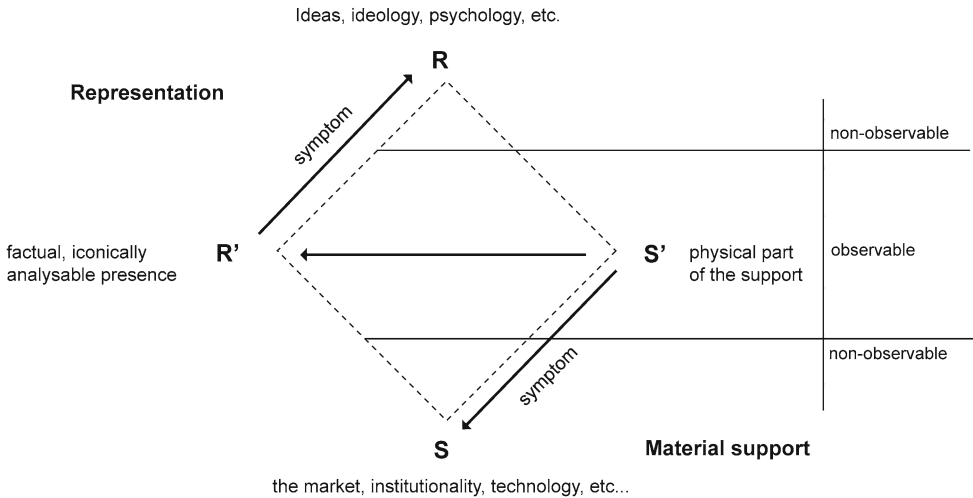


FIGURE 1 The structure of the plastic object according to Lauer (my own elaboration)

Representation, now understood as deriving from the material support and no longer the starting point of analysis – dominant in traditional art history and criticism, in fact – stands on that foundation, cannot have a social existence without a material support. The directly observable aspect of representation (R') can be examined through style, iconography, and other settled methodological strategies, taking its non-observable dimension (R) – the iconological level, as Erwin Panofsky would say – as the ultimate horizon of analysis; the material support's physical aspect (S') is a symptom or index of all the other social dimensions (S) that determine the materiality of the plastic object. Thus, '[w]hat we call the plastic object here is the historically determined relationship between these four domains, which overlay the generic and the individual at each point in the system of plastic-arts production: the moments of the movement of the plastique in history'.³³ While the sociology of art privileges the S'–S axis as a materialistic response to the traditional idealism of art history (and of Marxist aesthetics, according to Lauer), for which the R'–R axis contains the ultimate meaning of the work of art, the theory of the plastic object presented here seeks to overcome both unilateral perspectives through its dialectical articulation.

To a large extent, this involves introducing the Base–Superstructure model outlined by Marx into the plastic object itself, in order to counteract the disappearance of its multiple determinations in the final form – apparent or

33 Ibid.

observable – that it assumes.³⁴ Far from the determination of the plastic object by its material support leading us to reduce it to its economic dimension, it is a matter of recognising that the realisation of the representation *depends on* its material aspect, that is, on the processes that make it possible – relations of production, technique, etc. The issue is to not assert that the concrete reality of the plastic object lies in the material support alone, but rather to understand which aspect plays the fundamental or determining role in the relationship between material support and representation. Moreover, this is also the general utility of the Base–Superstructure allegory itself: as Eagleton suggests, such a scheme allows us to differentiate which elements play the determining role in a mode of production, but not to establish their ‘degrees of reality’.³⁵ Here, it is a matter of understanding the dynamics of the relationships between the components of a plastic object, of differentiating its aspects for empirical analysis. And the same applies to the problem of the *locus* of art in the social structure. If, as Marx put it, ‘the mode of production in material life conditions [or determines, *bedingen*] the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life’, then the plastic, insofar as it is widely recognised as a superstructural expression or objectification of consciousness – of *subjectivity*, to be precise – is determined by *social being*.³⁶

But let us go back to the plastic object. The formal innovations in global art in the second half of the twentieth century, now absorbed into the notion of contemporary art, challenge the necessary relationship between the two aspects that Lauer presents as determinations of the plastic object. But even a performance or a conceptual statement require both a physical medium that allows them to be accounted for, and a material support that, first, makes it socially possible to produce and record the artwork or artistic event, and second, provides a socially determined environment for it to be recognised as art. Representation – or any symbolic act – without a material support to give it concrete social existence is ultimately impossible. As Lauer pointed out:

34 A similar exercise should be carried out with the very notion of *form*, as it is usually understood as that which we observe or perceive of the plastic object – which indicates a phenomenological, if not empirical, understanding of the concept. Form itself, it seems to me, is divided into two aspects: on the one hand, those dimensions directly observable through sensorial perception; on the other hand, the determinations of form itself, that is, the multiple social processes that lead to the object appearing in that way and not in another, which undoubtedly includes the categories employed socially to frame the object and ‘give it’ to our perception.

35 Eagleton 2000.

36 Marx 1977.

One of the most widespread radical arguments at the beginning of the non-objectualist movement [a term coined by Acha in the 1970s to refer to the neo-avant-garde in Latin American art, but the point applies to conceptual art in general] was that it involved no saleable object. Indeed, if we remove one or more aspects of the materiality of the work, we take away the grounds for one or more aspects of its circulation as a commodity; but it is impossible to remove every one of its material determinations.³⁷

While the new discourses against representation in Latin America during the 1970s fed the imaginary of *non-objectualism* as a negation of objectuality as such, identified as its mercantile (and merchandisable) dimension – despite Acha’s caveats on this matter –, Lauer insisted on the persistence of the material support as the set of determinations that, beyond what occurred on the level of representation, would account for the form of social existence of the plastic object. We are already far from taking the object as an illustration or analogy of social life that does not lead to questioning its own historical configuration as a specific form, since ‘art that is not on the canvas, that is not confined to the frame, that does not rest on a pedestal, is at this time the expression of a situation in the field of the plastique’, and the issue is precisely to analyse that situation in its historicity – that is to say, the replacement of the system of galleries and dealers by new forms of transnational capital, says Lauer –, from which new forms of confronting it *could* emerge, although this is not the immediate function of theory.³⁸ This theory, finally, seeks to bring us closer to the social production of forms.

Following Lauer’s own example, by the end of the nineteenth century the canvas that supports a painting provides something more than a physical surface; the capitalist market conditions assign it the role of being ‘the “coin” of representation, the sole use of which is to hold the representation on its surface.’³⁹ That the canvas functions as currency alludes to the fact that this support makes the painting ‘transportable (interchangeable), [...] durable (accumulative) [...] [and] identifiable (differentiable)’; this is to say, it imprints the painting with the ability to participate in certain social relations thanks to its physical characteristics.⁴⁰ Likewise, painting’s public (nineteenth-century *history painting* or twentieth-century Mexican muralism, for example) and

37 Lauer 1982, p. 160.

38 Lauer quoted in Burga and Cathelat 1981, p. 265.

39 Lauer 1982, p. 153.

40 Ibid.

private functions (its use as adornment for bourgeois interiors) determine the size of the works. The capitalist market, in sum, is the basic mode of social existence of the tableau-form (*forma-cuadro*), and we could say without exaggeration that it continues to play that role for the forms associated with contemporary art. It should be clear that this premise squarely contradicts any idealistic assumption of the autonomy of art encoded in transcendent or spiritual terms. Autonomy here can be understood as the *result* of the historical process that led artists to rid themselves of their servitude to the court, the clergy, and nation states, until they appeared before them and ‘the public’ or ‘the spectator’ – figures of consumption that emerged in the midst of bourgeois society – as independent producers protected by the contradictory freedom that Marx discovered in the operations of the market. Or, more precisely, as *petty commodity producers* on the margins of wage labour and the law of value, as Marxist philosopher José María Durán argues.⁴¹

During a certain stage of capitalist development, then, the tableau-form under which painting was organised – or the pedestal-form in the case of sculpture – imposed itself not only as that physical base where representations were inscribed, but as a material form that allowed their worldwide circulation as commodities. ‘Industrial capitalism inherited the tableau of mercantile capitalism’, says Lauer:

and turned it into the privileged territory of art, the place where the determinations of the material base could ‘disappear’, blend into the landscape, in the same way that the ideology of liberalism makes disappear the economic realities on which the society and culture of capitalism are based.⁴²

While in the *Introducción* paintings offered a line of flight into the socio-cultural and political history of the country, in *Crítica de la artesanía* it appears not only as the bearer of a representation of the social – the *form of the content* – but also as an object historically overlaid with both the practical demands of the market and the ideological operations of capitalism – the *content of the form*, undoubtedly: that towards which art ultimately points as an ideological form.

41 However, Durán acknowledges that artists who do well in the market acquire ‘a social position that allows them to appropriate other people’s work’, which leads to a differentiation between independent artists, assistants (of other artists) and entrepreneurs themselves. See Durán 2015a, p. 66.

42 Lauer 1982, p. 152.

It is no accident that the tableau-form remains valid today and resurfaces in the market whenever, after a reckless incursion into dematerialised contemporary art forms, demand requires that high prices be objectified in a material support historically recognised as a bearer of 'value'.⁴³ Thus, the historicity of painting and of the plastic object in general plays out not only at the level of the visual, but also at the intersection – *dialectical interaction* would be more appropriate – between its material base and its ideological function. Far from being a theory of reflection hastily applied to the plastic object, and also far from the mere analogies between form and content produced by Marxist aesthetics, we see here a theory that makes it possible 'to disclose the concrete transactions hidden behind the mechanical image of "reflection", to understand *how* "background" becomes "foreground"; instead of tracing an analogy between form and content, to uncover the network of real, complex relations between the two'.⁴⁴

In turn, this newfound conception of the plastic object implied a virtual critique of the objectuality of art as such, albeit one that differed from Acha's notion of non-objectualism.⁴⁵ In the words of Peruvian art critic Augusto del Valle, Lauer's critical view of the tableau-form leads us to understand that '[i]f the tableau itself as a material support becomes a subject of painting, so can the exhibition room itself. This reflexive thematization necessarily leads outside the painting, towards social existence itself – not only the social existence of the painting's physical aspects, but also that of previously hidden determinations'.⁴⁶ Between 1976 and 1982, then, in Lauer's work painting went from being seen only as the bearer of representation, to appearing as a double object, and one might be tempted to say that its previous unilateral

43 The quotation marks indicate the distance that a Marxist approach to the idea that art 'has value' – in capitalist terms – must always keep. Works of art are paradigmatic examples of the *prices without value* that inhabit the capitalist market, although the usual confusion between value in the moral sense and its capitalistic definition does not allow us to capture the specificity of this type of commodity, also called 'speculative' or 'fictitious'.

44 Clark 1982, p. 12.

45 It is curious that the debate around non-objectualism in Latin America has bound together such disparate objects as landscape intervention, performance, conceptual art, and Andean retablos. This marked a crucial difference with regards to the understanding of art as a representative of something immaterial – as idealist aesthetics claims – and helped move the theory forward (and backward, historically speaking) towards an understanding of the plastic object outside its representational function, i.e., as an object pursuing a *presentational form* that indicates the immanent – social – existence of the symbolic. In this respect, see Lauer's comments at the end of *Crítica de la artesanía* (1982). For a general formulation of non-objectualism, see Acha 2011.

46 Del Valle 2011, p. 63.

analysis as use value was now complemented by the effective recognition of its exchange value, and of the conditions that imprinted both aspects of the commodity-form on artistic and artisanal production.

6 Against 'Marxist Aesthetics'

As I argued at the beginning, these new theoretical developments required not only a precise attention to Latin American cultural history, but also a positioning within the aesthetic debate in the Marxist tradition. In their Introduction to the book *Teoría Social del Arte, Bibliografía Comentada* (Social Theory of Art: An Annotated Bibliography) (1986), Lauer and Eder argue that there are two ways of framing art from Marx's *oeuvre*. On the one hand, an external or transcendent perspective: an approach that takes art as a given category and seeks to rescue 'the notions of social utility, democratisation, the search for a truth present in the work'; on the other hand, an internal or immanent critique: Marx's critique of political economy implicitly enables a critique of 'these categories and their social operations' by examining the processes that led, in the first place, to the very notion of art becoming sedimented in social life.⁴⁷ The first perspective takes art as something given and attempts to analyse the extent to which alienation crystallises in it and can be disarticulated, placing the problem in the realm of *representation*; the second emphasises the social processes (the relations of production and technique, for example) hidden behind the artistic phenomena.

From the second perspective, say Eder and Lauer, 'distrust towards the visible ultimately takes shape in the disarticulation of the established idea of the plastic object (of the type of socially recognised unity between representation and material support), differentiating between the physical idea of the artistic work and that of its materiality'.⁴⁸ For the authors, this last strand has been the least developed by Marxism, and its deepening attempted to move from a 'Marxist aesthetic' that seeks to determine which art will be most suitable for political struggle or to establish a revolutionary sensibility, to a *critique of art as an historical category* that gives an account of the totality of the art system, inspired by Marx's critique of political economy.⁴⁹

47 Eder and Lauer 1986, p. 21.

48 Eder and Lauer 1986, pp. 21–2.

49 Naturally, the contrast offered by Eder and Lauer refers only to the positions that Marx and Marxism took towards art, but it does not account for the debate within Marxism about the possibility of isolating a specifically aesthetic thought in Marx. This attempt is less about the analysis of art than about the reflection on the role of corporeal sensibility

If *Das Kapital* can be seen as revealing the processual source of certain abstractions institutionalised by bourgeois society – a critique of the categories of bourgeois thought already articulated in Marx’s denunciation of the ‘Robinsonades’ in 1857 –, the crucial thing here is to add art to the landscape of sedimented categories that shapes bourgeois culture, inscribing it in a ‘critique of capitalism’s self-awareness, of its self-representation’, in the words of Marxist philosopher José Manuel Bermudo.⁵⁰ The development of this second line of reflection involves distancing oneself from the usual function that art criticism has historically fulfilled; namely, legitimising certain artists, even when politically relevant reasons are put forward. I would now like to examine how this second line of Marxist reflection emerged in Lauer’s work.

Already in his *Introducción*, Lauer had proposed a distinction between *art criticism* and the *critique of art*: the latter sought ‘the exploration of a series of links between the practice of art, its usufruct and circulation, with the rest of the activities and ideas ongoing in Peruvian society throughout this century’, and constituted a ‘prior step, indispensable for it [art criticism] to be able to take place with a minimum of meaningfulness and transcendence as part of our cultural process’.⁵¹ At that point, however, the acknowledged difference between the two views on art criticism had not yet led Lauer to interrogate his own methodology, a move that became central on the way to his 1982 book, as well as for the project with Eder.

The passage from the first moment to the second signals Lauer’s growing scepticism towards Marxist aesthetics, which he understood as a speculative philosophy that, either because of the lack of empirical studies or because of the transformation of Marx and Engels’s loose ideas about art into a doctrine, had generated around itself a ‘sort of “crust” of categories taken from idealism’, because ‘the categories of Marxist aesthetics (which are the same as those of idealist aesthetics, but socially contextualised) not only do not come from concrete reality, but do not lead to it’.⁵² What was important now was to give an account of the process of the constitution of the *phenomenal concrete* of art, that is, art’s real forms of social existence. This is how Lauer put it:

in social praxis and its potential liberation under a communist society. On the subject, see the chapter ‘The Marxist Sublime’ in Eagleton 2004, and also Casanova 2016. The project of a critique of *art as a historical category* was originally formulated by Mario Perniola in the 1970s. An important fragment of Perniola’s *Lalienazione artistica* (1971) was translated by Lauer and published in *Hueso Húmero*, the magazine he edits in Lima to this day. See Perniola 1981.

50 Bermudo 2015, p. 118.

51 Lauer 2007, p. 31.

52 Lauer 1982, p. 45.

While in conventional idealist aesthetics works of art exist either in their pure immateriality, or at least in their most external visual appearance (forms and styles as unique and ultimate determinations), and while in Marxist aesthetics art, the *plastique*, can exist as a category already independent of individual works, but knowable through a typification that links back to the idea of *class* as a universal category in history [as Engels put it], in the social theory postulated here, what really exists is the social character of a process: the production, distribution and consumption of a set of objects and processes, which constitute a specific part of the general process of reproduction of a particular way of producing.⁵³

Against the idea that what Marxism brings to the aesthetic debate is the determination of the revolutionary or reactionary character of the artist and the artwork, here the method seeks first to give an account of the concrete reality of art, understood as a set of processes that configure it as such socially. It is only on the basis of such an account that political reflection on art would become fruitful.

A brief detour to specify which Marxist aesthetics this critique is formulated against may be worthwhile here. By 'Marxist aesthetics' in this context Lauer understood a varied set of theoretical and political positions developed historically by Marxism: in the first place, the aesthetic elaborations of Marxism-as-state-power have required the establishment of criteria for its own cultural policies, and it should be clear that these have always been the result of the concrete situations in which the rise to power of the revolutionary party unfolded. Lenin and Mao's contributions to the party's reflections on art and literature are well known. Both demanded that artists take a proletarian or popular position – the famous and seldom criticised 'working-class point of view', later converted into a universal, trans-historical, and transparent position – and redefine their feelings (Mao) or their will (Lenin) on that basis.⁵⁴ The change in artistic praxis would follow from that positioning, but let us note this is a kind of *formalism of the revolutionary party*, still in force today within certain Marxist organisations – in a good part of the Marxist-Leninist organisations in Peru, from the 1970s to the present, undoubtedly – that determines what are the effectively revolutionary contents and the appropriate attitudes to eradicate bourgeois subjectivity, as Andrei Zhdanov would put it. It is a formalism insofar as the determination of the correct line of artistic change depends on the party or on abstract criteria of class differences taken

53 Lauer 1982, p. 60.

54 See Mao 1942 and Lenin 2001.

as cultural differences, regardless of what content it effectively advocates as valid.⁵⁵ Interestingly, this position brings us back to the first Marxist view of art acknowledged by Eder and Lauer.

On the other hand, and to a great extent against this first tendency (in its Stalinist variant), a reassessment of the philosophy of the young Marx has favoured the desire to derive from art itself – understood as humanisation of nature or as the creative capacity of the *generic being* – an aesthetic principle that aims at reconciling the human being with their own creative potentiality. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez's aesthetics is a paradigmatic case of this attempt in Latin America, where 'a principle of causation predominates: work, which refers to man as the cause of himself'.⁵⁶ Or, in the words of the Peruvian Marxist musicologist Chalena Vásquez, 'when work becomes an estranged or alienated activity, art remains as the last stronghold of human affirmation, as long as one has the option of exercising creativity in freedom'.⁵⁷ Thus, art is seen here as the ideal image of an activity in which human beings overcome the degrading effects of alienation.⁵⁸ There is no historicity here in the category of the artistic: it is an anthropological constant in the history of humanity. If the determination of the revolutionary sensibility by the party requires art to take a *declared* political position, in this Marxist philosophy of art it is a matter of freeing art – a practical form of aesthetics understood in the Kantian mould as *purposiveness without purpose* – from the constraints imposed on it by capitalism. From Lauer's perspective, the two poles that define Marxist aesthetics have put forth two different versions of the same demand: that the new socialist art should not emerge from its own artistic praxis – conceptual and

55 Here it should be noted that the history of the cultural policies of socialist states should always be read according to the transactions they made between the 'universal bourgeois culture' developed up to that point (its canons, its narratives and its technical developments), and national and local plastic traditions. Despite the fact that this aesthetic formalism says similar things in different historical settings, if one looks at artistic practices effectively promoted by the Soviet Union, Cuba or China – to mention the cases with sufficient continuity as to facilitate the analysis of cultural transformations – it becomes clear that the official formulas – the famous 'point of view of the working class', for example – never meant the same thing in their respective countries.

56 Durán 2015b, p. 196.

57 Vásquez 2005, p. 15.

58 On a less philosophical level, it was this same idea that led a Marxist art critic like Meyer Schapiro (1978) to identify abstract expressionism, especially its obvious 'handcrafted' or artisanal character, as exempt from the effects of alienation typical of consumer society. In this case, a reduction of the concrete practice to an 'image' of itself is in operation, in which all non-visible determinations of the plastic process have disappeared.

material at the same time – but from the one-sidedness of political doctrine or philosophical (idealist) postulates.⁵⁹

Against this background, the line of reflection on the technical media involved in cultural production initiated by Walter Benjamin appears to be an exception within the Marxist tradition. The critical developments set out in the preceding pages owe their distance from philosophical and partisan aesthetics to him. For, ultimately, reflection on technique takes us away from an obsession with the aprioristic (class) content of art and in the direction of form, the fundamental dimension in a work of art, according to the Peruvian Marxist cultural critic Roberto Miró Quesada.⁶⁰ Or, at any rate, the *missing* dimension in the tradition of Marxist art criticism, now enabled to think of both dimensions in their dialectical articulation. As Eder and Lauer put it, it is this Benjaminian line that offered them a route to thinking about the Social Theory of Art as a method for ‘reopening the plastic object and contemplating the complex mechanisms of its internal structure and its relations with society’.⁶¹ It is worth noting that Lauer dedicated part of his *Crítica* to Benjamin’s memory.

Lauer’s shift towards research on crafts, after its intensive industrial development under the Velasco government – where it was promoted as a national industry that brought together half a million workers – shows that this Benjaminian line of thought allowed for an examination of the dissolution of aura not only through the effects of mass media, but also through the changes in peasant-ritual objects that, through major social processes (migration, urbanisation, development of the domestic market) become commodities – artistic or touristic, it matters not. From there, then, he returned to the debate between arts and crafts no longer as a primarily aesthetic issue, but as the confrontation of two categories articulated through their historical differentiation. Likewise, these categories were now understood as tributaries of the separation between manual and intellectual labour characteristic of bourgeois society, and especially relevant in colonial societies where the manual labour was directly associated with the Indigenous population.⁶²

These ideas were central to Eder and Lauer’s project of the Social Theory of Art as an attempt to gather the theoretical developments presented before, in the first place, but at the same time it was formulated as a step towards *the critique of art as a historical category*, claimed by Mario Perniola since the

59 I am paraphrasing here the reflections on the notion of socialist realism put forward by Fischer in the 1950s. See Fischer 1975.

60 Miró Quesada 1981.

61 Eder and Lauer 1986, p. 30.

62 Eder and Lauer 1986, p. 37.

1970s in his Situationist period, against idealist aesthetics and the sociology of art's naïve materialism, i.e., against the former's understanding of art as a transhistorical reality and the narrow empiricism with which the latter sought to counteract it. The main object of this critique then appeared as 'the ideology of the artistic', which has its roots in Latin America in the extirpation of idolatries under colonial rule, and then became established during the nineteenth century among the bourgeoisie and advanced throughout the twentieth century.⁶³ This ideology expanded the separation between the artistic and the non-artistic in the midst of social formations where class and race are juxtaposed, as part of a social structure inherited from the colonial order.⁶⁴ In contrast to the question of Latin American identity that dominated art criticism during the post-war period, the Social Theory of Art sought to reconstruct the ideological operativity of the category of the artistic in the history of the region, in order to understand the place of the plastique in the ongoing class struggles in the Third World.⁶⁵

Despite the boldness of these theoretical approaches after the publication of the Annotated Bibliography (1986) coordinated by Eder and Lauer, it is difficult to find even single essays in which the authors gathered therein continued to unfurl the consequences of their research.⁶⁶ Perhaps their desertion had to do with the fact that, in the end, all that those authors shared was a set of Marxian premises perhaps too abstract and general, developed by each as their own programme and according to their own interests.

An example will suffice here to explore this hypothesis. As we have seen, already in the 1980s Lauer gave priority to clarifying the social operation of the categories with which bourgeois society classifies cultural objects, seen as ideological moves covering up much more contradictory practical realities. Acha, on the other hand, not only continued to uphold the notion of the aesthetic as a more general level into which the categories historically constituted by the bourgeoisie could be subsumed, but also theorised the aesthetic dimension as

63 Lauer 1982, p. 21.

64 See Quijano 1980 for how the author understood the juxtaposition of class and race in Peru before his decolonial turn in the 1990s.

65 A panoramic view of Latin American art criticism between the 1950s and the 1990s can be found in Piñero 2019. On the notion of the Third World in these debates, see Lauer 1996. That text is a record of his intervention during the Third Havana Biennial in 1989.

66 The book presents a large effort in which Lauer, Eder, Acha, García Canclini, Shifra Goldman, María Herrera, Roberto Miró Quesada, Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Victoria Novelo, and Ida Rodríguez Prampolini systematised a large number of publications that could be articulated under the heading of a Social Theory of Art. See Eder and Lauer 1986.

a phenomenological path towards thinking the experience of art, crafts, and design beyond any concrete social formation.

This is what Acha's grand project of theorisation of art in Latin America indeed shows: he begins with the material structure of the artistic product – the 'object–subject relationship', as he puts it –, a relational structure doubly conditioned by socio-cultural determinations (without further specification of its operability) and by the 'biological basis of the subject' (the sensitivity moulded by culture).⁶⁷ Here, the object 'emits stimuli' that the subject receives and codifies in the terms established by their society. This is why aesthetic experience is relativised until it appears as the result of social conditioning, but the specific structure of the object itself – of the plastic object objectified as a *product*, as Lauer puts it – is lost among Acha's theoretical speculations.

In the end, in order to 'examine the constitution of a particular social and economic structure [sedimented in the very form of the plastic object, I might add], one must already be familiar with the final structure. Only then will one know what to look for in history', as Michael Heinrich says about the Marxian conception of the relationship between theory and history.⁶⁸ Acha started the other way round, taking art as something that emerges from 'a millenary history' – an artistic Robinsonade, we could say.⁶⁹ Perhaps that is why for Acha the problem of Latin American art was always its lack of identity, its need to overcome the 'developmentalist aesthetic', in line with the postulates of Dependency Theory. In the face of this, Lauer's Marxist theoretical development came closer to understanding art as a terrain where class struggle took place, distancing himself from dependentist assumptions and from the regional concern for identity.⁷⁰

Likewise, in Acha's thought the specificity of capitalism as a framework for the development of aesthetic forms is relegated to appearing as a set of ideological conditioning factors that filter into the material structure of the object, but not as a moving landscape that modifies certain forms, such as crafts, and remains indifferent to others, such as art. Ultimately, the capitalist market is the social space on which visual production depends even today, but, as Daniel Spaulding argues, it does not follow from this dependence that the plastique is *subsumed* by its logic.⁷¹ But the vanguardist belief that authentic culture must

67 Acha 1981, pp. 39–53.

68 Heinrich 2012, p. 31.

69 Acha 1978, p. 15. On Acha's and Sánchez Vásquez's Robinsonades, see Mitrovic 2021b.

70 For an early text where Acha aligns himself with Dependency Theory, see Acha 1973.

71 See Spaulding 2015.

stand apart from and in opposition to the art market and the Culture Industry prevailed in these debates.

7 Historical Limits and Current Relevance of the Social Theory of Art

During the early 1980s, much of the art criticism in Lima's print media disseminated the central ideas of the Social Theory of Art to the general public. For a time, and for those who adhered to it, this renewed vision of art and cultural production seemed to prepare the ground for the future socialist culture to be built after the seizure of power, although it was a marginal issue among the Marxist parties involved in the political dispute. With this in mind, in this last section I will raise some problems with the Social Theory of Art as it was understood among Lima critics during the 1980s. I will then discuss its historical limits and, finally, recover some of its ideas for Marxist analysis of the *plastique* today.

For some, like Alfonso Castrillón, these new critical theories meant a 'reaction against the development of alienating capitalism and its mass media'.⁷² Concepts like non-objectualism sought to question the legacies of the *Beaux Arts* system, which was implanted in Latin American societies between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. At the same time, they questioned traditional conceptions of art – including conservative post-war modernisms – and the new forms of the capitalist spectacle, to put it succinctly. In that sense, one might think that the Social Theory of Art was critical insofar as it sought to distance itself from the history of bourgeois art, while promising in the same operation to counteract the widespread commodification that was perceived as the main threat to the emergence of an autonomous or revolutionary art. It is because of this second desire that some perceived it more as a theory of what the new radical art *should be like* – such as those who tried to articulate the so-called non-objectualists within a single regional movement – than as what it actually was, namely, a critique of art from which new views of its historicity could emerge, which could act as its own theory only through a further connection with artistic praxis. This connection was not direct, although it is reasonable that the avant-garde artists themselves perceived these theories as legitimising their own artworks, and many critics maintained their traditional function as (radical) *connoisseurs* who indicate which is the 'truly important' art of their present.

72 Castrillón Vizcarra 2001, p. 192.

Moreover, its wide spectrum of antagonists led the theory to lose its specificity: discussion of the historicity of categories (art, crafts, design) gave way to the political need to declare their equivalence from the point of view of cultural value;⁷³ the desire to understand Latin American reality outside the framework provided by Western narratives led to the primacy of culture over the multiple dimensions that Marxism seeks to articulate when reflecting on social formations and their concrete dynamics, replacing economic reductionism with an excessive assessment of the structural weight of culture; the analysis of the transformations wrought by capitalist penetration of the traditional systems of crafts and art gave way to the urgency of identifying ‘the market’ as the main threat to social creativity. This is what Gustavo Buntinx, writing under the pseudonym ‘Sebastián Gris’, said in 1983:

Art as ideological production is not yet coherently integrated into a stable project of cultural domination and can be left to its own devices, in the absolute certainty that the very dynamics of its circuit will turn any gesture of rebellion into new forms of submission. The importance of the art trade in Peru does not lie, then, in its prices or in the relative contribution of the works that circulate through it, but in its character as the sole mechanism for the control of our visual production.⁷⁴

Here we find a strange combination of the recognition of a degree of independence of art from the market – art being ‘not yet coherently integrated into a stable project of cultural domination’, although Lauer registered the opposite situation in his *Introducción* – and the omnipotence of the market as the ‘sole mechanism’ for the domination of the visual arts. Perhaps this contradiction would have required us to consider the specific way in which artists participate in the market – petty commodity producers, as I argued above – since there would have been many indications that their autonomy, far from being a metaphysical question, actually derives from the fact that capital *does not appropriate artistic production as a process* (unlike crafts, as Lauer argued), and

73 Perhaps it was this desire that Gustavo Buntinx brought from the field of art theory and criticism into the ‘art world’ itself, through the many exhibitions he has curated since the early 1980s. Somehow, some traces of the Social Theory of Art examined here still appear in the statements of MICROMUSEO, a curatorial project and collection that Buntinx maintains to this day. However, it should be noted that the Marxist critique of art formulated at that time was not necessarily interested in reformulating the artistic field internally, but in questioning its institutions, ideologies, and, ultimately, its class commitments.

74 Gris 1983, p. 47.

if it does, it is only in isolated cases that do not revolutionise its social form of production.⁷⁵ The observation of such dynamics, however, should not lead us to conclude that art is in itself a form of resistance to capitalist domination.

That conclusion was rather common at the time, even though the specificities of the operation of art under capitalism remained unspecified, since answers had to be found in art itself in the face of the advance – real or imagined – of commodification. Against the unjustifiable idea of the artist's exceptionality in society, it was necessary to argue that the same relations of production that organise social life as a whole are realised in art – as García Canclini said – so that, if Latin American societies are predominantly capitalist, art should also be characterised that way. There were two routes out of this situation: either art as such was dismissed as an expression of bourgeois society and one searched for more authentic and non-alienated cultural forms (usually located in rural areas); or the anti-bourgeois tendencies of the artistic avant-garde itself were radicalised.⁷⁶ The second path led to the emergence of formal art innovations such as performance, installation, varieties of conceptual art, or the so-called *new media* – which we can recognise as emerging on a global field between the 1960s and the 1990s, and are now subsumed under the notion of contemporary art – as forms that were *already always critical*, which was equivalent to thinking that they would resist commodification and, with it, capitalist domination. If an artistic event did away with the forms associated with the fine arts – painting (tableau); sculpture (pedestal); etc. –, it was presumed that it had managed to resist the market.

In Peru, the irruption of the Shining Path onto the political scene and in the cultural field in the 1980s led to a shift in ideological and artistic radicalism towards practices and actors that these Marxist critics, as well as a good

75 Beech 2015.

76 Anti-bourgeois tendencies whose ambivalence had already been accurately grasped by José Carlos Mariátegui at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'Among the discontents of the capitalist order, the painter, the sculptor, the author, are not the most active and ostensible: but they are, intimately, the most fierce and bitter. The worker feels exploited in his work. The artist feels his genius oppressed, his creation coerced, his right to glory and happiness suffocated. The injustice he suffers seems to him triple, quadruple, multiple. His protest is proportionate to his generally excessive vanity, to his almost always exorbitant pride. [...] But, in many cases, this protest is, in its conclusions, or in its consequences, a reactionary protest. Displeased with the bourgeois order, the artist declares himself, in such cases, sceptical or distrustful of the proletarian effort to create a new order. He prefers to adopt the romantic view of those who repudiate the present in the name of their nostalgia for the past. It disqualifies the bourgeoisie to claim the aristocracy'. See Mariátegui 1970, p. 14.

part of the socialist left of the previous decades, openly disputed – with many victims from the ranks of Izquierda Unida, the main front of socialist organisations that dissolved after the 1990 elections. In the 1980s the socialist left abandoned the armed struggle in favour of taking power by electoral means, which meant a Gramscian turn towards a reconceptualisation of popular culture, civil society, the state and the struggle for hegemony, similar to other left-wing experiences in the region. Under the dictatorship of the 1990s, a good part of the Peruvian left subtracted Marxism from the ideological repertoire of the struggle to recover democracy, although this seems to have been reversed in the last decade. But what is certain is that the transition from the 1980s to the '90s profoundly changed the political landscape where a broad Marxist culture had developed in the country, of which the theoretical debate on the *plastique* examined here was a part.

Other general factors contributed to the retreat of the Social Theory of Art, such as the dissolution of the USSR and the neoliberal reforms in Latin America, that undoubtedly contributed to the disarticulation of a regional desire to think about art beyond capitalism, or at least through the lens of Marxism. Moreover, the participants in these debates did not share a common vision of the possible link between their theories and political practice, or a common programme for the renewal of the arts. These were mainly *critical* efforts that seemed to have lost their *raison d'être* when the shifts towards postmodernism took place in Latin America during the late 1980s and '90s.⁷⁷ In Lauer's specific case, his disengagement from the Marxist aesthetic debate took place in the mid-90s, when journalism became his main occupation (it remains so to this day, along with poetry) and his critical interventions in the cultural field shifted towards various theoretical perspectives characteristic of the turn of the century.

Although I will not elaborate on it here, the decline of the Social Theory of Art was the result of multiple personal, ideological, political and circumstantial factors, but there is no reason to dismiss the possibility of reformulating its more lucid contributions in a discussion of the current scenario of contemporary art and other forms of cultural production.⁷⁸ This is because such a scenario articulates the artistic systems of the main cities at a global level,

77 In Mosquera (ed.) 1996 we find a collective volume that gives an account of this turn in Latin American art criticism, as well as the 'overcoming' of the presuppositions of Dependency Theory and Marxism present in the authors reviewed here.

78 I am currently developing a doctoral project that revisits and reformulates several of the previously worked issues that constituted the Social Theory of Art in the region.

mainly through new market segments that make contemporary art (although not necessarily the most auspicious sector of the art market) a genuinely global form that dominates the institutional discourses on contemporary cultural production. On the other hand, it is obvious that the Social Theory of Art could shed light on the changes that state promotion and the new global markets have provoked in craft forms. Now, as was the case some decades ago, what a Marxist critique of art – rebranded as a *Social Theory of the plastique*, as it would be more accurate to call it – provides is not so much a scheme for the cultural legitimisation of certain objects, as curatorship usually operates today, but a theory to approach them, their creators, their consumers, and the institutions that articulate the different moments of their social existence.

Whether the project of articulating both dimensions can be (re)launched will determine whether we are able to clarify, as Marx did for political economy, why the social content assumes the different forms of the plastic object. Or, to be more precise, how this content is sedimented in a set of objects that, despite critics' efforts to reduce them to their most palpable and mundane realities, *seems to contain everything*.⁷⁹ For today it is clear that the dominant form of the plastique – or of visuality, culture, or some other encompassing term – is art, a form that is ideal for fetishisation: for some it is the promise of a life reconciled with its creative power; for others what is at stake is the possibility of making use of the magical powers encapsulated in its objectuality. What the Social Theory of Art offers, guided by the Marxian critique of political economy, is a question about the source for the *persistence* of art as the dominant cultural form under capitalism, although its conceptualisation of the link between art and value needs to be further developed.

For that should be the Marxian question about art under capitalism, since value is exactly what appears to us as a property of things themselves in the market, and to that extent it constitutes the fundamental formal problem of capitalist society. As Lukács thought, art aspires to embody the very image of the commodity-form, even if today it must compete more finely with the commodities that assume themselves as images of the beautiful and uplifting. The dialectic of representation and material support inherent to the plastic object contributes directly to examining the problem of value in current cultural production. It is a matter of apprehending this type of object, finally, as the result of a process unfolding against the backdrop of social totality.

79 Graeber 2001, p. 259.

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Missives for the Future? Michael Löwy's Close Encounters with the US Left

Alan M. Wald

H. Chandler Davis Collegiate Professor Emeritus, Department of American Culture, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States of America

awald@umich.edu

Abstract

The *oeuvre* of Brazilian-born and Parisian-educated Michael Löwy is widely recognised as the achievement of an exacting revolutionary cultural worker who integrates theory with his political duties, and labours hard at his craft so that the poetic imagination can reclaim and thereby re-enchant the reified reality of capitalist modernity. Nevertheless, when we come to Löwy's reputation in the United States we face a curious situation. There is no doubt that his work is known and respected among many activists and scholars. Yet from the perspective of the needs of the Marxist Left, the disparity is striking between what Löwy has to offer as a militant thinker and the actuality of his impact. The search for an explanation of such a discrepancy must begin with a preliminary stab at what I regard as a 'Löwyian' interpretation of Michael Löwy's life and writings. The method includes an exploration of his possible 'elective affinities', defined in a broad sense, with the cultural and political work of US radicalism since the 1960s. Are there analogies, kinships, or attractions of meaning that have entered into a relationship of reciprocal appeal and influence? In the end, however, I conclude that the disproportion between potential and actual stems largely from fractional perceptions of his accomplishment that are rooted in the peculiarities of US Marxist thought in general and of US Trotskyism in particular. Such partial and one-sided assessments are a profound barrier because the achievement of Michael Löwy needs to be understood in its totality.

Keywords

Michael Löwy – Marxism – Trotskyism – intellectuals – New Left

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Without commitment, everything is lost in advance.

ERNEST MANDEL¹

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A Passion for the Marvellous

What should revolutionary Marxist commitment in the United States look like as we move deeper into the new millennium? Where can we find a depth of thought that speaks to contemporary challenges, including the possibility of the exhaustion of older models of political engagement and the prospect of the socialist movement taking new forms? One militant intellectual who has held an unflinching dedication to the radical transformation of humanity for nearly seven decades deserves a more careful look than he has received to date – Michael Löwy, a Marxist author unlike any other. Löwy has lived a life that is a study in uncommon political responsibility, one that traverses the peaks and valleys of revolutionary politics on multiple continents from the 1950s to the present.

As a scholar and activist born eighty-four years ago in São Paulo, Brazil, of Austrian-Jewish immigrants and based primarily in Paris, France, for the last five decades, his is a rare intelligence inaugurated in youthful interactions with several national cultures. Then, in his maturity and even after an age when many would retire, Löwy's creative perspicacity has been continuously renewed by the shepherding of much global historical knowledge and many contemporary theories into a big tent all his own. To follow his work as it has gracefully moved through sundry topics since his first doctoral degree in 1964 is akin to observing an expert figure skater executing a free-style routine. That is why it is so remarkable that nothing feels extraneous in his writing.

Topping this off, ever since he met the poet Benjamin Péret in Paris in 1958, his angle of approach has been suffused with a passion for the metaphysical concept of 'the marvellous'; in Surrealism, this term denotes the stubborn mysteries of our experiences.² This core enthusiasm sets him close to Walter

¹ Mandel 1988, p. 154.

² More concretely, the 'marvellous' is used by Surrealists to refer to that fraction of the self, nature, and the bond between the two resting beyond the scope of reason and rationality.

Benjamin but apart from the preponderance of more traditional or orthodox Marxisms; and it blended felicitously with his attraction to Central European Jewish Culture in the mid-1980s followed by an absorption in Romantic anti-capitalism and eco-socialism. At the same time, he has long operated politically under the sign of a singular attachment to Leon Trotsky blended with Che Guevara. And into this mix comes an unusual fondness for the French poet Charles Péguy and the French socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui.³ All the above made Löwy ever-more-suited to his frequent role of formulating a wager on communist utopia as a principle of resistance and the *sine qua non* for not losing sight of commitment.

Nevertheless, when we come to the subject of this essay – Löwy's reputation in the United States – we face a curious state of affairs.⁴ There is no doubt that his work is known and respected among many activists and scholars; indeed there has been a thoughtful reception in the US of several of his major books that most professors would envy.⁵ Yet more is at stake in assessing Löwy's impact because he is at the farthest possible remove from the conventional armchair radical ensconced in university life. Whatever the nature of his written interventions, his larger goal has been to promote an activist encounter between the workers' movement and intellectuals; and my own perspective on the matter is likewise from the needs of building a revitalised Marxist Left in my native land. That is why I want to critically examine the disparity I think exists between what Löwy has to offer as a militant thinker and the actuality of his impact on the Left; this is not to 'solve' a personal mystery but to see where it leads in terms of our rethinking the state of affairs of revolutionary socialist thought and its organised expression at the present time. Is Löwy the vestige of a dying breed or harbinger of a new and needed exemplar of Marxist commitment? Or perhaps a little of both?

To be sure, any claim that the possible influence of Löwy is less than it should be is one that must be understood as a hypothesis, albeit a plausible one based on the quantity of his publishing and quality of reception. The difficulty is that

Seeing the prison-house of reason as a cradle of alienation, and also a basis of the West's claim of authority over the colonised, Surrealism calls up the subconscious to express the self and nature through wonder and transcendence. For a further elaboration of this element of Löwy's thinking, see Löwy 2009.

3 For more on Péguy, see Löwy and Sayre 2001, pp. 159–69; for Blanqui, see Bensaïd and Löwy 2014.

4 I have discussed a number of other aspects of Löwy's work in several review essays, which can be consulted for my opinions about additional matters: Wald 1994, 2017b.

5 See the reviews of *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*: Bute 2004; Crocco 2003/4; Keach 2002; Williamson 2002.

accurate measurements for assessing authority or inspiration are difficult to attain and determining with certainty anyone's would-be clout is even more of a stretch. Nevertheless, what I find in regard to Löwy is a pattern of numerous close encounters with many elements of the US Left even as there has been a failure for these to cohere in the kind of commanding presence for which he seems well-suited. At the time of this writing, many of the perspectives he has put forward *do* circulate fairly widely yet retain a status still unsettled but perhaps coming to fruition at a later date; in that sense, I wonder if they are to be judged 'missives for the future'?

Toward the Enlargement of Marxism

Commencing with his 1964 doctoral dissertation, 'The Young Marx's Theory of Revolution' (written in French but later published in English, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Japanese), Löwy set out to free Marxism from the heavy burden of dogmatic and scholastic interpretations. In some instances, doctrinaire renderings are the legacy of writers claiming adherence to various orthodoxies – Stalinist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Social-Democratic. In other cases, rigidity and determinism are qualities attributed by mainstream academics aiming to discredit Marxism. Löwy's approach, however, was not to engage in tedious polemics with either trend; rather, he contextualised Marx in the milieu of radical thinking of his and Engels's time so that the writings spoke with greater accuracy for themselves.

Löwy's was a 'Marxist analysis of the origins of Marxism itself'⁶ that pointed away from seeing Marxism in a manner frequently associated with a method like that of the nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte. Comte beget a positivist manner of thinking that can be found in mechanical renditions of dialectical and historical materialism. These analyse and explain socio-economic phenomena in terms of deterministic 'laws of nature' akin to those sought by the biological and physical sciences, 'laws' that presumably enable scientists to predict the ongoing course of development. Thus, the socialist and communist future of humanity is theorised as an inexorable and progressive unfolding of history's laws. As an alternative, Löwy argued that the young Marx's theory of revolution relied on 'the *philosophy of praxis* [action oriented toward changing society] and, dialectically linked to it, the idea of *workers' self-emancipation*'.⁷ In effect, he was moving away from the idea of

6 Löwy 2003, p. xvii.

7 Löwy 2003, p. xviii; emphasis in original.

positing revolution according to a pre-established model and toward the theorisation of the project as a strategic hypothesis.

This strong inscription of human agency was additionally conjoined with a warning against the fetishisation of industrial development by itself. According to Löwy, the progress of capitalist modernity ruled by an elite can be destructive even with economic growth and advances in technological expertise – as Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and climate change have taught us. The elimination of material suffering is an urgent objective. But its prerequisite is the *interruption* – not the *fulfilment* – of the system's linear evolution. And this must come along with the formation of socially transforming modes of both collectivism and radical freedom, some of which have been prefigured in utopian thought and writings, and historical experiences of revolt.

It is at this juncture that one finds the starting point for what the historian Donald LaCoss describes as Löwy's 'Romantic libertarian Marxism'⁸ and what Löwy and his recent collaborator Olivier Besancenot (a leader of the New Anticapitalist Party in France) champion today as 'an enlargement of Marxism, a broadening of its horizon', especially by incorporating ideas and practices associated with anarchism.⁹ Early on, as we have noted, Löwy began to dispute the notion that steps toward an ideal society arrive as the result of advances in industry and technology. Then, midway through his career, this conviction energised his already potent critique of the nineteenth-century doctrine of linear progress which in turn bolstered his twenty-first century vision of eco-socialist transformation. Still, other factors were already at work in forming his multifarious point of view. These include his youthful attraction to Surrealism and, by age fifteen, association with the 'Third Camp' school of revolutionary socialism initially identified with the US Jewish-American Marxist Max Shachtman (1904–72),¹⁰ and a tilt toward Rosa Luxemburg over V.I. Lenin.

What is now evident as well is that Löwy's dissertation, and all subsequent work, exhibit the profound influence of the Jewish-Romanian philosopher and sociologist Lucien Goldmann (1913–70), who taught in France

8 Löwy 2009, p. xxvi.

9 Löwy and Besancenot 2018, p. 364.

10 According to an October 1994 interview with Terry Murphy, Löwy declared himself a socialist in May 1954 in Brazil and participated in the founding of the Independent Socialist League, which included some partisans of Max Shachtman and used the name of Shachtman's organisation in the United States. Löwy read Shachtman's paper *Labor Action* and was primarily attracted to articles by Hal Draper. In 1960, under the inspiration of the Cuban Revolution, the Brazilian ISL united with other Marxists to form the much more significant Workers' Politics group. See Murphy 1994. Shachtman himself turned dramatically to the Right in the late 1950s, a development most fully explored in Drucker 1993.

and Belgium after World War II. Löwy's precise personal origins resemble Goldmann's in their hybridity, but even more so. Löwy was raised in Brazil in a Jewish-Viennese refugee family and received an advanced degree from the University of São Paulo in 1960. This was in social sciences, which he studied with Fernando Henrique Cardoso, at that time a Marxist sociologist and later a centrist President of Brazil. After 1961, however, Löwy relocated to Paris where he held a fellowship at the University of Paris (Sorbonne) expressly to work with Goldmann. Goldmann was himself an untypical Marxist in his version of dialectical humanism (focusing on the early Marx) inspired by Georg Lukács, and his method of 'genetic structuralism' that connected literary works and social structures. It was Goldmann, in his classic study *The Hidden God: A Study in the Tragic Vision of Pascal's Pensées and the Tragedies of Racine* (1964), who depicted the struggle for socialism as a wager, in the manner that French Catholic theologian Blaise Pascal gambled on the existence of God. 'Risk,' Goldmann wrote in his best-known work, 'possibility of failure, hope of success, and the synthesis of the three in a faith which is a wager are the essential constituent elements of the human condition'.¹¹

Moreover, throughout this steady unfolding of his intellectual project, the commitment to a revolutionary politics has remained constant, integral, and a necessary framework. On the one hand, this is 'party commitment' as an explicit allegiance to the project of building a revolutionary party to raise the general level of working-class consciousness and facilitate the self-organisation of that class to replace the capitalist form of the economy. On the other hand, Löwy has long been sceptical of the 'substitutionist' elements in Lenin's early writing, and a one-sided emphasis on centralism in *What is to be Done* (1902). He is far more comfortable with the 'libertarian Lenin' that he finds in *The State and Revolution* (1917); partial to criticisms of Bolshevism made by Rosa Luxemburg and the young Leon Trotsky; and convinced that democracy and pluralism must be maintained even under the most adverse conditions. He stands as a living example that intellectuals can and must be able to function in their party commitment as critical-minded individuals based on Sheila Rowbotham's demand for 'a recognition of creativity in diversity'.¹²

Whether active in the Far Left in France, Brazilian socialist groups, the international environmental cause, or many branches of the international Surrealist movement, his aim has been to help us forge a vision that gives coherence and purpose to socialist strategy. Numerous practical debates about

11 Cited in Cohen 1994, p. 4; emphasis in original.

12 Among other places, these opinions are expressed in Löwy 1991.

how to proceed on the Far Left, including a searing one about the efficacy of guerrilla warfare in Latin America in the late 1960s and 1970s, saturate his work even when not directly referenced in texts. This is crucial since most of us in the Marxist movement live our political lives in a tensive realm. On the one hand, we are pledged to a vision of total social transformation (utopianism) that Löwy sustains through his repositioning of Surrealism and the marvellous as fundamental to his political project; on the other, there are the exigencies of practical, day-to-day politics where we work on behalf of reforms that we hope will promote this revolutionary outcome. It is a fool's game to predict anyone's future behaviour and opinions, but Löwy's *oeuvre* to date can serve theorists as well as activists as a compass to find one's way; a sort of Rosetta Stone for understanding how to nourish and navigate over the decades a socialist movement that has still to live up to its full potential.

The View from the United States

Why, then, is Löwy's profile not higher among left-wing, and specifically Marxist, intellectuals and activists in the United States? To be sure, one cannot expect a single or simple clarification of this matter, and I admit in advance that I will of necessity be raising several related conundrums about Marxist commitment in different cultures and periods that I alone will not be able to resolve. My effort should be judged as a small contribution to a 'Löwyian' interpretation of Michael Löwy's life and work, and I will conclude with observations about the limitations of this inquiry.

What a 'Löwyian' interpretation means methodologically is exploring the issue of his 'elective affinities'. This term will be used here in the broad sense of feelings of connectedness among ideas and kinships of intellectual forms with the cultural and political work of US radicalism since the 1960s. It is a quest for analogies or attractions of meaning in the cultural forms through which Löwy and US Marxists have worked that have entered into a relationship of reciprocal appeal and influence, even in the absence of specific causes. In the end, however, I conclude that the disproportion between the potential and actual stems largely from fractional perceptions of Löwy's accomplishment that are rooted in the peculiarities of US Marxist thought in general and of US Trotskyism in particular that I will attempt to outline. These in turn will be connected to related matters such as the future of the aforementioned type of 'party commitment' and its compatibility with Western Marxism and twenty-first century socialism.

It is the partial and one-sided affinities that I see as the most profound problem because the achievement of Michael Löwy needs to be understood in its totality in two senses. One is totality in terms of its integration of multifarious topics, disciplines, and theoretical traditions. The other is the integration of intellectual work and ongoing political commitments; that is, his theoretical thinking is inseparable from his militant commitment. What is read by Löwy in the US is not intended by him to be academic Marxism, even if it is mostly processed through the academic Marxist gaze. His writing is the creation of an exacting revolutionary cultural worker who integrates theory with his political duties, and labours hard at his craft so that the poetic imagination can reclaim and thereby re-enchant the reified reality of capitalist modernity.

Here biography is critical: With an original grounding in the young Marx, Péret, Luxemburg, and others, over the course of several decades Löwy expanded his focus to centre on Latin American political strategy, the theory of uneven and combined development (as pertaining to social and economic advance), European Jewish culture, Romantic anti-capitalism, religious politics in Latin America, and the reclamation of ‘elective affinity’ from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Max Weber. Books from this late twentieth-century era of astonishing productivity that were translated into English include *The Marxism of Che Guevara* (1973), *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (1979), *The Politics of Uneven and Combined Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (1981), *Redemption and Utopia: Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe* (1992), *Marxism in Latin America from 1909 to the Present* (an anthology, 1992), *On Changing the World: Essays on Political Philosophy from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (1993), *The War of the Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (1996), and *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the National Question* (1998).

Today, like a Marxist gem tumbler very much in the tradition of Walter Benjamin, Löwy bangs the rocks of historical materialism and theology together to get a deeper sparkle in writings about Franz Kafka, Surrealism, eco-socialism, and more. Volumes translated into English after the new millennium are *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (2000), *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (with Robert Sayre, 2001), *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (2005), *Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Humanism* (with Olivier Besancenot, 2009), *Eco-Socialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe* (2015), *Franz Kafka: Subversive Dreamer* (2016), and *Romantic Anti-Capitalism and Nature: The Enchanted Garden* (with Robert Sayre, 2020). A 540-page volume of commentaries on political photographs assembled by Löwy appeared in French in 2000 and was also translated into English as *Revolutions* in late 2020.

The dazzling depth and breadth of this output is protean and stubbornly unclassifiable.

Fractional Perceptions

From a distance, the hypothetical expectation of a considerable reputation for Löwy due to multiple affinities among radicals in the US seems well met. After all, the majority of Löwy's scholarship has been translated into English starting in 1970 (and many are from leftist publishing houses well-known in the US such as *Monthly Review*, Haymarket Books, and Verso); his essays and reviews began appearing in *Telos*, *New German Critique*, *Monthly Review*, and *Latin American Perspectives*, and today turn up in *Jacobin*, *Science & Society*, *New Politics*, *Against the Current*, and other venues of special interest to the Marxist Left; he has a long-standing association with *New Left Review*, broadly respected among Marxists; he has lectured widely in the US, as well as taught and held fellowships at several US universities; his writing speaks to the preoccupations of a number of constituencies (literary, sociological, religious, and environmental scholars); and his political activities parallel those of radicals in the US in many social-justice movements – not only individuals from the Vietnam War and Cuban Revolution era, but extending to Latin American Solidarity, Jewish internationalism, anti-racism, socialist ecology, and more.

Nevertheless, although I judge his achievements to be among the most vital Marxist ones of our time, Löwy (born in 1938) has never received the rock-star attention in the US accorded the younger Slavoj Žižek (born in 1949), or some of Löwy's French rough contemporaries such as Alain Badiou (born in 1937), Hélène Cixous (born in 1937), Julia Kristeva (born in 1941), Chantal Mouffe (born in 1943), Jacques Rancière (born in 1940), or Étienne Balibar (born in 1942). As if scanning a beach with a metal detector, what we can detect of the necessary active convergence and mutual reinforcement necessary to produce elective affinities between the forms of Marxist culture prevalent in the US and those championed by Löwy are occasionally strong pings. These are primarily a positive reaction among academics to his books on Che Guevara, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Jewish messianism, Romantic anti-capitalism, and eco-socialism. At the annual gatherings of the Socialist Scholars Conference in the 1990s and the Left Forum in the new millennium, he appears as a frequent panellist but not a keynote speaker. I am unaware of a single essay in a US publication devoted to a survey of his achievement, as one commonly finds in regard to Fredric Jameson, Immanuel Wallerstein, and others who aim for an impact beyond their university departments.

Of the several reasons for this asymmetrical fit, most seem to point to the aforementioned obstacle of fractional perceptions and affinities. Distinct from many of the other scholars, who are mainly identified with specific academic fields such as philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, and comparative literature, the breadth of Löwy's specialties crosses many disciplines and continents, and his own official branch of learning – the Sociology of Culture – barely has a counterpart in the United States, even if we include what is sometimes referenced as 'Cultural Studies'. This is dramatically reflected in the fact that reviews of his books in one specific area rarely engage or even cite his research in others, thereby reinforcing a very partial depiction of this activist-scholar.¹³ He is simply not treated for what he is: a complex cross-disciplinary thinker as well as a professional revolutionary working in the cultural field.

This comes to the fore if we consider the bearing of his singular mark as a militant Marxist scholar whose greatest impact has come in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America, where he has a deserved reputation as an inspiring thinker and an influential public intellectual.¹⁴ In his home base of France, the situation is different. There he is well-known compared to the US, but it is mainly as a figure on the Marxist Left (due to affiliations with the Communist League, New Anti-Capitalist Party, and Ensemble!). This is probably because the broader radical culture is governed by trends such as the positivistic sociology of Durkheim–Bourdieu and the anti-humanist tendencies of structuralism and poststructuralism. Elsewhere in Europe, too, rival Marxist trends are dominant so that Löwy's syncretism among the Cuban Revolution, Western Marxism, Jewish Messianism, and the Theology of Liberation seems more appealing to the Southern hemisphere of the Americas, although his very recent work on eco-socialism and romantic anti-capitalism may be having its greatest impact in the US part of the North. And yet Löwy doesn't quite fit the category of 'Latin American Scholar' since he does not live in Latin America and so many of his publications deal with non-Latin American topics.

Finally, and perhaps most decisively for understanding his profile in the US, Löwy's work is entwined with a record of revolutionary engagement and organisational participation over six-and-a-half decades scarcely matched by the above list of his rough contemporaries from Europe.¹⁵ For most of his life he has been an energetic militant, working in the political as well as cultural

13 For example, reviews of *Redemption and Utopia* and *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, which may have received most of the attention in the US, make no mention of Löwy's work on Latin America, Surrealism, or anything outside of the primary subject.

14 See Bois *et al.* 2007.

15 Alain Badiou, however, was a founder and member of a small Maoist group for about fifteen years.

field; one can point to Marxist-activist figures such as Ernest Mandel and Daniel Bensaïd among his closest associates.¹⁶ I am talking about his attendance at meetings of Marxist organisations, running for office, campaigning on the street, serving on political bodies, editing Left journals of groups, drafting resolutions, attending world congresses (of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, World Social Forum), and much more.

The names of several US scholars might be cited as possible analogues to Löwy in terms of select aspects of their intellectual work as well as ongoing committed activism; for example, Angela Davis (influenced by Herbert Marcuse's views on fascism, and a member of the CPUSA until 1989 and Committees of Correspondence after that); Mike Davis (among other things, a pioneering Marxist scholar of the Anthropocene, and at one time in the CPUSA and then a supporter of the International Marxist Group in England); Robin D.G. Kelley (notable contributor to African-diaspora Surrealism, and a student member of the Maoist Communist Workers Party);¹⁷ and Cornel West (proponent of a Marxism–Christian dialogue, and admirer of the Black Panther Party as a high school student in Sacramento).

Even so, none of these have promoted his work, and Löwy's degree of consistent, organised, and collectivist activist commitment is mostly something unicorn-rare among the US academic Left. This incongruence raises the question of whether there is even a viable comparison set by which to evaluate his impact. It is hard to imagine any of the superstars of Marxist academe writing the kind of thorough-going, thoughtful, highly detailed critique of the practical issues in Lenin's organisational history that Löwy offered in his 1991 critical review-essay on Paul Le Blanc's *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*.¹⁸ And even though there are certainly Marxist intellectual activists of real note in the US, a large number have deradicalised over time or else moved increasingly to the sidelines. Löwy, in contrast, is still going strong in his ninth decade; it is as if he has turned on his after-burners to formulate original projects, carry out new responsibilities, and maintain globe-trotting activities such as participating in conferences and holding down residential gigs.

16 See Löwy's contribution to Achcar (ed.) 2000, and his obituary tribute to Bensaïd, Löwy 2010.

17 The Communist Workers Party was part of the anti-revisionist 'New Communist Movement', and began as the Asian Study Group in 1973. In 1985 it became the New Democratic Movement.

18 Löwy 1991.

Our Parties, Ourselves

Considering the above observations, it now seems possible that two overlapping narratives might provide the contours of this consideration of the presence and absence of elective affinities between Löwy and the US Left. One involves the general status of Marxism among intellectuals in the United States, especially regarding the watershed year 1968, Western Marxism, and the matter of 'party commitment'.¹⁹ In distinction from many countries in Europe and Latin America, the impact of the Cold War in the US exiled more than one generation of Marxist thinkers from the universities or drove them to operate under guises that tended to undermine efforts to directly nurture a tradition. Due to the impact of the McCarthyite witch-hunt, affiliation with Marxist organisations became near-impossible and divulgence of any ongoing memberships remained mostly taboo even after the radicalism of the 1960s.

As a result, very few US Marxist intellectuals of stature established a presence in the 1950s and almost none embraced Western Marxism. Several with whom Löwy's elective affinities would be the strongest – C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Hal Draper – worked in near-obscurity before the mid-1960s, active in miniscule and crumbling Marxist organisations. Herbert Aptheker, the best-known scholar in the Communist Party, was an orthodox pro-Soviet ideologue in every respect despite his pioneering research in African-American history. He surely evinced party commitment but was black-listed from academe. Between 1959 and 1967, the journal *Studies on the Left* began to point in the direction of rethinking Marxism in some new fashion, but much of the early New Left focused on historical matters such as 'corporate liberalism' and was influenced by non-Marxists such as the sociologist C. Wright Mills. Despite some precursors among revolutionary anti-Stalinist Marxists of the 1930s and 1940s, and the presence of a few Marxist-Freudian thinkers in the 1950s, it was not until the late 1960s that an authentic Western Marxism type of presence was established with the work of scholars such as Fredric Jameson (born in 1934) and Marshall Berman (1940–2013).²⁰

19 There are various ideas about what constitutes 'Western Marxism', but the notion arose in reference to the decades after 1917. At that time Marxist intellectuals emerged in Western and Central Europe who stood apart from the official Marxism promulgated by the Soviet regime and focused on culture and philosophy. See Anderson 1976. Moreover, 'party commitment' does not necessarily mean membership in mass socialist or communist parties; small vanguard groups often operate as pre-party formations or are otherwise devoted to developing larger parties.

20 There was also an earlier tradition of independent Marxism that might be linked to Western Marxism starting in the 1930s; this will be explored in several forthcoming collections edited by the US historian Howard Brick.

Even during the early days of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, party commitment of any type seemed out of the question for almost all US established socialist scholars, party in response to disillusionment after the 1956 crisis of the CPUSA over Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes. I do not mean to suggest that party-type commitment is the only valid form of activism; one can point to a number of US scholars who prize political practice and have carried out successful interventions. This is different, however, from collectively collaborating in building socialist organisations that carry out a variety of interventions. Such an involvement brings a unique set of challenges and experiences that are known to Löwy, and available to veteran Marxist intellectuals in other countries, but not so widely shared in the US.²¹ Herbert Marcuse, for example, was a Western Marxist partaking of the Frankfurt School outlook. Although he had been active in the 1919 Spartacist uprising in Germany, he came to the US in his mid-30s and never held membership in any Marxist organisation; nor was he even politically active in the postwar era until the 1960s, and even then his involvement was through writing and lecturing. Eugene Genovese, attracted to the work of Antonio Gramsci, did hold membership in the Communist Party and its youth group for five years in the late 1940s, and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) for a few years in the early 1960s.²² Nonetheless, ties to neither group nor to any other were sustained by Genovese, and, after the collapse of the USSR, he renounced Marxism, became right-wing, and returned to the Catholicism of his youth in 1996. In the historical profession there emerged in the 1960s several dozen former Communists and a few others with low-key organisational ties.²³ Staughton Lynd, while a student, was very briefly in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1949.

The other story line is the peculiar history of US Trotskyism vis-à-vis US scholars. What I mean by 'peculiar' refers to an unfortunate mismatch that surely influenced the partial perceptions of Löwy's achievement. This is because Löwy's affiliations outside the United States have been with groups and publications openly identified with a heterogeneous current in Trotskyism (distinguished from others by the modifier 'United Secretariat') that progressively evolved into a revamped 'Fourth International' with a broader

21 See the collection edited by Francis Mulhern: Mulhern (ed.) 2011. Only two of the subjects are from the US, and the vast majority of others have undergone a substantial experience of party commitment.

22 The Progressive Labor Party (called the Progressive Labor Movement until 1965) was a split from the CPUSA that originally followed the political line of the Communist Party of China. For Genovese, see Phelps 2012.

23 A few examples are Robert Fogel, Herbert Gutman, Gerda Lerner, David Montgomery, Alexander Saxton, and John Womack.

self-understanding.²⁴ Löwy's classical Marxism, which has fused with the best traditions of workers' council communism and the libertarian spirit of anarchism, was present as an acceptable component of many affiliated organisations; and his critical attitude toward Leninist organisation was shared by many of his comrades. In the US, however, this particular variety of Trotskyism, which since the 1990s no longer refers to itself in any orthodox sense as 'Trotskyist', has never received significant organisational expression, despite the myriad small groups declaring that they are Trotskyist or claiming to be linked to the United Secretariat.²⁵ Moreover, the prevailing concept of 'party commitment' in the US was one prioritising the achievement of 'homogeneity' and often criticised by unhappy veterans as anti-intellectual.

Although Trotskyism was a pole of attraction for a number of brilliant intellectuals in the 1930s, that experience was never duplicated.²⁶ None of the foremost intellectuals who had already attained prominence chose to ally with the main Trotskyist movement, the SWP, after World War II, although there was the continued presence of several cultural figures of note (the sculptor Duncan Ferguson, the painter Laura Slobe, the poet and translator Sherry Mangan, the composer George Perle, the art historian Peter Raphael Bloch).

The postwar SWP had weathered several crises and splits in its history well before the mid-1960s that cast out of its ranks relatively young and middle-aged seasoned activists who eventually went on to make substantial contributions to Marxist culture.²⁷ Yet the priority placed on maintaining its theoretical magazine, called *Fourth International* from 1940 to 1956, then *International Socialist Review*, allowed it to enter the 1960s in a stronger position than one might

24 In 1963, two major public factions of the original (1938) Fourth International came back together after a ten-year split, largely due to common views on the Algerian War of Independence and the Cuban Revolution. In the mid-1990s, the United Secretariat turned to the strategy of encouraging realignment and reorganisation on the Left, and of no longer identifying itself principally as 'Trotskyist'. The prime example here would be the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), called the Communist League from 1969 to 1973, which morphed into the New Anticapitalist Party in 2009.

25 Marxist scholar Warren Montag notes this in a recent interview about the mid-1970s: 'Through Mike [Davis] ... I was introduced to the Trotskyism of the Fourth International (or more accurately its dominant tendency), that is, of Mandel, Krivine, Bensaid, Tariq Ali and others. This variant of Trotskyism, which had virtually no presence in the US at that time, was very much a codification of the political experiences of 1968 internationally, combining a notion of the direct democracy of workers' councils, consistent opposition to the bureaucratic regimes of the USSR and its satellites, and intransigent support for anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements around the world.' See Montag 2017.

26 My own research on this topic is included in Wald 2017a.

27 A few examples: Cochran 1977; Braverman 1974; Garson 1966; James Petras, originally a sociologist specialising in Latin America.

have imagined. Many members and leaders had contributed to these publications, including self-taught worker-intellectuals such as Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry. At the helm were mainly experienced writers who had attended college but were never academics, especially Joseph Hansen and George Novack.

Novack, in particular, considered work among intellectuals to be a primary focus, although he also participated a great deal in political defence activity, fund-raising, and publishing and editing.²⁸ Throughout the 1950s he carefully followed developments in Marxism and early on developed an interest in the New Left guru C. Wright Mills, with whom he developed a collaboration that led to Novack's giving critical feedback on the manuscript of the anthology *The Marxists* (1962). Novack also collaborated with Isaac Deutscher on *The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology* (1964).²⁹ Not only did Novack have an impressive record of contributing well-researched and polished essays to *Fourth International* and the *International Socialist Review*, but he was conversant with all the ins and outs of the Trotskyist movement around the world, having served as the representative of the SWP to the Trotskyist movement in Europe in 1953–4.

In addition, with the advent of the New Left and the establishment of the original Socialist Scholars Conference in 1965, Novack attempted to intervene to draw young intellectuals toward Trotskyism.³⁰ This bore fruit in his appearance as a speaker on 'Radical Intellectuals in the 1930s' in a major session at the 1967 Socialist Scholars Conference (with respected radical scholars Christopher Lasch and Warren Susman as commentators) and his collaboration with SWP member Robert H. Langston, a Hegel specialist from Oklahoma who had studied for a doctorate with Jürgen Habermas in Germany. When Langston withdrew into more specialised studies in Marxist economic theory, Novack worked with myself (a graduate student at University of California at Berkeley and then an assistant professor at the University of Michigan), the brilliant autodidact and SWP secondary leader Leslie Evans (editor of several books by James P. Cannon and author of *China After Mao* (1978)), and possibly others to reach out to scholars and theorists.³¹

28 See the biographical introduction to his papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society: Novack 1992.

29 In this instance, Novack made the selection of texts and prepared the notes while Deutscher wrote the Introduction.

30 The Socialist Scholars Conference was refounded in 1981 by individuals close to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and then was replaced by Left Forum in 2004 when a number of DSA members left the governing board.

31 For Robert Langston, see Freeman and Mandel (eds.) 1984; for Leslie Evans's activities, see Evans 2010.

At first glance, Novack and Michael Löwy make for a thought-provoking match. Despite the age and generational difference, both contributed decades of committed activism to Marxist groups and integrated their research and intellectual interests with their political dedication. Both were secular Jews who held that a Marxist understanding was far more than just politics but involved one's philosophy and a dramatic revolution in thinking and in the marrow of one's bones. Both integrated Marxist philosophy with sociology, history, and culture. Both were fluent in French and admirers of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The dissimilarities, however, may have actually been greater.

Although Novack saw himself as challenging dogmatism in Marxism, and made several original contributions in developing the theory of permanent revolution, exploring the dynamics of US history, and providing the most extensive critique available of Pragmatism from a Marxist perspective,³² he was unabashedly an adherent of what he saw as an orthodox interpretation of dialectical and historical materialism.³³ He was also an aggressive critic of the very forms of Marxist-humanism and Western Marxism that drew Löwy and that are such a critical part of Löwy's intellectual project. This is clearly on display in Novack's *Existentialism versus Marxism* (1966), *Humanism and Socialism* (1973), and *Polemics in Marxist Philosophy* (1978). While Novack carefully read and rigorously responded to new modes of Marxist thinking, his stance was that of a defender of an older faith treated as science. In almost every instance he would throw down the gauntlet on the dividing line between what he saw as the materialism of the classical Marxists and Bolsheviks vis-à-vis the alleged idealism of practically everyone who came after. (Sebastiano Timpanaro, the Italian philologist who wrote *On Materialism* (1975), was among the few exemptions.) To Novack, Western Marxism was not a body of knowledge from which to learn but one that must be unmasked and defeated. While all manner of people found Novack to be charming, attentive, and learned, it was almost exclusively SWP members in the US who were drawn to share his views on Lukács, existentialism, Lucio Colletti, etc. However, there is no evidence that he was successful in having an impact in terms of philosophical writings produced by his own comrades in the US – of which there are none.³⁴

32 See Novack 1972 and 1975.

33 See Novack 1963.

34 Novack's books were reviewed uncritically in the SWP newspaper, the *Militant*, but I am aware of no substantial publications by disciples in the US. One SWP member wrote in opposition to Novack's ideas in the SWP discussion bulletin, after a submission of his was rejected in the *International Socialist Review*. See Garrett 1973, pp. 13–21.

Although Löwy published regularly in the US from 1980 through 1990, when the SWP broke definitively with the Fourth International, the only point of contact between him and Novack was by proxy in 1971, when Novack debated a student of Löwy's who used the name Etienne Abrahamovici, on the meaning of the young Lukács in the SWP journal *International Socialist Review*.³⁵ The gist of the exchange was that Abrahamovici considered Novack's critique of Lukács's position to be incomplete. Whereas Novack maintained simply that the objective in nature exists prior to and independent of the subjective, Abramovici insisted that this claim would be accurate only with a qualifier: 'that this independence and priority [of the objective] is itself modified by the subject and that, moreover, the distinction between the subject and the object is itself a product of the dialectical evolution of nature and society.' That is, the subject does not simply reflect the object and there is no 'dialectic of nature' apart from the human society that perceives nature in a dialectical fashion. Marxists may strive to approximate the objectivity of science but even that must be qualified by relativity and uncertainty. Scientists, including those using a dialectical method, may observe an objective world but such a perception takes place through a social prism that deforms their view in one way or another.³⁶ This is not a simple discussion, and one might have hoped to see it further explored through additional debate in this milieu.

One reason this discussion did not develop into anything more is that, as the 1970s progressed, the SWP leaders made an unexpected turn toward what they imagined to be a 'Leninist-Trotskyist' orthodoxy; this resulted in devoting less and less time to cultural and theoretical matters beyond announced political priorities. The SWP membership increased a bit, yet the organisation was prospering in its own bubble and participation in debates in Marxist theory beyond ones related to factional concerns was increasingly ignored.

The Rupture of 1968

As Fredric Jameson observed, the sporadic consciousness of history usually enters the lives of individuals through the feeling of belonging to a particular generation.³⁷ For US Marxist intellectuals of the most recent decades, it was experiencing the events of 1960s – not studying those of the 1930s – that

35 The exchange was reprinted in the section called 'Georg Lukács as a Marxist Philosopher', in Novack 1978, pp. 117–45.

36 For a more recent discussion of these complex matters, see Royle 2014.

37 Jameson 2010, p. 515.

produced a sense of their consciousness as Marxists. Although countless activists had identified as independent radicals by the 1960s, it was specifically from 1968 onwards that the lives of many became a continuous Marxist seminar as they formed caucuses in professional organisations and began to study the hitherto hidden tradition of the Left. To look back on that year seems like watching a generation deciding on what they thought would be a future as committed revolutionaries.

Scores moved from the exploding Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a New Left organisation, to various Marxist groups.³⁸ That same year, Löwy, who had been teaching in England after launching his career in Israel, returned to Paris and switched his affiliation from United Socialist Party of France (PSU, a radical group created by fusions) to the Trotskyist organisation Communist League (later, after being banned in 1973, the Revolutionary Communist League). For activists in the US as well as in France, the June–July worker–student uprising in Paris was critical, although all were well aware of events that were counterparts around the world – the Tet Offensive in Vietnam that began in January, the Prague Spring that culminated in the Soviet invasion in August, the protest in Chicago at the Democratic Party convention in August, and the massacre of students in Mexico City in October.

Can we therefore treat 1968 as the historic turning point for considering Löwy's relation to Marxist intellectuals in the United States? One problem is that not all 1968s were alike, even for those who decided to choose a future working for the world revolution. (Which I admit is very nice work if you can get it!) For instance, Löwy and some US activists concurrently joined groups affiliated with the same Fourth International (United Secretariat) in the same months, which in the United States was the SWP.³⁹ However, up close and in context, the state of affairs was very different. Whereas many US activists had until recently been college students galvanised by the war their country was waging against Vietnam, Löwy was a mature scholar of thirty distinctly bonded to Rosa Luxemburg, Che Guevara, and Leon Trotsky. Although Löwy was profoundly shaped by the late 1960s, he may more accurately be said to be part of a slightly older layer of Marxists who made commitments earlier in the postwar decades. Some of these identified keenly with aspects of the Western Marxist

38 SDS lasted from 1960 to 1969, although it emerged from a predecessor organisation, the social-democratic League for Industrial Democracy, and its last convention was followed by various attempts to revive it. See my memoir of the experience, Wald 2011.

39 The SWP was launched in 1938 after the Trotskyist 'Socialist Appeal' faction was expelled from the Socialist Party. After a decade of moving from Trotskyism to Castroism, it broke formally with the Fourth International in 1990. At its founding it had 1,520 members but went downhill from there and only returned to the thousands in the 1970s.

tradition and earnestly took a 'party commitment' – active membership in a revolutionary organisation, if not a formal party. In Europe and Latin America there was nothing unusual about any of this.

At that earlier time of new radicalisation in the US, the young activists of the Young Socialist Alliance and SWP emerged as the Marxist backbone of the movement against the war in Vietnam and for the political perspective of the slogan of 'Immediate Withdrawal'.⁴⁰ In contrast, especially after the USSR's invasion of Czechoslovakia, the pro-Soviet Communist movement in the US already seemed deeply politically compromised and had an aging membership.

Across the ocean, in France, the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Youth (soon to become the Communist League and then Revolutionary Communist League) was perhaps the leading organisation in the 1968 revolt, while the Communist Party tried to resist the students' 'Night of the Barricades' and the general strike called by the trade-union confederations. Meanwhile, a younger generation of Marxist scholars and activists was also cast up and exploring new routes to activist commitment. Isaac Deutscher, formerly part of the Trotskyist movement and who was Trotsky's pre-eminent biographer, was broadly esteemed. The most distinguished radical journal in the English language, *New Left Review*, was openly sympathetic to a compelling and sophisticated neo-Trotskyism.⁴¹

A growth in the membership and intellectual authority of Trotskyism was thus conspicuous in many countries of Europe and Latin America, although numbers were more along the lines of tens of thousands world-wide, not hundreds of thousands. It is particularly notable that in England very militant but less sectarian varieties of Trotskyism were in the forefront of the 1960s radicalisation and after. These were mainly the International Socialists, which published an excellent journal called *International Socialism*, and the International Marxist Group, with internationally-known Tariq Ali among its leaders and a following among *New Left Review* editors and contributors.⁴² But even some of the more cult-like movements, especially Gerald Healy's Socialist Labour League (later on, Workers Revolutionary Party), attracted artists and scholars,

40 The story is accurately and wonderfully told in Halstead 1978.

41 *New Left Review* is a highly influential bi-monthly Marxist journal founded in 1960. For a political history see Thompson 2007 and Blackledge 2004.

42 The International Socialists in England were associates of Tony Cliff, an advocate of a state-capitalist theory of the Soviet Union, between 1962 and 1977. The International Marxist Group was the name for supporters of the Fourth International between 1968 and 1982, which reached a membership of about 1,000. From both of these organisations emerged influential Marxist intellectuals far too numerous to list. Some histories include: Kelley 2018; Birchall 2011; Tate 2014. For more details, one might consult Alexander 1991.

most famously the actress Vanessa Redgrave and moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.⁴³

In the United States, oddly, despite a historic connection to Great Britain, a shared language, and commonalities in culture, there were substantial differences. While some graduate students began joining the SWP in the 1960s and after, only a few stayed in the organisation or even in school.⁴⁴ Perhaps more were drawn to the Communist Party, which was undergoing a resurgence in the era of the New Left. But the tradition of a 'code of silence' regarding one's CPUSA affiliation makes it problematic to know who a member was and for how long, even decades after McCarthyism. Angela Davis, who had studied with Marcuse, was among the few who dared be open about their Communist affiliation and she was almost immediately fired from her teaching position at UCLA. Although documentation remains scarce, several scholars in Philosophy were attracted to the PLP, such as Harvard Professor Hillary Putnam and Wellesley Professor Ruth Putnam. There is also the strange story of Martin Nicolaus, a brilliant translator of Marx's *Grundrisse*, who was a founder of the

43 These were dogmatic organisations under the tight leadership of Gerry Healy. See Pitt 1989.

44 A few of the exceptions in the SWP, for which I will provide dates to give a perspective on ages and periods of affiliation: The Shakespeare scholar Paul N. Siegel (1916–2004) was a member of the SWP from 1937 to 1953, and again from 1978 to 1983, after which he was a member of Socialist Action, an organisation of expelled members, until his death. The Gramsci scholar Frank Rosengarten (1927–2014) was a member of the SWP for a few years in the late 1970s but may more accurately be located within Euro-Communism and never contributed to the SWP press. Morris Starsky (1933–89), who held a doctorate in philosophy and mainly taught Spinoza, was fired from the University of Arizona after he joined the SWP in the late 1960s. (Starsky was subsequently blacklisted, remaining an SWP member until his death at the age of 56 from heart disease.) Sociologist James Petras (born in 1937) was briefly in the SWP as a graduate student, as was the historian Michael P. Hanagan (1947–2018). Between his college years and the completion of his doctorate, the historian Paul Le Blanc (born in 1947) was an SWP activist. The situation followed a different pattern with the rival Independent Socialist League, founded by Max Shachtman as the Workers Party. Outstanding intellectuals in the 1950s such as Irving Howe and Hal Draper were of an earlier generation, although they became better known and published more in the 1960s. Younger ones such as Michael Harrington, Robert Martin, Alex Garber, Paul Novick, Bodgen Denitch, Richard N. Hunt and Arlon Tussing variously moved away from the Far Left as they established careers. A few such as Martin Oppenheimer and Morris Slavin did not follow suit. A successor generation mainly associated with the International Socialists produced a number of important scholars such as Barbara Winslow, Kim Moody, Dan La Botz, Nelson Lichtenstein, Charles Capper, Sam Farber, Johanna Brenner, Nancy Holmstrom, and Robert Brenner. The limitations of space, prior research, and respect for privacy prevent the compilation of a complete list.

Maoist October League in 1971 but expelled five years later as a 'revisionist and opportunist'.⁴⁵

In the end, however, it was Maoism and not Trotskyism that ultimately came to have greater influence among the younger US activists of the 1960s, as was the case in Germany, Third World student groups, and to some extent in France. This was partly due to Mao's seeming to be more militant than the Soviet leadership and to represent a Third World revolutionary trend that was uncompromising in its anti-racism. In some quarters the Chinese Cultural Revolution lasting from 1966 to 1976 was misinterpreted as a cleansing of corruption and bureaucratisation. The new Maoist groups in the US (at first called 'anti-revisionist' and later the 'new communist movement') were the most successful in attracting activists of colour.⁴⁶ Most of the Euro-American cadres originated in a 1969 split from the SDS of a faction called 'Revolutionary Youth Movement 11'.⁴⁷ The fact that Maoism was a variant of Stalinism did not seem to be a problem for these 1960s radicals; the most vulgar characterisations of Trotskyism as 'counter-revolutionary' regained their former currency from before 1956, along with other crude styles of polemicising.⁴⁸ The highly respected Marxist journal *Monthly Review*, and its publishing house, took on a less-sectarian Maoist cast, and the historical radical newspaper *The Guardian* morphed from independent Marxism and quasi-fellow-travelling of the Soviet Union into an organ of Maoist politics.⁴⁹

As with the case of Communist Party intellectuals, one can say with certainty that political sympathy with varieties of Maoism among intellectuals was much greater than public declarations of membership or signed articles in Maoist publications. Research to date on this aspect (the affiliation of intellectuals) is almost non-existent, although several books have appeared dealing with the attacks on Maoists by the FBI.⁵⁰ The most common phenomenon appears to have been a 'soft Maoism'; in particular, a faculty member who shared a sympathy for China's Communist experiment, but who was not about to join any cadre organisations.⁵¹ For the most part, Maoism did not translate

45 The October League was a Maoist group formed in 1971 and led by Mike Klonsky. For the Nicolaus expulsion, see October League 1976.

46 See Kelley and Esch 1999, pp. 6–41.

47 The story is most fully and accurately told in Elbaum 2003.

48 See, for example, Carl Davidson's execrable twelve-part series, Davidson 1973.

49 *Monthly Review* was an independent socialist magazine established in 1949, and the *National Guardian* (after 1968, the *Guardian*) was a radical newspaper established in 1948. Both were founded by supporters of the Henry Wallace Progressive Party campaign. See Belfrage and Aronson 1978.

50 The most helpful is Leonard and Gallagher 2015.

51 The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars had this reputation.

into attraction to Western Marxism in the US, the most notable exception being the extraordinary influence of the French Marxist Louis Althusser. This occurrence was surely an element in the side-lining of thinkers of such a different stripe as Löwy and Goldmann.

Nevertheless, the actual relationship of Althusserianism to Maoism was knotty and is still under debate.⁵² Firstly, Althusser offered criticisms of Soviet policy that echoed those of Mao; but secondly, Althusser was a long-time loyalist of the official pro-Soviet Communist Party of France; thirdly, he is identified with structuralism; but fourthly, he was repudiated as a revisionist by some Maoists. The result is that both Maoists and non-Maoists in the US and elsewhere have felt sympathy for parts of the Althusserian *oeuvre*, as is evident in several brilliant critiques by the Trotskyist-influenced intellectuals Alex Callinicos, Perry Anderson, and Warren Montag.⁵³

Then we have the Trotskyist presence among post-1960s Marxist intellectuals in the US, which can be assessed in different ways but remains minimal outside of a few publications and scholarly books. Among most groups that regarded themselves as the sole repository of Trotskyist orthodoxy, the attitude has been that anyone not of their own political rendition was a 'fake Trotskyist'.⁵⁴ This would include Michael Löwy for his connections with groups of the United Secretariat, his sympathetic critique of Che Guevara, his tilt toward Luxemburg over Lenin, and his obvious attraction to Romantic anti-capitalism, Liberation Theology, and Jewish Messianism. Among the rare scholars in North America whom they might accept is Bryan Palmer, a Canadian writing impressively on the US Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon and the Minneapolis Teamster Strikes of 1934.⁵⁵ Over the years it seems likely that only a handful of faculty members have joined such organisations, none lasting as members for very long. Many of these small groups seemed to echo the worst instrumentalist traditions of the Communist movement, using intellectuals as vehicles to promote the line determined by political leaders, while simultaneously regarding them as suspiciously in need of cleansing of their alleged petit-bourgeois traits. Some organisations were genuine sects that fixated on idolised father figures and restructured the personalities of members through social pressure. The groups whose achievements were much sounder, such as the SWP and International Socialists of the 1960s and 1970s, did only

52 See, for example, Humphries 2016.

53 See Callinicos 1980 and 1986, and Montag 2002 and 2013.

54 Terms like 'fake Trotskyist' are still commonly employed by organisations such as the Spartacist League and Socialist Equality Party (formerly the Workers League) for their rivals.

55 See Palmer 2010 and 2013.

marginally better. It was not until the creation of a few of their descendants, the International Socialist Organization (founded in 1976) and Solidarity (founded in 1986), that there has been a detectable if modest increase in cultural and intellectual workers who became members and allies of socialist groups holding some partial historical connections with Trotskyism.⁵⁶

The Non-Trotskyist Trotskyist?

What about the post-1960s? Despite Löwy's heretical views, he still remained linked to the Fourth International. However, Trotskyism entered the new millennium in a curious state, worldwide and especially in the US. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, there was a dramatic confirmation that the Stalinist system was unviable in ways that Trotskyists had long documented. Nonetheless, the effect of this collapse, and the transformation of China into a capitalist powerhouse under a one-party dictatorship, principally served to widely discredit belief in the possibility of socialism for the next twenty years and to produce a refrain that there is no alternative to some form of free-market rule. While the political situation has been changing during the past decade, it still appears that Trotskyism, which emerged as potentially a more democratic and humane communist alternative to Soviet Communism in the Great Depression, had already had its second and final chance to grab a foothold in the 1960s and 1970s. The fifty years that followed, including up to the present, now have the appearance of something of a protracted farewell tour for the various remnants and groupuscules with Trotskyist origins. Moreover, Marxist groups from the Maoist and Stalinist tradition are in a comparable situation.

This raises the question of whether the long-awaited reunion between an intellectual vanguard and the social movements in the form of a revolutionary Marxist organisation has now moved permanently off the agenda, or whether it might occur in some form entirely different from 'party commitment' of any variety. This brings us back to the Löwy question from another angle: Imagine that the SWP had become, despite its small resources, the kind of intellectual and cultural storm-centre that it had been in the 1930s, or that the Communist League and International Marxist Group approximated in their respective

56 The International Socialist Organization was founded in 1976, by a group that departed the International Socialists, growing from a handful to nearly a thousand before imploding in 2019. Solidarity was formed in 1986 by a number of Far Left small groups and has remained a pluralist organisation whilst never exceeding more than a few hundred members.

countries during and after the 1960s and 1970s. Would Löwy's impact on the US Left have come closer to its potential? That possibility is questionable because of several underlying issues that this inquiry has brought into play. The problem here is *not* to be found in the quality and relevance of Löwy's scholarship, although it is surely idiosyncratic in its various blends and would hardly resonate with the orthodox-minded. The matter seems to be a much deeper one that involves the political and cultural limitations of the place of looked-for reception and the likelihood of substantial affinities – the nature of the US Left, which at some point must fully own the defects of our record.

On the one hand, the few scholars and cultural workers in the various revolutionary organisations tended to be opponents of the Western Marxism with which Löwy's was in dialogue; this means that we are left with a narrow intellectual tradition associated with the experience of Marxist organisations in the US. On the other, those drawn, like Löwy, to the Frankfurt School, Surrealism, and dialogues with theology were usually at a distance from anything resembling a party commitment. This suggests that a heavy price has been paid for the disconnection between Marxist intellectuals and organisations on *both* sides. Intellectuals lack the benefit of socialist practice when they refuse to combine their cultural work with a party commitment; and Marxist organisations deprive themselves of genuine expertise in economics, philosophy, and so on, if rigidly run by two-dimensional apparatchiks with inflated fantasies about their Marxist skills. This lack of space for a coming together of truly creative Marxism and socialist organisation may explain why only a handful of US Marxist groups have promoted Löwy;⁵⁷ and why those US radical scholars who admire his work either misunderstand or airbrush the revolutionary-activist dimension.⁵⁸

To some extent, then, the answer to the question of *why* Löwy's reception has been so limited might be the same as the answers to questions about other

57 The reception of Löwy's *Uneven and Combined Development* is a somewhat unique case since it was a sophisticated defence of an idea associated with classical Trotskyism. Paul Le Blanc, a respected Marxist historian who has played a vital part in gaining a hearing for Löwy's work in the US, published an essay in an Australian publication called 'Open Marxism and the Dilemmas of Coherence: Paul Le Blanc's Reflections on the Contributions of Michael Löwy' in Le Blanc 2013. The focus of analysis is almost exclusively on 'permanent revolution', with only passing (and descriptive) references to Lukács and other heretics, and nothing at all about Surrealism. Nevertheless, Le Blanc provides useful insights into the limitations of Löwy's treatment of this theory in light of developments in Russia and China. However, Alex Callinicos, a leader of the British Socialist Workers Party, wrote a sharply critical assessment; see Callinicos 1982.

58 In fact, several of the most welcoming reviews in US publications of Löwy's work on Frankfurt School Marxism have been by Europeans. See Fehér 1981 and Wistrich 1994.

select Marxists, such as 'Why no Daniel Bensaïds or Ernest Mandels or Enzo Traversos [who completed his Ph.D. in 1989 under the direction of Löwy] in the US?' Or to political formations and journals, such as 'Why no Communist Leagues, International Marxist Groups, or *New Left Reviews* in the US?' I cite these as examples of life-long Marxist activist-scholars, pluralistic revolutionary organisations, and a journal making memorable contributions to socialist culture that exemplify the quality of socialist thought and militancy of which I have been able to find little more than a smattering in the US. The political soil here, perhaps for historical reasons that we have yet to fully address, has been inadequate for the growth and blossoming of *these types* of Marxist commitment. That is why possibilities for genuine affinities have been provoked through close encounters, but rarely solidified.

Specifically, it is worth noting that Löwy's association with *Telos* came to a halt largely because the journal transmogrified into a reactionary anti-communist organ. While Löwy's publication record in *Monthly Review* has been ongoing for decades, and his relations with editor Harry Magdoff followed by John Bellamy Foster have been cordial, the journal itself is decidedly not associated with the politics that Löwy has championed on many issues.⁵⁹ Even his much closer connection with *New Politics* is troubled by its antipathy for his enthusiasm for Che Guevara; a personal friendship with several editors is central to his tie. Although Löwy does have a strong association with the US Surrealist trend associated with Penelope and Franklin Rosemont, a public presence in this capacity has been minimal and US Surrealists have been a marginal force.⁶⁰

When it comes to particular scholars with whom one finds a substantial elective affinity in scholarly work or sometimes activism, it comes mainly in highly selected dimensions. Hal Draper, for example, wrote about the young Marx in a manner similar to Löwy, and gave his five-volume book series (1977–90) the same title as Löwy's dissertation; but Draper's ultra-sectarian approach to the US Communist movement is removed from anything Löwy might write, despite a shared Marxist anti-Stalinism. Löwy is also an admirer of the writings of Herbert Marcuse (whom he had as a teacher in Paris), but in contrast Löwy has maintained a grounding in working-class politics. With *New German Critique*, Löwy felt a strong connection in the 1980s and 1990s, but then realised that its focus had changed. Löwy is distinct from much of the US Marxist Left

59 There is anecdotal evidence that their publication of *The Marxism of Che Guevara* had an impact on activists, but this did not translate into anything tangible.

60 The most notable manifestation of the relationship is that Rosemont was responsible for publishing *Morning Star*.

in his Trotskyism, but equally distinct from US Trotskyism in his heterodoxies. To adapt Isaac Deutscher's famous characterisation of 'The Non-Jewish Jew', Löwy might qualify as 'The Non-Trotskyist Trotskyist'.

We're All Democratic Socialists Now?

And yet the state of affairs of the culture of the US Left has been changing since the new millennium; what has until now been a missed rendezvous may not be entirely foreclosed. Following the 2011 appearance of the Occupy movement, which was part of the international global-justice movement, the US Left has been undergoing a transformation with new forms of socialist activism and theorising. These can be observed as emergent in places such as the success of new left-wing publications – especially *Jacobin*, which has to date been more accepting of Marxist anti-Stalinism – as well as social movements such as Black Lives Matter, which spearheaded demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands in 2020. The superb publishing triumph of Haymarket Books, also politically more sympatico with Löwy's politics than most venues, the dramatic presidential campaign of social-democrat Bernie Sanders, and the explosion of membership in the Democratic Socialists of America have brought about a national debate over the meaning of socialism. So far most of this has been quite distinct from Jesuitical ideological wrangling or the destructively self-righteous forms that Bolshevik allegiance has taken in the past in the US Left. Instead of dividing into factions such as Maoism, Trotskyism, and social democracy, many of the new socialists have been promoting the term 'Democratic Socialism' as a common meeting ground for individuals who wish to rethink and redefine many aspects of previous ideologies, leavened with some anarchism.

In this context, many of the ideas of Michael Löwy that had previously faced neglect have the potential of increasingly entering current discussions and debates. These might include his writings on the national question in regard to definitions of nationhood and creative approaches to self-determination; his research on the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui in relation to discussions of Marxism and Indigenous traditions; his writings on Jewish messianism as more of a reference point for US Jewish radicals who may be turning toward religion as part of their move to the Left; his thinking about breaking radically with the ideology of linear progress and taking the view of the vanquished in relation to recent theorising about Afro-pessimism;⁶¹ his understanding

61 See the discussion of anti-Blackness in Rey *et al.* 2017.

of internationalism as expressing the best elements of the Enlightenment's universality of reason and the French Revolution's 1793 concept of citizenship; and of course his efforts in relation to the legacy of Che Guevara, revolutionary Romantics, and libertarian Marxists to forge a more sophisticated alternative to the traditional polarisations between those who approach past revolutionary experiences with uncritical adulation and those who too harshly write them off due to defects.⁶²

One must also acknowledge that the old-fashioned notions of party commitment are substantially discredited, in part because socialists are still paying a price for the suffocation of critical thought by the Communist parties and many other self-proclaimed 'Leninists'. On the other hand, we should have no illusions about what happened when Marxism was finally accorded the precious acceptance of academe after the 1960s. The result was that there was a tendency for 'theoretical practice' to become political practice itself, divorced from hands-on movement-building. The result of this precarious delusion was that a number of the '68 generation found themselves unexpectedly *en route* to throwing in the towel and turning against the very far Left that once exalted their thinking and ideals. The worst embraced a new anti-communism with the passion of their previous Stalinist, Maoist, or Trotskyist fervour. This sorry record by radical scholars, often based in the academy but sometimes linked to think tanks, is why the tradition of party commitment represented by Löwy cannot be written off, even though it has likewise declined considerably in France, England, and other once-promising localities. As yet, there is simply no convincing alternative to take its place.

Still, if the party commitment model is not quite finished, it remains in poor repute. One explanation is an anti-intellectual element in US radicalism that still must be expunged; another could be that the conditions of radicalisation simply have not been sufficiently deep and urgent to produce the necessary connection between intellectual work and party commitment. If the last is the explanation, one might reconsider what I have been regretting as the relative lack of recognition accorded Löwy. It could be that the achievement of celebrity status under such non-radical conditions would have changed the character of his work, even undermining one of the most admirable qualities – his transcendent humility. The point is that what I have been presenting as a 'missed rendezvous' can lead one in several different directions of further inquiry. It presents the kind of problem too elusive for a single or certain explanation, and many underexamined aspects still remain. That is why we find

62 I am grateful to Peter Drucker for coming up with this observation and formulating the list of aspects of Löwy's work that may now be addressed.

ourselves continuously identifying new complications only to be boggled by the search for solutions.

Of course, the Left has been reckoning with trouble spots in its past for as long as it has had one, and it would be a mistake to ignore the existence of the political experience of ancestors if they have come up with formulations that can help address challenges of the present. Alongside the matter of the necessity of truly creative and high-quality cultural/intellectual work required by the socialist movement, we can point specifically to the troublesome politics of campism. Here, even the resources of Trotskyism indigenous to the US, despite some shocking political aberrations that have been noted in this essay, deserve reconsideration in their writings critical to sustaining the subversive legacy of 'socialism from below'; one that survived the twentieth century even as it lay battered between the Stalinist systems and imperialism.⁶³ Most likely, however, all variants of Trotskyist tendencies have by now exhausted their potential as the lodestar of the twenty-first century Left, although small breakthroughs of charismatic activists or disciplined little groups may occur.

Nevertheless, the trend since the late 1970s suggests that novel ways must be found to think against the *Zeitgeist* of global capitalism. In this sense, Löwy's writings, which are substantially devoted to new forms of anti-capitalism and the new problems with which revolutionary strategy is confronted, still remain an undiscovered country for US radicalism. Their critical and emancipatory potential exist independently of the limitations we have noted in past reception. Yes, most are still somewhat beyond the horizon for present-day activists, too, but glimpses have whetted the appetite for topics of which many of us had not even been aware. The current disconnection could shift as a recomposition of the Left gets underway.

We in the US may still fail to take full advantage of what they have to offer. In the end we may be facing new issues that old remedies are unable to resolve, and it can certainly be hard to say goodbye to yesterday. For Löwy himself, of course, his achievements stand fully on their own and no one can say that his life was a missed opportunity. He has always been pledged to uncertainties while retaining confidence in a course of action wagered on utopia.

63 For the most influential version of this perspective, see Draper 1966.

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Unfree Labour and Value Productivity: Challenges for the Marxian Labour Theory of Value

Bryan Parkhurst

Professor, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, United States

Bryan.Parkhurst@oberlin.edu

Abstract

This paper explores the question: does unfree labour produce value? The paper does not answer the question. Rather, it contends that, no matter how Marxists answer the question, they end up either (1) relinquishing the view that labour is the only source of value or (2) appealing to an apparently bogus distinction in order to hang on to the view. Both of these alternatives will be unacceptable to the orthodox Marxian economist. For the choice is between jettisoning the labour theory of value and thus giving up on Marxian orthodoxy, or else frankly conceding that one's orthodoxy is baseless and dogmatic.

Keywords

Marx – value theory – unfree labour – wage labour – slavery – animal labour

Introduction

The focus of this paper is a question that comes up from time to time in the Marxian economics literature: can the labour of unfree (e.g. enslaved, enserfed, indentured, etc.) workers produce value?¹ 'Unfree workers' refers, generically, to those who are compelled to work because of an implicit or explicit threat of positive harm rather than (merely) negative deprivation. Unfree workers are those toward whom the class of owners stands in a 'direct, unmediated relation

1 See Rioux, LeBaron and Verovšek 2019 for an overview of recent Marxian treatments of the topic of unfree labour.

of domination'² and with respect to whom 'physical and/or politico-legal compulsion are used to acquire and exploit labor power'.³ 'Free' labourers, by contrast, own their own labour power, are at liberty to sell it (or not) as a commodity on the labour market, and are motivated to work by the need for and prospect of remuneration in the form of monetary wages. Marx believes, and spills much ink arguing, that wage labour standardly creates value. His view is that, under 'normal' (non-crisis, etc.) capitalist circumstances, wage labour causes a magnitude of socially-necessary abstract labour time (SNALT) to be congealed in commodities, in excess of the SNALT that is 'carried over' from the constant capital used up in production. Can unfree labour also create new value, in the exact technical sense just specified?

This question may sound scholastic. But it bears on wider historical topics. These include the nature of slave-based economies in the ancient Mediterranean and the antebellum American South, the gestation of capitalism within feudal society, and the economic stakes of the Haitian Revolution and the American Civil War. The issue of unfree labour is also pertinent to discussions about the modern-day prison–industrial complex.⁴ My set of concerns, though, lies on a rather rarefied plane, one that is conceptually prior to any particular historical application of any given Marxian analysis of unfree labour. Rather than trying to defend a 'yes' or a 'no' answer to the question of whether unfree labour produces value, I argue that either answer lands the Marxist in hot water. This is because either answer ultimately leads to (1) an outright rejection of the Labour Theory of Value (LTV), or to (2) an arbitrary distinction between (a) a form of labour that putatively does produce value and (b) a (for all value-theoretic intents and purposes) functionally identical form of labour that putatively does not produce value. The difficulty my line of reasoning raises is that there are to all appearances only two alternatives,

2 Miles 1986, p. 41.

3 Ibid. 'Autonomous wealth as such can exist only either on the basis of direct forced labour, slavery, or indirect forced labour, wage labour. Wealth confronts direct forced labour not as capital, but rather as a relation of domination [*Herrschaftsverhältnis*]' (Marx 1973, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/cho6.htm>>). All citations of Marx are from the online editions of his works available at <www.marxists.org>.

4 Jay 2019; Clegg and Usmani 2017.

a rock and a hard place, both of which are unacceptable to the orthodox Marxian economist: one must either reject the LTV or else open oneself up to accusations that one's acceptance of it is groundless. I myself can see no way past this damned-if-you-do–damned-if-you-don't predicament.

Outline of the Argument

Unfree labour either does or does not produce value; these two possibilities are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. One who holds that unfree labour does not produce value must identify the dissimilarity between wage labour and unfree labour that explains why the former produces value while the latter does not. I present a thought-experiment – in which a paradigmatic capitalist enterprise that employs wage labour is incrementally transformed into what is in essence a slave plantation – that should make us sceptical about whether there is a relevant dissimilarity. On the other hand, if one holds that unfree human labour does produce value, then one is faced with the further question of whether other forms of labour that involve ownership of the labourer, such as unfree nonhuman animal labour, also produce value. If one holds that unfree nonhuman animal labour does not produce value, but that unfree human labour does, then one must identify the dissimilarity between unfree human labour and unfree nonhuman animal labour that explains why the former produces value while the latter does not. One who holds that unfree nonhuman animal labour produces value is faced with the further question of whether other forms of input–output transformation in the productive process that involve motile or automated systems akin to animals (such as robotic apparatuses or, more generally, self-propelled machines of whatever sort) produce value. If one holds that non-animal machine systems do not produce value, but that animals do, then one must identify the dissimilarity between input–output transformations mediated by animals and input–output transformations mediated by machines that explains why the former produce value while the latter do not. I present a thought-experiment – in which animal labourers are transformed piecemeal into robot labourers – that should make us sceptical about whether there is a relevant dissimilarity. If one holds that non-animal machine systems produce value, one thereby abandons anything resembling Marxian economics. Logical space is thus exhausted: of the four relevantly possible positions, four of them rest on dogmatic commitments and one of them results in the straightforward denial of the LTV, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

	Does the Form of Labour Produce Value? (Y/N)				Problem with Position	Proponents
	Human Wage Labour	Unfree Human Labour	Animal Labour	Robot / Machine 'Labour'		
View #1	Y	N	N	N	arbitrary distinction between wage labour and unfree labourer	Marx (sometimes), Murray 2016, Tomich 2016, Miles 1986, Bough 2008a, Bough 2008b, Bough 2014, Genovese 1965, Genovese 1971, van der Linden 2016, Post 2011 ^a
View #2	Y	Y	N	N	arbitrary distinction between humans and animals	Marx (sometimes), Ortiz-Minaya 2019, McMichael 1991, Bhandari 2007, Novack 1939, Boutang 2018, McGrath 2005, Mandel 1962, Banaji 2010, ^b Banaji 2011, Clegg 2015, Clegg 2018, Clegg and Foley 2018, Castoriadis 1988, Stache 2019
View #3	Y	Y	Y	N	arbitrary distinction between animals and machines	Haraway 2013, Whitener 2018, Hribal 2003, Adorno 2003, Braverman 1974, Hochschartner 2014, Macdonald 2016, Perlo 2002, Ferrari 2017, Torres 2007
Views #4	Y	Y	Y	Y	LTV rejected	Not a Marxist view

- a Post 2011 characterises slaves as fixed capital (p. 134), but still divides the workday of the slave into necessary labour and surplus labour (p. 10). According to Marx's definitional scheme, this is simply a contradiction in terms: fixed capital does not produce value, so none of its 'activity' can count as surplus labour, i.e. as productive of surplus value.
- b Banaji 2010, p. 104, likens slaves to fixed capital, but also claims that they produce surplus value (pp. 281–2).

It will be helpful if, before fleshing out the argument, I provide some background information about the Marxian theory of value production and Marx's views on slave labour.

Production

Marx writes:

Since the direct purpose and the actual product of capitalist production is surplus value, only such labour is productive [...] as directly produces surplus value. Hence only such labour is productive as is consumed directly in the production process for the purpose of valorising capital [...] Hence such labour is productive as is represented in commodities.⁵

We must ask, in light of this passage: what is it for labour to produce value, or to 'valorise capital', or to be 'represented in commodities'? Here I shall follow the broad outlines of Moseley's (2015) exegesis of Marx's account of what happens when value production happens; and I shall frame my subsequent questions about value-productivity in terms of Moseley's contention that the notion of value production takes on its full and fundamental meaning at the macro-level of a global system or totality. I assume, however, that my series of questions could also be terminologically adjusted so as to comport with (some but not all) other exegeses of Marx's value theory. According to Moseley,

Marx's theory is based on two main levels of abstraction – the production of surplus-value and the distribution of surplus-value. The main question at the level of abstraction of the production of surplus-value is the determination of the total amount of surplus-value produced in the economy as a whole, and the main question at the level of abstraction of competition is the division of the total surplus-value into individual parts – first the equalisation of the rate of profit across industries and then the further division of the total surplus-value into commercial profit, interest, and rent. The fundamental premise of this logical structure is that the total surplus-value is determined at the first level of abstraction (the production of surplus-value) and is taken as a predetermined magnitude at the second level of abstraction (distribution of surplus-value), i.e., in the division of this predetermined total surplus-value into individual parts.⁶

⁵ Marx 1864, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/cho2b.htm>>.

⁶ Moseley 2015, p. 42.

It is important to keep in mind that, within this theoretical scaffolding, the following questions are *not* equivalent to the question of whether unfree labour is productive labour:

- A. *Whether wage labour is more efficient than unfree labour.* Marx believed that, because of the recalcitrance of humans who are pressed into bondage, production based on slavery has an innate tendency to be less efficient and more wasteful, other things being equal, than production based on wage labour. ‘From Olmsted, or from Cairnes who had quoted Olmsted, Marx took over the so-called theory of sabotage. One could give only primitive tools to slaves since they would destroy better equipment; one could only entrust mules to them because mules, in contrast to horses, would survive mistreatment by slaves.’⁷ But slave labour could be less (or, for that matter, more) efficient than wage labour with respect to the rate of output of physical units (relative to physical inputs) irrespective of whether, like wage labour, it is capable of producing surplus value. If indeed slave labour is value-productive, its level of physical efficiency may impact its level of value productivity (since value production is a matter of social averages, which particular instances of labour may either exceed or fall short of). But the question is whether it is indeed value-productive.
- B. *Whether or not unfree labour brings into existence items that are useful and/or good.* Utility is a precondition for saleability; something for which nobody had any use could not have an exchange value. But labour can be ‘productive’ in the sense of producing use values without being ‘productive’ in the sense of creating new (monetarily expressed or expressible) value or surplus value. When I make my own dinner, this labour ‘produces use values’, but it creates no value or surplus value. Also, the fact that a labouring process produces something ‘objectively bad’ rather than ‘objectively good’ (anthrax instead of vaccines, or whatever) or is itself ‘objectively bad’ rather than ‘objectively good’ (because unfree and unpleasant rather than the opposite) has nothing to do with whether it or its products are ‘valuable’ in the germane technical Marxian econometric sense.
- C. *Whether or not unfree labour produces physical (enduring, concrete, material, etc.) things or instead ephemeral (nonmaterial, transient, non-accumulable, etc.) things.* Labour does not have to be ‘productive’ in the sense of creating a durable spatiotemporal object in order to be ‘productive’

⁷ Nippel 2005, p. 42.

in the sense of creating new value. Materiality of this sort is, so to speak, an entirely immaterial consideration. Services as well as goods can be valuable, for Marx.⁸

Regarding (B) and (C), Moseley writes: ‘The criterion for the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is whether the labour produces surplus value, not the usefulness of the product. Similarly, the distinction between material and immaterial products is also irrelevant to the distinction between productive and unproductive labour; surplus value is also produced through the capitalist production of services.’⁹ Additionally non-equivalent to the question of whether unfree labour produces value is the question of

D. *Whether or not unfree labour is a source of profit.* Marx allows that certain sorts of capitalistic investment in labour and means of production may secure a profit for the capitalist without also contributing anything to what Moseley calls ‘the total amount of surplus-value produced in the economy as a whole’. In other words, there are ‘unproductive’ capitalists who make ‘withdrawals’ from the ‘common pot’ of global surplus value but make no ‘deposits’. This is because, according to the model Marx develops in *Capital* Volume III, a capitalist receives an amount of profit from the (metaphorical) common pot that is proportional to the amount of money the capitalist invests, not proportional to the amount of productive labour the capitalist sets in motion (although the total amount of distributable value contained in the global common pot is a function of the total amount of productive labour set in motion). For example, because, according to Marx, the circulation (transfer of ownership) of existing commodities does not add to their value (i.e. to the amount of SNALT embodied in them), capital invested in retail businesses, most of whose activities involve the transfer of ownership, is largely non-value-productive.

[N]o value is produced in the process of circulation, and, therefore, no surplus-value. [...] In fact, nothing occurs there outside the metamorphosis of commodities, and this has nothing to do as such either with the creation or change of values.¹⁰

8 See Parkhurst 2019 on digital and other ‘disembodied’ commodities.

9 Moseley 2015, p. 44.

10 Marx 1894, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch16.htm>>.

But obviously businesses engaged primarily in circulation, such as Amazon and Walmart, can be profitable. So the question of whether a firm is profitable is not the same as the question of whether the firm engages in value production (i.e. makes deposits to the global common pot of surplus value). A firm could engage in value production without being very or at all profitable and could be profitable without engaging in value production. Marx sums up the orthogonal relationship of profit and value (at the level of the individual firm) when he says that

The capitalist class thus to a certain extent distributes the total surplus value so that, to a certain degree, it [shares in it] evenly in accordance with the size of its capital, instead of in accordance with the surplus value actually created by the capitals in the various branches of business. The larger profit – arising from the real surplus labour within a branch of production, the really created surplus value – is pushed down to the average level by competition, and the deficit of surplus value in the other branch of business raised up to the average level by withdrawal of capitals from it [...]¹¹

So, for Marx, the question of whether unfree labour is value-productive is distinct from the questions of whether it is (A) efficient/cost-effective in comparison to wage labour (i.e. comparably productive in physical terms); (B) useful and/or good (i.e. productive of use values and/or morally or otherwise normatively condonable); (C) materially generative (i.e. productive of durable or tangible use values, physical goods instead of services or ‘non-physical’ goods), or (D) profitable (i.e. productive of revenue that exceeds expenses). The question of whether unfree labour is value-productive is instead equivalent to the question: do businesses that command unfree labour thereby (other things being equal) contribute to the global common pot of surplus value, from which an individual firm withdraws profits ‘in accordance with the size of its capital’?

Marx on Slavery

Marx had much to say, generally, about the character of unfree labour insofar as it is a foil to the waged form of labour that is paradigmatic within the capitalist mode of production. And he had a handful of things to say, specifically, about the value-productivity (or lack thereof) of unfree labour. Marx’s remarks are

¹¹ Marx 1973, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/cho8.htm>>.

important to consult, but they do not help to settle the issue of whether unfree labour is productive. One reason they do not help to settle the issue is that, on any untendentious reading of what he says, Marx contradicts himself, as we shall see. Another reason is that what he says about the value-productivity of unfree labour tends to be elliptical and open to conflicting interpretations. Another reason is that Marx might have been mistaken about how best to understand unfree labour relative to his own model of value production.

On more than one occasion, Marx says that there are at least some instances where unfree labour exemplifies the 'capitalist mode of production'. For example, in his *Theories of Surplus Value*, he claims that

In the second type of colonies – plantations – where commercial speculations figure from the start and production is intended for the world market, the capitalist mode of production exists, although only in a formal sense, since the slavery of Negroes precludes free wage-labour, which is the basis of capitalist production. But the business in which slaves are used is conducted by capitalists. The method of production which they introduce has not arisen out of slavery but is grafted on to it. In this case the same person is capitalist and landowner. And the elemental existence of the land confronting capital and labour does not offer any resistance to capital investment, hence none to the competition between capitals. Neither does a class of farmers as distinct from landlords develop here. So long as these conditions endure, nothing will stand in the way of cost-price regulating market-value.¹²

Since capital, according to Marx, just is 'self-valorising value, value that gives birth to value',¹³ we might think that Marx's claim that 'the capitalist mode of production exists' on plantations implies that he thinks that they produce value. But his claim raises more questions than it answers. It is far from clear what it means for plantations to be capitalist 'only in a formal sense'. What work is the word 'only' doing in this formulation? What sense besides the formal one could matter at all, if the matter at issue is whether a productive enterprise is capitalist or not? For what is capitalism other than an underlying *form* of production that manifests itself in many superficially differentiated surface realisations? And if a plantation can be 'formally' capitalist without wage labour, in what sense is 'free labour' a strictly necessary condition for the

12 Marx 1863, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch12.htm>>.

13 Marx 1864, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/cho3.htm>>.

capitalist mode of production? (Perhaps, as Marx seems to hint, wage labour must be the prevailing rule, and unfree labour must be the localised exception, if unfree labour is to count as 'formally capitalist'. But why?) Moreover, the question of whether unfree labour can produce value is not settled by the fact (if it is one) that, with respect to the price-tags of commodities produced by colonial plantations, we see 'cost-price regulating market value'. This will be trivially true of any commodity produced for sale on the open market, even if its production involves little or no labour: built into Marx's account of profit-rate averaging, mentioned above, is the tenet that cost price ($C+V$) will regulate (i.e. factor into) the market value ($[C+V] + [(C+V) \times \text{average rate of profit}]$) of commodities whether or not they are the result of value-productive labour, i.e. whether or not $V > 0$.

In an enigmatic passage of *Capital* Volume III, Marx appears to espouse the view that unfree labour generates surplus value, which would directly imply that it is value-productive:

Take, for instance, the slavery system. The price paid for a slave is nothing but the anticipated and capitalized surplus-value or profit, which is to be ground out of him. But the capital paid for the purchase of a slave does not belong to the capital, by which profit, surplus labour, is extracted from him. On the contrary, it is capital, which the slave holder gives away, it is a deduction from the capital, which he has available for actual production. It has ceased to exist for him, just as the capital invested in the purchase of land has ceased to exist for agriculture. The best proof of this is the fact that it does not come back into existence for the slave holder or the land owner, until he sells the slave or the land once more. Then the same condition of things holds good for the buyer. The fact that he has bought the slave does not enable him to exploit the slave without further ceremony. He is not able to do so until he invests some other capital in production by means of the slave.¹⁴

But there may be more to this evidently clear-cut claim than meets the eye. When Marx says that 'surplus value or profit' can be 'ground out' of the slave, does he mean, as it seems most obvious to assume he does, that this grinding-out is a matter of the slave *producing* value, value that, if greater than the value of the slave's means of subsistence, represents appropriable surplus value? Or is it possible that what is ground out of the slave is 'mere' profit? That is: Marx could simply be saying that money (M) invested in the purchase of the slave,

¹⁴ Marx 1894, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch47.htm>>.

as is true of money invested in any aspect of production (be it value-productive labour or not), tends to come back to the capitalist (upon the occasion of the sale of commodities) compounded by the average rate of profit (as M'). In other words, Marx might just be saying what everyone already knows: that the slave-owning capitalist makes *profit* (receives more money as a result of an unfree labourer's labouring, over the course of the working life of the unfree labourer, than what is invested in ownership and maintenance of the unfree labourer). But this leaves open the question of whether the slave-owning capitalist produces *value*. To put the interpretive question in terms of our 'common pot' metaphor: Marx could be saying that the slave-owning capitalist makes a withdrawal from, but no deposit to, the global common pot of surplus value, as is also the case for the (*ex hypothesi* nonproductive, but potentially profitable) commercial capitalist, rentier, and banker. When Marx says that the slave can be 'exploited', we cannot rule out the possibility that Marx has it in mind that slaves are *not* value-productive labourers but *are* causally responsible, owing to their labour, for a revenue stream of which they do not receive a 'fair' share. This is more or less what Marx thinks about the exploitation of unproductive wage labourers in the retail sector.

Marx's claim that the purchase price of the slave is a 'deduction from capital' that 'does not belong to the capital, by which profit, surplus labour, is extracted from him' is likewise tough to interpretively pin down. It seems to imply that the up-front cost of buying the slave does not represent (productive) variable capital. It also seems to imply that the relevant contrast is with the *upkeep* cost of the slave (food and shelter for which the slave-owner bears the expense) which perhaps *does* represent variable capital. But whether or not that is precisely what Marx intends to get across, what he says insinuates that slave labour is to be classified as value-productive, since 'surplus labour' is by definition, at least in certain of Marx and Engels's definitional formulations, labour that is productive of surplus value: 'The labor-time during which the laborer reproduces the value of his labor-power – in capitalist or other circumstances is the NECESSARY LABOR; what goes beyond that, producing surplus-value for the capitalist, SURPLUS-LABOR. Surplus-value is congealed surplus-labor.'¹⁵

But, again, it could be that Marx is being uncaringful, and really means to be conveying the idea that 'profit, surplus labour' is extracted *from the global common pot* owing to the coerced, unwaged, but non-value-productive activities of the slave – again on analogy with other unproductive capitalist firms and the labour they engage.

15 Engels 1868.

In *Capital* Volume II, it looks as though Marx definitively *rejects* the idea that unfree labour corresponds to value-productive variable capital. There, he equates slaves with fixed capital (i.e. constant capital that depreciates and thus enters into the commodity product gradually, over the course of its productive lifespan):

In the slave system, the money-capital invested in the purchase of labour-power plays the role of the money-form of the fixed capital, which is but gradually replaced as the active period of the slave's life expires. Among the Athenians therefore, the gain realised by a slave owner directly through the industrial employment of his slave, or indirectly by hiring him out to other industrial employers (e.g., for mining), was regarded merely as interest (plus depreciation allowance) on the advanced money-capital, just as the industrial capitalist under capitalist production places a portion of the surplus-value plus the depreciation of his fixed capital to the account of interest and replacement of his fixed capital. This is also the rule with capitalists offering fixed capital (houses, machinery, etc.) for rent. Mere household slaves, whether they perform necessary services or are kept as luxuries for show, are not considered here.¹⁶

If the unfree labourer is fixed capital, then the unfree labourer is by definition constant capital,¹⁷ which transfers its pre-existing value to the final commodity product via amortisation, but does not create new value. At least at first glance, this seems unequivocal: if unfree labour is constant capital, it is not variable capital, and thus does not produce value. But in this same paragraph Marx analogises the 'gain' of the Athenian slave owner 'through the industrial employment of his slaves' to the surplus value of the capitalist under capitalist production, which might make us second-guess things. Perhaps, again, only the *purchase* of the slave is an investment of money in fixed capital, but the *upkeep* of the slave (which enables the daily recurrence of the slave's 'industrial employment') is an investment of money in variable capital?

16 Marx 1893, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885-c2/ch20_04.htm>.

17 '[Fixed capital] does not circulate in its use-form, but it is merely its value that circulates, and this takes place gradually, piecemeal, in proportion as it passes from it to the product, which circulates as a commodity. During the entire period of its functioning, a part of its value always remain fixed in it, independently of the commodities which it helps to produce. It is this peculiarity which gives to this portion of constant capital the form of fixed capital' (Marx 1893, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885-c2/cho8.htm>>).

Finally (though chronologically first, in the textual examples we have consulted), in *Capital* Volume I, Marx talks about slave labour in a manner that suggests that it is value-productive, since Marx seems to be drawing a distinction between the necessary labour and the surplus labour of the slave:

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, therefore, in fact, he 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. There the property-relation conceals the labour of the slave for himself; here the money-relation conceals the unrequited labour of the wage labourer.¹⁸

Here, yet again, we might entertain the (increasingly *ad hoc*) interpretive hypothesis that Marx is expressing himself unrigorously. Perhaps if pressed, Marx would offer the clarification that there is a tacit counterfactual conditional at play: *were it the case that unfree labour produced new value (though it does not), only a portion of the unfree labourer's working day would be required to create an amount of new value that equals the value of the unfree labourer's means of subsistence*. This, we have already seen, is the derivative or non-paradigmatic sense in which unproductive retail-sector wage labourers can be said to be 'exploited'.¹⁹

Although there is an at least somewhat-viable interpretation of all the above passages on which they all come out consistent with one another (since all of the passages can, at least in principle, be made to go in either direction as concerns the value-productivity of unfree labour), still on any natural reading Marx patently contradicts himself, particularly between *Capital* Volume II and other texts. In all likelihood, Marx never fully made up his mind, hence the waffling in his later economic writings – which, as we know, were not definitive statements and were cobbled together by Engels.

18 Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch19.htm>>.

19 Elsewhere in *Capital* Volume I, Marx writes that the slave labourer is, 'to use a striking expression of the ancients, distinguishable only as instrumentum vocale, from an animal as instrumentum semi-vocale, and from an implement as instrumentum mutum' (Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>>). This seems to classify the slave as an instrument of labour rather than as a labourer.

View 1: Unfree Labour Is Not Value-Productive

Those who claim that unfree labour does not produce value usually classify investment in unfree labour as an investment in constant capital. The slave's owner must purchase the slave as *fixed* constant capital (whose value enters the commodity product through depreciation), and the owner invests in *circulating* constant capital (whose full value enters the commodity product in a single production cycle) by directly supplying the labourer with means of subsistence rather than paying wages.

On this slaves-as-constant-capital view,²⁰ unfree labour is, for all value-theoretic intents and purposes, no different from non-human animal labour. According to Van der Linden, 'to Marx, the slave is part of fixed capital and no different, economically, from livestock or machinery. [As Marx says,] "The slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse." The slave's capital value is his purchasing price, and this capital value has to be amortized over time, just as with livestock and machinery.'²¹ Genovese claims that 'the initial outlay [for the purchase of a slave] is the equivalent of part of the capitalist's investment in fixed capital and constitutes the "overcapitalization of

20 Ortiz-Minaya 2019, p. 73, asserts that this view is Marx's, but rejects the view: 'Marx directly characterizes [...] slaves as fixed capital. How does capital create and reproduce a humanity that is socially dead? [...] If slaves are fixed capital, then the labor theory of value becomes problematic at best, and incorrect at worst. Slave labor under capitalism is not constant capital, although it embodies the appearance of it. Where does the surplus value generate from, if slaves are placed into the category of fixed capital? Like many of the authors who address this topic, Ortiz-Minaya begs the question by simply assuming that slaves produce surplus value. But whether or not slaves create surplus value is precisely what is at issue; this is *the same question* as the question of what kind of capital (constant or variable) a slave represents.'

21 Van der Linden 2016. Van der Linden, who argues that there are big lacunae in Marx's treatment of unfree labour, describes this position (as Marx's) but does not adopt it. 'The example of slave labor shows Marx did not provide a consistent justification for the privileged position productive wage labor is given within his theory of value. There is much to suggest that slaves and wage workers are structurally more similar than Marx and traditional Marxism suspected. [...] It is true, of course, that the slave's labor capacity is the permanent property of the capitalist, whereas the wage worker only makes his labor capacity available to the capitalist for a limited time, even if he does so repeatedly. It remains unclear, however, why slaves should create no surplus value while wage workers do. The time has come to expand the theory of value in such a way as to recognize the productive labor of slaves and other unfree workers as an essential component of the capitalist economy' (Van der Linden 2016.) Van der Linden is correct to say that the economically relevant difference between wage labour and slave labour is unclear, but does not notice that the economically relevant difference between unfree nonhuman animal labour and unfree human labour is similarly unclear.

labor” under slavery’.²² This creates a disadvantageous situation in which ‘the heavy capitalization of labor, the high propensity to consume, and the weakness of the home market seriously impede the accumulation of capital’.²³

Murray affirms the upshot of the slaves-as-fixed-constant-capital position, which is that it is impossible for unfree labourers to produce surplus value:

If labourers are not free, they do not own their own labour power (do not have a ‘property in their own persons’, as John Locke would put it). In that case, the labourer has nothing to sell, so there will be no wages, for wages are paid to free workers, whereas the price of slaves (workers who are commodities) is paid to the capitalist who ‘produced’ them. In a system of unfree labour, you cannot exploit workers in the capitalist manner: without wages, there is no gap between wages and the value produced by workers. Where there is no gap, there is no surplus value. (However, surplus wealth and exploitation may exist.) Without surplus value, there is no capital.²⁴

And Murray compares the value-productive status of slaves to the value-productive status of animals:

Were workers produced within the sphere of capitalist production, they would be commodities, hence not free. Since work animals are unfree and can be produced as commodities within the sphere of capitalist production, it follows ... that they do not create value. (The same holds for machines.) Were animals (or machines) to eliminate wage labourers, capitalism would collapse.²⁵

22 Genovese 1971, p. 36 n. 1.

23 Genovese 1971, p. 49.

24 Murray 2016, p. 187.

25 Murray 2016, p. 187, n. 106. I do not see why it is supposed to obviously follow from the fact that animals can be produced as commodities that they cannot produce value. Are animals that are *not* produced as commodities able to produce value? Moreover, the labour-power of a wage labourer both *is a commodity*, on Marx’s view, and is the source of value. Consider, also, that commercial surrogate-pregnancy businesses in effect arrange for the production of humans as commodities. Suppose that in some advanced technological dystopia, the prevailing practice is that, instead of delivering the babies of pregnant mothers, hospitals generate babies in artificial wombs and sell them to would-be parents for a profit. Is it obvious that this would make capitalism collapse by eliminating the production of value?

Tomich also says that unfree labour is constant capital, but nevertheless speaks in terms of 'surplus production under slavery';²⁶

Because the slave's capacity to labor does not take the form of commodity it cannot thereby be distinguished from his physical being. The category labor-power cannot therefore appear as a social relation independent of the person of the laborer. The activity of labor does not possess exchange value. Neither the labor required to reproduce the slave nor surplus labor take the form of value, and the commodity form does not relate the value of labor to the value produced by labor. Value, therefore, cannot measure labor, nor can labor measure value. The labor expended in the production process is thus independent from the value of the slave. The process of material production is not coincident with or absorbed into the social process of producing value but remains separate from it. The property relation and the labor process presuppose one another as given, external conditions, but there is no economic relation mediating between the two. Slave price, the cost of slave maintenance, and the activity of labor remain independent of one another. The slaveholder can compare monetary expenses to the revenue from the sale of the product, but the activity of labor remains outside of this economic calculation and cannot be organized through it. The absence of the commodity form of labor-power and the assimilation of the slave into the category of constant capital greatly constrained the potential development of the productive capacity of social labor and the expansion of surplus production under slavery.²⁷

26 Tomich 2016, p. 204. One wonders what is meant by Tomich's claim that slaves, *qua* constant capital, engage in 'surplus production' without producing 'surplus value'. Is the 'surplus product' of a sugar plantation simply the sugar that the plantation does not eat? Talking about a 'surplus product' apart from 'surplus value' only makes sense in a discussion of production for *subsistence*, where the 'surplus' is not a value increment, but is instead that portion of the total heterogeneous consumable output that is not required for subsistence and that can thus be sold off. It is hard to see what it could mean to say that for-profit, cash-crop monoculture produces a 'surplus product' without 'surplus value'. With respect to *what* – over and above *what* – does the product count as a 'surplus'? The only pertinent surplus in this case is a surplus *of value*, i.e. an amount of value that is greater than the amount of value expended in producing the sugar commodity.

27 Tomich 2016, p. 204. This passage is too opaque for me to confidently reconstruct the series of inferences Tomich intends to be making. And I do not understand what is supposed to be demonstrated by the fact that 'the labor expended in the production process is [...] independent of the value of the slave'. For this is of course true of the labour power of the wage labourer: the number of hours of labour actually expended in the production process is not constrained by the value of the labour power. This is the whole point of Marx's arguments about absolute and relative surplus value, the struggle over the working day, etc.

If unfree human labour represents fixed constant capital, then slave-owning capitalists who receive a return on their investment in unfree labour do so without contributing anything to the common global pot of surplus value from which their profit derives.²⁸ This is significant, because it implies that slave-based capitals tend to bring down the global average rate of profit. Slavery thus represents a drain on the system, inasmuch as it siphons off surplus value and thus diminishes the overall prospects for expanded reproduction (and does so, perhaps, without being compensatorily useful to value-productive industrial capitalism, as are, for example, retail capital and finance capital). Van der Linden notes this ramification:

According to Marx, the rate of profit tends to decline because the social productivity of labor increases constantly: ‘Since the mass of living labor applied continuously declines in relation to the mass of objectified labor that sets it in motion, i.e. the productively consumed means of production, the part of this living labor that is unpaid and objectified in surplus-value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied.’ The endpoint of this tendency would of course be a situation in which variable capital has been reduced to zero and total capital consists exclusively of constant capital. In such a situation, the collapse of capitalism would be a fact. But the odd thing is that there already existed such a terminal phase prior to the industrial revolution, namely on the plantations of the 17th and 18th centuries. These plantations employed slave labor, so that according to Marx’s premises, total capital consisted exclusively of constant capital. How are we to account for the economic dynamism of the plantations on this basis?²⁹

If unfree labour were fixed constant capital, then slave-based individual capitals would be strictly parasitic, in terms of value production, on the surrounding capitalist economy (assuming there is one); and an entirely slave-based economy could not create surplus value or (*a fortiori*) profit (since profit must

28 This assumes that a plantation has a comparatively high value composition of capital because most or all of its labour costs represent fixed or circulating constant capital. However, it is possible (though, I would guess, unlikely) that a plantation could employ enough wage labour (variable capital) alongside unfree labour (constant capital) to have a value composition of capital equal to or lower than that of an industrial capitalist firm.

29 Van der Linden 2016.

be withdrawn from the global common pot of surplus value) and could not set in motion and sustain an overall $M-C-M'$ growth dynamic. These are big conclusions.

But what is it about the unfreedom of the unfree labourer's labour that disbars it from generating new value? How does *liberty* cut any ice? One way of posing this question more pointedly is to set up a thought-experiment in which a paradigmatic capitalist firm, one that employs wage labour drawn from the pool of the labour market, is transformed, by a series of small changes, into a plantation-type enterprise. We can then ask: which of the small changes is responsible for the nullification of the firm's value-productive capacity, and why exactly – by dint of what observable events or processes – is such responsibility assignable to that change?

1. Imagine that there is a capitalist mining operation, King Coal, located in some remote region. It employs miners whose wages are exactly equivalent to the cost of their means of subsistence. Miners purchase their subsistence commodities at the only nearby general store, Wahl Mart, which is independently owned and operated. The miners labour at a given rate of exploitation, produce a given amount of surplus value that factors into the global common pot, and so on. The miners live in High Rise, the only nearby apartment complex, which is also independently owned and operated. Wahl Mart and High Rise have no customers other than King Coal miners.
2. Now imagine that Wahl Mart and High Rise are purchased by King Coal. King Coal miners are still paid in the national currency. They still spend all of their wages on rent and necessities at High Rise and Wahl Mart. But now all of their expenditures take place at subsidiaries of King Coal.
3. Now imagine that Wahl Mart and High Rise begin to accept only company scrip issued by King Coal. Workers are paid exactly as much in company scrip as they were paid in the national currency; the amount of company scrip they receive has exactly as much purchasing power at Wahl Mart and High Rise as the national currency used to have. At this point, we have a 'company town'. This differs from the previous scenario, in which King Coal has a monopoly on the means of subsistence, principally in that now King Coal does not need to have any of the national currency on hand to cover its wage bill.
4. Now imagine that company scrip is eliminated and workers are directly supplied with housing and necessities. They receive exactly as much housing and necessities as they used to purchase, first with the national currency and then with company scrip, but now this goes on through direct provision, without retail or the company-town simulacrum of

retail. (The details of how the direct provision happens do not matter.) Nothing about the ‘real production process’ in the mines is any different than it was at the beginning of the thought-experiment, and the workers’ level of consumption is exactly where it was at the beginning of the thought-experiment. The only real difference is that now no formal payment transactions take place in which commodities are exchanged for currency.

5. Now imagine that the New Confederacy Party comes to power and enacts legislation that enslaves miners and legally classifies them as transferable assets of King Coal, i.e. as chattels. But assume, also, that this is a purely formal change, in the sense that production and consumption in King Coal City goes on just as in [4]. Perhaps because of some religious compunctions, King Coal Corporation does not pursue its own absolute best economic interest by taking advantage of the unfree workers’ vulnerable status and viciously increasing the intensity of their labour. Instead it acts as a ‘benevolent master’ and does not reduce the miners’ standard of living or heighten the barbarity of working conditions in comparison to what they were like before. But King Coal does own the miners: they are not free to depart and sell their labour power elsewhere, and they must work (or else they will be somehow extra-economically punished).

At this point, King Coal is a slave plantation. Morally and legally, it goes without saying, the situation at stage [1] is quite different from the situation at stage [5]. But from the perspective of the global ebb and flow of value, it seems that all of the value-theoretically relevant variables have either been held constant or have been altered in a way that, if anything, should make the enterprise *more* value-productive. For example, company scrip and direct provision of subsistence goods would likely lower King Coal’s labour costs and raise the rate of exploitation. Yet if the slaves-as-fixed-capital view is correct, at stage [5] King Coal contributes nothing to the global common pot of surplus value. At what point between [1] and [5], then, did King Coal stop producing value? Was it at the legal change between [4] and [5]? But why would a merely formal or nominal change of this sort have any impact on what gets contributed to the global common pot of surplus value? Or could it be the monopolisation of the means of subsistence, or instead the substitution of company scrip for the national currency, that explains the cessation of value production? As I said, these changes seem as though they should make the enterprise *more* value-productive, not less value-productive or non-value-productive.

It might be replied that the claim that stage [1] of the King Coal thought-experiment is value-productive whereas stage [5] is non-value-productive can be defended by invoking the Sorites Paradox, which involves vague predicates,

such as 'bald', that have fuzzy boundaries of application.³⁰ The Sorites Paradox begins with the intuitively plausible claim that removing a single hair from a full head of hair does not turn a non-bald head into a bald head. We can then ask: if we keep on plucking, at what exact point does the head start to count as bald? Exactly how many hairs must be subtracted? The fact that there is no clear cut-off between baldness and its opposite does not imply that plucking out individual hairs will not eventually make someone bald. It is obvious that there are such states as being non-bald and being bald, and that a change from one to the other is possible, and that subtracting hairs is the agent of change, even if it is not obvious (or knowable, or something about which there is a fact of the matter, etc.) which individual act of plucking institutes the state of baldness. Someone might similarly hold that in the King Coal thought-experiment it is obvious that at stage [1] there is value production and that at stage [5] in the experiment there is no value production, and also hold that this can be plainly the case without it also being obvious (or knowable, or something about which there is a fact of the matter) where precisely there is a sharp transition from one status to the other.

But the comparison with the Sorites Paradox breaks down quickly. Value productivity, unlike baldness, is not a vague predicate. There is no 'grey area': labour is value-productive *as soon as the amount of new value it creates is greater than zero*. So our confusion about when the labouring process begins or ceases to be value-productive is very different from our confusion about when someone begins or ceases to count as bald. In the latter case, the question we do not know how to answer is: when precisely does the vague predicate 'bald' start or stop applying? In the former case, the question we do not know how to answer is: *by what mechanism* does a labouring process contribute an amount of value greater than 0 to the (metaphorical) global common pot of surplus value, when it does, and how can we tell when that mechanism ceases to be operative? To relate this second question to the baldness scenario: this is akin to asking *what* it is that eventually brings about baldness (answer: plucking), rather than asking *when* it is that plucking brings baldness about. Another disanalogy between the King Coal thought-experiment and the Sorites Paradox is that the King Coal thought-experiment does not proceed by tiny, iterative, identical changes, i.e. by altering the original state of affairs in the same miniscule, cumulative way again and again, such that there could be vagueness about which change brought about the transformation. All the changes in the King Coal thought-experiment are heterogeneous. If stage [1] is obviously productive of value, and stage [5] obviously is not, then it would seem that one of the changes between [1] and [5] ought to be obviously the one that is causally

³⁰ On which, see Hyde and Raffman 2018.

responsible for nullifying value-productivity. But none of the posited changes seems to be the obvious culprit.

In a passage that attempts to explain away the sorts of worries I just raised, Murray concedes the point (in the part of the passage below that I have placed in bold font) that the kinds of alterations enumerated in the foregoing thought-experiment do not seem as though they can be assigned causal responsibility for nullifying value production. It is worth quoting Murray at length:

- [1] Without wages, workers have no money. So all monetary exchanges will be between capitalists. But with all monetary exchanges going between capitalists, where will surplus value come from? In a monetary exchange you either get equal value or not. If you do, you get no surplus value. If you have unequal exchange, then one exchanger gets surplus value at the expense of the other. But that contradicts the assumption that all parties to these exchanges are capitalists (i.e., those who increase value through exchange). Capitalists cannot have all the money; wage labourers must have money. Turning the household into a commodity would undo capitalism.
- [2] Since value can be expressed only in money, the same must be true of surplus value. Consequently, the exploitation involved in pumping surplus value out of workers must have a monetary expression. But, where workers have no money, there can be no such expression. So there can be no surplus value, hence, no capital [...]
- [3] This demonstration may strike the reader as a conjuring trick: **wait a minute! How can surplus value vanish just because workers are switched from one social role to another, from 'free' wage labourers to slaves? Do not slaves create surpluses for their masters? But this objection only reveals the stubbornness of Ricardian prejudices. We sense a hoax precisely because we slide back into the notion that 'labour' creates value – and for that, slave labour should serve as well as any other. That sort of thinking completely misses the point of Marx's critique of economics: value is entirely a matter of the social form of labour. If we really got that point we would expect value and surplus value to disappear with the elimination of a fundamental capitalist social form like free wage labour.** And that is what the demonstration shows. It says, once more, that Marx holds a 'truly social' labour theory of value.³¹

One could go on for many pages trying to untangle this knot of dubious inferences. I will try to be concise. Paragraph [1] begs the question as to whether unfree labour can produce surplus value. It takes as given the very thing that

³¹ Murray 2016, pp. 187–8; emphasis and paragraph numbering mine.

stands in need of establishment and explanation. ('Where will surplus value come from?' – well, unfree labour, if unfree labour produces new value; that's what we need to figure out.)³²

Paragraph [2] identifies an *explanans* (workers having no money) for the *explanandum* (value production being negated). But – and this is a question raised by my thought-experiment – why should the form of the wage (money vs. payment in kind or direct provision of means of subsistence) have this result? I see no straightforward connection between the *explanans* and the *explanandum*.³³ Imagine that King Coal gradually reduces money wages while gradually increasing the amount of means of subsistence that it directly provides to workers. Do the workers stop being productive labourers all of a sudden, only when wages are at last reduced to 0 and all means of subsistence are directly supplied? This is a strange proposal. Presumably the rate of value productivity would go *up* as wages are gradually reduced with labour hours held constant (assuming it is cheaper for the capitalist to directly provide means of subsistence). Why think that at the end of this process, after wages go from one penny to zero pennies, value-productivity, instead of continuing to increase, now suddenly evaporates?³⁴

Paragraph [3] is correct to claim that, in Marx's theory, it is not labour *just as such* that creates value (as was touched upon above), and that, in that sense, 'value is entirely a matter of the social form of labour'. True, I produce no value when I toil in my backyard vegetable garden. But this truism does not help us to understand why a transformation from the 'social form' of wage labour (used to create commodities) into the 'social form' of slave labour (used to create commodities) negates the value-productive capacity.³⁵

32 Murray's claim that 'capitalists cannot have all the money' should be weighed against Kliman's (2011) anti-underconsumptionist 'reproduction schemes', which demonstrate with a bit of simple maths the possibility that 'growth can occur indefinitely, despite a relative decline [in value terms] in consumption demand, by means of an increase in the demand for machines to produce new machines and a relative expansion of machine production' (Kliman 2011, p. 164).

33 In addition to the matter-of-factual question about how abolition of money payment nullifies value production, there is the epistemic question of how, even in principle, one would verify this.

34 Note also that Murray's claim that 'value can only be expressed in money' seems to wilfully ignore large swaths of text in Marx's *Capital*, which obsessively repeats such statements as: 'the equation: 40 yards of linen = 2 coats presupposes after all that both commodities cost equally much labour.' That is: commodity exchanges of whatever sort 'express value', which is why the money commodity can 'express value' in the first place.

35 Bough 2008a, 2008b, and 2014 all deny that slave labour produces surplus value, on the grounds that 'calculation of exchange values requires participation in the process of calculation, requires participation in exchange [...] This means that only free participants in exchange, and therefore in the process of calculation, can assess exchange values, and

Nota bene: I have not attempted to disprove either the claim that money invested in purchasing unfree labourers represents non-value-productive fixed constant capital, or the claim that money invested in maintaining slaves represents non-value-productive circulating constant capital. These claims might well be true, for all I have shown. Instead, I have tried to plant a seed of suspicion about whether we have any principled grounds whatsoever, let alone manifestly good grounds, to believe such claims. Many attempts to explain why unfree labour is constant capital have some version of the following illicitly-circular form (though the circularity is often concealed by pleonasm, as is the case in the Murray excerpt above), or else adduce some subset of the following set of propositions as thought that sufficed as an explanation:

- (1) Unfree labourers do not produce value because unfree labourers represent constant capital.
- (2) Unfree labourers represent constant capital because they do not represent variable capital.
- (3) Unfree labourers do not represent variable capital because only wage labourers represent variable capital.
- (4) Wage labourers represent variable capital because wage labour is the unique source of new value.
- (5) Wage labour is the unique source of new value because the other form of labour, unfree labour, does not produce value.

(1), (2), (3), (4), and (5) may all be true, and each of them taken individually may be informative to an extent (if true), but taken together they are non-explanatorily circular. Really, all we are doing is juggling stipulative definitions. This cannot explain anything. The fact that unfree labour is constant capital does not *explain* the fact that unfree labour is non-value-productive; these are one and the same fact, under different guises. What we need to know is: what concrete event or process is it, between steps [1] and [5] in the King Coal thought-experiment, that ‘shuts off the valve’ of the flow of surplus

therefore it is only their labour time that can be a measure of value. If I capture a horse to use for powering a mill to grind wheat I only take into consideration the labour time needed to capture the horse, sustain the horse, not the time the horse actually spends grinding. The same is true if instead of a horse I capture a slave [...] No Surplus Value is created by the slave, only the labour-power of the slave owner and his free workers create new and surplus value. The consequence must be that the exchange value of the product, and the quantity of surplus value produced must be considerably reduced’ (Bough 2008a). I do not know what to make of the suggestion that it is the ability to participate in ‘the process of calculation’ (it is unclear to me what process this refers to) and the ability to ‘assess exchange values’ that make it so that the labour time of someone with those abilities is a ‘measure of value’. If a wage labourer lacks the mental capacity to ‘assess exchange values’, or lacks the initiative to ‘participate’ in the assessment (again, whatever that means), would that wage labourer’s labour not create value?

value into the common pot, and why does it shut it off? If we have no answers to those questions, and indeed no inkling even of what kind of answer to look for, it would be irresponsible and premature to confidently insist that unfree labour is non-value-productive.

View 2: Unfree Labour Is Value-Productive And Animal Labour Is Not

Many post-Marx Marxists hold that unfree labour produces surplus value. 'It is only a purely passive object that cannot be exploited; slaves, not cows, workers, not machines, produce surplus value', writes Castoriadis.³⁶

Far from yielding *no* value, slave labour yields a *higher rate of surplus value* than free wage labour, according to these theorists. Novack writes that slavery

thrives best upon an extremely rich soil which yields abundant crops with comparatively little cultivation by the crudest labor. Warm climates moreover enable the working force to labor without pause from one year's end to the next and to be sustained with a minimum of the necessities of life. The smaller the amount of labor required for the maintenance and reproduction of the actual producers, the greater is the surplus value available for appropriation by the agricultural exploiter.³⁷

Boutang construes the elevated value-productivity of unfree labour as an enabling factor in the historical genesis of capitalism, and says that it is a characteristic mistake of 'orthodox Marxism' that it too closely associates capitalism and the social form of free wage labour:

The surplus extracted from the sweat and blood of slaves, like the sugar they produced, is indispensable to proletarianization [...] Through the circulation of money and commodity flows, and through the world market, the core of the capitalist system comes to extract surplus-value, including forms of unfree dependent labor, without the prior establishment of the canonical wage relation. [...] The creation of the incredibly complex institutional form of the fixed-length labor contract and wage-labor is not a formal precondition for the extraction of surplus-value, but the historical

³⁶ Castoriadis 1988, p. 240, n. 34.

³⁷ Novack 1939.

product of a struggle by dependent labor to win its freedom, and thus a social invention.³⁸

McGrath claims that slaves who are ‘capitalistically employed’ produce surplus value:

Unfree labor has been used to provide goods and services directly to the employer, but also to produce goods and services that generate wealth for the employer. In the former, where unfree labor produces only ‘use values’ for the employer, labor is not capitalistically employed. In the latter, in which it is used by the employer in order to extract ‘surplus value,’ the labor is capitalistically employed. There may, therefore, be important differences when considering the use and causes of unfree labor under capitalism. However, it can be very difficult to draw these lines. One example of this difficulty is where the employer is freed from tasks of social reproduction by the unfree laborer. The use of unfree labor in this case would be not only ‘productive,’ but instrumentally important for the capitalist to successfully run an enterprise through which s/he does extract surplus value from laborers.³⁹

For McMichael, slave-labour is a ‘phenomenal form of value-producing labor’:

And slave labor itself assumed a new meaning as planters acquired slaves less for social status, and more as commodity-producing labor. In this movement slave labor became a phenomenal form of value-producing labor. As value-producing labor, ante-bellum slavery was ‘internal’ to world capitalism [...] Industrial capitalism transformed the content of world-market relations. Instead of being regulated within the mercantilist framework, commerce, now globally organized, was driven by value relations. Under these new relations, combining metropolitan wage labor and peripheral slave labor, the content of the latter changed while its form remained. [... P]henomenally slavery and wage labor coexisted as distinct social forms of labor, and yet theoretically value relations were their common determinant.⁴⁰

38 Boutang 2018.

39 McGrath 2005.

40 McMichael 1991, pp. 321–2.

Mandel says that ancient slavery, not just capitalist (or capitalism-adjacent) slave agriculture in the modern era, was a source of surplus value:

Buying a slave ... constitutes a source of surplus value of a special kind. This surplus value is not the result of mere appropriation of existing values, a mere transfer of values from one pocket to another. It results from the production of new values, the appropriation and sale of which are the source of surplus value The surplus value produced by a slave, leaving out of account the recovery of his purchase price, represents the difference between the value of the commodities he produces (and which his master appropriates) and the cost of production of these commodities (cost of raw material, overheads, including depreciation of tools, and maintenance costs of the slave himself). [... T]his difference can be considerable. Otherwise, there would not have been the thousands of entrepreneurs and landowners that there were in the ancient world, ready to buy slaves in order to set them producing a large quantity of craft and agricultural products, the sale of which brought in a substantial surplus value to these slave-owners.

If value-productive slave labour is conducted at a higher rate of exploitation than is wage labour, then slave labour will tend to elevate the general profit rate. This result is the exact opposite of the one we get if we classify slaves as fixed constant capital. On this matter Banaji writes:⁴¹

I'd like to suggest that the real reason why Marx had to acknowledge the capitalist nature of the plantations was the impact of the colonial trades on the equalization of the general rate of profit, in particular their role in raising the general level of profit. 'As far as capital invested in the colonies, etc. is concerned ... the reason why this can yield higher rates of profit is that the profit rate is generally higher there on account of the lower degree of development, and so too is the exploitation of labour, through the use of slaves and coolies, etc. Now there is no reason why the higher rates of profit that capital invested in certain branches yields in this way, and brings home to its country of origin, should not enter into the equalization of the general rate of profit and hence raise this in due proportion, unless monopolies stand in the way' (*Capital* Volume 3). Again, 'the average rate of profit depends on the level of exploitation of

41 Banaji 2011.

labour as a whole by capital as a whole'. 'Labour as a whole,' including, then, slave labour or any other form of labour whose exploitation generated capital. It was Marx's recognition of the contribution of the colonial trades to the general rate of profit that tilted his conception decisively in favour of seeing the Atlantic slave economy essentially as capitalist.⁴²

(Observe, also, that the internal quotation from Marx seems to leave little doubt as to whether the Marx of *Capital* Volume III thinks that slave labour is value-productive.) Clegg also defends the view that slave-labour is value-productive and has a higher rate of surplus value than wage labour.

In value-theoretic terms the cost of slave labor is variable capital that may take both a fixed (purchase) or circulating (maintenance cost, rental) form. Where slave labor coexists with wage labor and capital is mobile (as in the nineteenth-century United States), our model predicts the price of slaves will equal the present value of the additional surplus value produced by slaves over and above wage laborers. This excess surplus value arose because of the additional means of coercion and lack of exit options in the slave labor process.⁴³

Clegg argues against the fixed constant capital interpretation of slave investment and invents the label 'fixed variable capital' for slaves.

Some scholars, apparently conflating fixed and constant capital, have suggested that, according to Marx's definition, slaves (like machinery and other constant capital) are not productive of either value or surplus value [...] However, since slave labor is indeed labor, and the purchaser buys not actual labor but potential labor, or labor-power, the money that exchanges for the latter is, according to Marx's definition, variable capital, which may in this case take either a fixed or circulating form.

42 Bhandari 2007, p. 396, following Banaji, categorises slave labour as a species of wage labour: 'I have elsewhere defended my adoption of Jairus Banaji's understanding of wage labor as that condition of vulnerability in which the means of production and means of life are confronted as alien personifications, and advanced only on the condition that the dependent worker create surplus value for this alien personification. Such an understanding of wage labor throws into relief its enslaved nature [...] An enslaved African was thus doubly enslaved as a concrete human being and as a member of a class; he was, in short, an enslaved wage slave.'

43 Clegg 2015, p. 302.

When slaves are rented, all of the variable capital circulates like wages. But even when purchased outright, the actual cost of slave labor power is not entirely fixed, for maintenance costs form part of the circulating capital.⁴⁴

Clegg ostensibly offers a rationale for why slave labour should be categorised as value-productive, in that he at least addresses and dismisses the salient alternative categorisation. It would be nice if this argument by elimination could settle the issue summarily. But the dismissal is really just sleight of hand: the undeniable fact that 'slave labor is indeed labor' in no way shows that slave labour is value-productive within the Marxian model and in the Marxian sense – otherwise Marx would have no use for *his own* concept of unproductive wage labour. And the claim that the purchaser of slave labour 'buys not actual labor but potential labor, or labor-power' is, once again, question-begging. The matter of *what is being paid for* when the plantation owner spends money to gain legal title to and then to bodily maintain unfree labourers is precisely the matter that needs to be settled. Why does this purchase count as a purchase of labour-power (akin to the capitalist's payment of wages) and not a purchase of constant capital? To reply that it is because 'slave labor is indeed labor' is reminiscent of Molière's learned doctor who 'explains' why opium induces sleep by saying that it contains a *virtus dormitiva*.

The obstacle that immediately arises for the claim that investment in slave labour represents value-productive variable capital is that slave labour appears to differ from the labour of unfree nonhuman animals only in ways that do not seem as though they should make any value-theoretic difference. It goes without saying there are differences of the utmost significance between humans and other animals, both at the descriptive levels of genetics, biology, psychology, ethology, cognition, etc., and also, at the normative-ethical levels of the assignment moral statuses, the recognition of autonomy, the conferral of respect and dignity, and the like. But why think that these descriptive and normative differences conspire to induce a profound *economic* cleavage between the unfree labour of humans and the labour of other animal species?

Marx, without ever really saying what entitles him to say so, says that humans are *sui generis* in their capacity to produce value. As we saw above, by the time he came to write what Engels later fashioned into Volume III of *Capital*, Marx had apparently settled into stably affirming that slave labour produces value. And he is consistent across all his writings in his insistence that animals used in production count as either fixed or circulating constant capital. A particular product may be used as both instrument of labour and raw material in the

44 Clegg 2018, p. 2, n. 2.

same process. Take, for instance, the fattening of cattle, where the animal is the raw material, and at the same time an instrument for the production of manure [used to fertilise agricultural fields]'.⁴⁵ Thus, as an instrument of labour, 'a head of cattle for instance, as labouring cattle (instrument of labour), represents the material mode of existence of fixed capital, while as cattle for fattening (raw material) it is a constituent part of the farmer's circulating capital'.⁴⁶

But what is it that legitimates this stark human/animal dichotomy? Correspondences between unfree human labour and nonhuman animal labour abound. Both unfree human labour and nonhuman animal labour (i.e. the use of the animal as an 'instrument of labour' rather than as raw material) can exemplify cases where: 1) the labouring being is bought and owned by the person on whose behalf and at whose behest the labour is performed; 2) the owner bears the cost of the sustenance of the labouring being; and 3) the labouring being performs mental and physical exertions that transform inputs into (pricier) outputs. Why, then, would an enslaved human being, but not an enslaved nonhuman creature, have the capacity to create surplus value?

This question is not meant to suggest that there is no discernible unlikeness between the kind of work nonhuman animals can do and the kind of work humans can do. In a much-cited passage from *Capital* Volume I, Marx discusses what he takes to be a radical dissimilarity between human and non-human labour:

We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose.⁴⁷

45 Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho7.htm>>.

46 Marx 1893, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885-c2/ch10.htm>>.

47 Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho7.htm>>.

But, quite apart from whether it is even true that purposiveness of action, internal mental imagery, and norm-governed exertions of the will are uniquely human capacities,⁴⁸ it is not readily apparent why these traits would be necessary or sufficient conditions for value-productivity. Are we meant to think that a human wage labourer who works planfully, with a strong sense of purpose, and with abundant internal mental imagery *ipso facto* produces value, whereas another human wage labourer who performs the same task at the same level of productivity, but who behaves like a mindless automaton, uses little mental imagery, etc., produces no value?⁴⁹ But if mental imagery *et al.* is beside the point when we compare a human worker to another human worker, as it seems to be, why is it not beside the point when we compare a human worker to an animal worker?

48 See Ingold 1983 for reflections on Marx's conception of the human/animal divide.

49 Wright 2021 contends, as I do, that the 'goal-directedness' of human behaviour cannot be what accounts for the unique value-productivity of human labour: 'It's true that human imagination surpasses any machine. But it's not true that only humans are goal-directed. All animals, and all sophisticated robots, formulate plans and follow goals of a kind. And, for the purpose of producing surplus-value, all that matters is behavior, not how that behavior is ultimately generated. A beehive is a beehive regardless of whether it was produced by a smart machine or a dumb machine.' Wright then goes on to claim that humans alone can create value because 'humans have universal causal powers. Machines have particular causal powers. Labour-power is the "universal value-creating element" because, in every production process, it can work harder or smarter to change the conditions of production causing changes in the level of profits.' One of the many problems with this account is that the intended contrast between 'universal' and 'particular' causal powers is hazy. Another problem is that the contrast does not help us understand why nonhuman animals would be precluded from producing value. Are chimpanzees just like machines in that they have only 'particular causal powers'? Or are their causal powers *a little bit* universal, but less universal than humanity's 'fully universal' causal powers, or what? Do human children have universal causal powers? If not, should we think that child labour produces no (or less) value? Another problem is that (as usual) the link between 'universal causal powers' and value is opaque. It is of course true that smarter, harder-working workers could make a firm more value-productive (though a generalised acquisition of these virtues would just change the 'social average'). But this explains a *change in the level of productivity* of a process that is already assumed to be value-productive; it does not explain the more basic fact that the process is value-productive in the first place, nor does it explain why *if the exact same process were done at an equal level of efficiency but entirely with machines* this would not produce value. Appealing to the fact (if it is one) that 'in every production process' human labour-power 'can work harder or smarter' will not get us anywhere. Consider, first, that both machines and humans can be made to 'work harder' – the capitalist can, as it were, 'turn up the dial' on the intensity of both mechanical processes and human mental/bodily processes. And second, when Wright says that humans, unlike machines, can 'work smarter', it turns out that what he really means is that humans, unlike machines, can 'produce relative-surplus value'. But this, once again, is circular: it presupposes exactly the claim that Wright purports to be substantiating: the claim that human labour is the unique source of value.

Another thought-experiment will help me cut to the chase. 1) Suppose a capitalist agricultural estate (a plantation economically situated in a circumambient capitalist context) uses unfree human labour exclusively. For simplicity's sake, suppose that the plantation consists only of slaves and owners, with no additional wage labourers, overseers, etc. 2) Now suppose that it is possible to train nonhuman primates to do exactly what the unfree human laborers do (let us assume that it is some menial, repetitive task), and suppose also that these nonhuman primates have a purchase and maintenance cost identical to that of enslaved humans (but are simpler to procure, so that the owners have some incentive to use the nonhuman workers). 3) Now suppose that half of the enslaved human labourers on the plantation are replaced by nonhuman primates. Must we conclude that the plantation contributes half as much value to the global common pot as it did before? 4) Now suppose that all the enslaved human workers are replaced by nonhuman primates. Does the plantation now produce zero value? But why? Simply because of the tiny difference between human DNA and primate DNA? Why would the flow of value to the global common pot be sensitive to this genetic difference? What if the nonhuman primates were replaced by Neanderthals? Is *Homo neanderthalensis* genetically close enough to *Homo sapiens* to produce value?⁵⁰

These sound like silly, angels-dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin-type questions. They invite a theological, rather than economic, style of reasoning. (Exegeses of Marx's texts often have a Jesuitical quality.) To the extent that we find ourselves shoehorned into a position of pessimism about the prospects of discovering an economically *ad rem* dividing line between unfree human labour and nonhuman animal labour, we are under a proportional amount of rational pressure to hold either that both are non-value-productive or that both are value-productive. We have already canvassed the difficulties associated with holding that unfree human labour is non-value-productive (in comparison to and contrast with wage labour). So now we must proceed to consider the proposal that animal labour is value-productive.

View 3: Animal Labour Is Value-Productive And Machines Are Not

Many Marxist thinkers have had sympathy for the idea that animals can produce surplus value. Adorno, for instance, condemns the 'crassness' of Marx's position that animals do not produce value:

⁵⁰ Notice that this thought-experiment is different from the first thought-experiment in that it uses just one kind of change (replacement of enslaved humans by nonhuman animals) rather than many heterogeneous changes.

According to the Marxian way of seeing, there is something of a change in the relations of domination between people – they are supposed to come to an end, that is, such domination should disappear – but the unconditional domination of nature by human beings is not affected by this, so that we might say that the image of a classless society in Marx has something of the quality of a gigantic joint-stock company for the exploitation of nature, as Horkheimer once formulated it. The fact that, according to Marx, the labour performed by animals does not lead to the production of surplus value – even though the costs of reproduction are lower in animals than the time or energy expended – the fact that, according to an explicit passage in *Capital*, their labour produces no surplus value, is merely the crassest symbol of this.⁵¹

Harry Braverman, who does not announce his view as the strict departure from Marx's that it is, finds no value-theoretic difference whatsoever between humans and animals:

It is known that human labor is able to produce more than it consumes, and this capacity for 'surplus labor' is sometimes treated as a special and mystical endowment of humanity or of its labor. In reality it is nothing of the sort, but is merely a prolongation of working time beyond the point where labor has reproduced itself, or in other words brought into being its own means of subsistence or their equivalent. This time will vary with the intensity and productivity of labor, as well as with the changing requirements of 'subsistence,' but for any given state of these it is a definite duration. The 'peculiar' capacity of labor power to produce for the capitalist after it has reproduced itself is therefore nothing but the extension of work time beyond the point where it could otherwise come to a halt. An ox too will have this capacity, and grind out more corn than it will eat if kept to the task by training and compulsion.⁵²

John Hochschartner sees the animal's workday as subject to the same internal value-theoretic divisions as the wage-labourer's workday:

Within Marxism, necessary labor is that work needed to reproduce the exploited's labor power. In the human context, it's the work slaves or proletarians perform to create the equivalent of their livelihood. All work over and above this is surplus labor, unremunerated toiling which creates

51 Adorno 2003, p. 58.

52 Braverman 1974, p. 38.

profits for the slave master or capitalist. Domesticated animals also perform necessary and surplus labor for their owners. When an animal exploiter purchases a non-human, he is not only purchasing the animal herself, but a lifetime of her labor power, which is used to create commodities that include – among others – her offspring, her secretions, and her own flesh. Her necessary labor would be that required to create the equivalent of her food and shelter. Her surplus labor would be all that beyond this, which is used to enrich her owner [...]

[...] Domesticated animals' surplus labor can also be divided into the generation of absolute and relative surplus value. For instance, when a carriage horse's working day is increased from six to nine hours, absolute surplus value is produced for the animal exploiter. In contrast, relative surplus value is created when chickens' productivity is increased through genetic manipulation and the introduction of growth drugs. Similarly, relative surplus value is produced by lowering the cost of chickens' livelihood through intensive confinement.⁵³

To cite a few more authors who have brought up this matter: If, as Donna Haraway says, 'working dogs [...] are laborers who produce surplus value by giving more than they get in a market-driven economic system',⁵⁴ then it is perfectly sensible for Jason Hribal to say that animals 'are part of the working class',⁵⁵ and for Brian Whitener to say that 'animals will have to be thought about seriously as co-laborers from a theoretical position that articulates an *animal labor theory of value*.'⁵⁶

But this is a big 'if'. This family of views faces a tall hurdle: it is not at all clear why a Marxist should think that animals differ from machines in any crucial value-theoretic respect. Marx himself, as we have already seen, is firmly persuaded that animals that 'do work' are *instruments of labour*, not *labourers*:⁵⁷

Raw material may either form the principal substance of a product, or it may enter into its formation only as an accessory. An accessory may be consumed by the instruments of labour, as coal under a boiler, oil by a wheel, hay by draft-horses...⁵⁸

53 Hochschartner 2014.

54 Haraway 2013, p. 55.

55 Hribal 2003, p. 435.

56 Whitener 2018.

57 'Animals which have been bred for the purpose, and have undergone modifications by means of labour, play the chief part as instruments of labour' (Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho7.htm>>).

58 Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho7.htm>>.

For Marx, horses are of a piece with boilers and wheels. Regarded as parts or moments of a productive process, animals *are* machines. Marx says so in a discussion of mechanical locomotion in manufacture:

Machinery does away with horses and other animals that are employed as mere moving forces, and not as machines for changing the form of matter. It may here be incidentally observed, that Descartes, in defining animals as mere machines, saw with eyes of the manufacturing period.⁵⁹

Whether an animal is considered as just one interconnected part of a total productive ‘machine’, the part that supplies the motive force,⁶⁰ or is considered as itself constituting the entirety of a self-contained machine, it is, in either case, and like any other ‘mechanical’ implement used in the labour process, an element of constant capital. Unsurprisingly, in *Capital* Volume III, Marx classes animals and machines together under the heading of constant capital:

It is possible for the increase of social productivity in agriculture to barely compensate, or not even compensate, for the decrease in natural power – this compensation will nevertheless be effective only for a short time – so that despite technical development there, no cheapening of the product occurs, but only a still greater increase in price is averted. It is also possible that the absolute mass of products decreases with rising grain prices, while the relative surplus-product increases; namely, in the case of a relative increase in constant capital which consists chiefly of machinery or animals requiring only replacement of wear and tear, and with a corresponding decrease in variable capital which is expended in wages requiring constant replacement in full out of the product.⁶¹

The draft horse must be fed hay so that it can pull the plough; and the tractor must be fed diesel so that it can pull the plough; and both the draft horse and the plough must themselves be *produced*:

Animals and plants, which we are accustomed to consider as products of Nature, are in their present form, not only products of, say last year’s labour, but the result of a gradual transformation, continued through

59 Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm>>.

60 ‘In the case of a tool, man is the motive power, while the motive power of a machine is something different from man, as, for instance, an animal, water, wind, and so on’ (Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm>>).

61 Marx 1894, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch45.htm>>.

many generations, under man's superintendence, and by means of his labour. But in the great majority of cases, instruments of labour show even to the most superficial observer, traces of the labour of past ages.⁶²

Wherein lies the value-theoretic difference? (It hardly needs to be mentioned that moral compunctions about animal welfare are irrelevant to this question.)

Consider this short thought-experiment: 1) There is a capitalist farm that uses oxen for pulling ploughs. 2) Every day, one part of every ox is replaced by a bionic device, which must be recharged by electricity rather than by the consumption of ox fodder. 3) After some number of days, the oxen are entirely robotic and are entirely powered by electricity. Rather than a hay-fuelled animal, we have an electricity-powered machine.

What rationale could one offer for the view that at the beginning of this transformation, the fully biological ox produces value, whereas at the end of the transformation the robo-ox produces no value? Does the ox gradually lose its value-productive capacity as it is gradually roboticised? (What a strange view that would be!) Notice, as well, that this thought-experiment could have been run, *mutatis mutandis*, starting with unfree human labourers (who are gradually roboticised) instead of oxen, and would thereby pose a challenge to the view that unfree human labour produces value.

If we can find no consequential difference between animals and machines, we should conclude that both are value-productive or that neither are. But we have already seen the problems associated with holding that animals are not value-productive (in comparison with and contrast to value-productive unfree human labourers). Our last option is to affirm that machines produce value. But of course this is what Marx identifies as the fetish belief of the capitalist class! To hold that machines produce surplus value is to abandon Marxian economic theory entirely.

Let me conclude by saying what I have and have not done in this essay. I have *not* appealed to empirical evidence that should boost or diminish our confidence in any of the positions I have considered (e.g. that slaves do or do not produce value, that animals do or do not produce value, etc.). (Marx's texts do not make it clear what kind of evidence one should seek, in any event.) Nor have I shown any of the positions under examination to be either self-contradictory or inconsistent with the rest of Marx's theory: there is no theory-internal *logical* barrier to believing that wage labourers do produce value but unfree human labourers do not, that human slaves produce value but animal slaves do not, or that animals produce value but machines do not. All of these options lie within the space of open possibilities. The question is: what

62 Marx 1887, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho7.htm>>.

reasons do we have to prefer any one of the positions on offer to any other? What I have claimed is that I can see no non-arbitrary, non-question-begging grounds for positing a value-theoretic distinction between wage labourers and slaves, between slaves and animals, or between animals and machines. And I have presented thought-experiments that feature step-by-step transformations between wage labour and slave labour, slave labour and animal labour, and animal labour and machine 'labour' in which no particular step seems as though it plausibly bears responsibility for the cessation of value-production. Together, these thought-experiments add up to one big slippery slope: allowing that unfree human labourers, and not just wage labourers, produce value then pressures one to allow that animals produce value (owing to the functional identity of unfree human labour and nonhuman animal labour), which then pressures one to allow that machines produce value (owing to the functional identity of machines and animals). This slippery slope does not *disprove* the LTV. It places a burden of explanation on anyone who wishes to endorse it. It also suggests, to my mind, that the place for the Marxist to dig her heels in is at an insistence upon the uniquely value-productive character of *wage labour*, since, at least intuitively and pre-theoretically, wage labour seems to differ more greatly (and in potentially value-theoretically relevant respects) from unfree labour than unfree human labour differs from animal labour and than animal labour differs from machine 'labour'. At times, Marx is adamant that wage-labour is an absolute *sine qua non* for the creation of surplus-value, and I have a hunch that this is the view he should stick with:

The sale and purchase of labor power [...] forms the absolute foundation of capitalist production and is an integral moment within it. Material wealth transforms itself into capital simply and solely because the worker sells his labor-power in order to live. The articles which are the material conditions of labor, i.e. the means of production, and the articles which are the precondition for the survival of the worker himself, i.e. the means of subsistence, both become capital only because of the phenomenon of wage-labor. Capital is not a thing [...] Without a class dependent on wages, the moment individuals confront each other as free persons, there can be no production of surplus-value, without the production of surplus-value there can be no capitalist production, and hence no capital and no capitalist! Capital and wage labor [...] only express two aspects of the same relationship.⁶³

But I do not know how to affirm this tenet except as an article of faith.

63 Marx 1864, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/choza.htm>>.

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Sève and Alienation – A Biographical Preface

Julian Roche

Researcher, Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Edinburgh,
Edinburgh, UK

julian_roche@hotmail.com

Abstract

Lucien Sève devoted his life to the development of a Marxist theory of the personality. In so doing, and as part of a theoretical debate with both Marxist humanists and structural Marxists within the *Parti Communiste Français*, he was inevitably drawn to analyse alienation as a category of Marxist analysis. His conclusion was that although Althusser had been right to argue for the ‘epistemological break’ in Marx’s thought, it was wrong to suggest that Marx abandoned the concept of alienation in his later work. Far from it: a transformed conception of alienation derived from historical materialism remains the key to understanding Marxism.

Keywords

psychology – alienation – Marxism – Lucien Sève

A Biographical Preface

Lucien Sève conceived of his life’s work as involving the design, development, and defence of a Marxist theory of the individual, and in so doing he intended

to take on the task of preventing Marxism from degenerating into an inhuman anthropology, the fate that one of its leading constructive critics had already warned would inevitably await should it fail to reintegrate Man into itself as its foundation,¹ yet without issuing Marxism with a merely revisionist and wholly inadequate anthropology instead.

Sève's theory, originally advanced in his master work *Marxism and the Theory of the Human Personality*,² therefore steered a course between two opposite poles. On the one hand, the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser and his adherents, who came close, at least, to denying the need for a theory of the individual altogether. On the other, Marxist humanism – for a time the official line of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) despite the close association of humanism with revisionism – whose defenders, such as Adam Schaff and Roger Garaudy, insisted on the importance of freedom, choice and subjectivity within Marxism,³ and promoted the role of the individual personality in the eventual disintegration of capitalism. Because the issue provoked such controversy, he became embroiled in a prolonged debate with Althusser, Garaudy and their respective supporters during the heady days of the 1966 Argenteuil Conference of the PCF.

Any middle course might smack of compromise in the name of Party discipline, an accusation that has indeed been levelled against him.⁴ In this view, with the experience of the awkward response of the PCF to 'les événements' of May 1968 in France a recent and raw memory for the Party leadership, the leadership faced what eventually became an impossible dilemma. On the one hand, the vocabulary of Marxist humanism could not be left to those inside the Party who might follow Garaudy into what suspiciously resembled social democracy, complete with a rapprochement with the Catholic Church. On the other, Althusser's promulgation of structural Marxism provided a route to rebellion that might derail even the tactical political alliance of the Left that the PCF was seeking.⁵ Sève's contribution, from this perspective, should therefore be seen entirely as a search for a suitable fire blanket which could be thrown over both ends of the political spectrum aflame within the PCF.

Sève's view of his own efforts was, however, quite the opposite: he believed that his view, rising above an unproductive debate, ought to have been uncontroversial for Marxists to adopt.⁶ It is worth pointing out that he continued argu-

1 Sartre 1963, p. 250.

2 Sève 1978.

3 Schaff 1980, p. 214; Garaudy 1970, p. 102.

4 O'Donnell 1986, p. 10.

5 Baudouin 1984, p. 801.

6 Sève 2008, p. 396.

ing against both positions long after the original participants had departed the scene, right up until the time that he finally left the PCF in 2010, a departure fuelled more by political disagreements than ideological ones, and even thereafter.⁷ In his view, hardly anything was more important philosophically within Marxism.

The Rejection of Marxist Humanism

Sève agreed with Althusser's adoption of the term 'epistemological break', in that the materialism of *Das Kapital* was evidence of a fundamental divergence from Marx's earlier work. For Sève, the personality, the human essence, must be envisaged not as merely relational, as the humanists argued, but fundamentally located in the economic relations of individual societies. He argued that the views of Schaff, Garaudy and fellow Marxist humanists such as Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and Bertell Ollman, the latter of whom was caricatured as suggesting that 'Marx's thirty years of mature work was a matter of gathering "supporting material" for his early works',⁸ represented such a distortion of Marxism that it could reasonably be argued they had failed to understand the Marxist project properly and stopped being Marxists altogether.

On the other hand, Sève viewed the complete rejection of the concept of personality by structural Marxists as alarming, not only because of its theoretical incorrectness and the resultant distortions it introduced,⁹ but also because it virtually conceded the entire ground of psychology to the opponents of Marxism. The concept of personality, and with it the analysis of individual biographies, was an essential yet neglected component of the future successful development of Marxist theory, for which Sève argued he was laying the groundwork: predictably, the role of labour in individual lives was where Sève as a Marxist placed the centrality of the development of the personality.

Yet whilst his denunciation of the notion of the biological determination of individuality was strongly and coherently argued, Sève's original theory ended up resting on undoubtedly awkward formulations, such as the 'juxtastructure' of individuals and society,¹⁰ and he was accused, in turn, of neglecting the social, gender, and other determinants of the individual personality that could not easily be directly explained by economics. In response, Sève did give ground

7 Sève 2018b.

8 Dunayevskaya 1972, p. 5.

9 Sève 2008, p. 123.

10 Sève 1978, p. 144.

to his critics as the decades wore on, especially in respect of conceding that biographical realities comprise even more socio-historical variables than his original formulation had envisaged,¹¹ but even his later work demonstrated both his continued firm opposition to both Marxist humanism and structural Marxism, and his belief that an accurate Marxist approach to personality was not only possible, but necessary.

Sève's View on Alienation in Marx

'Alienation is a pervasive feature of modern life. It is one of the few theoretical terms from Marxism that has found a place in ordinary language.'¹² A no-doubt true assertion: any Marxist, and perhaps especially a theorist concerned with the human personality and its biography, might therefore be expected to dwell on the matter of alienation, especially if writing at the time when attention to alienation peaked, during the late twentieth century.¹³ Sève was no exception. His original work¹⁴ contained the genesis of his views, which were developed in a specific article originally written in 1973,¹⁵ which is published alongside the present article in a translation by Carl Shames. Much later, he combined that article with others of his own and numerous quotations from Marx concerning alienation in one volume: *Aliénation et Émancipation*.¹⁶ From this and other writing, it is possible to understand how Sève himself conceptualised alienation, an understanding which bears comparison to those of his ideological competitors in structural Marxism and Marxist humanism.

The text reproduced here as an accompanying article, 'Marxist Analysis of Alienation', was written, so Sève explained, as a contribution to the debate over the Marxist-humanist conception of alienated labour as being at the heart of Marxism philosophically and at the centre of de-Stalinisation politically, and in particular as a rebuttal of Garaudy's view that the 1844 *Manuscripts* represented the birth of genuine Marxism.¹⁷ Sève's complaint was that the concept of alienation was being pressed into service to crumple Marxism into just another variety of humanism, entirely reliant on an abstract, speculative concept of

11 Sève 2018a, p. 150.

12 Sayers 2016, p. 49.

13 Lee 1972, p. 121.

14 Sève 1978.

15 Sève 1974.

16 Sève 2012.

17 Sève 2012, p. 2.

‘Man’, a criticism wholeheartedly shared by Althusser, whose famous text *Pour Marx*¹⁸ Sève considered as another part of the same extended debate.¹⁹

Sève’s focus on Marx’s comments regarding religion in *On the Jewish Question*²⁰ in his introduction of Marx’s conception of alienation in the 1973 text is logical enough. But it should also be remembered that at the time of writing, the principal target of his criticism, Garaudy, had after his expulsion from the PCF broken cover and was edging ever closer to declaring himself a Christian, which he eventually did in 1975.²¹ Sève’s analysis may also from a contemporary standpoint appear serendipitous, given the post-secular turn by the Left in recent decades.

In fact, however, Sève’s summary of Marx’s intent in the *1844 Manuscripts* itself is little different from that of the Marxist humanists, frequently, like Garaudy, sympathetic to religion, who he intended to criticise. ‘Man’ is isolated from his ‘essence’ through ‘work’. Alienation is a loss of self that happens as a result, and which is the cause rather than the effect of private property.²² The generalisations of the *1844 Manuscripts* with regard to what subsequently became the highly detailed Marxist concept of labour paralleled the adoption of an equally abstract notion of alienation, which metamorphoses into a further abstraction, that of a human essence inherent in each individual, none of which in Sève’s view can be incorporated into actual *Marxism*. The absence of economic categories, explained in Sève’s view by Marx’s own inadequate knowledge of economics when he wrote the *1844 Manuscripts*, entails an equivalent lacuna in their potentially valuable explication of alienation. As a direct result, Sève contended that for the early Marx, the worker is not only the object of alienation but also the subject – even in a sense the author of their own misfortune.²³ Marx even comes close, Sève suggested, to ascribing the cause of alienation to work itself. Sève reflects, in language no doubt shaped by decades of criticism²⁴ of his own original direct derivation of personality from labour, that what Marx missed were all the ways in which labour does *not* alienate: professional pride, and workers’ comradeship.²⁵ A more subtle explication is evidently required.

18 Althusser 1965.

19 Sève 2012, p. 4.

20 Marx 1978.

21 Garaudy 1975, p. 265.

22 Sève 2012, p. 22.

23 Sève 2012, p. 10.

24 For example: Clot 2008, Oddone 1981.

25 Sève 2012, p. 13.

For both Sève and Althusser, the 1844 *Manuscripts* were still hidebound by idealist philosophy, and a far-from-mature Marxism. The concept of alienation found there, far from being a central facet of Marxist thought about history, was carried over from Hegelian and Feuerbachian thought, subsequently demoted and eventually sliding into the background in *Das Kapital*.²⁶ But from this point on, Sève parts company²⁷ with Althusser: far from denying alienation a place in Marx's mature thought, or conceding that it takes second place to the concept of commodity fetishism,²⁸ Sève's view is that it forms an essential part, and he was determined to refute the Althusserian argument that alienation is absent from Marx's later work.²⁹ Althusser's mistake, Sève argued, was to compare only two works, which are situated at the beginning and the end of Marx's career, and to ignore the contribution of intermediate works, the *Grundrisse*³⁰ in particular, as well as to rely on inadequate translations into French of *Das Kapital*.³¹ His method of refutation, in *Aliénation et Émancipation*, was to present a mass of textual references to the contrary as conclusive evidence of its tenacity and significance. His analysis suggested that, completely contrary to what he regarded as a prevalent myth that alienation is a concept Marx gradually abandoned, references actually proliferate in his later work – but not in the same way.

Selbstentfremdung No Longer

To retain both the concept of a break in Marx's thought and the concept of alienation, Sève was inevitably committed to adopting the position that the concept of alienation in Marx's later work is not only identifiably 'very different',³² not just 'an important evolution',³³ 'a development and extension of ideas first sketched out in his early works under the heading of "estranged labour"',³⁴ nor merely 'enriched by a greater understanding of economic categories and by more rigorous social analysis',³⁵ but *qualitatively distinct* from that of the 1844 *Manuscripts*.

26 Sève 2012, p. 5.

27 Sève 2004, p. 27.

28 Sève 2012, p. 27.

29 Sève 2004, p. 29.

30 Marx 1973.

31 Sève 2004, pp. 29–30; Sève 2012, p. 16.

32 Mészáros 1970, p. 36.

33 Mandel 1970, p. 18.

34 Sayers 2016, p. 51.

35 Musto 2018, p. 39, footnote.

Sève would have us believe that between these words from the *1844 Manuscripts*:

What applies to man's relation to his work, to the product of his labour and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to other men, and to the other man's labour and object of labour.³⁶

and those of *Das Kapital*, that considering:

... a relation between owners of commodities in which they appropriate the produce of the labour of others by alienating [*entfremden*] the produce of their own labour ...³⁷

... To that extent the worker stands on a higher plane than the capitalist from the outset, since the latter has his roots in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it whereas right from the start the worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel and experiences it as a process of enslavement ...³⁸

there is a huge, unbridgeable distinction: between the speculative concept of the early Marx, which slips all too easily into a Feuerbachian concept of abstract human nature,³⁹ and the mature, economic view of the later Marx, in which it is now *capital* that is the cause of alienation, not any abstract concept of labour. In the *Grundrisse*, Sève argued, Marx insists that bourgeois economists are incapable of understanding how the objectification of the social forces of labour is not, in fact, inseparable from their alienation in relation to actual, living labour.⁴⁰ No worker alienates themselves through their work: on the contrary, the relations of production themselves are the force that creates alienation. And in turn therefore, private property is not caused by alienation, an argument that Sève viewed as incomprehensible.

In sharp distinction to the earlier, idealist conception of the *1844 Manuscripts*, Sève again agreed with Althusser in viewing alienation in the later Marx as being derived from historical materialism: an historical divorce between productive work and social wealth, caused by capital, an implacable force that crushes and subjugates humanity, which is for Sève and others unsurprisingly

36 Marx 1964, p. 77.

37 Marx 1990, p. 203.

38 Marx 1990, p. 990.

39 Sève 1999, p. 90.

40 Marx 1973, p. 716; Sève 2008, p. 40.

an idea of the strongest possible force.⁴¹ If alienation can still be *described* as self-determined, it can no longer ever be *explained* in such an idealist fashion.

Do we lose anything of anthropological significance in this transformation? Not in Sève's view: Marx's humanity is even more on display in his exposition of the pitiless deprivation of individuals caused by capital than in his earlier work. Nor are there two ontologically distinct forms of alienation, the one operating at the level of social relations and the other at the individual level,⁴² merely two different perspectives, the former economic and the latter biographical.⁴³ Rather, although alienation itself – as with the human essence – is situated in social relations, its manifestations, which correspond quite closely to the many familiar uses of the French word 'aliénation', are for Sève predictably multi-dimensional: cultural, ideological, and historical. Everyone is alienated under capitalism: through both the reification that Marx intended *Enttäusserung* to convey, and the depersonalisation encompassed by *Entfremdung*.⁴⁴

Though Sève insists that alienation is *situated* in social relations, he is ready to acknowledge that alienation is *experienced* by everyone, not only as members of a class or a group, but individually. Not only as frustration and the curtailment of individual development,⁴⁵ but also as illusion, for example erroneous perceptions of abstract 'human nature', for example in relation to allegedly biological causes of individual characteristics that are in fact determined by capital: most obviously, allegations of innate human intelligence, illusions in respect of which Sève campaigned against all his adult life.⁴⁶ Becoming a stranger to oneself, detached from the product of one's own labour, objectified, dehumanised and thrust into inevitable resistance, Marx's materialist conception of alienation in Sève's hands is claimed to demonstrate inescapable psychological disturbance under capitalism. What distanced Sève from the New Left approach to alienation of the kind advanced by Fromm or Marcuse⁴⁷ is therefore not how alienation is experienced at the level of the individual, but the more focused identification of its cause in labour and therefore its remedy.

In Sève's later work, however, alienation is curiously now detached from his previous criticism of lack of nuance, whilst being reflected in a lightly sketched idea of 'de-alienation'⁴⁸ drawn up as a deliberate riposte to the eternal life of

41 Sève 2012, p. 23; Cowling 2006, p. 321.

42 Bidet 2008, p. 56.

43 Sève 2012, p. 26.

44 Sève 2012, p. 19.

45 Sève 2008, p. 504.

46 Sève 1964, 1976, 2009.

47 Koechlin 2015, p. 183.

48 Sève 1999, p. 93.

ideology intimated by Althusser,⁴⁹ that fortuitously seemed to correlate with the political preoccupations of the contemporary Left. There must be a lingering concern that alienation here has been packaged to suit the occasion, almost in a familiar move⁵⁰ defined by what communism will remove,⁵¹ rather than by the experience of individuals that Sève so wanted to incorporate into Marxism. It is after all noteworthy that his dramatic depiction of alienation and its cure is by the turn of the century scarcely different from the typology of alienation employed by his Marxist-humanist opponents of a generation earlier.⁵² Apparently, turning alienation upside-down did not cause its contents to spill.

With such a view of the development of alienation in Marx's thought, it is little surprise that Sève tasked himself with admonishing contemporary French authors⁵³ for returning to the 1844 *Manuscripts* rather than to *Das Kapital* as their inspiration for creating further, merely interpersonal categories of alienation bereft of economic grounding, insisting that in so doing they were merely continuing and amplifying the reformist errors of humanism, rather than making useful contributions to Marxism. Any failure to place economics at the centre of the cause of alienation, and its solution, was destined to undermine any effective critique of neoliberalism.⁵⁴ As late as 2012, therefore, Sève took the view that his 1973 article would make useful reading for those who wish to utilise the concept of alienation in their analysis of contemporary capitalism.

The Career of a Concept

If as David McLellan said, ideology is 'the most elusive concept in the whole of social science',⁵⁵ alienation, first identified as possessing a 'career' by Lewis Feuer,⁵⁶ must bid fair to run it a close second. So, whereas in justifying the disinterment of his debate with Garaudy and Althusser half a century later, Sève lamented that what he argued had been hard-fought theoretical ground had been abandoned, in reality criticism of Sève's position could and has come in three different forms. With the two outlined above, the enthusiastic co-option

49 Sève 1999, p. 193.

50 Ollman 1976, p. 132.

51 Sève 2013.

52 For example: Girardi 1968, p. 23.

53 Amongst those he singled out were Haber 2007, Renault 2008, and Fischbach 2009.

54 Sève 2012, p. 38.

55 McLellan 1995, p. 1.

56 Feuer 1962, p. 117.

of Marx's early promulgation of alienation by Marxist humanists and the equally enthusiastic denial by Marxist structuralists of any need for a theory of alienation applicable to individuals or their biographies, Sève was entirely familiar. Indeed, however much he believed in it himself, his analysis of alienation was clearly intended as a third way between them.

The same cannot be said of the development of the concept of alienation more widely, despite its being 'one of the most important and widely debated themes of the twentieth century'.⁵⁷ We may grant Sève licence to avoid the institutionalisation of the concept by bourgeois sociology, reducing it to a phenomenon of individual maladjustment to social forms,⁵⁸ or even the attempted taming of the concept by repeated contributions from those tangential to, or even outside Marxism, such as the Frankfurt School or Herbert Marcuse.⁵⁹ All were ultimately anxious to question the firm causal relationship between capital and alienation upon which Sève, as a Marxist first and foremost, always insisted. We may however be slightly less forgiving of his neglect of notable contemporary theorists of alienation such as Shlomo Avineri,⁶⁰ István Mészáros,⁶¹ Ollman,⁶² Mandel,⁶³ and McLellan himself,⁶⁴ all of whom rejected Althusserian structural Marxism, and who traversed similar ground in respect of an insistence in varying ways on the importance as well as the overarching unity of the concept in Marx's work. This even though they frequently sought to harmonise Marx's earlier concept of alienation with that in *Das Kapital*,⁶⁵ despite lacking the particular focus on the individual and on psychology that distinguishes Sève's own work.

But does the debate over alienation within Marx's own thought matter as much as its protagonists agree it does? For all Sève's contribution in demonstrating how, far from being relegated to the background, alienation is transformed in the work of the later Marx to become a fundamental category of historical materialism, we are surely entitled to ask: what is the real significance of the allegedly vital theoretical distinction that he is so keen to make? Even if we agree with Sève in assigning the direction of causality firmly from capital to alienation, an historical perspective with which Marxists will surely be largely sympathetic, what can we actually *do* with this information?

57 Musto 2021, p. 3.

58 Musto 2021, p. 27.

59 Marcuse 1955.

60 Avineri 1968.

61 Mészáros 1970.

62 Ollman 1976.

63 Mandel 1970.

64 McLellan 1970.

65 For example: McLellan 1970, Borbone 2013, and Musto 2018.

Conclusion: Pointers to the Future

Sève remained optimistic: he insisted that capitalism is essentially transitory, an exemplary repository of what Garaudy would have called Marxist hope; and so for Sève alienation, for all its multifaceted grim ferocity, can be recognised as not an inevitable fate for humanity but rather an essential rite of passage – something much better awaits us when we reach a truly free society.⁶⁶ On that at least, Sève and all his Marxist critics would surely agree.

But we may therefore have cause to regret that for all his expressed interest in a Marxist perspective on the individual Sève never once tried, whether in 1973 or at any time subsequently, to explain how we might detect alienation, analyse it, or even how to use it once we did. The furthest he was prepared to go was to suggest that although ‘the concrete personality first presents itself as an ensemble of personal, indeed inter-personal, non-alienated activities, unfolding as self-expression’,⁶⁷ individuals whose work involves mainly abstract activity will be more alienated. We might also note in this regard that whilst Marxist humanists such as Garaudy identified and openly denounced the continuation and even amplification of alienation within state-socialist societies in the early 1960s,⁶⁸ it took Sève much longer to come to the same agonised conclusion.⁶⁹

We may also therefore wish for Sève to have developed his later, more nuanced, conception of alienation in much more depth, for example to investigate the difference between alienation experienced individually and collectively, or to explore the dimensions of alienation, for example in relation to the built environment as does David Harvey,⁷⁰ or the natural world as does Kohei Saito,⁷¹ but unfortunately Sève never did so. He never moved beyond the criticism that in relation to a definition of alienation as ‘the loss of man’s being which has become an estranged power in the world of private property, communism meaning the elimination of this alienation – psychology has created nothing worthy of note.’⁷² However justified this criticism, the response to Sève in respect of his endorsement of a Marxist perspective on anthropology and psychology was equally curt: ‘What has the new psychology yielded so far? Not much, as yet.’⁷³ The explanation for his reticence to move onto empirical ground that Sève himself so frequently gave was that he was a philosopher, not

66 Sève 2012, p. 29.

67 Sève 1978, p. 341.

68 Garaudy 1963, p. 18.

69 Sève 1999, p. 51.

70 Harvey 2014.

71 Saito 2017.

72 Sève 1978, p. 64.

73 Levitin 1980, p. 48.

a psychologist,⁷⁴ let alone a social scientist – that he could only ‘sketch out’ the significance of Marxism for psychology or alienation for Marxism itself.

Sève’s readers today might not be so reticent. His work could serve at the very least as inspiration to combat the ideological diminution of interest in researching the realities of alienation that arguably commenced in the early 1970s but which certainly became more widespread thereafter.⁷⁵ To return instead, in fact, *as Marxists*, to the task of analysing the experience of alienation by real, living people, and not to abandon alienation to the category of an existential fate. In short, to ‘get on with it’,⁷⁶ as Marxists were urged to do decades ago precisely in respect of the empirical analysis of alienation. That would surely please Lucien Sève.

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74 Sève 2018a, p. 151.

75 Yuill 2011, p. 115.

76 Archibald 1978, p. 130.

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BRILL

Marxist Analysis of Alienation (1973)

Lucien Sève

Abstract

Lucien Sève (1926–2020) was one of the foremost Marxist theoreticians of the Parti Communiste Français. An indomitable opponent of both structural and humanist Marxism, his 1973 article reprinted below represents the core of his conception of alienation. For Sève, whilst the mature Marxism of *Das Kapital* is fundamentally distinct from the speculative humanism of the 1844 *Manuscripts* in placing capital, not abstract labour, at the heart of alienation, this reinforces, rather than replaces, the role of alienation at the centre of Marx's mature thought, and hence of Marxism itself.

Keywords

psychology – alienation – Marxism – Lucien Sève

Religion and Political Economy

Everyone knows the famous formulae summarising the Marxist conception of religion: religion is ‘the opium of the people’, it is the ‘fantastic realisation of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality’, is ‘the expression of real distress’, but also to some extent the ‘protest against real distress’, or still, ‘Man makes religion, religion does not make man’,¹ ‘the earthly family is the secret of the holy family’,² etc. We repeat these famous formulae³ but have we reflected sufficiently on the fact that they all belong to the early works of Marx, including the Introduction he wrote in 1844 for his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*? This poses a considerable problem: are the famous formulae that

1 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 176.

2 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 4.

3 In the Preface to *For Marx* (Althusser 1969, p. 27), Althusser refers to the ‘famous quotations’ to which a certain Marxism was once reduced.

are supposed to summarise the Marxist conception of religion valid in terms of mature Marxism, a Marxism that in many respects has surpassed the point of view of his early works? To clarify the question: at the heart of the famous formulae is found, if only implicitly, a notion whose role is crucial in this respect, that of *alienation*. Often his intervention is explicit. Thus, immediately after the formulae mentioned above in the Introduction of 1844, we read: ‘The task of history, therefore, once the truth of the world beyond has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the holy form of human self-estrangement [*Selbstentfremdung*] has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its secular forms.’⁴ Similarly, in *On The Jewish Question*, written at the same time, we encounter aphorisms like this: Christianity has ‘completed theoretically the estrangement of man from himself [*Selbstentfremdung*] and from nature’.⁵ It is unnecessary to multiply these citations in order to establish the well-known fact: at the centre of all of Marx’s conceptions in this early period (he was little more than twenty-five years old), including of course his conception of religion, we find the notion of alienation. This, obviously, gives rise to a major difficulty: if it is true, as is often claimed today, that the concept of alienation was purely and simply abandoned by Marx when he came to the theoretical views of his maturity, what becomes of a conception of religion that holds this idea at its centre?

The difficulty is even more serious than the thesis of the abandonment of alienation in mature Marxism, and more precisely after the great transition of 1845–6, which appears to be founded on solid argument, and even some irrefutable texts. So when in *The German Ideology*, after a series of analyses of the meaning and effects of the division of labour, Marx adds: ‘This “estrangement [*Entfremdung*]” – to use a term which will be comprehensible to the philosophers ...’;⁶ does this not suggest that from now on this alienation is for him no more than an obsolete philosophical concept, pertaining to a reality whose effective analysis should be on a completely different terrain, that of the history of social relations?

But we find a clearer and firmer repudiation of the phraseology of alienation in the *Manifesto* regarding ‘true socialists’:

4 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 176.

5 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 173.

6 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 48.

It is well known how the monks wrote silly lives of Catholic saints over the manuscripts on which the classical works of ancient heathendom had been written. The German literati reversed this process with profane French literature. They wrote their philosophical nonsense beneath the French original. For instance, beneath the French criticism of the economic functions of money, they wrote 'Alienation [*Entäusserung*] of Humanity', and beneath the French criticism of the bourgeois state they wrote 'Dethronement of the Category of the General' and so forth. [...] The French Socialist and Communist literature was thus completely emasculated.⁷

When we read such texts, we come to believe that indeed something decisive changed in the thought of Marx and Engels between the years 1843–4, where the theory of alienation of the human essence is the centre of reference, and the years 1846–8, where it was denounced as a betrayal of class positions. But then how to understand how a theory of religion, summed up in these famous formulae, clearly haunted by the notion of alienation, can be adopted unproblematically by Marx and Engels in all their mature work – and even Lenin, who does not hesitate to offer the Marx's aphorism of 1843–4 – 'Religion is the opium of the people' – as 'the cornerstone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion'?⁸ That is the question I would like to elucidate here.

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To see this clearly, we must first have in mind the theory of alienation in the works of the young Marx, whose main text is undoubtedly the *1844 Manuscripts*. And as these works deal largely with the critique of Feuerbach's philosophy, it is worth recalling Feuerbach's theses on religion and alienation.

At the heart of Feuerbach's philosophy is a materialist critique of Hegel, which proposes to establish two things: that speculative philosophy, in particular, that of Hegel, when it is summed up in its entirety, is an ultimate avatar of theology, and that the truth harboured within theology is humanism. Feuerbach did not deny the problematic of alienation (mainly designated by Hegel – we shall return later to these terminological issues –, by the word *Entäusserung*), which in its most general sense consists of grasping opposed realities as moments of the life of a single subject, going out from itself to

7 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, p. 511.

8 Lenin 1973, LCW 5, pp. 402–3.

objectify in external forms which it then re-appropriates. But for Feuerbach, instead of essential truth being found in this process itself, that is, in thought, as it is in Hegel, it resides in *man* who is the concrete subject of the whole process of alienation of essence. The alienated essence as such was for Feuerbach only an illusion. In other words, while man alienates his essence in religion, offering a fantastic expression of himself in religion, this does not mean at all to Feuerbach that religion is the truth of man, but rather that man is the truth of religion. There is therefore there – the same term which is used by Feuerbach – a *materialist inversion of Hegel*, which is the basis of his texts of 1839–43, the same that Marx and Engels devoured with enthusiasm. In the *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy* (1842), we find the thesis:

We have to reverse [*umkehren*] speculative philosophy to have the truth revealed, the pure and naked truth.⁹

To reverse, in a materialistic sense, the Hegelian conception of the relation between the process and the product (the '*predicate*', we read in thesis 7) of alienation, of idealist externalisation, and the concrete *subject* of this externalisation, of this alienation, such is, literally, the task undertaken by Feuerbach.

A Feuerbachian Theory of Alienation?¹⁰

At the same time, he introduces this fundamentally new idea that the alienation of the human essence is a bad thing that should be done away with, and not at all a historical process with its own rationale and necessity (as it is in Hegel). What is religion for Feuerbach? An illusion of consciousness. Let us beware of attributing to him anachronistically an historical-materialist conception of ideology! For Feuerbach, if human consciousness is religious it is because quite simply it does not recognise its own essence in the objectified form it takes, through the life of the senses, of reason, of morality, etc. And why this failure of recognition? Feuerbach has an interesting hypothesis, which is also far from foreign to the thinking of the young Marx: if man does not recognise his own essence in the objectified form it has taken, through the life of the senses, reason, morality, etc. in which he encounters it, this stems from the fact that the individual is bounded, strictly limited, as opposed to the infinite

⁹ Feuerbach 1960, p. 106. The German text appears in Feuerbach 1970, p. 244.

¹⁰ I add here the section titles that were not included in the publication in 1973. [Note added in 2012.]

nature of the human essence, i.e. it has to do with the existing opposition between the individual and the human race.

How could the infinite human essence appear to me as my essence, when the essential characteristic of my individuality is to be limited? It is therefore necessary, to escape religious illusion, to bring the human essence in its reality, in its truth, not merely to the limited individual, taken separately (here we have the kernel of the *negative* aspect of Marx's 'sixth thesis on Feuerbach', although we are still far from its *affirmative*), but to the relations between individuals. These, for Feuerbach, are still grasped through the relation of you and me, the interpersonal relationship, that is to say, ultimately, love. This is where we find, for Feuerbach, the concrete truth of the human essence:

The essence of man is contained in the community, in the unity of man with man, unity is based on the distinction between me and you [...]. Man with man, the unity of self and you, this is God.¹¹

Moreover, he cites with enthusiasm the words of Goethe:

It is only the sum of humans which knows nature, it is only the sum of humans which is genuinely human.

A sentence characteristic of an interpersonal humanism, but which precisely does not discover, behind subjective interpersonal relations, the objective social relation in its universality. And that is why the actively materialist intention of Feuerbach, who wants radically to critique religious alienation, leads ultimately to another religion,¹² secular, concrete-humanist, no doubt, but religion just the same.¹³ We should read in this context the masterful and decisive analysis Engels gives in Chapter III of his *Ludwig Feuerbach* of this Feuerbachian religion of love, showing how it leaves us far from the

11 Feuerbach 1960, p. 198. I retain Louis Althusser's translation, but, as we are aware, the German language, as distinct from the French (and many others) distinguishes *der Mensch*, the human being of either sex, and *der Mann*, the human male. It is the human in the first sense, human beings in general, *Mensch*, that is referred to here, i.e. *the woman* as well as 'man'. [Note by LS.]

12 Cf. the 1843 Preface to the *Essence of Christianity*: '(My book is negative) with regard to the *superhuman* essence only and not with regard to the human essence of religion' (Feuerbach 1960, p. 210). Cf. also in *Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy*: 'To replace religion, philosophy must become religion as philosophy ...' (Feuerbach 1960, p. 99).

13 TN: Note that there is an additional sentence here in brackets, added in 2012: 'All religion is nothing other than the absolutisation of interpersonal relations, of the relation between what is close, detached from the wider and deeper base of social relations.'

ability to establish a science of history, without which any attempt at human de-alienation is doomed to remain a dream.

So it is mainly on this point that early Marx and Engels, despite their Feuerbachian enthusiasm, find themselves in disagreement with the author of *The Essence of Christianity*. For them, the drama of Feuerbach is that, in his rural isolation, he was hardly in a position to understand that if ‘man is the world of man’, according to a formula which, taken in itself, is held in common between the Marx of 1843–4 and Feuerbach, then ultimately it is the state and with it civil society that constitute the objective reality of the human essence.¹⁴ Already, in his letter to Ruge of 13 March 1843, Marx said:

Feuerbach’s aphorisms seem to me incorrect only in one respect, that he refers too much to nature and too little to politics. That, however, is the only alliance by which present-day philosophy can become truth.¹⁵

So, while still in many ways Feuerbachian, Marx at that time is clear that the materialist inversion of Hegel in Feuerbach only leads to a very poor and speculative result, lacking a sufficiently concrete understanding of the ‘world of man’ that constitutes the reality of the human essence. Under the influence of Engels, who was more advanced than Marx in his recognition of the fundamental role of political economy as the explanatory basis of human history, Marx began seriously to study English and French economists,¹⁶ discovering quickly in this study the secret to a reversal of the Hegelian concept of alienation, far more materialist and revolutionary than Feuerbach’s. It is this world of reflections, and especially the richest of them, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, that we take as the basis of our analysis.¹⁷

What the *1844 Manuscripts* present is what can be called the *first ‘Marxist’ theory of alienation*, the quotation marks serving to draw attention to the fact

14 Cf. Karl Marx, ‘Introduction’ of 1844 (in Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3), and Ludwig Feuerbach, *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy*, point 67 (in Feuerbach 1960, p. 125), where the idea, very rarely expressed by him, that ‘the state is the realised totality of the human essence’, remains purely embryonic.

15 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 1, p. 400.

16 On the role of Engels, especially his *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy* (written late in 1843, published in February 1844 [in MECW 3]), as well as economic studies of Marx at this time, cf. Cornu 1962, pp. 89ff. Notes taken by Marx on his economic readings of this time are included in the MEGA, Section I, Volume 2.

17 In a more detailed study, one should also analyse other important texts, particularly the extracts annotated by Marx of the *Elements of Political Economy* by James Mill, and of course *The Holy Family*.

that this theory is not yet exactly Marxist, although it played a significant role in the genesis of conceptions which Marx and Engels came to on this issue in their mature work.¹⁸ And the first question before us is to elaborate the meaning of the concept of alienation that has an openly central position in these extraordinarily rich texts.

1. What is immediately striking is that, unlike Feuerbach, for whom the problem of alienation is identified with the problem of religious consciousness, Marx is no longer concerned with alienated consciousness, but rather alienated labour, so that the terrain of his critique is longer religion, but political economy, understood in a very broad sense. The *1844 Manuscripts* start with the economy. The first half of the first manuscript is almost like a series of economic lectures, and when Marx's own reflections begin, he focuses on alienated labour; it is not philosophical arguments but economic facts that function as premises: 'We begin with the presuppositions of the national economy', 'We proceed from an *actual* economic fact.'¹⁹

2. Transported from the terrain of religious criticism to that of the critique of political economy, alienation no longer refers to a simple misunderstanding, a process of consciousness, but to a practical enslavement that also includes forms of alienation of consciousness, but only as a corollary. The alienation of the human essence is no longer understood as the ideal objectification of human qualities in a celestial god, but as the divestiture for the worker of his own life in worldly things. We see here how the materialist inversion of Hegel's theory of alienation is more radical, that is, more materialist than it is in Feuerbach. An example: at the beginning of the text on alienated labour, Marx poses an economic fact: 'The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces...'; and he says:

This fact expresses merely that the object that labour produces – Labour's product – comes to confront it as something alien [*fremdes Wesen*], as

18 Republishing this 1973 study in its original version, as I point out in the preface, I retained the formulations of a phrase such as this, very unsatisfactory to my understanding of 2012, in that they implicitly identify the positions to which Marx had arrived when he wrote *Capital* to 'Marxism' as a 'theoretically correct' Marxism. This is a mode of thinking still part of a political-historical culture that went bankrupt, and for profound reasons. In place of this dated sentence, today I would simply say: in the *1844 Manuscripts* is the first Marxian understanding of alienation; a substantially different understanding, but with the same vocabulary, is found in *Capital*, and I think there are strong reasons to see this as better founded and more relevant.

19 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 271.

a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour [*Vergegenständlichung der Arbeit*]. Labour's realisation is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realisation of labour appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers; objectification as *loss* of the *object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement* [*Entfremdung*], as *alienation* [*Entäusserung*].²⁰

And this divestiture of self in a dominant and overwhelming practical power is manifest not only externally, in the process of becoming-foreign of the product of labour, but within the worker himself, in the process of becoming-foreign of labour to the worker, of transformation of labour into *forced labour*.²¹

From Religious Alienation to Alienation of Labour

3. There is more. The alienation of labour is expressed not only in the transformation of labour and its product into an alien, enslaving thing, but also in this domination of the thing taking the form of a dominating *person*, the private owner. Objectification of people, and personification of things: this dialectic plays a key role in Marx's conception of alienation. Here on this point, among many others, is a characteristic section of the *1844 Manuscripts*:

Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. For this reason, religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest, or again to a mediator, etc., since we are here dealing with the intellectual world. In the real, practical world, self-estrangement can only become manifest through the real, practical relationship to other men. The medium through which estrangement takes place is itself practical. Thus

20 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 272. Let us note now that what in France is conventionally called *the* category of alienation, corresponds actually in Marx to quite a complex system of categories, based not on a single term but on two families of terms: *ausser* (a preposition meaning 'out of ...'): *entäussern*, *Entäusserung*, *veräussern*, *Veräusserung*; and *fremd* (an adjective meaning 'foreign'): *entfremden*, *Entfremdung*, *Fremdheit* ... – not to mention the related vocabulary of objectification and of reification [literally, thing-ification – CS]. We will return later to this linguistic problem.

21 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 274.

through estranged labour, man not only creates his relationship to the object and to the act of production as to powers that are alien and hostile to him; he also creates the relationship in which other men stand to his production and to his product, and the relationship in which he stands to these other men [...] Through *estranged, alienated labour*, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labour of a man alien to labour and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labour creates the relation to it of the capitalist (or whatever one chooses to call the master of labour). Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence of *alienated labour*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.²²

Thus the notion of alienation of labour not only allows us to think an ensemble of anthropological effects of the capitalist economic system, but also reveals the source of this system, to the point of rendering conceivable this extraordinary enterprise of deducing from the analysis of alienated labour what constitutes social classes – although the term is virtually absent in the *1844 Manuscripts*.²³

4. In becoming an economic-philosophical, historical-anthropological notion, has alienation, as Marx conceived it at the time, ceased to be what it was for Feuerbach, that is, the central materialist category for the interpretation of religion? Not at all, as we have seen in the passage in the *1844 Manuscripts* on the capitalist relation as a result of the alienation of labour. Far from being exceptional, the move from economic analysis to the analysis of religion is a frequent approach for Marx, every time he touches on the problem of alienation. To give some examples:

[I]t is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and above himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.²⁴

22 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 279.

23 In the *1844 Manuscripts* we find only *once* the term *Arbeiterklasse* (working class) (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 289), in an instance which does not bestow it any theoretical importance. While Engels in 1844 was working on a book on the English working class, the first developed work of Marx where the concept of class plays an important role is *The German Ideology* (1845–6), a work written in collaboration with Engels.

24 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 273.

Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independent of him – that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is a loss of his self.²⁵

Alienation is therefore, at this point in Marx's thinking, a polyvalent category, pertaining to economy and religion. But on the one hand there is no longer any common measure between these two uses, the religious from then on, and only from far away, only *à propos* of economics, which occupies all the attention. On the other hand, religious issues are always introduced in the course of economic analysis, as mutually clarifying *comparisons*, and nothing more. We do not have a historical-materialist theory of religion as a specific ideological reflection of economic and social alienation, but at least already the idea of a homology between economic alienation, which is conceived as fundamental, and religious alienation; a homology that occurs in the text as a trace of the passage from Feuerbach's analysis of alienation, centred on religion, to a new analysis focused on labour, on economic policy, economy. We see at the same time that Marx did not abandon giving to the new category a universal theoretical scope, that of a matrix of all forms of alienation.

5. Since alienation is considered no longer by reference to a simple attitude of consciousness but to a socio-economic system, it no longer appears only as a bad thing that *should* be eliminated, but as a phase of history that necessarily has an end in history, and this not by any appeal to the spontaneity of consciousness but by the development of practical activity: activity realising communism, which is both

the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man. [...] Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of private property, as the appropriation of human life, is therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement [Entfremdung] – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social existence. Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of consciousness, of man's inner life, but economic estrangement is that of real life; its transcendence therefore

25 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 274.

embraces both aspects. [...] [A]theism is at first far from being *communism*; indeed, that atheism is still mostly an abstraction. The philanthropy of atheism is therefore at first only *philosophical*, abstract philanthropy, and that of communism is at once *real* and directly bent on *action*.²⁶

We see already the basic Marxist idea that religion is not ‘the enemy’ for communism, and that the necessary disappearance of this form of human alienation cannot be the result of an anti-religious struggle, but arises rather from struggles on other terrains, against a completely different alienation, whose disappearance will result in that of religious alienation that is rooted in it. In *The Holy Family*, atheism is itself defined as ‘the last stage of theism, a negative recognition of God’,²⁷ a still-alienated attitude.

Thus, for Feuerbach’s materialist inversion of the Hegelian concept of alienation, a reversal that despite its profound novelty *kept the terms* of the man/religion relationship and thus remained within speculative thought, Marx substituted in 1844 a far more materialist reversal, which requires a materialist rethinking of the terms of the relationship itself. If it is *man* who is alienated in religion, then alienation is itself a *human* process, real, concrete, historical, practical; its centre can no longer be religion but concrete human activity *par excellence*, i.e. labour. De-alienation, then, cannot be accomplished through simple ‘weapons of criticism’ but rather through the ‘critical weapons’ of revolutionary practice. This does not obviate the achievements of Feuerbach’s conception of religion as alienation, but paves the way for its materialist reversal within a materialist theory of ideology, including comparisons between the sphere of the economy and that of religious consciousness that contributes to it. In this sense, the 1844 *Manuscripts* appear as the fulfilment of Feuerbach’s reversal of Hegel, beyond the limitations and inconsistencies of Feuerbach himself. And no doubt the depth, the extreme fertility of this new conception allows us to understand the extraordinary and sustained appeal exercised by this text to this day, so that those who desire to understand Marxism in its authenticity should carefully analyse the situation, not at all an imaginary one, if they want to combat the distortions of Marxism that occur with such frequency.

26 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, pp. 296–7.

27 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 4, p. 110.

A Richly Suggestive Analysis

1. It is impossible, when we read or re-read the *Manuscripts of 1844* (and other texts of the same period), to remain indifferent to the exceptional descriptive fertility of this theory of alienation, to its universal richness and the lively analyses of the forms it takes and the effects it produces, whether relations of labour or of money, needs or aesthetic sense, love or liberty. We know, for example, this passage where Marx establishes the deeply moral character of the bourgeois economy:

Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is its principal thesis. The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence etc., the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure which neither rust nor moths will devour – your capital. The less you *are*, the less you express your own life, the more you *have*, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged [*entfremdeten*] being.²⁸

The *1844 Manuscripts* contain many analyses in which this extraordinarily forceful revelation remains intact, and whose disregard ‘in the name of science’ lessens the scope of revolutionary Marxism. On a slightly different plane, we find in *The Holy Family* a passage like this:

Precisely the *slavery of civil society* is in appearance the greatest *freedom* because it is in appearance the fully developed independence of the individual, the uncurbed movement, no longer bound by a common bond or by man, of the estranged [*entfremdeten*] elements of his life, such as property, industry, religion, etc. whereas actually this is his fully developed slavery and inhumanity. Law has here taken the place of privilege.²⁹

How can we not recognise here also the fecundity of the analysis in terms of alienation that grasps, behind the bourgeois illusions of freedom, the very form of enslavement of bourgeois society?

2. But in reality there is much more than the richness of a phenomenology: the precision of a scientific approach is being born. For what this theory of alienation involves are by no means the simple effects of bourgeois economic

²⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 309.

²⁹ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 116.

relations, they are the relations themselves, which it reveals to be historically transitory. Bourgeois political economy does not challenge the alienated forms of human productive activity, it accepts uncritically wage labour, profit, private property, i.e. it provides scientific support to the illusion that it takes for natural fact, that these are eternal forms of productive activity. Marx immediately calls into question this pseudo-naturalness, he reveals the not only inhuman, but transient nature of these social forms, and here he lays the foundations of a genuinely scientific critique of political economy. How does *man*, he asks at a nodal point of the analysis developed in the *1844 Manuscripts*,

come to alienate [*entfremden*], to estrange his labour [*Arbeit zu enttäusern*]? How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development? We have already gone a long way toward the solution of this problem by *transforming* the question of the *origin of private property* into the question of the relation of *alienated labour* to the course of humanity's development. For when one speaks of *private property*, one thinks of dealing with something external to man. When one speaks of labour, one is directly dealing with man himself. This new formulation of the question already includes its solution.³⁰

Here we see how the point of view of alienation, pushing to find behind apparently indisputable 'states of fact' the internal meaning of the human process that is externalised in them, transforms what bourgeois political economy posits dogmatically as givens into problems relevant to a radical historical critique.

3. That is not all: a fertile principle of descriptive analysis, and of the radical critique of bourgeois society, provides the seed, therefore, not only for a phenomenology of alienated life but also for a real economic science. This theory of alienation leads even more generally to a decisive coming to terms with Hegelian philosophy and thus, for the first time, to the surpassing of the speculative attitude altogether. Here again, the *1844 Manuscripts* go far beyond Feuerbach, although it is true that Feuerbach had already begun an insightful critique of Hegel's dialectic; because while having the goal of a materialist critique of Hegel, Marx can also glimpse the rational core of his approach and the contours of a truly de-alienated dialectic. It is notable that the Hegelian categories of the negation of the negation and supersession (*Aufhebung*) are objects of an extraordinarily penetrating critique, which exposes 'the uncritical positivism and equally uncritical idealism'³¹ of Hegel, and that shows by

³⁰ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 281.

³¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 332.

contrast, outside the circle of abstract thought, the dialectical movement of the establishment of communism as the concrete historical basis for thinking about the corresponding categories in a wholly different way. From a conception of contradiction as movement of the Idea, and which finds its solution in the movement of the Idea, the transition is at least initiated toward a very different conception in which contradiction is a concrete relation between material realities, and can only find its solution in the effective suppression of its material bases.

In order to abolish the *idea* of private property, the *idea* of communism is quite sufficient. It takes actual communist action to abolish actual private property.³²

Thus, the theory of alienation and de-alienation developed in the 1844 *Manuscripts* prefigures the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, which marked the end of speculative philosophy:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to transform it.

4. In order to close this brief survey, let us return to the question of religion: here again it is easy to understand the status of such a conception. The great enigma, which was the stumbling block for pre-Marxist atheism, including Feuerbach's, is the vitality of religion, the wealth of its diverse manifestations. How could a simple illusion of consciousness exercise such historical positivity, if in essence it is only negative? But in showing economic alienation as the historical matrix of human alienation in general, including religious alienation, Marx shows not only how to think of the origin, source, the basis of religion, but also its concrete content, its human 'truth': real alienation, the alienated protest against real alienation. The theory of alienation not only helps us to understand the content of religion, but at the same time the *alienated form* taken by its content.

The essence of economic alienation is indeed to render opaque the relations between people as well as their relationship with nature, and that is why it appears to people enmeshed in these relations in the form of an alienated, fantastic reflection. Thus takes shape a conception of humanity and the world even more radically emancipated from religion; it does not polemically oppose its sense to the 'non-sense' of religion, thereby admitting what it doesn't

³² Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 313.

understand, but is actually able to reveal the meaning of religion, in its content and in its form. And in the same way, it is able to account for the very fact that at this point in history there arises such a radically de-alienated conception of alienation, based on a general theory of ideology: if consciousness is able to see through the secret of alienation, this is because it is the consciousness of a real, material historical force: the proletariat, which in its very existence is the daily experience of real alienation fantastically reflected in consciousness, and which by its very existence announces the dissolution of a world that needs illusion.

And that is why, in their writings of this period, whether the *1844 Manuscripts* or *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Marx and Engels attach visible importance to the fact that the proletariat developing in England, in France and even Germany has largely adopted atheism: it detaches from religion to the extent that it moves toward radical revolution, to communism. In so doing, it does not pose as the gravedigger of religion, a practical attitude that corresponds to a still-alienated bourgeois atheism, but rather it gives a de-alienated form to the real content of religion, transforming the illusory protest against real distress into the practical struggle against this distress, in effective emancipation. That is why, for proletarians

the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.³³

Yet just at the point where this theory of alienation reached a first set of formulations of a whole series of apparently promising developments, Marx abandoned it – the *Manuscripts of 1844* remain as manuscripts. This same notion of alienation, in *The German Ideology* and in the *Manifesto*, had been subjected to the decisive judgments that we mentioned above. And that, we suspect, is not without reasons, which appear when we turn our attention to the limitations and contradictions of this theory.

A Concept Still Trapped by Speculative Abstraction

1. Let us return first to the descriptive richness, the phenomenological value offered by the analysis of alienated labour. Is not this *universal* descriptive fertility – what cannot be described in terms of alienation? – one side of a

33 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 313.

category whose reverse side would be the convenient *abstraction* through which it grasps reality? Does not its *phenomenological* richness entail the cost that it still traps us, at least in part, in *phenomena*, in the immediate forms of the lived? We can understand its fascination, but is it not ultimately a theoretical will-o'-the-wisp? Let us take a simple example.

Developing the idea that the objectification of the worker's labour is a disenfranchisement, that the realisation of the object is the loss of reality for the subject, Marx wrote in the *1844 Manuscripts*: 'So much does labour's realisation appear as loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death.'³⁴ The remark is biting, but from a theoretical point of view, is it anything more than a jab? For what is the concrete reason for low wages, unemployment, economic crisis, etc., to which the worker owed his mortality? Not only does the invocation of the 'loss of realisation', the extreme form of alienation of the worker, tell us nothing on this subject, but we can say, it puts off the concrete economic analysis of these issues, since it is presented as their ultimate answer *directly derived* from the concept of alienated labour.

Here is the trap contained in the *1844 Manuscripts*: they encourage us to mistake simple *abstractions* for analyses. In the face of facts as diverse as the exploitation of wage labour, prostitution, the avarice of the hoarder, or religious belief, we can clearly pronounce the formula of formulae: alienation of the human essence, and with that we designate the deep kinship of all aspects of bourgeois society grasped from what is effectively their common basis, the relations of production. But we grasp them in this way; instead of undertaking a concrete scientific analysis, we just need to formulate them confidently in the language of alienation to 'account' for them and even to 'deduce' them: have we really left behind speculative construction?

2. This leads us to take another look at this uncontested merit of the theory of alienation developed in the *1844 Manuscripts*: the refusal to consider, as does bourgeois political economy, the system of private property as a natural and eternal given. It is true that this, on the one hand, is the starting point for a radical critique of the ideological in bourgeois economics, the first step towards a true science of economics. But at the same time, this refusal leads not to overcoming all the partially mystified contents of the bourgeois economy and to surpassing it on the terrain of science, but to setting it aside, ignoring its scientific core. Thus, in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx did not deal with the labour theory of value, a basic precept of English classical economics. He is not yet on the path that will lead him in the early 1850s to the discovery of surplus value.

34 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 272.

In this regard, it is not enough to point out that the analysis of labour in terms of alienation remains abstract, still far removed from real scientific analysis: the most serious issue is that, taking the point of view of alienation as essential, Marx, in 1844 takes a short cut around the critical accounting of the full richness of economic data and concepts, when it is only through this that there can be a scientific elucidation of the problem.³⁵ This opposition between a philosophy of alienation and a scientific critique of political economy, corresponds, on the terrain of practice, to the lack of interest paid to the struggles and concrete demands of workers if not to the negation, in principle, of their legitimacy. In the final pages of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in 1847, Marx will be fighting both bourgeois economists and socialists who each in their own way reject workers' 'coalitions', and will be illuminating, in a famous passage, the historical significance of union struggles as a necessary step toward class struggle.³⁶ The contrast with this characteristic passage of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, representing a still purely abstract view of the conditions of class struggle, is striking:

An enforced increase of wages [...] would be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity.³⁷

We would say that today, this apparent radicalism (one solution, revolution...) is less relevant than ever and in fact obscures ignorance of the necessary conditions of workers' struggles and, from the theoretical point of view, ignorance of the necessary conditions for scientific analysis.

3. From here, it is not very difficult to grasp the philosophical limitations of this theory of alienation, and the overall coming-to-terms with Hegel's philosophy. It is undeniable that in the 1844 *Manuscripts* there is an extremely penetrating materialist critique of Hegel's speculative dialectic, one that points the way to a fundamentally new dialectic, where contradiction is no longer contained within the realm of ideas, but in material reality. But it is clearly not enough to effect a materialist reversal of the *conception* of the dialectic; we must transform its whole *categorical content* from speculative to scientific. The 1844 *Manuscripts* proposed that the truth of dialectical movement is real

35 Cf. the analysis of Jésus Ibarrola, 'Aliénation, théorie de la valeur-travail et fétichisme' (Ibarrola 1965), which showed how the surpassing of classical political economy by means of this theory of alienated labour has 'as ransom a complete abandonment of its objective core'.

36 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, pp. 210–11.

37 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 280.

historical movement – a crucial point of lasting value –, but it still sees this real historical movement as the movement of an abstract generality, the human essence, which alienates itself in the regime of private property, then recovers itself in communist society.

Thus the dialectic is understood as pertaining to the concrete, but it is a still an abstract dialectic, which is represented as immanent movement of the concrete. Therefore, although the *1844 Manuscripts* assign history a central theoretical place, what it actually tells us about history remains extraordinarily limited. How could Marx grasp concrete historical development while he still has almost none of the essential concepts of historical materialism, not even that of social class? History can be nothing other than the logical, a-temporal succession of major avatars of the human essence, and even the real action for the establishment of communism, a pistol shot at the speculative concept, retains the abstract tone of a Hegelian supersession (*Aufhebung*).

In sum, we are fully justified in saying that the philosophy of alienation, of which the *1844 Manuscripts* are the clearest and most systematic expression, is based on a *humanist* conception, in the theoretical sense of the term, that is, that its focal point is *man*. To be precise: to speak of *man*, seeing in this singular the general subject of history, is to believe that the human individual ‘carries in himself the form of the human condition’, as Montaigne said, so that there is no essential difference between the individual and the human race, and that the individual is the essential form of the race. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, this idea is expressed by the notion of generic man.

The whole character of a species – its species-character – is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character.³⁸

Thus, man is characterised by an essential nature, a generic form of activity whose purpose is the free unfolding, through practical production, of an objective world, an externalisation that at the same time detaches from man, escapes him, and, in the era of alienated labour and private property, enslaves him. The alienation of the human essence is a historical fact in that it is a moment within man’s development, affecting the concrete life of individuals, and that is why a phenomenology of alienated existence is presented to us as the riddle of history solved: for humanism, history is read directly in psychological terms.

38 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 276.

Moreover, communism is understood essentially as re-appropriation by man of his essence, as a finally free realisation of his generic activity, as a form of life reconciled with itself, and as such, as the higher phase of history. It is this speculative identification of abstract man and concrete man, of the human essence and the living individual, thus of history and psychology, that allows us to make *man* the subject of history, and which defines philosophical humanism.

However, as we have seen, the theory of alienation that is the basis of Marx's early works, despite its immense merits, and all that is radically new that it foreshadows, remains prisoner to this humanist illusion, and thus powerless actually to complete the programme it sets out, whether the critique of political economy, the development of the science of history and the concrete dialectic, or the transition in general from thought-solutions to real solutions. Worse still, it fails to answer the central question posed by the *1844 Manuscripts*: 'How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development?';³⁹ that is, the question of why human history has had to go through class societies before communism could become possible. This colossal historical detour the 1844 theory of alienation *states*, but is unable to *explain*. In this sense, we can say that the *1844 Manuscripts* are an excellent entry to an impasse.

And that is why, pushed deeper into his thinking by the powerful historical movement which led to the revolutions of 1848, Marx, increasingly linked to Engels, had to get out of this impasse, to surpass this conception of his youth. The early stages of his thinking had led him to take up in his own way the materialist inversion of Hegel accomplished by Feuerbach, but now with increased pressure, he had to take it much further. Thus the materialist reversal of the man/religion relation led him to a materialist rethinking of the very terms of the relation, that is, to consider the man/labour relation as more fundamental. But to actually be truly materialist, this new relation could not continue as one between abstract essences, a relation still incompletely emancipated from the traps of speculation. Forced even further by historical requirements, the materialist critique is thus led to dissolve its own framework, that of abstract relations, to dissolve the very form of the categories of theoretical thought within which it developed, to make itself practically revolutionary.

39 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 281.

Toward a Historical Materialism

It is this truly decisive transition that is specified in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and developed at length in the *German Ideology*,⁴⁰ less than two years after the *1844 Manuscripts*. This time, we have definitely left philosophy, it seems, to move onto the terrain of pure science – the science of history, of economics – and of concrete political struggles. We have rejected alienation, in its anthropologically abstract form, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, notably the sixth,⁴¹ where it states that the human essence ‘is not an abstraction inherent in the individual taken separately’ but that ‘in its reality it is the ensemble of societal relations’. There can be no question from now on of representing history as the odyssey of a human essence identified with a species where the individual is the parent form in some natural way. To understand human affairs, we must abandon all discourse of *man* in favour of the concrete scientific study of the only reality that can replace the philosophical category of human essence: *societal relations*. We must renounce starting from a phenomenology of alienated labour, that is, from the life processes of a subject, to resolutely place ourselves outside ‘man’, in the objective processes of history.

This transition, where what can only be called Marxism without quotation marks is born, is seen most clearly in the centrality of a new category: while the *1844 Manuscripts* understand history on the basis of alienated labour, in *The German Ideology* it is the *division of labour*. That is, we always begin with labour (this materialist supersession of Hegel by Feuerbach is not in question), but now with labour as a *social relation*, and not as a *manifestation of self*. Thus the division of labour replaces the alienation of labour at the centre of the analysis, as we see in many passages of *The German Ideology*. From the beginning of the first part, the division of labour is presented as the source of all conflicts between ‘productive forces, the state of society and consciousness’, therefore as the true source of private property. ‘Division of labour and private property are, after all, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity.’⁴²

40 Recall that if *The German Ideology* remained in manuscript form throughout Marx and Engels’s lifetimes, it is only because they could not find a publisher. It therefore cannot be confused with a text that remained in manuscript form of the author’s own choice, as with the *1844 Manuscripts*.

41 Lenin had clearly seen its central importance, since he calls it, in ‘Karl Marx’, one of the fundamental traits that distinguishes Marxist materialism from all others (cf. Lenin 1973, LCW 21, p. 53).

42 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 46.

In the 1844 *Manuscripts*, the alienation of labour was the source of private property; now it is the division of labour. It could not be more clear that the division of labour, in *The German Ideology*, is the ‘transformed’ alienation of labour. And certainly this transformation still resembles an abstract category, an all-purpose explicative, of which Engels, re-reading the old manuscript forty years later, will say it ‘proves only how incomplete our knowledge of economic history still was at that time.’⁴³ We know how the rich categorical structure of developed historical materialism replaced the simple division of labour of 1845–6. Nevertheless, the decisive break lies in the transition from the alienation of labour to the division of labour, even if formally the second still resembles an abstract philosophical category such as the first, more than a broad categorical structure of the scientific type such as that of developed historical materialism. The alienation of labour keeps us prisoners of speculative humanism, while the division of labour places us on the terrain of concrete historical-social processes. The era of philosophy in itself is closed, that of science begins.

•••

One might think, then –, and today it is commonly believed among Marxists themselves – that in mature Marxism, especially in the huge mass of many thousands of pages that make up the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Capital* and the preparatory manuscripts, starting with the *Grundrisse*, the problematic and even the vocabulary of alienation have disappeared, while other problematics and vocabularies appear, notably those of *commodity fetishism*, which cannot fail to have major effects on the corresponding conception of religion, the starting point and ultimate goal of our study. However, as I propose to establish here, a careful reading of all these texts, without blinkers on, reveals to the contrary a major and stubborn fact: the problematic and vocabulary of alienation, without a shadow of doubt, occupy a considerable place in mature Marxism. Ignorance or denial of this fact is possible only on the basis of a deliberately selective or negligent reading of the texts. To describe, analyse, and try to understand what is meant by this vocabulary and this problematic of alienation in mature Marxism, is the problem that we must address now, and which no Marxist can avoid.

Of course, the accomplishment of this task is possible only under certain conditions. We must study and cite numerous texts, at the obvious risk of being accused of Talmudism, especially by those for whom the economy of citations

43 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 26, p. 520.

is favourable for maintaining an interpretation of Marxism contrary to the facts. We must study the whole corpus, without neglecting any important text, such as the *Grundrisse*, book IV of *Capital* or even the so-called ‘unpublished’ chapter VI. This was scarcely possible until recently, and remains partly impossible for those who do not read German,⁴⁴ so that much of what has been written in French on the subject through the end of the sixties is now quite obsolete. We must ultimately refer systematically to the original text, most often the German, on the one hand, because many translations are unreliable, and secondly because, as noted above, the sole French term, *aliénation*, corresponds, for Marx’s pen, to a complex family of terms whose exact semantic terrains are yet to be defined, so that a certain problematic or absence of a French problematic of *aliénation*, including a psychiatric connotation of the term that does not exist at all in German,⁴⁵ is actually an artefact of translation.

Does Alienation Disappear from *Capital*?

With these strictly necessary conditions, let us proceed. For the mature Marx, what is the starting point of any analysis, whether in the *Contribution* or *Capital*? The answer is clear: it is no longer alienated labour but the *commodity*. We are not beginning with an anthropological question, but an economic one. But beware: from the first analysis of the commodity, which reveals its

44 Here appeared in the 1973 edition of the present text a prescient note that the *Grundrisse* was only available in French after 1967–8 in the Anthropos edition ‘under the disputed title of “Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy” and in a “very casual translation” by Roger Dangeville; that Book IV of *Capital* was published by Costes in 1924–5 in eight volumes long exhausted “under the unjustified title *History of Economic Doctrines* and in a translation devoid of all rigor”; that chapter VI was meanwhile “available in French since 1971” in 10/18, without mentioning that Roger Dangeville’s translation was no more reliable than that of the *Grundrisse*. A distressing bibliographic situation which forced me throughout the following pages to retranslate for myself from the original many of the passages cited. Things certainly are incomparably better today: since 1980 a good translation of the *Grundrisse* by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre has been available (two volumes; Paris: Éditions sociales, 1980), reprinted in a single volume (*Manuscrits de 1857–1858 dits «Grundrisse»*); a good translation of Book IV of *Capital* published under the responsibility of Gilbert Badia (*Théories sur la plus-value*, three volumes; Paris: Éditions sociales, 1974–6); a good translation also of chapter VI (*Le chapitre VI. Manuscrits de 1863–1867*; Paris: Éditions sociales, Collection GEME, 2010). But I am nevertheless led in many cases to modify somewhat the translation cited to respect Marx’s conceptualisation more fully in my opinion than was still the case in the seventies, when Book IV of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* were published by Éditions sociales.’ [Note by LS.]

45 While basically accurate, this assertion may call today for some nuance. [Note of 2012].

dual character, exchange-value, use-value, we are led to another, rigorously connected analysis, the *equally double character of labour*: concrete labour, abstract labour. And this double nature of labour in commodity production is, in Marx's opinion, the cornerstone for constructing a critical and scientific political economy. Writing to Engels on 24 August 1867, a few days after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, he said:

The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to *all* understanding of the FACTS) *the two-fold character* of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the very *First Chapter*; 2. the treatment of *surplus-value*...⁴⁶

And he returned a few months later, as if, by taking a step back, he could outline even more clearly the overall meaning of his work:

the economists, without exception, have missed the simple fact that, if the commodity has the double character of use value and exchange value, then the labour represented in the commodity must also have a double character; thus the bare analysis of labour *sans phrase*, as in Smith, Ricardo, etc., is bound to come up against the inexplicable everywhere. This is, in fact, the whole secret of the critical conception.⁴⁷

Thus, the purely economic analysis of the commodity implies from the start an analysis of *labour*, labour that manifests a *division*, no longer in the sense of an all-purpose and still-abstract historical process, as in *The German Ideology*, but in that of a concrete duality intimately present within each commodity-producing activity; labour which finds itself *split* in its very unity into two opposites, of which one, abstract labour, the expression of market relations in the process of productive activity, imposes its law and domination on the other, concrete labour. And this split in labour, according to Marx, is what bourgeois political economy did not understand, although it is the entire secret of a critical conception.

How could we not see in these basic assertions the scientific response to the admittedly speculative and poorly posed questions at the heart of the *1844 Manuscripts*? We must start by analysing labour if we want to radically surpass the limits of a bourgeois political economy that takes capitalist relations as natural and eternal givens. And to do this, we must grasp the movement

46 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 42, p. 407.

47 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 42, p. 514.

of what comes to oppose labour as a concrete manifestation of itself, labour that has become abstractly foreign to itself in the form of capital, of private property. To these questions, the *1844 Manuscripts* respond with a still partly speculative and anthropological theory of alienation. There is nothing like this in the economic works of the fifties and sixties. Here, labour, even the preliminary analysis of which goes beyond the limitations of Ricardo himself, is no longer seen as the *self-manifestation of a subject* but as a *social productive activity*. The opposition between concrete labour and abstract labour does not lead us to follow the life of the worker in its own logic and its non-economic dimensions – that would be the object of a *psychology* – but the development of production and its relations, the sole object of political economy.

All this is true and essential. But at the same time, the fact remains that *Capital* ‘pivots’, in the words of Marx himself,⁴⁸ around an analysis of *labour*, which, through the effect of relations foreign to the activity of the subject taken by himself – market relations, capitalist relations – splits and becomes *opposed to itself*. This analysis is the key to the transition from a political economy locked within bourgeois limitations, toward a radically emancipated political economy that contributes to this emancipation. To claim that this concern to analyse labour fundamentally, central to Marx in 1844, no longer appears in *Capital*, would be to deny the obvious. The truth is rather that in twenty years of efforts, Marx fully grasped how the question addressed in 1844 was ill-defined and therefore posed in an insoluble form, and how to pose it correctly in order to resolve it. Let us not anticipate what becomes of the problematic of alienation; in any case, the continuity of purpose, through its displacements and qualitative transformations, is clear.

Let us follow some of the principal axes along which the original analysis of the contradictions of the commodity and of labour develops.

1. The essence of commodity production – and of capitalism, the full development of this form of production – is that from the use-value of the products of labour, value that is specific to their physical properties, exchange-value splits off. This is value dependent on the social-human labour-time the products require, and that comes to be crystallised in them and which is borne by

48 Marx 1976, p. 132. Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, book I, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1983, p. 47 (republished by PUF, Collection ‘Quadrige’, in 1993 with the same pagination). I retain here, for once, the translation of Joseph Roy, reviewed by Marx, and not followed by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre. Marx uses the word *Springpunkt*, which lends itself to a strong image and that seems to me well rendered by ‘pivoté’. [Note by LS.]

them as commodities. Thus, an exchange between *things* actually involves an exchange of labour, thus, an invisible relation between persons:⁴⁹

The determination of the magnitude of value by labour time is therefore a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities.⁵⁰

[...] The commodity-form, and the relation of value of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely with no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁵¹

This analysis of commodity fetishism, informed by a religious analogy, Marx obviously did not place at the very beginning of *Capital* by accident, but because it is an essential condition for the intelligibility of all that follows. It has been taken up numerous times throughout the economic works of the 1850s and 1860s, whether in the vocabulary of *fetishism* (*Fetischismus*) or in the synonymous vocabulary of *reification* (*Versachlichung*)⁵² or the 'becoming a thing' of social relations.

49 *Persons* (*Personen*) of which Marx speaks in such a context are not of course the 'subjects' of personalism or the individuals of psychology, but the *agents* of given social functions, general representatives of social classes.

50 Marx 1976, p. 168.

51 Marx 1976, p. 165.

52 According to my principle – I have *not rewritten* my text of 1973 – I retain here and elsewhere the word *reification* as the French equivalent of *Versachlichung*. But I think it is now appropriate to take account of the classic choice made by Kostas Axelos and Jacqueline Bois in their translation of Lukács (Lukács 1960, p. 110, note), reserving the word 'reification' to render *Verdinglichung* and translating *Versachlichung* by 'objectification'. Since I cannot here retain in their expired status of 1973 the translations of numerous texts of Marx cited here, it is *in the citations*, the term objectification (*chosification*) that I adopt to render *Versachlichung*. [TN: This is an example of the ability of the German language to express philosophical ideas not easily accessible in other languages. *Ding* and *Sache* both mean 'thing', but in different senses.]

We read, for example, dozens of times in the *Grundrisse* analyses like this:

In one of the forms of money – in so far as it is *medium* of exchange (not *measure* of exchange value) – it is clear to the economists that the existence of money presupposes the objectification [*Versachlichung*] of the social bond; in so far, that is, as money appears in the form of *collateral* which one individual must leave with another in order to obtain a commodity from him. Here the economists themselves say that people place in a thing (money) the faith which they do not place in each other. But why do they have faith in the thing? Obviously only because that thing is an *objectified relation* between persons; because it is objectified exchange value, and exchange value is nothing more than a mutual relation between people's productive activities. Every other collateral may serve the holder directly in that function: money serves him only as the 'dead pledge of society,' but it serves as such only because of its social (symbolic) property; and it can have a social property only because individuals have alienated [*sich entfremdet haben*] their own social relationship from themselves so that it takes the form of a thing. In the *lists of current prices*, where all values are measured in money, it seems as though this independence from persons of the social character of things is, by the activity of commerce, on this basis of alienation [*Fremdartigkeit*] where the relations of production and distribution stand opposed to the individual, to all individuals, at the same time subordinated to the individual again.⁵³

What is particularly instructive here for our purposes is that, repeated over twenty years in this text, the fetishism inherent in market relations, the importance of which in mature Marxism no-one contests, is naturally thought and expressed by Marx not only in the vocabulary of reification (the becoming-a-thing of relations between people), but in that of alienation: the relations between people become *foreign to them* in the form of the thing. How can we then argue that in *Capital* fetishism is substituted for alienation?

53 Marx 1973, p. 160.

When Human Activity Becomes a 'Foreign Power'

But perhaps we believe that the equivalence we just saw figures only in the *Grundrisse*, in a manuscript that Marx never published? It would be a very bad reading of *Capital* to imagine that. In truth, the vocabulary of alienation is used a hundred times to express the major and multiform fact of the reification of social relations in the world of commodity production in capitalist society. Some examples: Chapter XXIV of Book III is entitled 'Alienation [*Veräusserlichung*] of capitalist relations in interest-bearing capital'.⁵⁴ This chapter begins:

In interest-bearing capital, the capital relationship reaches its most externalised [*äusserlichste*] and most fetishised [*fetischartigste*] form.⁵⁵

Moreover, dealing with capitalist profit, Marx writes that

this state, separated from its inner essence by a mass of invisible intermediate links, reaches an even more externalised [*veräusserlichste*] form, or rather the form of absolute externalisation [*Veräusserlichung*], in interest-bearing capital [...] the form in which capital is antecedent to its own reproduction process...⁵⁶

Elsewhere, in the short but very important chapter of Book III of *Capital* entitled, 'The Trinitarian formula', in which he analyses the income (rent, profit, wages) and its source, he notes:

The division of profit into profit of enterprise and interest [...] completes the autonomisation of the form of surplus-value, the ossification of its form as against its substance, its essence.⁵⁷

Then, turning to the case of ground-rent, he adds:

54 In Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, book III, Volume 2, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1970, p. 55. This title is translated less faithfully with respect to the text.

55 Marx 1981, p. 515.

56 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 487.

57 Marx 1981, p. 968.

Since, in this case, one part of the surplus-value seems directly bound up not with social relations but rather with a natural element, the earth, the form of mutual alienation and ossification is complete [*der Entfremdung und Verknöcherung ... gegeneinander*]. [...] It is the great merit of classical economics to have dissolved this false appearance and deception, this autonomisation and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another, this personification of things and reification of the relations of production, this religion of everyday life.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, he continues, even the best bourgeois economists 'remain more or less trapped in the world of illusion their criticism had dissolved' of 'estranged [*entfremdeten*] and irrational forms'⁵⁹ in which the agents of capitalist production move every day. Thus, without a doubt, the theme of *commodity fetishism*, central to the thought of the most mature Marx, is inseparable from the idea of an *alienation* understood, from this point of view, both as a separation and a sclerosis of social forms in relation to their content, and more particularly as a reification of relations between people. In addition, and quite remarkably, this fetishised–reified–alienated form of social relations constantly tends, as in 1844, although the starting point is quite different, to evoke the *religious analogy*.

2. But there is much more. This ensemble of processes by which reified social forms become autonomised and sclerotised, whose essence becomes unrecognisable, is not only a movement of alienation in the sense of an externalisation (*Veräußerlichung*): these *externalised* forms become a *foreign power* (*fremde Macht*) which *in turn* dominates, enslaving individuals, and thus alienates them in another sense of the term. With the notion of social relations having become a foreign power, we are at the very heart of *Capital*. Moreover, here is the 'secret of originary [*ursprünglich*] accumulation': for capitalism to be established, it is necessary that a wage worker

has nothing but his personal strength, labour in the state of power, while all external conditions required to give substance to this power, and material and instruments necessary for the effective performance of labour, the power to dispose of substances indispensable to maintain the labour force and its conversion into productive motion, all this is on the other side. At the basis of the capitalist system is the complete separation of the producer from the means of production. This separation reproduces

58 Marx 1981, pp. 968–9.

59 Marx 1981, p. 969.

on a progressive scale what the capitalist system has once established; but like that form the basis of this, it cannot be established without it.⁶⁰

This type of analysis finds noteworthy expressions in the *Grundrisse*, for example this passage:

The fact that in the development of the productive powers of labour the objective conditions of labour, objectified labour, must grow relative to living labour – this is actually a tautological statement, for what else does the growing productive power of labour mean than that less immediate labour is required to create a greater product, and that therefore social wealth expresses itself more and more in the conditions of labour created by labour itself? – this fact appears from the standpoint of capital not in such a way that one of the moments of social activity – objective labour – becomes the ever more powerful body of the other moment, of subjective, living labour, but rather – and this is important for wage labour – that the objective conditions of labour assume an ever more colossal independence, represented by its very extent, opposite living labour, and that social wealth confronts labour in more powerful portions as an alien and dominant power [*als fremde und beherrschende Macht*]. The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being *objectified*, but on the state of being *alienated*, dispossessed, sold [*Entfremdet-, Entäussert-, Veräussertsein*]; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social labour itself erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not to the worker [*das Nicht-dem-Arbeiter-gehören*], but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital. To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the immediate labour capacity – that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession [*Prozess der Entäusserrung*] from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the standpoint of capital – to that extent, this twisting and inversion [*Verdrehung und Verkehrung*] is a *real* [phenomenon], not a merely *supposed one* existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists.⁶¹

60 Karl Marx, *Capital*, book 1, translated by Joseph Roy, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1950, Volume 3, pp. 154 and 155. Reviewed by Marx, this text differs significantly from the one in the fourth German edition, the basis of the edition of the book in a volume cited earlier.

61 Marx 1973, p. 831.

‘This universal objectification’, we read in another passage of the *Grundrisse*, ‘appears as total alienation [*als total Entfremdung*].’⁶²

These are crucial texts, we must surely agree, for those hoping to achieve an objective view of the problem of alienation in mature Marxism. For what is confirmed here is not only the undisputed and frequent presence of the vocabulary of alienation (*Entäußerung*, *Entfremdung*, etc.) in the Marx of *Capital*, which we could still deny or at least ignore here or there. But it is much more than a matter of vocabulary: far from referring solely to commodity fetishism and sclerotic social forms, it refers to the historical-social processes of despoliation *of people themselves*; that we are no longer dealing with a residual vocabulary still linked to the narrowly economic use of the term (the ‘alienation’ of a product, *Veräußerung*), but a conception of alienation as the profound essence of a crucial phase of history, that is, as the *life of human individuals*. And here again, it is easy to show that this does not appear only in the *Grundrisse*, but also in *Capital*, and what’s more, in the most basic chapters of *Capital*. Take, for example, at the culmination of Book I, the exposition of the general law of capitalist accumulation, original text in hand. We read

that within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man [*einen Teilmenschen*], they degrade him to the level of an appendage [*Anhängsel*] of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment [*Qual*]; they alienate from him [*ihm entfremden*] the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power ...⁶³

62 Marx 1973, p. 488.

63 Marx 1976, p. 799. In 1973, I quoted this text in the Roy translation, where the key verb *entfremden ihm*, as I noted in a footnote, disappears under the banalising term ‘opposing them’. Today, I can no longer follow the excellent translation by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, who in turn avoids the concept of alienation by writing: ‘it deprives him by transferring to another the intellectual potentialities of the labour process’. Thus, an interpretative reading of Marx, clearly contradicted by the facts, according to which the concept of alienation was no longer registered by Marx at the time when he worked on *Capital*, gets the help of translations where its occurrences are more or less often erased. It is in opposition to this retraction that the present study was written, while at the time the Althusserian thesis that alienation ‘disappears’ in *Capital* was the law (cf. especially Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, Paris: François Maspero, 1965, p. 204; *Réponse à John Lewis*, Paris: François Maspero, 1973, p. 54). I added that to my knowledge no translation of a major passage just quoted is at the level of his exceptional *vehemence*.

Thus at the heart of the general law of capitalist accumulation, one of the summits of Marx's *scientific* work, we find the category of alienation (*Entfremdung*) which refers directly to the *life* of the worker, in his *despoliation as a human being* (*Teilmensch*). Similarly, in Book III, Marx wrote that the capitalist relation

actually does conceal the inner connection in the state of complete indifference, externality and alienation [*Äusserlichkeit und Entfremdung*] in which it places the worker vis-à-vis the conditions of realisation of his own labour.

And he adds that to the general system of social labour, the worker can only behave as to a 'power that is alien to him [*fremde Macht*]', 'something totally foreign [*etwas durchaus fremdes*]'.⁶⁴ Even in the 'unpublished' Chapter VI, he writes that what imprints on money and the commodity,

what stamps money or commodities as *capital* from the outset, even before they have been really transformed into *capital*, is neither their money nature nor their commodity nature, nor the material use value of these commodities as means of production of subsistence, but the circumstance that this money and this commodity, these means of production and these means of subsistence confront *labour-power*, stripped of all material wealth, as autonomous powers, personified in their owners. The objective conditions essential to the realization of labour are *alienated* from the worker and become manifest as *fetishes* endowed with a will and a soul of their own. *Commodities*, in short, appear as the purchasers of *persons*.⁶⁵

A 'Necessary Transition'

Thus the circle closes: reification, the becoming-a-thing of relations between people, creates a personification of these alienated things, because capital implies the capitalist, and the domination of people by reified foreign powers takes the form of the domination by one class of people, the capitalist class, over the workers, who are in turn converted into mere things. This is a *double alienation* that capitalism reproduces on an ever-increasing scale.

3. Let us go further still. Since scientific analysis itself establishes and reveals the nature of the processes of what we can rightly call *capitalist alienation*, can

64 Marx 1981, p. 178.

65 Marx 1976, p. 1003.

we not also expect an equally scientific answer to the question that remained unanswered in 1844, and was then put in these terms: ‘How is this alienation based in the essence of human development?’ Formulated and thought in terms of a speculative humanism, starting from a still abstract-philosophical, timeless human essence, how could this *historical* question find a *historical* answer? On the other hand, since the human essence is no longer understood as an abstraction inherent in each individual, albeit ‘generic’, but as the *ensemble of social relations*, thus as a purely historical and concrete reality, it is not hard to see why the (fundamental) question of 1844 would not admit of a ‘transformed’ scientific expression such as: what internal necessity (if it exists), in the vast process of human history, does the phase of capitalist alienation serve? Not only is this transformed question not rejected by Marx in his work of the 1850s and 1860s, but in addressing it he wrote some of the most profound pages one could hope to read, and which unfortunately do not seem to have been appreciated for their immense value.

First let us mention some remarkable texts of the *Grundrisse*. At the end of his long analysis of pre-capitalist forms, Marx rises to a broader view:

It will be shown later that the *most extreme form of alienation* [*die Form der äusserste Entfremdung*], wherein labour appears in the relation of capital and wage labour, and labour, productive activity appears in relation to its own conditions and its own product, is a necessary point of transition – and therefore already contains in *itself*, in a still only inverted form, turned on its head, the dissolution of all *limited presuppositions of production*, and moreover creates and produces the unconditional presuppositions of production, and therewith the full material conditions for the total, universal development of the productive forces of the individual.⁶⁶

After the passage quoted above on the inversion and reversal of objectification in alienation in capitalist relations, Marx adds:

But obviously this process of inversion is a merely *historical* necessity, a necessity for the development of the forces of production solely from a specific historic point of departure, or basis, but in no way an *absolute* necessity of production; rather, a vanishing one, and the result and the inherent purpose of this process is to suspend this basis itself, together with this form of the process. The bourgeois economists are so much cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic

66 Marx 1973, p. 514.

stage of social development that the necessity of the *objectification* [*Vergegenständlichung*] of the powers of social labour appears to them as inseparable from the necessity of their *alienation* [*Entfremdung*] vis-à-vis living labour. But with the suspension [*Aufhebung*] of the *immediate* character of living labour, as merely *individual* [*einzelner*], or as general merely internally or merely externally, with the positing of the activity of individuals as immediately general or *social* activity, the objective moments of production are stripped of this form of alienation [*Entfremdung*]; they are thereby posited as property, as the organic social body within which the individuals reproduce themselves as individuals, but as social individuals. The conditions which allow them to exist in this way in the reproduction of their life, in their productive life's process, have been posited only by the historic economic process itself; both the objective and the subjective conditions, which are only the two distinct forms of the same conditions.⁶⁷

Still elsewhere we find these synthetic views on the place and role of capitalist alienation in the historical process as a whole:

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third.⁶⁸

Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal relations, are hence also subordinated to their communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible presupposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation [*Entfremdung*] of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities. In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness,

67 Marx 1973, pp. 831–2.

68 Marx 1973, p. 158.

or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself. It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill.⁶⁹

These texts, which still appear new and deeply suggestive, contain a clear answer to the question posed earlier, an answer we can summarise as follows: in the early stages of historical development, individuals and social relations still form a concrete unity on the basis of natural conditions which have been only slightly transformed, so that the narrowness of the development of individuals and the narrowness of their relations are mutually reinforcing, maintaining in the history of humanity certain traits of natural history, notably slowness, but not prohibiting to individuals a certain plenitude within the strict natural and social limits. However, the development of trade, and therefore of commodity production, gradually causes the direct relationship to break up by introducing, in the form of money, an element of abstract universality that dissolves the concrete relations, and whose reproduction, on an increasing scale in capitalism, becomes an end in itself. This universality plays a doubly revolutionary historic role: first, it separates from individuals the conditions of their production and development, their social relations, transforming them into an increasingly colossal foreign power that crushes them, but on the other hand, it drives the unlimited development of productive forces, of relations and of all forms of social wealth, and through the complete alienation of the mass of individuals, it creates in the proletariat a universal form of individuality.

This inherently antagonistic phase of history is reproduced on an ever larger scale to the point where the anachronism of the two sides of alienation bursts: the private appropriation of reified social wealth on the one hand, the total dispossession of individuals on the other – and where therefore the necessity has matured on a *social*, no longer natural, basis, for the re-unification of the separated elements that have only been able to develop freely in their separation.

69 Marx 1973, p. 162. In the 1973 version of this study, all quotes from the *Grundrisse* were retranslated by me from the original text, and I had to point out repeatedly in notes that the translation available, by Roger Dangeville, published in *Anthropos* in 1967–8, was ‘full of nonsense’. [note by LS.]

Alienation and the Movement of History as a Whole

How could we not see it? What appears as the deepest and most general dialectic of the historical development of humanity is an *immense movement of the negation of the negation*, where the still embryonic natural unity must be *temporarily dissolved* for each of its elements to go through a universal development,⁷⁰ a development which in turn creates the necessary conditions for the *return to the unity on a higher plane*. It is not at all by accident that Marx, in the conclusion to Book I of *Capital*, expressly refers to the dialectical category of the negation of the negation, not of course in the Hegelian sense of a return to a speculative unity in the Idea, but in the entirely materialist sense of the suppression of social antagonisms in history. This category grasps the most general sense of the necessary movement, which, through the phase of capitalist alienation, leads to the expropriation of the expropriators, to communism.⁷¹ And once again, we see that the analyses of alienation and de-alienation are found not only in the *Grundrisse*, but in *Capital* itself.⁷² In Book IV, there are many developments that repeat exactly the analyses we have just discussed. For example:

The original unity between the worker and the conditions of labour //abstracting from slavery, where the labourer himself belongs to the objective conditions of labour// has two main forms: the Asiatic communal system (primitive communism) and small-scale agriculture based on the family (and linked with domestic industry) IN ONE OR THE OTHER FORM. Both are embryonic forms and both are equally unfitted to develop labour as social labour and the productive power of social labour. Hence the necessity for the separation, for the rupture, for the antithesis of labour and property (by which property in the conditions of production is to be understood). The most extreme form of this rupture, and the one in which the PRODUCTIVE FORCES OF SOCIAL LABOUR

70 That capitalism as a whole has thus responded to a need for historical development and even ripening conditions for the transition to socialism does not mean, naturally, that *now* a non-capitalist path of development could advantageously fill the same role for poorly-developed countries.

71 Marx 1976, p. 929.

72 The fact that in Book I of *Capital*, and even more so in the *Contribution* of 1859, due to the strict boundaries of his scientific object, Marx prohibits much more than in his drafts addressing tangentially issues of a more general nature has undoubtedly contributed – wrongly – to our failure to recognise many dimensions of the thought of the most mature Marx. All the more reason to restore them, beginning with a comprehensive, and not arbitrarily selective, consideration of the texts.

ARE also MOST POWERFULLY DEVELOPED, is capital. The original unity can be re-established only on the material foundation which capital creates and by means of the revolutions which, in the process of this creation, the working class and THE WHOLE SOCIETY UNDERGO.⁷³

Elsewhere, defending Ricardo, partisan of production for production, against the sentimental critiques of Sismondi, for whom production must be subordinated to the good of the individual, Marx demonstrates that the historical justification of capitalism is precisely this universal development of productive forces taken as an end in itself, and that what economists such as Sismondi did not understand is that:

although at first the development of the capacities of the human species [*der Gattung Mensch*] takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and whole human classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed...⁷⁴

This text clearly shows also that the overall conception of historical development at which Marx arrived in *Capital* includes a concept of alienation not only as a necessary moment in the immense process of the negation of the negation, but also as the fundamental unity of social *and individual aspects* of this process; the first constitutes the real basis of the second. No error would be more impoverishing, and more contrary to Marx's visible efforts, than to separate and oppose the dialectic of forces and relations of production, considered as the legitimate scientific object, and the dialectic of individual life, rejected as a philosophico-humanist chimera. Marx's entire analysis opposes this discriminatory reading, and is in line with the affirmation, given in a letter to Annenkov of December 1846, of the quintessence of the theses of *The German Ideology*: 'the social history of man is never anything else than the history of his individual development...';⁷⁵ an affirmation which Engels echoed forty years later in his *Ludwig Feuerbach* by writing that for 'The cult of abstract man, which formed the kernel of Feuerbach's new religion', historical materialism substituted 'the science of real men and of their historical development'.⁷⁶

73 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 33, p. 340.

74 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 31, p. 348.

75 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 38, p. 96.

76 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 26, p. 381.

All this is fully coherent in light of the sixth thesis on Feuerbach: if the reality of the human essence is constituted by the ensemble of social relations, alienation can be a reality only as a process that affects social relations, but precisely for this reason it also affects the objective conditions of production and reproduction of individuals, of the historico-social forms of individuality that determine the basis of their existence. And that is why *Capital* finds, on a strictly scientific basis, whenever the analysis is raised to a general point of view, the problematic of alienation in the lives of individuals inextricably linked with that of the contradictions between the forces and relations of production.

Looking Back on Religious Alienation

4. This is also why the reference to religion remains *constant* in the economic works of maturity, demonstrating that the problematic of alienation has not been lost from sight. Of course, this is first of all the analysis of the inherent fetishism of commodity production, the analysis of the reification of the relationship between persons that finds its basis in the analysis of religion, and above all in the famous pages of the first chapter of Book I of *Capital*:

For a society of commodity producers, whose general social relation of production consists in the fact that they treat their products as commodities, hence as values, and in this material [*sachlich*] form bring their individual, private labour into relation with each other as homogenous human labour, Christianity, with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly, in its bourgeois development, i.e. in Protestantism, Deism etc., is the most fitting form of religion. [...] The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Marx 1976, pp. 172–3. I retain here, for once, the Roy translation, in order to keep some formulations presumably due to corrections added by Marx. [Note by L.S.]

This is a theme frequently repeated throughout *Capital*, even by brief allusions, but nevertheless far from lacking in interest, such as the following:

Thus the nature of surplus value, the essence of capital and the character of capitalist production are not only completely obliterated in these two forms of surplus value, they are turned into their opposites. But even in so far as the character and form of capital are complete [it is] nonsensical [if] presented without any intermediate links and expressed as the subjectification of objects, the objectification of subjects, as the reversal of cause and effect, the religious quid pro quo, the pure form of capital expressed in the formula $M-M'$. The ossification of relations, their presentation as the relation of men to things having a definite social character is here likewise brought out in quite a different manner from that of the simple mystification of commodities and the more complicated mystification of money. The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete.⁷⁸

Elsewhere are explicit analogies like this:

Whereas the classical, and consequently the critical, economists are exercised by the form of alienation [*Entfremdung*] and seek to eliminate it by analysis, the vulgar economists, on the other hand, feel completely at home precisely with the alienated form in which the different parts of value confront one another; just as a scholastic is familiar with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, so are the vulgar economists with land–rent, capital–interest, and labour–wages.⁷⁹

But, most noteworthy, and already perceptible in the texts we have just read, the analysis or religious analogy is not only addressed by commodity fetishism, but by *all* aspects of the analysis of alienation, which were surveyed above, including those concerning alienation of individuals and the vast movement of the negation of the negation in the history of humanity. In other words, religion was in no way conceived by Marx, when he wrote *Capital*, as a simple effect of the structure of commodity fetishism – the objective opacification of social relations – but at the same time as the ideological reflection of the historical movement of alienation that stands before individuals with the products of their social activity in the form of dominating foreign powers. Again,

78 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 494.

79 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 502.

many texts could be cited, among which we will mention only two. Analysing once more in the *Grundrisse* the historical tendency of capitalism, Marx writes:

The barrier to *capital* [*Schranke*] is that this entire development proceeds in a contradictory [*gegensätzlich*] way, and that the working-out of the productive forces, of general wealth etc., knowledge etc., appears in such a way that the working individual *alienates* himself [*sich selbst entäusert*]; relates to the conditions brought out of him by his labour as those not of his *own* but of an *alien wealth* and of his own poverty. But this antithetical form is itself fleeting, and produces the real conditions of its own suspension [*Aufhebung*]. The result is: the tendentially and potentially general development of the forces of production – of wealth as such – as a basis; likewise, the universality of intercourse, hence the world market as a basis. The basis as the possibility of the universal development of the individual, and the real development of the individuals from this basis as a constant suspension of its *barrier*, which is recognised as a barrier, not taken for a *sacred limit*. Not an ideal or imagined universality of the individual, but the universality of his real and ideal relations. Hence also the grasping of his own history as a *process*, and the recognition of nature (equally present as practical power over nature) as his real body. The process of development itself posited and known as the presupposition of the same.⁸⁰

In this text, a remarkable development of the eighth thesis on Feuerbach ('All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory toward mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.'),⁸¹ we see quite clearly that for Marx the basis of religion does not at all boil down to commodity fetishism, but is identified with all the barriers which individuals confront in their relations with each other and with nature. Capitalist alienation ossifies, so that only the collective conquest by individuals of control over these natural and social relations will transcend these 'sacred boundaries'.

In a passage in the 'unpublished' Chapter VI of *Capital*, Marx develops the analysis of religion even further in relation to the movement of the negation of the negation that affects humanity's historical development:

80 Marx 1973, pp. 541–2.

81 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 5.

Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over living labour, of the product over the producer. For the commodities that become the instruments of rule over the workers (merely as the instruments of the rule of *capital* itself) are mere consequences of the process of production; they are its products. Thus at the level of material, of the 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*. Viewed *historically* this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such, i.e. the relentless productive forces of social labour, which alone can form the material base of a free human society, could not possibly be created by force at the expense of the majority. This antagonistic stage cannot be avoided, any more than it is possible for man to avoid the stage in which his spiritual energies are given a religious definition as powers independent of himself. What we are confronted with here is the *alienation* [*Entfremdung*] of man from his own labour.⁸²

What Marx boldly suggests here is not only the idea of the historically transitory necessity of religion, logically linked to that of the historically transitory necessity of economic alienation, but still more the idea that religion has played in part a positive ideological role in developing the autonomy of human spiritual forces. It has pushed us to conceive these forces, in an inverted and mystified form, in their objective universality. It is an extremely fruitful view – also in line with the first thesis on Feuerbach, and with his remark on the partially positive role of philosophical idealism – which helps to counter the naively unilateral understanding of the opposition between materialism and religion seen through three centuries of bourgeois thought.

It is certainly not a question of minimising the great importance of the major achievements of materialistic thought, such as Darwinism, or to forget the struggles against stupidity it has led. But it is possible to think, from the point of view of historical materialism, that in the exceptionally tenacious reluctance of religious thought to accept biologism or psychologism, i.e. bourgeois materialism as a satisfactory conception of humanity, all was not unreasonable, in that the affirmation of a *transcendent human essence* reflected, in mystifying form, the *social exteriority* of the real human essence in relation to individuals, first identified in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach. The alienated reflection of real alienation, and precisely for this reason historically

82 Marx 1976, p. 990.

inevitable – this is ultimately the conception of religion that Marx proposes in his maturity, on the basis of his conceptions of economics.

A Central Category for Thinking History

What conclusions have we arrived at?

1. Contrary to a widespread assertion, the vocabulary of alienation is massively present in the mature works of Marx, not marginally, but in a central position. We need merely count the hundreds of occurrences of the most characteristic terms: *entäussert*, *Entäusserung*; *entfremdet*, *Entfremdung*. As for the specific meaning of each of the terms that make up the vocabulary of alienation, I believe it is possible to propose, with caution because it has to do with the most complex of questions, the following general hypothesis. The words of the lexical family *ausser* ('outside'), characterised by this basic meaning, are most often used by Marx to designate the simple divestiture of a good by the act of sale (as a general rule: *Veräusserung*) or to note the most fundamental process of *becoming external*, as a process separating, even opposing, *things*, or relations and forms as they take on the appearance of things. This is one aspect of the mature conception of alienation: with the vocabulary of *Entäusserung*, we are essentially on the terrain of reification, the autonomisation and sclerosis of forms in relation to their essence, of fetishism. It is typical in this regard that in the *Contribution* where there is still no question of the movement of goods and money, we find only the vocabulary of *Ver-* and *Entäusserung*.

The words of the lexical family *fremd* ('foreign'), marked also by this basic meaning, or by the presence in the immediate context of the word *fremd* itself (for example in the constant expression *fremde Arbeit*, 'work of others') introduce another dimension of alienation: that of the relationship between *persons*, social individuals, that covers also the relations between *classes*. With the vocabulary of *Entfremdung* we are on the terrain of divestiture, disenfranchisement, the enslavement of people by the products of their activity that has become a foreign power, and taken the form of the domination of an exploiting class. We capture alive the link, both semantic and theoretical, between *fremd* and *Entfremdung*, which characterises the process of alienation as it affects people, in typical sentences such as this:

[...] objectified [*objektivierte*] labour, become independent as value appeared on all sides as the *product of alien labour* [*Produkt fremder Arbeit*], the *alienated product* [*das Produkt entfremdete*] of labour itself.⁸³

83 Marx 1973, p. 638.

or even in formulae that acquire the value of definitions, as in this passage from Book IV of *Capital* where capital is posited ‘as forces – personified in the capitalist – which are alienated from labour [*der Arbeit entfremdete*] and dominate it’.⁸⁴

Certainly, the vocabulary of alienation in Marx is neither very rigorous nor always clear. Its variability may simply be an index of a desire for varying frequently repeated terminology. But for those who know the texts, there is no possible doubt about the general tendency: alienation, in the mature Marx, is both the reifying externalisation of *Entäusserung*, and the personifying externalisation of *Entfremdung*. What is more, while the dominant term in Hegel is *Entäusserung*,⁸⁵ in Marx *Entfremdung* becomes the main term, by its frequency, and its scope, to the point that, when we note an exception to the respective use of the two terms that we need to explain, it is most often in favour of *Entfremdung*. For example in the following case when it comes to the mystifying trinity, ground-rent, interest-capital, wage-labour:

precisely in the estranged form of appearance [*entfremdete Erscheinungsform*] of economic relations ... vulgar economics feels completely at home.⁸⁶

We expect rather *entäußerte* here, but this seems to be the same idea, expressed two pages earlier, of the personification of the alienated products of labour. Is not this displacement of vocabulary from Hegel to Marx a reflection of the transition from an idealist concept of alienation as autonomisation of moments of the Idea, to a materialist conception of alienation as antagonism in history between *persons*, and through them between *classes*? In any case, we see how distorted is the belief that the idea of alienated labour in the 1844 *Manuscripts* becomes only commodity fetishism in *Capital*.

In truth, the reification of relations between people is inseparable from the personification of the relations between things, and fetishism is only one aspect of the multifaceted process of alienation. That is why also the diversity of German vocabulary encountered, that defies exact French [or indeed English – cs] translation, does not prevent us from speaking about *a* category of alienation in mature Marxism, as long as this single word is not taken in a narrow and abstract way. At its core, alienation is the transitory historical

84 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 406.

85 As already noted by Jean Hyppolite; cf. his translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1941, p. 316).

86 Marx 1981, p. 956.

movement by which the objective products of human social activity attain universal development at the price of a split (*Ent-äusserung, Ent-fremdung, Ent-leerung*, etc.) from the individuals who are the source, a split that confers on these social products, conditions, relations, etc., the character not only of unrecognisable things, but even more, of dominant and overwhelming powers. The theoretical elaboration of this category of alienation on a proven historical basis is one of the central achievements of the mature Marx.

2. Between the conception of alienation that we find in the 1844 *Manuscripts* and that in *Capital*, there is both continuity and rupture. The continuity is obvious, and it is hardly necessary to dwell upon it. It manifests itself even on points where the schema of 1844 was undoubtedly equivocal, if not confusing. Thus, in 1844, Marx frequently relates the analysis of this or that aspect of alienation to *man*, so both to the capitalist and the worker. He even remarks that, 'everything which appears in the worker as an activity of alienation, of estrangement, appears in the non-worker as a state of alienation, of estrangement'.⁸⁷ It is an undeniable truth that the illusions inherent in commodity fetishism tend to mystify all classes. But how can we not see the danger of sliding toward an anthropological idealism, if not an ethical socialism 'above classes'? This is what Engels indicates in a self-critical way in his preface to the 1892 German edition of his 1845 book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

Thus great stress is laid on the dictum that Communism is not a mere party doctrine of the working class, but a theory compassing the emancipation of society at large, including the capitalist class, from its present narrow conditions. This is true enough in the abstract, but absolutely useless, and sometimes worse, in practice. [...] And to-day, the very people who, from the 'impartiality' of their superior standpoint, preach to the workers a Socialism soaring high above their class interests and class struggles, and tending to reconcile in a higher humanity the interests of both the contending classes – these people are either neophytes, who have still to learn a great deal, or they are the worst enemies of the workers – wolves in sheep's clothing.⁸⁸

While Marx had already expressed this idea with Engels in the *Manifesto*, the fact remains that in the 'unpublished' Chapter VI of Book I of *Capital*, Marx develops the 1844 analysis further:

87 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 282.

88 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 27, pp. 261–2. (This is actually from the 1892 Preface.)

What we are confronted by here is the *Alienation* [*Entfremdung*] of man from his own labour. To that extent the worker stands on a higher plane than the capitalist from the outset, since the latter has his roots in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it whereas right from the start the worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel and experiences it as a process of enslavement.⁸⁹

And further, he speaks of the self-valorisation of capital in which

the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationships of capitalism as his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in quite a different manner.⁹⁰

But if there is continuity in the concern, thematic and terminological, there is much more discontinuity in the deep theoretical content of the two concepts of alienation. At the time of the *1844 Manuscripts*, alienation signified a rejection of the limits of political economy; at the time of *Capital*, it is based entirely on economic analysis. In the first case, it was presented as an explication of class antagonism and the dialectic of history; in the second it is class antagonism and the dialectic of history fully realised. In the first case, it was fundamentally a process of the generic activity of individuals externalising themselves in social relations; in the second, it is a process of social relations extending to the interior of the life of individuals. In short, in 1844, the individual psychological form of alienation was taken as the general matrix of all its historico-social forms; at the time of *Capital*, it is the historical and social forms that allow us to understand, if we pursue the analysis onto this terrain, individual psychological forms.

In other words, between these two periods of Marx's thought there has been a fundamental *reversal*, the same as pronounced by the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, between a human essence still represented as belonging to individuality ('generic activity'), thus anthropological in the abstract sense ('man'), and a 'human essence' whose entire reality is constituted by social relations, which is studied, therefore, in terms of historical science. In this second point of view, to speak of alienation is not to say that 'man' has lost 'his' 'essence' – as others would say he lost 'his' 'soul' – but that people have lost their immediate relationship with the objective conditions of their activity and their individual development, *thus* creating their alienation within their individual existence.

89 Marx 1976, p. 990.

90 Marx 1976, p. 990.

Therefore, many assertions and analyses of 1844 *preserve their meaning* in this new perspective, but it is in a *transformed sense*, that we can grasp correctly (without relapsing into speculative mystifications) *only* by the detour of economic and more broadly, historical science. The anthropological scope of mature Marxism is no less than in 1844, but it is now based entirely on historical materialism.

The Great Meaning of the Idea of Alienation in Marx

This is why any underestimation of the rupture that intervened between 1844 and the time of *Capital*, any tendency to ‘economise’ the detour it establishes, leads us back to before Marxism. This is typically the approach initiated by Garaudy in the early sixties, and very significantly, initiated *on this point*.⁹¹ To imagine that when Marx brilliantly develops, in the *1844 Manuscripts*, the idea that the more wealth the worker creates, the more he is impoverished, ‘the first formulations of the law of absolute impoverishment derived from his analysis of alienation’ (when on the contrary, Marx expressly posited this impoverishment as a fact from which we should *begin*),⁹² to imagine that the law of impoverishment in *Capital* ‘is the expression of the Marxist conception of man, of his humanism’,⁹³ is to undo the decisive reversal of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, to subordinate the new scientific analyses to philosophical abstraction, therefore to the class point of view of an abstract man through which bourgeois ideology rushes back in. A valuable lesson for Marxists.

But this lesson has nothing to do with the rejection of the category of alienation, a rejection that would require great liberties taken with the text, and therefore, an unacceptable distortion of Marxism. And above all, a deformation of the very way Marx and Engels, in 1845–6, critiqued their ‘earlier philosophical consciousness’,⁹⁴ according to Engels’s formula in the foreword to his *Ludwig Feuerbach*. I mentioned earlier the harsh judgments in *The German Ideology* and the *Manifesto* regarding theoretical and political mystification that accompanies the speculative notion of alienation. These judgments remain, and they forbid us from confusing the *1844 Manuscripts* with the

91 Cf. his article in the January 1961 issue of *Cahiers du Communisme* devoted to research on poverty.

92 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, pp. 271–2.

93 Garaudy 1961, p. 13.

94 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 26, p. 519.

theses of mature Marxism. But what exactly do they propose? Let us re-read *The German Ideology*:

[...] the division of labour offers us the first example of the fact that, as long as man remains in naturally evolved society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him [*ihm zu einer fremden gegenüberstehenden Macht*], which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. [...] This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into a material power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now. [...] This 'estrangement [*Entfremdung*]' (to use a term which will be comprehensible to the philosophers) can, of course, only be abolished given two practical premises...⁹⁵

What does this say? That alienation is a false concept that we have to discard? Completely to the contrary, it shows that it concerns 'a central moment of historical development to this day'. What is in question here is not the *practical historical reality* of alienation, but the opposite – the obscuring of this reality in a philosophico-speculative category of alienation that returns us to 'self-consciousness' and other idealistic nonsense. *Thus, at this crucial point of the formation of Marxism, we are witnessing, not the rejection of the rational kernel of alienation, but the completion of its materialist reversal.* This is not an 'interpretation': it appears much later in *The German Ideology* in a passage (apparently little noticed) that states it positively:

[...] We see already here that his [Max Stirner's] only concern is to present all actual relations, [and also] actual individuals, [as alienated] (to retain this philosophical [expression] for the time being), to [transform] them into the wholly [abstract] phrase of alienation. Thus [instead] of the task of describing [actual] individuals in their [actual] alienation and in the empirical relations of this alienation, [purely empirical] relations, the same happens here – the setting forth is replaced by the [mere idea] of alienation, of [the Alien], of the Holy.⁹⁶

95 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, pp. 47–8.

96 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 282.

To progress from the idealist philosophical language of alienation to the concrete historical study of real alienation and its empirical conditions: this is the path that *The German Ideology* sets out unambiguously. And it is precisely on this path that the *Manifesto* advances: Marx and Engels unceremoniously unmask the bourgeois basis of the 'socialist' language of alienation, but at the same time they write:

In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society, accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.

In bourgeois society, therefore, the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.

And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois, abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at.⁹⁷

This is precisely the outline of all the analyses of capitalist alienation developed in the economic works of the 1850s and 1860s.

What is this notion of alienation found at the centre of mature Marxism? It is not an economic concept – although it functions on the terrain of economic analysis –, or a concept of social psychology – although it directly concerns the forms of individuality –, nor even a concept of historical science – although it refers to a fundamental historical process. More generally, it is not a concept pertaining to a science or even several sciences –, which is not to say it lacks scientific consistency. It is a concept that grasps the *profound unity* of the most diverse processes operating on the terrain of the most varied human sciences. It is a *fundamental category of historical materialism*, that is, of the most general theoretical basis of the sciences whose object is constituted by one or another aspect of human activity and its historical development. In other words, it is a *philosophical category*, in the fundamentally new sense that mature Marxism has conferred on philosophy.

What does this mean? First, that without being a scientific concept in the sense that it indicates adherence to the conceptual apparatus of a particular science (alienation is not a concept of the same *nature* as exchange value, surplus value or rate of profit), it is a concept of *scientific consistency*, based solely

97 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, p. 499.

on scientific evidence and returning there. But it is a concept of another *order of generality*, more advanced than that where one or another particular science is established on the terrain that alienation reflects. This extreme generality corresponds to an abstraction that is itself extreme: alienation is ultimately nothing but the *most general form of human history* and of the development of individuals in the epoch of commodity production and, specifically, of capitalism. It is a *fundamental figure of the dialectic*: the development of the antagonistic contradiction through the negation of the negation, as manifested *in history*; it is the *antagonistic form* temporarily taken by the constant cyclical process of objectification – subjective re-appropriation, that forms the basis of all human activity. This *philosophical generality*, in the sense that philosophy includes the *theoretical basis* of the scientific conception of the natural and social world, presupposes, in order to be understood, the concrete scientific knowledge that constitutes its real content. Hence the profound mistake of trying to make it work as a directly scientific concept, for example, economic: this is the confusion that still taints the *1844 Manuscripts*.

On the Way Towards De-alienation

But if the philosophical, historical-materialist category of alienation is not functioning, as such, on the terrain of any one particular science, it is, however, primarily on the terrain of the synthesis of the theoretical teachings of these sciences. As a philosophical category, it is inadequate to respond concretely to concrete economic, psycho-social or historical questions, just as the philosophical category of ‘matter’ is inadequate to respond concretely to concrete problems of physics or chemistry. But it is fully relevant and operative in relation to philosophical questions, questions of the general theory of historical materialism, such as this: is there an objective *unity* of all aspects of capitalist society and if so, how to think it? What overall historical *necessity* does capitalism meet? Does the thesis that socialism is a higher phase of human history have *scientific coherence*?

Because it is operative in relation to such questions, the category of alienation, like any philosophical category, has not only an ontological significance, but also, and inseparably, one that is gnoseological.⁹⁸ One cannot go without

98 TN: In his *Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, Sève maintains that the distinction between gnoseology and epistemology has particular meaning for a Marxist. He defines gnoseology as ‘the historical study and critique of the overall movement of thought as reflection of matter, or of matter as reflected by thought’ (Sève 1980, p. 680).

the other for a materialist. That is, it grasps the essence of its object – the historical development of people – and thereby provides *strategic guidance for the knowledge of this object*. Reciprocally, as strategic guidance for knowledge, it helps us to understand *critically* what it tells us about the essence of its object. Considered in terms of gnoseology, the category of alienation means that the error of errors, for those studying human activity and its historical development from whatever angle, would be to consider *structures and individuals* separately, as things without an intimate relationship. This separation leads this study to decompose into an antihumanist structuralism and extra-scientific personalism, without seeing the unity of processes behind the exteriority of moments. Alienation means that behind all aspects of the most diverse reality we must re-grasp the transiently necessary opposition between dead and living labour, and therefore also the class antagonism that is its basis; it means that the most demanding scientific approach not only grants, but assigns meaning to the idea of the necessary transition to a *higher* historical stage, emancipated from the antagonistic limits of the previous stage.

Thus we see how the unfounded identification of the idea of alienation with the still partly speculative views of 1844, and then, its rejection in the name of science, is an extraordinary impoverishment and uncontestable distortion of Marxism. To arbitrarily subtract from Marxism the great conception of the necessary movement of alienation and de-alienation, is to diminish the importance of historical materialism for all human sciences, to render suspect the very notion of a meaning of history and to make it impossible to understand class struggle as well as the historical role of the proletariat, which is universally emancipatory because it bears within itself, in its radical alienation, the ‘dissolution of all classes’.⁹⁹ The category of alienation forbids us from abandoning Marxism in a speculative humanism or letting it slide into a sociological positivism. Mature Marxism is neither of these things.

3. All this finally allows us to respond to the question posed at the beginning: if the famous formulae by which the young Marx expressed his conception of religion can rightly be taken as still valid in light of mature Marxism, it is simply that the idea of alienation that is its basis did not at all disappear without a trace, but rather survived through its materialist reversal. In mature Marxism, religion is understood in direct relation to the analyses of alienation discussed above. If in doubt, we re-read the famous pages of *Anti-Dühring* in

99 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 52. See also Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, p. 495. Recall that *Anti-Dühring* was written by Engels in 1877–8, nearly thirty-five or so years after the famous formulations of the young Marx on religion.

which Engels theoretically annihilates Dühring's idea that socialism implies the prohibition of religion:

All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces [*äussern Mächte*] which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.¹⁰⁰

These powers, Engels continues, are at first those of nature, and then are added social powers that are 'equally foreign [*ebenso fremd*]', especially in capitalism.

It is still true that man proposes and God (that is, the alien domination [*die Fremdherrschaft*] of the capitalist mode of production) disposes. Mere knowledge, even if it went much further and deeper than that of bourgeois economic science, is not enough to bring social forces under the domination of society. What is above all necessary for this, is a social act. And when this act has been accomplished, when society, by taking possession of all means of production and using them on a planned basis, has freed itself and all its members from the bondage in which they are now held by these means of production which they themselves have produced but which confront them as an irresistible alien force [*Macht als überwaltige fremde*]; when therefore man no longer merely proposes, but also disposes – only then will the last alien force which is still reflected in religion vanish; and with it will also vanish the religious reflection itself, for the simple reason that then there will be nothing left to reflect.¹⁰¹

There is no need for exceptional insight to recognise here, certainly condensed, the whole theme and even part of the vocabulary of alienation, and especially its nodal point: the metamorphosis of the products of people's activity into foreign powers that dominate them. And it is still the same theme we find in Lenin at the centre of a text such as 'On the attitude of the workers' party with regard to religion'. That is why Marx's formulae of 1843–4 can still be offered in 1909 by Lenin as cornerstones of the Marxist conception of religion.

And they have not lost their fertility today. For example with regard to the so-called 'crisis of the priests', the questioning by a number of them of their

100 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 25, p. 300.

101 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 25, pp. 301–2.

status as priests.¹⁰² Regarding a problem like this, is not the analysis of religion in terms of alienation profoundly illuminating? In the *1844 Manuscripts* we find this indication:

Every self-estrangement [*Selbstentfremdung*] of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. For this reason religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest, or again to a mediator, etc., since we are here dealing with the intellectual world.¹⁰³

Twenty years later, the mode of thought and expression has changed, but the idea remains, and Marx takes it up in Book IV of *Capital*:

If man attributes an independent existence, clothed in a religious form, to his relationship to his own nature, to external nature and to other men so that he is dominated by these notions, then he requires priests and their labour. With the disappearance of *the religious form* of consciousness and of these relationships, the labour of the *priests* will likewise cease to enter into the social process of production. The labour of priests will end with the existence of the priests themselves and, in the same way, the labour which the capitalist performs qua capitalist, or causes to be performed by someone else, will end together with the existence of the capitalists.¹⁰⁴

If we bear in mind this analysis, that of the personification of the alienation relation, both as a symptom and as a repetition of this relation, is not the current refusal of many priests to be ‘men apart’ a significant indication of the process of the decline of religious alienation as such, that is, the dissolution of its bases, i.e. of the maturity of the objective conditions of the transition to socialism in a country like ours?

Translated by Carl Shames (2013)

102 This ‘crisis of the priests’ defrayed the crisis when I pronounced on this discourse in 1973. [Note of 2012.]

103 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 279.

104 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 496.

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Notes on Contributors

Sunyoung Ahn

is Assistant Professor of English at Korea University, Seoul, Korea. She studies contemporary literature, culture, and theory, and has published essays on new materialisms, post-9/11 fiction, and environmental and science-fiction literature. Her current research interests include animal philosophy and the representations of crisis. [sunyoungahn@korea.ac.kr]

Jacopo Nicola Bergamo

is a Ph.D. student at the University of Vigo (Spain) and a member of the Post-growth Innovation Lab. He has published a book in Italian for Ombre Corte entitled *Marxismo ed Ecologia. Origine e sviluppo di un dibattito globale* [*Marxism and Ecology: Origin and Development of a Global Debate*]. [jacoponicola.bergamo@uvigo.es]

Andreas Malm

teaches human ecology at Lund University. He is the author of, most recently, together with the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (Verso, 2021). [Andreas.Malm@hek.lu.se]

Mijaíl Mitrovic Pease

is a Professor at the Faculty of Art and Design of the PUCP (Lima), where he is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Anthropology. His research focuses on the links between art and society in modern and contemporary Peru, and on the Marxist debate on cultural production. He has published *Extravíos de la forma: vanguardia, modernismo popular y arte contemporáneo en Lima desde los 60* (PUCP, 2019) and *Un fabricante de figuras. Historia y forma en Juan Javier Salazar* (Jedeqe, 2022), among other publications. [m.mitrovic@pucp.edu.pe]

Bryan Parkhurst

teaches music and philosophy at Oberlin College in Ohio, USA. He has published a number of interpretive articles about Marx's economic thought. [Bryan.Parkhurst@oberlin.edu]

Julian Roche

is a professional economist, who has worked worldwide with governments and international development agencies. He has researched a succession of Continental Marxist philosophers at Hull and Edinburgh Universities. [julian_roche@hotmail.com]

Alan M. Wald

is the H. Chandler Davis Collegiate Professor Emeritus of English Literature and American Culture at the University of Michigan. He is the author of numerous books on the US literary and intellectual Left, and serves on the editorial boards of *Against the Current* and *Science & Society*. [awald@umich.edu]



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